

Schemes and Games

Their group moved over the rocky ground at a brisk pace, too fast for Zach to even have the time to study it. The most that he could see was that the ground had a blue tint to it here, and that the rocks were red. He hadn't even had a chance to ask why, though he didn't really need to. He knew that territories could sometimes differ incredibly from those that bordered them, but more often they were placed in groups. The color of the ground and rocks had remained through all the territories they had passed through so far, and there had been several. It was probably the result of some special kind of Essence infused with the terrain, though he hadn't seen or felt any type of effect from them. Still, they had been on the move for almost a full week, with no stopping. All of them were strong enough that they could handle that, though their escorts had started showing signs of tiredness.

At the end of the sixth day, the Knight Commander called for a stop to rest. His people built up camp in a practiced and swift manner, while the Core group settled for a simple campfire, the undead that carried the big wooden container behind them lowered it and moved out in the darkness making a perimeter around the camp. Most of the Core group were a lot more powerful than their escorts, and probably still didn't need any sleep. Zach on the other hand felt like he should take advantage of the stop. He looked around at his group, seeing Ryun sitting on the ground with the two women from the sects, the cthul—Vryull—was talking with Maleatus to the side, leaving Naha and Zach alone with the last member of their team. Zach had... a fascination with him, an undead body, controlled by a necromancer from half a world away. It was impressive, but no less so than the undead himself. Zach could feel nothing from the undead, it was... almost as if he wasn't even there, despite the visual proof that he was. The weapons, looked impressive, and he was sure that they were more powerful than anything that Zach had seen before, but like everything else it was as if it wasn't even there. It had started after their first meeting with the Knight Commander and his group.

It was obviously some kind of a concealment effect, but it only made the undead more... terrifying. The undead looked like a mummy, a pharaoh

from old Earth, at least marginally. It was a demasi, so it had horns and a tail as well as other differences, but the style reminded Zach of things he knew from Earth. Knowing that the undead was their leader was... another thing that he had to accept. Not that Zach had any room to complain. He was chosen not because he was the strongest possible choice, but because one; he had experience with this enemy. And two; because he could open the way to the Ethereal. There were probably many others who had the same power, but only he had been there at the end, he who had closed the portal. It was the combination of the two that allowed for him to even be entertained as a choice. Looking around the others, he knew that he wasn't as strong, not yet at least. Oh, he was powerful enough to match them, maybe even kill some of them if it was the right situation. He had tools and perks that allowed him to punch above his weight, but the march itself had given him more perspective than anything else. The others didn't get tired, they could've gone on for longer. Sure, Zach could've as well, but he would be pushing himself.

He glanced to the side at Ryun, sitting on the ground with his legs crossed. He held a black crystal in his hand, and even with Zach's limited Cultivation he could tell that he was drawing the Essence in. None of them were tired, they were... their power had changed them into things that were far removed from what they had been at birth. Zach had changed too, but he... his body was still flesh and blood. Perhaps in time he too would change, but for now, this trip was just a reminder of how different things were.

"We would've stopped anyway," a reverberating voice said, startling Zach. The fact that the undead somehow knew or at least assumed what Zach was thinking was... disconcerting.

He turned to look at the undead, the orange glowing eyes, a face devoid of emotion. Looking almost as if it was made out of plastic, with a slightly reflective sheen on top of it. Every part of the skin was covered in a script, formations, and Zach had no doubt that they were powerful.

Zach tilted his head, not quite sure how to respond to the undead—Eratemus.

"This," he gestured around them. "Making camp. There is an enemy patrol ahead of us, if we stop here for a while, their path will not cross ours.

Though the Knight Commander for some reason does not wish for us to know.”

Zach blinked at that then looked in the direction of the Empire’s camp, only to see that there was a sphere around the three of them. It was easy to deduce that Eratemus had activated something that would prevent their words from being heard.

“Why not?” Naha asked.

