

Here Be Dragons

Zach and Naha followed behind Warden Commander's assistant. Bera, the minotaur, set a brisk pace, leading them through Wardens Headquarters in the Tournament City. Zach kept glancing at Naha, he feared that her showing her partial shifting ability had revealed her. Yet, if the wardens knew that she was not in fact Nyathulla he didn't think that they would just invite them to a meeting. He would've expected an entire strike team coming at them. Perhaps that was what this whole thing was, perhaps someone was waiting for them just around a corner.

Zach didn't know what to do, he was still filled with rage about Ryun even though he had decided that there were things that were more important to him. He glanced at Naha, seeing her nervousness even though she was hiding it. He couldn't let anything happen to her. His eyes scanned their surroundings, and his Shade Reaver arm was ready to activate at a moment's notice. He started figuring out the best ways to run if they needed to. The best way would of course be through the Ethereal Realm, he could open a way and then close it behind them rather quickly now. He just hoped that he was looking too much into this. Her arm shifting hadn't been that obvious, only her hand had been visible because of her clothes. And it had been on his chest. He hadn't paid much attention on where every warden had been, but most had been to the side and behind him, and their attention on Ryun and his group. Perhaps no one saw anything, and this was just about them nearly starting an incident.

They made their way through the various corridors until finally they reached the Warden Commander's office. Bera escorted opened the doors for them and ushered them in, then entered and closed the doors behind her.

Inside the office, Warden Commander Yirrel Annsi sat behind her desk her eyes following them as they walked over to stand in front of her desk.

"Warden Commander," Zach and Naha greeted her with a bow of their head.

For a moment, she said nothing. Bera walked around the desk to stand behind the Warden Commander, then adjusted her glasses. He was still not quite used to seeing a minotaur wearing a strange glasses-like contraption.

Then before he had the time to contemplate her glasses, the Warden Commander spoke.

“You’ve found the one you wished to hunt down,” Yirrel said slowly. “You confronted him, even after I told you that the crimes of your old world did not matter here. Despite the Peace, despite that badge you wear,” she nodded at the warden’s badge tied to his waist.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

Zach kept his eyes on hers, unflinching, her accusation was right. He wondered what he should say, a dozen believable lies flashed through his head. In the end, he decided on the truth, he knew too little about what she knew.

“Yes, that is correct,” Zach answered.

She looked at him for a long while, then glanced at Naha for a second. Her eyes narrowed at her, but then she turned back to Zach. “It seems that in the end you decided against doing what you had been seeking ever since you arrived. Tell me why you changed your mind.”

Zach blinked; he didn’t quite understand what her thoughts were. Why she wanted to know. He wasn’t that important to her. Perhaps she just wanted to be sure that Zach wouldn’t go off the rails and cause an incident. And yet, he didn’t quite know what to say to her. The emotions inside of him were raw, he hadn’t processed things yet. Ryun was here, in front of him, and Zach had realized that he wasn’t the most important thing to him. His rage and hate, his pain, all his thoughts and promises, their hold on him had grown lesser over time he had spent with Naha. He had traveled around the Infinite Realm, it had finally sunk in that this was another world. Now, his world too. Earth was gone and there was no going back to it. He had a choice of living in the past or looking toward the future.

It did not mean that he would forgive Ryun, it did not even mean that he would let him go free because Zach would not stand by if innocents were being killed. But... perhaps he could achieve a balance. Naha was far more important than revenge.

“I... I nearly attacked him. But in the end, I realized that I have things that are more important to me now than he is,” Zach said, his eyes sliding over to Naha.

Yirrel nodded her head, then started tapping the fingers of one hand on the wooden table in front of her. “And what now? Do you still want to go and try to kill him? Will you try it once the Peace is no more?”

“I... I hate him, but... I can see that the consequences of me going after him could be grave.”

For a moment something resembling a half smile appeared on her face, quick enough that he wasn't even sure that he had seen it right.

“That is good, I've wondered what you would do once you knew that he was here.”

Zach narrowed his eyes, something about the way she said nagged at him. And then he realized what it was.

“You knew,” he said.

Yirrel nodded her head. “Of course I knew. Only two Rankers of the Seventh Iteration Earth arrived in the Infinite Realm. I had people searching for him since the moment you told me your story. I said that his crimes on the old world did not matter, and they don't. But I was not about to allow someone to go on a rampage and start murdering people all over. If it makes you feel better, he didn't do that. Oh, he killed people, he conquered a sect. But he didn't indulge in wanton slaughter, nothing that anyone in Sects would consider excessive.”

It didn't make him feel better. He didn't know what to think, how to align his image of Ryun with someone who didn't go around and kill everyone in his way—because that is who he had been on Earth.

