

## **Interlude - Wardens**

Bera looked around her small fort, watched the people walking around with purpose for the first time in years. Wardens training, a glimmer in their eyes with every swing of their weapons. Crafters working overtime, preparing supplies for the war. She saw it in their faces, in the way that they talked. Something had been reignited inside of them, they wanted to go, to retake their home. They didn't understand that the Wardens were over, one way or the other.

She didn't say anything about that, not yet. There were things at the Citadel that they couldn't let fall in the wrong hands. Resources that she hadn't been able to move in time. The Citadel might be retaken, but things would never be the same again. The world was changed. Factions had turned on one another, and now everyone looked for the concealed knife. Nearly all factions that had once had agreements with the Wardens had revoked them, and those that hadn't probably just had more important things to worry about. The time of them policing across the Settled Territories was long since passed. A faction that had once had millions, was barely a scant few thousand now.

Bera closed her eyes, cursing her Class. She knew how many had died, she knew how many abandoned them, and she knew every name. Sometimes it hurt to think about it, because ultimately she had failed. The Wardens had failed. They were unable to keep the peace.

Those who remained were the believers. Those who wanted to help people above all else. She was grateful for them, they honored the memories of those that had died. Her thoughts turned to Yirrel, her friend. She had grieved for her friend, years ago. Back when Bera had been made faction leader and knew that that meant only one thing, Yirrel was dead. She had tried to keep them together, to keep her friend's legacy alive. And she failed. She had been defeated, lost.

And then... Two wardens returned, Zacharia Gardner and Nahamassa Plainrunner. A Ranker of the Seventh Iteration, who once came to their Citadel searching for power. A serial killer who should've been punished, but had instead been allowed to live in hopes that she would prove useful in the future. They've changed, so much so that it almost boggled the

mind. They survived things that Bera doubted many would. And they've gotten so strong that Bera could barely believe it.

She looked down into the courtyard from the balcony, and found a small workstation in the corner, nestled between two walls. Two people sat there, bent over the table, looking at the contraption there. One a crafter, and the other Zacharia Gardner.

He had requested that she find him someone who knew how to make slave collars, and she had. It was easy enough with her skill set. It had been her job to find people, to make connections and know things. She didn't know if what he wanted was possible, but she admired him trying. Anything that he needed, she would provide. She had to keep him and Nahamassa here, with the Wardens. They were the most powerful people in the faction. And they were their only hope of restoring anything resembling their old mission.

Neither had shared their screens with her yet, and she didn't press. But she already had an idea about what she would see. There was something about Zach that was ever present. Most people probably noticed it, only without knowing what it was. They would rationalize it away, she knew, those weak enough that they couldn't really sense what it was. May of the stronger ones would do to, they would simply get a feeling that he was strong. But she knew, she had met a Sage before. She didn't know how he had achieved that, he didn't go in depth on his power, but she could guess. That alone put him at the top of the Infinite Realm.

Of course, it didn't mean that he was as strong, though she suspected he was. She had felt a strange effect around him when they talked. Almost as if... as if they were all trapped in that moment, like the world around them didn't matter. And at the same time, it was the opposite, as if there was something about him that was always moving forward.

She didn't know how to explain it, but it was clearly an effect on the Essence he had mastered.

She hoped that they decided to stay, that they help her try to salvage what was left. She needed them far more than they needed her. And now with this war... perhaps the Wardens could redeem themselves in the eyes of the people. Not be looked at as just another faction that had fallen apart the moment hard times arrived. In less than a month they would be traveling to a kingdom on the border of the Sect Territories, to meet

up with the rest of the armies. She still didn't know what to think about that. That the sects were the ones that saw the danger and decided to act while the rest just... It was humiliating. But at least she had a way forward now, something to do other than trying to hold everything together.

She took a deep breath, and then headed down the stairs, over to give Zach the report she just received.

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## **Zach**

The slave collars were simple in a way. They bound the collared person's soul, it was almost like an oath of absolute service, if Zach was understanding it correctly.

"The collar itself can be made out of anything," the crafter said, his eyes evading Zach's own. Embarrassed and terrified in equal measure. Zach wasn't going to hurt the man, which he had told him several times. Bera had assured him that the man no longer crafted and sold the collars, and everyone deserved a second chance.

"It is—th—these here," he pointed at the rough lines inside of collar. "That truly matter."

"You said that these are arrays?" Zach asked.