The undead turned his eyes on her. “That, I do not know yet. They have another group ahead of us, a dozen strong. They are communicating with a Far-link Orb. I assume that they were there in order to scout out the path. These lands are untamed, filled with monsters and the enemy.”

“Why not tell us about them?” Zach asked.

“Most likely because they want an advantage in case that our relationship turns sour.”

Zach frowned. “They need us, don’t they?”

“How much they need us is... uncertain at this point. The Empire should have many powerful people, their plan is a good one, they should have enough to be able to send a task force. Unless things are not going well. They haven’t shared much of how their fight against the enemy is going, I only know that it is bad. My guess, is that they are in a stalemate with the enemy, and cannot afford to send enough people on the mission,” Eratemus said slowly. “For that, they had come to us, despite our history. The reason that *we* are here is because of that history. Look around, there is eight of us, not the strongest that the Core has to offer, because those would be looked at in worse light than these enemies. We are strong, yes, even you, but the enemy we are facing is unknown at this point. The Empire and a few of us came to an agreement, our help in return for things that... are not important now.”

Eratemus remained still, his body not moving at all, lifeless. After a moment, he continued. “The reason we are here is because we are all that could be spared, all that have a chance to do something. Perhaps not the most powerful, but certainly those able to punch very far above their true power, if only for a few moments. It was what they requested. And we’ve picked a team that would be able to work well together and cover for each other’s weaknesses.”

Zach nodded his head in understanding. It made sense to do that, though he didn't yet know where he fit in the team. Perhaps just his Ethereal kit was enough for them.

"We will know more once we arrive in the Empire," Eratemus said. "I believe that not everything is how our hosts presented it to be. We shall see."

"If they had been fighting the enemy for a while, they must know a lot more about them than we do," Zach added. "Did they share any information that we should know?"

"Not much, which is why this situation is suspect," Eratemus said, then turned to look at Naha again. "I would appreciate it if you could go and scout the Empire and the enemy force out there, after the night turns, of course."

Zach glanced at Naha to see her reaction. He had feared that the only reason she had been sent was because of her closeness with Zach. Few knew her real power and where her mastery lied. That Eratemus knew about her shadow-related powers meant that he had some idea about it.

Something in Zach's expression had to have alerted Eratemus because he spoke again.

"We would not have chosen someone at random for this mission," Eratemus started. "Nahamassa, you are here because of your power and not who you are close with. You are passable as a scout, and in this instance will be useful. But that is not why we brought you."

"Why then?" Naha asked.

"Because we will stay in the Empire for a time while we train with those that the Empire chooses to accompany us, while we learn and practice the plan. We will be outsiders, our movements restricted. They will show us only what they wish us to see, let us hear only that which they wish us to hear. Having someone who could infiltrate the public and listen to what the population thinks and knows, will help us a lot."

They wanted Naha because she was a shapeshifter. He should've seen that before now, but... he hadn't looked at it from that perspective. He had been thinking only about the mission against the monsters, not all that had to come before that. They were going to a foreign nation, one that had an ingrained hate toward people in the Core.

“I would suggest,” Eratemus continued. “That you don’t use your shapeshifting abilities in the presence of the Empire’s people. Transforming into your monster shapes should be fine.”

Naha held the undead’s gaze for a few moments, and then nodded her head in agreement.

With that, the undead gestured and the screen around them disappeared. Zach saw the other members of his team glance in his direction, probably wondering what they had talked about, but quickly they turned back to their business. It seemed that no one was willing to just ask their leader.

Zach didn’t blame them, the undead was terrifying just to look at.

Seeing everyone settle down for the night, made Zach wonder about the others on his team. The only one that he had talked with and had at least some rapport was Maleatus. The cthul man was far more interested in talking with Ryun, and the two women that seemed to know everyone were more content to keep to themselves, though he had seen them talking with Ryun more of late.

Zach hoped that they would all get a chance to know each other better when they arrive at their destination. At least learn how they fought, otherwise, their mission might not last too long.