“How long did you know about him?” Zach asked, trying to keep his voice level.

Yirrel tilted her head as her star shaped eyes studied him. “Before the Tournament started in truth.”

“You knew,” Zach said, now certain. “You wanted me to see him. You wanted to see what I would do.”

She had given him access to the arena on purpose, she manipulated him.

“Does that make you angry?” Yirrel asked.

“Why did you do it?” Zach ignored her question, of course it made him mad. There was just nothing that he could do about it.

“Because I wanted to see what you would do, as you have deduced.”

“What would you’ve done if I had attacked him?”

“It would’ve never reached that point,” she told him. “Bera was nearby, she would’ve stopped you.”

Zach blinked and then glanced at the minotaur, an assistant. Nothing about her screamed danger, yet Zach didn’t for a moment think that Yirrel was lying to him.

“Why test me?” Zach asked.

“You are *my* Warden, and you are a Ranker. You do not realize just how fast you grow compared to everyone else, how much strength you have within you. What Rankers go through, what we’ve gone through... It makes us different. We’ve lived through a reality that was alien to this one, and we’ve adapted to something completely out of our realm of understanding. That makes us strong, and I have a need of people who are strong. I wanted to see if I could rely on you, if I can invest in you and trust that you will not go mad with power. I needed to see if you are willing to set aside your personal feelings. To know if you can tolerate darkness if it means doing something good,” she glanced at Naha who had been standing next to him in silence.

“So, you wanted to see if you could trust me. To see if I can control myself. Why?” He asked again. There was more to it, he could see it in her eyes.

For the first time since they arrived, he saw her mask crack, and beneath it he saw a tired woman. She stood up and walked around, turning her back to them as she looked out of a window.

“You’ve traveled through some parts of the core,” she started, her back still turned toward them. “Tell me, what do you think about life in it?”

Zach frowned, then exchanged a look with Naha. Zach thought about it, and then gave his answer.

“It is... it feels like it is too tame. Like there are no great dangers, for most of the population at least. The monsters are all but exterminated, the dungeons conquered and known. The criminals are weak but are not taken

down by those who could do it with ease, instead they are allowed to go free. Almost as if they are allowed as to give the ordinary people and those who are on lower tiers of power an impetus to do something about them by themselves.”

Yirrel turned around from the window and smiled. “Yes, it is one of our great mistakes. We’ve scoured the core of nearly all threats. It is how we grew strong quickly. And then we realized that our descendants had nothing to do, nothing to worry about. They lived in the light that we created, light that protected them. It took an incredible will for them to push and grow. They didn’t have threats constantly pressing at them from all sides, it made them weak. It still makes them weak. They are surrounded by relative safety, and so they don’t even try to reach greater heights. The Sects combat that with their constant wars, with their culture focused on advancing in order to gain prestige. Each faction has its own ways. My Wardens enforce the laws, adventurers hunt the few monsters that spawn in the core. It isn’t enough.”

She shook her head. “It is why we let people deal with issues that are near their tier of power, why an immortal doesn’t go around hunting criminals with lesser tiers of power,” she glanced at Naha again. “It is why we let her roam around for so long.”

Both Naha and Zach froze at that. She knew who she really was. He felt his Shade Reaver arm twitch, and he nearly activated it, only the knowledge of how futile that would be made him pause.

“Still restrained I see,” Yirrel smiled at him, then turned back to Naha. “You don’t need to worry, if I wanted you dead you would’ve never left the Citadel. Your perk is formidable, it did fool our usual tests. But it failed to fool our advanced ones.”

Zach’s head was filled with thoughts that not even he could keep track of, there were things at play here that he couldn’t even imagine.

“You did good,” Yirrel said as she turned back to look at him. “Removing one of her focuses was smart. It is hard to reverse madness, but at least you got her under control. You must’ve done something incredible for Gemheart for him to grant you such a boon. A focus removing elixirs are beyond rare. He traded some of his oldest favors for it. For you, a stranger to him.”

“I saved his daughter’s life,” Zach said, not really knowing what else to say.

“Ah,” Yirrel nodded in understanding. “That would do it. Gemheart loves deeply.”

“How—why?”

“Why I let you two go after she killed wardens?” Yirrel asked.

Zach closed his eyes, the guilt rising up again. Naha’s words from earlier came back to him—*We are all monsters to someone*. He had done something horrible, because he wanted to help Naha. Because he had lived a life of horrors and couldn’t bring himself to harm someone he loved.

“Yes,” Zach answered finally.

