

## Night Attack

“You’ve been quiet.”

Zach raised his head and saw Naha looking down on him. Her basic form took some getting used to, but in the end, it was Naha. Her double horns curved back, and her black hair swayed on the wind. Zach was sitting on the railing of the ship, with his feet dangling over the edge. He was trying to think, but as always, it was somehow still too hard.

They were standing on one of the ship's upper decks, looking out at the ocean and the ships sailing next to them. His eyes allowed him to see in the dark, so he could make them out clearly. The ship they were on, the Kraken Slayer, was a mix of what Zach would imagine a futuristic modern ship to look like. The decks were small and ran in a circle around the central pyramid. The other ships were a variety of all kinds, from those that seemed to be powered by formations to those with sails.

He had stopped here to get some peace and quiet, the inside of the ship was loud with the voices of all the crew. But up here, the wind drowned everything else out as they almost soared on top of the waves, faster than he had ever traveled before.

“There isn’t much that I can say,” Zach responded.

Once they had reached Brimstone Harbor on the Island of the Dungeons, Bera had met them and explained the mission. Some of it at least. They were sent to the Empire of the Third Iteration, where they were fighting the bulk of the Dome’s forces. It was an offer, not an order, but Zach knew that he couldn’t have refused it no matter what. The monsters from the Dome were a threat, even though most decided to ignore it. Zach believed that they shouldn’t leave them to grow and become a bigger threat. Yet, he was one man, there was little that he could do. Not without having a lot more power. This mission was the best way for him to achieve several things. He would be working to

protect people by eliminating the threat, and it was an opportunity to grow in power. It was as simple as that.

“Can you be clear of mind for this?” Naha asked.

“I’ve already worked with him before,” Zach answered.

“This is a bit different,” Naha put a hand on top of his shoulder. “We were in a situation where we did not have much time to think and make decisions. Now... we are going to be traveling together for a while before we enter combat.”

Zach shrugged. “I am tired of this Naha, he... The world is not fair. There is never going to be justice for the monstrous things that he had done. What does killing someone mean when they are immortal? And what kind of justice is a swift death? Even if I could manage to destroy his soul, what guarantee is there that there is nothing beyond that? The Infinite Realm is filled with secrets, I doubt that what we know is everything.”

He shook his head. “You and me, that is all that we need. Grow in power, go out and find a place that we can carve out for ourselves. Do something to make things better.”

Naha smiled and leaned forward. “Move forward, but be better than we were yesterday.”

“Yes,” Zach said. It was the words that she had spoken to him a while ago. The words that had started to be a guide for the way that he lived his life. He would fail in that, but he always wanted to protect the innocents. He would never stop trying to do good. He gained nothing by attempting to find justice. What did a dead world care for this new one? There was no one left to feel the satisfaction of vengeance, of seeing justice done. “We do this mission because it is something that we want. Because we can be of use, and I do not want to turn it down when we can help. And because we can gain from it, but also because it is right.”

Naha nodded her head.

Then a voice from above them startled him.

“Wow,” Zach turned immediately and saw a ravzor man sitting on top of deck above them. He hadn’t even sensed him there. “That was some speech right there.”

A moment later the man flickered and then he was standing in front of them, peering with his slitted eyes. The ravzor was of the type that didn’t have a mane, instead his fur was white with a few lines of black near his eyes and ears on top of his head. Where Naha’s ravzor form resembled a lion-like biped, this man looked more like a snow leopard, only without the spots. He had a slim build, and wore a simple garb. Just brown trousers and a red shirt. And he had somewhat of a cocky expression on his face.

“Listening in on private conversations is rude,” Naha told him, her expression neutral. For some reason Zach was almost sure that she was trying very hard not to react.

“Ah, I apologize,” the man said. “I was just out for a short night walk. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

The man was one of their teammates, Maleatus Enis. Zach didn’t know much about him, they had only been introduced a few days ago when Zach and Naha arrived. The two of them hadn’t even had the chance to speak with any of their other teammates. Granted, only two of them had been on the ship, the ravzor and the cthul. The third was apparently in storage somehow, though, Zach wasn’t quite sure if he understood correctly. Bera hadn’t known much about who their teammates would be, but she did mention the two women that had arrived with Ryun the day before.

Zach and Naha knew them, though they had never really spoken much, there wasn’t time in the Tournament Territories when they were fighting for their lives. He did know that they were High Rankers, and that they were Cultivators, and apparently, they were somehow involved with Ryun.