* * *

They headed out once the moon turned back into the sun. Naha had arrived just before then and had informed Eratemus that she hadn’t managed to see the enemy patrol. She watched the Empire’s second force instead, not wanting to risk them seeing her as she tried to get close to the enemy. Zach supported her decision, there was no need for her to risk something like that now. Eratemus seemed to agree as well.

“There will be more opportunities,” he told her once she returned. “Tell me about their scouts.”

“They were hard to find, even with your directions. Four karura, two skreen, two humans, two kreativean and two demasi. Their presence was obfuscated, I couldn’t determine if it was a perk, an item, or if all of them had

some kind of stealth abilities. And I didn't want to get too close to try and figure it out."

Eratemus tilted his head. "It is hard to tell from this distance, and I dare not press and reveal my sight. I don't know what they can do."

The fact that the undead could somehow detect them so far out was... impressive.

Footsteps interrupted them as someone came closer, before anyone could say anything else. Everyone turned to look at the newcomer, and Zach frowned as he saw that it was Ryun.

"It is an item," he said slowly.

Zach's eyes narrowed as he realized that Ryun had been listening-in somehow.

"You are certain?" Eratemus asked.

"I am," Ryun said. "The effect is spreading from the karura in the center of their formation, from a belt around his waist."

Eratemus took a step closer, looking at Ryun with interest. "I had hoped to speak with you at some time as you are one of the people on this mission that I know least about. You were recommended by Selia, and I respect her opinion, but I need to know what you can do for myself. I had planned on speaking once we arrive in the Empire, as I couldn't be on the ship during the travel."

"Why was that?" Ryun asked.

"I was fighting a war in the Core," Eratemus said simply. "I might still need to pull back from time to time, we shall see. What is important now is information, if you could sense their scouts then your range is sufficient that you probably sensed the enemy patrol."

"It is," Ryun said.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Zach asked before Eratemus could say anything.

Ryun's eyes met Zach's. "There was no need, Eratemus was already aware of it."

Before Zach could say anything else, the undead spoke again. "That is true, still, tell me what you sensed of the enemy patrol. My sight in this vessel was not meant for precision."

“There are twenty of them, none are any kind of monsters that we’ve fought at the Tournament. They are... people, minotaurs and humans. There is something about them, the way that their bodies move that... I don’t know what it is, I’ve never sensed anything like that.”

The undead nodded. “Taken, then.”

“Taken?” Zach asked.

“They were people, before the enemy captured and turned them to their side. They are... husks that know and possess all the power that they had before. We’ve encountered a few of them in the core, though... most that disappear and are believed to have been taken do not venture out of the enemy’s territory. They are... building up their forces there for something.”

“What reason would the Empire’s people have to hide their presence here?” Naha asked.

Eratemus waved his hand. “I have found that answers are usually much simpler than what we imagine them to be. They could simply not want us to know about the taken, or they are afraid that if we know that they had reached this far, we might turn back and go home in fear of the enemy bypassing the Empire. In the end the reasons don’t matter, we know that they are there, and we know about them keeping things from us. That alone gives us an advantage and tells us many things about our allies.”

“That they are untrustworthy?” Ryun asked.

“That they might need our help, but they are certainly not excited for it,” Eratemus said, he turned to Naha and continued. “I want you out every night, scouting our surrounding and keeping an eye on things.”

He then turned to look at Ryun. “And I want you to keep looking as well, one can never know what type of power our enemies have, and which ones would be able to hide from which.”

Ryun nodded his head.

“I wish that we had more privacy to speak more freely, but...” Eratemus trailed off.

Zach understood what he meant. If Ryun had been able to hear through his screen, there was no way of knowing if someone else had the same ability.

“For now, we should focus on reaching our destination without any major encounters,” Eratemus added. “We cannot afford getting slowed down. The trip is too long as it is.”

Zach knew that everyone agreed with that.

A few minutes later, they were on their way again.