“Because I need strong people, and you,” her eyes turned back to Naha. “Are a Ranker too. You went mad, but I hoped that you could be made whole again. I let you live to see what he would do with you. To see what he would allow you to do. Because I need the strong and I am willing to pay any price to get the right kind of powerful people on my side.”

“What for?” Naha asked, speaking for the first time.

Yirrel took a deep breath and looked at them. “We’ve painted a world filled with *false lights*, a bastion of civilization, a safe haven for those who are weak and who did not want to advance. We taught them to stay close to those lights, the High Rankers, the rulers, and guiding hands hidden behind thrones. Even though most are mad, even though most are as monsters themselves. We keep them in power because we need them. To protect people from the *darkness*, from the things that lurk beyond our *light*. We keep the people here, around us, protected and safe, where they cannot grow strong because we fear the darkness that waits beyond our borders. We fear the wrong people growing strong and then provoking the things that lurk in the dark and killing us all. We keep them from wanting to explore, we keep them from finding out the things that we know to be true—that there are things far worse than they can imagine just over the next mountain.”

“You ask why I tested you, why I let you live?” She asked, and then answered her own question.

“Because this world is cruel, because we need people who understand the dark, who have seen horrible things happen but still wish to protect those

who are weaker. Because we are—because *I* am one of those monsters, because I need people who are willing to stand between that darkness and the rest, even when it means letting a murder go free so that you may use them later, even when it means keeping the peace when all you want is to punish a wrong. People like you, a monster that had regained her sanity. A Ranker who arrived here consumed by rage and hate but had been able to not let it consume him.

“I need strong warriors who can stand with me, who can stand side by side with other monsters in order to keep what is coming from washing over us all. For survival, and for any hope of a future.”

Yirrel stopped and looked at them both. Zach didn't know what to say, he didn't know if there was anything to say to that. He couldn't imagine what kind of great danger could exist that it made even someone like the Warden Commander terrified.

He didn't like what she had done, how she had tested him. And yet, she had done things for him as well. She had allowed Naha to live when she had every right to demand her head. That alone would've been enough.

“The only thing I ever wanted was to protect people,” Zach told her.

“I failed my people once,” Naha whispered. “I do not intend to fail again.”

Yirrel nodded her head. “I know, it is why you are in this room still breathing,” she said.

Zach swallowed, trying not to think about what could've happened.

“You say that you that the High Rankers are mad? That you need to let them remain in power, why?”

Yirrel sighed. “Not all of them are mad, some, and their madness is focused, particular. Something that can be controlled, but still terrible. We need them in power because finding people who are... right, is harder than you can imagine. Because if we tried to remove them now, we would have a war that would consume the entirety of the core. Because despite their flaws, they do serve a purpose. Because we struggle to find a balance of what this world should be. Most of us who are strong, who rule, grew up on the old worlds. We remember a life when there were laws, when we lived in a way that is so much different than anything that we have here. And we know that

we cannot replicate the civilizations of the old worlds here and now. There are no laws of the old worlds that can be equal for all here. How do you create a framework of civilization when one person is barely level one hundred and the other almost four hundred? You can't enforce that; you can't make a law that is equal for all. So, we've adopted this system, we are divided into countless smaller factions, each led by those who have power. And the only thing that is keeping the peace is that the threats they pose to each other are keeping them in balance," she shook her head and paused.

Zach understood, he had struggled with the same ever since he arrived here. The laws and moralities of Earth cannot work in a world guided by the Framework. In a world where people can live forever.

Yirrel sighed. "There are things that are beyond you as you are now, in time, if you rise and prove yourselves you might learn more."

She reached for her desk drawer and pulled something out. Quickly Zach recognized it as a warden badge, the same as the ones that he and Naha carried. She offered it to Naha.

"This is to replace the one you have on you now," Yirrel said. "Warden Nyathulla's circumstances mean that it is unlikely for anyone to come looking for her, but there are people in the Infinite Realm that do know her. You will leave this territory in that body and then return with another. You will not use this body again. Warden Nyathulla will die on a mission; you will take on a new identity. Be sure to pick a suitable body."

Naha blinked at that, then hesitantly picked the badge up.

Yirrel then turned to look at Zach. "You will continue to compete in the tournament, it is not a priority for us, but a good showing will be good for the Citadel. After the tournament is over, we will talk about what we will do with the two of you."

With that, she waved her hand, dismissing them. "Oh," she called after them as they walked toward the exit. "I am sure that I don't need to tell you that you are not to speak about anything spoken in this room today?"

Both of them nodded their heads at that, and then finally, they were out.

Zach wondered how long it would take him to process everything. His world seemed to be getting more complicated by the minute. He met Naha's

eyes, and smiled. As long as the two of them were together, he could weather any storm.