“So,” Maleatus spoke again. “You are wardens?”

“We are,” Zach answered.

“I am curious as to why you’ve been chosen for this mission. I’ve heard that Wardens had been hit hard in what happened in the core. I

didn't think that they had anyone that strong to send. Selia and Erdania are High Rankers, even that Seventh Iteration Ranker is one too. You... I don't think that I've ever heard anything about you two."

Zach wasn't surprised. The stories from the Tournament rarely mentioned him. He was just some low tiered warrior that was unimportant. Few people knew that he was the one to close the portal, not that Zach cared about that.

"We have experience fighting this foe," Zach told him. "We have... expertise I guess that you could say."

"Well, then, I guess that Eratemus will explain, once he decides to grace us with his presence."

Zach knew that Eratemus was the name of the person who was in storage, he wondered what it meant that people both talked as if he was here and not at the same time.

"And you, why were you invited on this mission?" Zach asked.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" Maleatus asked.

"I too am from the Seventh Iteration, so no, I don't know who you are."

The man grinned at them then. "Well, perhaps I was invited because I am ruggedly handsome?"

"He is Maleatus Enis, one of the most notorious thieves in the world," Naha said. "A while ago, he broke away from the Thieves Guild, and had been on the run from them ever since."

"I take offense at that," Maleatus said with a dangerous glint in his eyes. "I am not on the run from anyone. I simply decided to do something else with my life than serve the Cowl in the Dark."

Zach frowned at the end of his sentence, the way he said it made him think as if it was a title. Regardless, it didn't really matter to him, they already had a genocidal murder on their team. A thief was nothing compared to that.

"Well, I am sure that you've been chosen for this mission because you have something to add. The same as us."

Maleatus tilted his head. “I guess that you are right about that, the people that gathered this team did know what they were doing. I think.”

“You don’t know?” Zach asked, wondering who exactly arranged for all of this. Bera hadn’t told him much beyond the basics. They had been told that they would have a briefing after they were underway. Zach had been impatient to learn more.

“Well, I know that their choices were limited. So, I guess that we are the best of those that could be sent.”

“What do you mean?” Zach asked.

Maleatus shrugged. “The Third Iteration and the old Rankers of the first Iterations have a lot of baggage between them. It was smarter to send people who are as far removed from them as possible, I guess. I am descendant of people from the Fourth Iteration, you are Seventh. It is better to send us than anyone even remotely connected to the First or the Second. Not that the old bastards would even want to help, they are all too busy fighting their pointless wars, or hiding behind others, to help. Few of them strive for anything more than to keep what they had achieved long ago.”

Zach glanced at Naha, wondering if the two of them would ever turn into someone like them. He doubted it.

“Do you think that we can accomplish this mission?” Zach asked.

Maleatus snorted. “You are going to need to learn that people in this world rarely do things that they believe would lead to certain death. Risk is always weighed against the reward. We are here because we can add something to the team, it is as simple as that. Anyway, half of the old Rankers are not even remotely as powerful as they like to pretend to be. So perhaps, we might have a better chance than they. We are still hungry for power after all.”

That Zach did agree with. Power was what he needed now. His new Class was powerful, but he needed more.

“And what do you know about the others on the team?” Zach asked.

“I am most familiar with Vryull, Selia and Erdania. They are strong, Vryull is an asshole, Erdania is fun most of the time, and Selia is a frigid bitch.”

Zach blinked at the descriptions. “I thought that you were friends?”

“We are,” Maleatus grinned. “The last member, though, I guess that you would know more if you were from the same Iteration. I heard some rumors about that actually. That no one from the Seventh arrived.”

“Only the two of us arrived,” Zach told him.

“Really? What, the others couldn’t make the power threshold? I think that there is one right?”

“The reason why is that only the two of us survived by the end.”

Maleatus blinked. For a moment Zach saw him on the verge of laughing, but he had to have understood Zach’s expression, and realized that he wasn’t joking.

“You are serious,” he said with a surprised expression.

“I am.”

Zach wondered if he should explain more. He didn’t want to create problems between his teammates, but he also didn’t want to conceal the truth.

“How did that happen?” Maleatus asked.

Zach took a deep breath and spoke. Maleatus could make his own opinion about Ryun now, but the past was the past, and it was what it was.

