

## **As Before**

“She is done,” Bera said. They sat at the edge of the forest, waiting for Naha to accomplish her part of the plan. And Bera was their coordinator, she didn’t have a lot of combat power, but she had ways to be useful in it. Zach nodded, then he and Vitor rushed across the plain and toward the city. They jumped over the walls where the guards scrambled to figure out what was happening. Zach wore armor provided by Bera, a white plate warden’s armor, masterwork which belonged to a high-ranking warden that had left the faction. Such armors were restricted, only able to be worn by those in the faction. Vitor wore a robe made of thick leather and cloth and had a breathing mask over his face. Zach had one in his storage too, provided by Vitor, though he didn’t anticipate needing to use it. Still, it was good to have. Vitor had said that he wasn’t a fighter, not really, but he came from the sects, and all of them knew how to at least. The scaleless drake had said that he would be able to do best in the city, in the tight places in between and inside buildings where his gases couldn’t dissipate too quickly.

Naha had reached the fort, and the enemy was learning that something was happening. They didn’t bother to hide, that was not part of their plan.

A guard on the walls noticed them, but before he could do anything, Vitor flicked a hand in the guard’s direction, throwing a small ball of wrapped paper. It unwound and then a small cloud of powder hit the man in the face, making him cough, his hands coming up to try and cover his face. He didn’t struggle for more than two seconds, and then he slumped against the wall, slid to the floor where soft snores could be heard. The guard had been one of the traitors, and not a taken, but still, they had decided on trying to keep as many people alive as possible. Crimes would be punished, of course, but killing people outright was not something that Zach would allow. Not without first knowing that the people had no intention of changing. After that, Zach and Vitor jumped down from the wall into the streets. The city was covered in pale amber light coming

from lampposts on the street corners, casting shadows across the dark alleyways. Zach could feel the shadow, the deep of it, and wondered if some part of Naha's power touched it from even this far away. He was impressed with just how much power she had, and just how much she almost didn't seem to realize.

Zach had drank his attunement potion, improved his **Aspectborn** attunement to allow him to choose more aspects for his arsenal, but also make them even more powerful. And it now gave him a basic sense of his arsenal aspects, which he didn't quite need. He didn't choose shadow, though it had been available to him, probably because of the True Link with Naha. He had added two, Mind and Ethereal. Though Ethereal was still closed, and most related powers didn't work, it... interested Zach. He wanted to see if he could figure out why that had happened. No, he didn't sense the Shadow in the city through his perk. Everyone with a soul could feel aspects, as far as Zach believed. All of them were Essence, both people and Aspects. When you felt the wind on your skin, you felt the Aspect of it. People just had to sharpen that sense, to let themselves feel the Essence in a way that was not innate to the bodies they had. Zach had been able to feel aspects with more clarity ever since he gained **Sage of Time**. They moved into the city, heading to one of the empty buildings that they had previously marked through reconnaissance.

They passed by unopposed, the still awake guards were too confused and too focused on the walls and outside threats. Not that they would be much of a threat, even if they were watching the city. Vitor entered the building and placed an explosive formation inside. Once he was done, they rushed through the city, their speed increased by Vitor's potions. He had given them all some, and a few of them were incredibly powerful. Though, Zach didn't anticipate needing them, he was still grateful. There were no guards moving through the streets, only those on the walls, and by now they had noticed that the people in their guardhouses were asleep. There were alarms being sounded up in the city, coming from the fort. But no one knew exactly what was happening. But that made their task easier.

“There,” Vitor said as they neared the first location—the slave block. “Do you want to try and release one now?”

Zach looked at the building, thinking about the imprisoned people inside. He was certain that he could release a slave from the collar, but he didn’t know yet how draining it would be on him. And besides, there were too many of them, this was going to be a long process, and they had to take care of the enemy before they could focus on it. For now, he couldn’t afford to weaken himself.

“No,” he answered. “We should focus on protecting them for now.”