"Y—yes warden," the crafter said.

"So, they are created through power?"

"In most cases, yes," the crafter bowed his head.

"Explain that to me," Zach said.

"We—well, you see, sir, it can be created by someone who has a Slavemaster or related Class. Those people are rare, that Class is illegal in most of the Settled Territories. The other, and more common variant is created by... c-crafters."

"How?"

"Well," the crafter swallowed audibly. "Most crafters have an archive perk of some kind. Where they can store any arrays that they know. Then a power that allowed them to create it on cooldown."

"How does one get such a design in the first place?"

"As you would assume, w-warden. Through some... unsavory means."

Zach narrowed his eyes. “Do you know who invented these in the first place?”

“Whoever it was, is long dead by now warden,” the crafter said hurriedly. “I believe that there had been a big... uproar when they first appeared, and the creator executed. By then it was too late, the knowledge spread, y-you see.”

Zach grimaced, it was abhorrent, but there wasn't much that he could do about it, yet.

“You said that each collar is linked to one... *owner*?”

“Yes, s-sir.”

“How many... owners, do you think a city filled with hundreds of thousands of slaves would have?”

“Not many wa-warden,” the crafter said immediately.

“Really?” Zach raised an eyebrow.

He nodded. “People like that... they don't share much. And having so many slaves all have different owners just invites trouble.”

“And killing the owner does nothing?” Zach asked.

“It will no free them, no, they would still be bound by any orders they were given before the owner's death.”

Zach picked up the collar in hand, he needed to figure out a way to break it without killing the person around whose neck it was. That was... going to take a while.

“Thank you, we'll speak again,” Zach said and stood up. As he was walking away from the workbench, he noticed Commander Bera coming his way.

“Warden Zacharia,” she greeted him. “I have a new report for you.”

Zach tilted his head. “About?”

“The slave city,” she said. “Sadly, we don't have anything too detailed, especially not about the city itself. But the taken and the traitors regularly leave the city with their slaves on work details. We have rough numbers.”

She offered a piece of paper, and he took it, reading it immediately.

She was right, it wasn't detailed. But it did have some interesting things, like the estimated number of slaves, taken and traitors. “Only eight owners?” Zach asked once he reached that point.

“That is what I was informed of,” Bera answered. “It does make sense; they are all traitors. No taken had been seen actually collaring people. It

is my assumption that there are no taken with Slavemaster Classes—which is possible, probable even, that Class is rare in the Settled Territories. And only eight does make sense as well. People with such Classes are hunted down in most Territories. Some persist at the edges, on the Frontiers, but even there they know to tread lightly. There are regulations about what kind of orders they can give, and how they can treat slaves, regulations that even the Wardens enforce—or we enforced rather.”

Zach nodded his head. “Not many then.”

“Do you have a plan?” Bera asked as they walked back into the keep.

“Naha and I have been talking,” Zach admitted. “I do have some ideas.”

“Anything you want to share?”

“An attack on the city will never work,” Zach said. “They will use the slaves as soldiers, force them to defend them, which would defeat the purpose of trying to save them. No, we need to infiltrate the city, kill the owners and then attempt to free them afterward.”

“You don’t think that threatening them and having them release them of their own free will would work?” Bera questioned.

“I had wondered if these people deserved a second chance,” Zach said slowly. “It has occurred to me that they had probably been doing this before, and had decided to join in with the taken in order to do it freely.”

“You don’t think that they would accept, not even to save their lives?”

“Naha tells me that it is doubtful, but we are still planning.”

Bera nodded. “I would like to come with you.”

That made Zach blink. “You don’t want to go to the Citadel?”

“There are other wardens who know it as well as I do, and they can ensure that the army knows the way in and secure our interests there. What you are doing... it is what the Wardens were meant for. And I believe that my skillset can provide your mission with greatest benefits. There will be people better suited for war on the other battlefields.”

Zach stopped and turned to look her in the eyes. He saw the sincerity there, but beyond that he saw... a kindred spirit. Someone who believed that lives should be preserved. That the rules should be the same for everyone.

“I would be glad to have you with us,” Zach told her.

For a moment her face turned surprised, but it was quickly gone. “Thank you. I’ll make sure that everything is ready for departure. Warden,” she inclined her head, and walked away.

Zach remained there watching her go, and then frowned when he realized that she had been acting a bit... subordinate to him. He shook his head and went to find Naha. They had planning to do.