“My world was consumed in fire and war. He... he decided that he was going to kill anyone in his way. And by the end, he had caused the death of everyone. He murdered an entire world. I guess that it isn’t such a big thing here, where people with power can do whatever they want.”

“Huh,” Maleatus glanced behind him, at one of the ships walls, almost as if he could see through it. “Well, I don’t have anything smart to say about that. And you are willing to work with him?”

“I’ve learned that life rarely cares about what is right or fair. I have no intention of fighting the nature of existence itself. I have my own goals, if fighting by his side is going to get me closer to it, then I have no choice.”

“Admirable,” Maleatus said. “I guess that he does have some power, I heard that he is a High Ranker too. Undying Void.”

“You didn’t watch the Tournament I am guessing,” Naha interjected.

“No, I had... another mission at the time,” Maleatus said.

“He fought in the High Division,” Naha said. “He is strong. From what I’ve seen the name he is known by is aptly given.”

“Hm, I guess that we shall see what each of us is made out of by the end of this.”

Zach nodded. “Do you know anything more about the Empire’s side of things?”

“Nope,” Maleatus shook his head. “I’m guessing that we’ll learn more once we arrive.”

Zach wasn’t sure if he liked that. He didn’t know if those who had set all of this up knew or not, but he wasn’t a fan of not knowing anything about the plan. Oh, he did know the basics. Go behind the enemy lines and kill the Dome leader. What he was worried about was everything in between. He hoped that the people in the Empire knew more about their foe.

“You are not worried that we are going into the unknown?” Zach asked.

Maleatus spread his hands. “I tend not to worry about things that I can’t control. I live my life moment to moment, why worry when I can just experience.”

“I guess that is one way to live life,” Naha commented pointedly.

“I don’t remember criticizing your: *Move forward, but be better than we were yesterday.*”

Zach chuckled at that and put his hand on Naha’s forearm. He knew that she was a bit protective of what they had, and that she didn’t like people who lived life lightly. Though Zach suspected that there

were hidden layers to Maleatus. He seemed like a person for whom everything was a show. All that they had seen from him was what he wanted them to see and learn.

Zach opened his mouth to speak, and then the ship lurched. A moment later light and noise filled the air as the weapons of the Kraken Slayer opened fire on something on the other side of the ship.

**Battle Roar**—Zach felt the perk take effect and increase his stats.

“Looks like we have company,” Maleatus said and then flickered, disappearing.

Zach and Naha both speed around the deck, heading to the other side to see what was happening. By the time they arrived, a battle was being waged on the other side of the ship.

The Kraken Slayer’s weapons fired at large monsters. They looked like serpents, long and sinuous, with massive jaws and scales that looked like rough sheared stone. Bright red beams of light hit and annihilated one of the monsters. Other ships were firing too, a curtain of weapons fire of all kinds had filled the air. He saw a wreckage of a ship in the distance at the edge of their formation. He narrowed his eyes on one of them, reading its tag.

**Serpent of the Depths** (Tier 9)

And then, a beam of violet and black speared one of the massive monsters through the head. Zach’s eyes turned up to the sky and there he saw him.

Ryun was jumping from a cube to cube, one shaped beneath his feet just as he jumped off another that dissipated. His hands were pointed in the direction of one of the monsters, disintegrating it with his beams.

Nearby, another shape was floating in the air, a large staff in his hand. Three spheres the size of a house orbited him, and then flew off



to hit a monster and simply erase anything that they hit. Tearing holes through the monsters that were at least several hundred meters long.

The Kraken Slayer's rate of fire increased, and of the dozen or so monsters that had been heading their way, only two remained. Zach watched from the ship as Ryun and the staff wielder fought against them.

"I guess that he is strong enough," Maleatus said from the side. Zach hadn't even noticed him there.

He looked around and saw that the other two members of their team, Selia and Erdania, had gotten out on deck as well. All of them looked in the distance as the monsters died.

Zach saw Ryun land on a dying beast and laid his hand on top of it. Then, he pulled. Immediately, Zach recognized the ability. White mist pulled from the monster and Ryun consumed it.

Zach watched as the two of them returned to the ship and landed on the deck. Ryun landed near Selia and Erdania and exchanged a few words that Zach couldn't quite catch. Then, his eyes turned in his direction. Two empty holes of nothing but darkness. Somehow, Zach was certain that he had known that Zach was there from the beginning. He walked over and looked up at Zach.

"Zacharia," he started. "Can we talk?"

Zach took a deep breath, and then nodded.