Vitor nodded his head, and then they moved. Quickly, they placed the defensive arrays around the buildings where the unconscious slaves were. All had been provided by Bera and should be powerful enough to protect the buildings in case the worst came to pass and the fighting spilled out into the city proper. They had to protect them and keep them unconscious, until Zach could free them. They didn’t know what kind of orders they had, and couldn’t risk them trying to kill themselves if the holders of their collars were dead or captured.

Once all the defensive arrays were in place, they moved back to the entrance of the city near one of the gate guardhouses. Once there, Vitor pulled out a small device and pressed a button. The building they had visited previously exploded, shaking the ground. That should be enough to pull the strongest from the fort. They didn’t know enough about what was inside to fight in there, and by drawing the enemy out they could have Naha flank them from behind as they left, maybe take a few of them out before the fighting really started.

It didn’t take long for their presence to be noticed; they weren’t trying to hide. It didn’t take long for reinforcements to come to them. A shape flew out from the hill, flying—or as Zach had realized, falling—on them. Both Zach and Vitor jumped out of the way from the falling shape. The newcomer impacted the stone street and it shattered beneath his feet, sending dust and debris flying in all directions. The ground shook and the cracks spread everywhere across the stone street, the buildings, even the walls and the guardhouse.

A tall minotaur straightened, he wore a thick green armor that covered every inch of him and a helmet that sheathed even his horns. He carried a large two-handed hammer which he held in a ready stance as he walked out of the crater he made by his landing.

“Intruders,” his deep voice rumbled. “Only two of you, underhandedness I assume. It will not go your way, intruders.”

“I guess that we will see about that,” Vitor answered.

Zach’s skill told him that the man was strong, he had few flaws that it let him see.

“Surrender,” the minotaur said. “And you might live to see the glory of a new world.”

Before they could give their answer, a shooting star flew at them from the fort. A comet of blue fire that came to a stop just above them.

A man covered in fire floated there, wearing an orange armor and smooth helmet. A moment later the helmet peeled away to reveal a face that Zach recognized.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment, Zacharia,” the human with red hair said.

Zach met his eyes. “You shouldn’t have,” Zach told him. “The outcome will not be any different than last time, Erik.”

He hadn’t known the man’s name when they fought, but Naha had told him after. He did feel an ache inside of his heart when he looked at him, the same one that he felt every time he looked at an taken. The knowledge that he couldn’t help them, weighed on him. Even when Bera had told him of all the things that they had tried, he held some hope, but in the end, he saw nothing that he could do.

“I am not the same as I was then, unused to the gift, still confused from the dream. And I had prepared,” Erik Ornn said. “You will pay for what you have done. Hastur could’ve made it all so much easier. Now, to achieve the dream, we will have to spill blood first.”

“There is still time for you to change your ways,” Zach said, looking at Erik and at the minotaur. He had figured out what happened to the taken, it hadn’t been that hard. What Zach had gone through, the ages all alone,

was the same that they had gone through. Only for them it had been a world filled with all the things that they desired. A world filled with this... dream, of Hastur's. It might've even been a good dream, a good vision of the future. But they, the taken, had been changed under the weight of so many years, just as how Zach had been. There was nothing to fix by people that Bera had had try. This was who they were. Perhaps, if one day Zach became a Sage of Mind, if he made a Dao, a Way of Mind, perhaps then he could help. But not now.

Erik grinned, and his helmet folded back over his face. "I look forward to putting a collar around your neck."

The blue fire burned more intently around him, and then it sneaked its way above him, forming three small dragons.

The minotaur hefted his hammer, and Vitor pulled out vials out of his storage. One he screwed into the side of his mask with a click, and two other smaller vials he held in his right hand, between his fingers.

Zach closed his eyes for a moment as he felt time around him. His hand changed into a blade, long, straight, and metal, **Greater Windsong Form**.

"Last chance, Erik," Zach said as he readied himself.

The answer was the roar of dragons, made of bright hot and blue flames.