Aftermath

Ra'azel Equinar, the yeti, enemy, untrustworthy, dangerous. Zach remembered the carvings in stone, but more than it he felt a sense of fear every time he thought on those carvings.

He walked a few steps in one direction, then turned and walked back, pacing. The dragon, the Explorer's Soul, had told Zach what it knew, which was little. Zach knew more from what Naha had told him, and he passed that on to the dragon.

"A prisoner," the dragon said slowly. "The warden refuses to communicate with anyone outside his prison. If he had talked with us… Alas, we cannot change the past. What I knew of the yeti had already been bad enough, a shade butchering and mutilating spirits, trying to leave the Ethereal Realm. It was a threat beyond any other in this Realm. Shades are not meant to leave this place."

Zach grimaced, his hand tightening on the **Sealing Blade of Learning** on his waist. He didn't dare turn his right hand into a blade, he didn't know what else the yeti had done to it, but he also didn't want to stand in this realm without a weapon.

"It is a tragedy, that a Ra of my people had fallen so far," Ra'vallim's voice whispered in Zach's mind.

Zach was still struggling with understanding what had happened. The yeti had obviously made plans that were years in the making. And he had managed to escape the Ethereal Realm even with it being closed off. Zach was yet to wrap his head around the dragon who had the power to close

down an entire realm. He had never met anyone with that much power, just standing in his presence made him feel the weight of his will.

"Can't you follow?" Zach said finally, turning his head to look at the dragon. "You stopped him from leaving this place, can't you bring him back?"

The great dragon shook his head. "I am not a spirit or a shade, I am a Soul that had chosen this Realm as my domain. Here is where I belong."

"I need to get back, who knows what the yeti had already done," Zach bit out.

"A Ra is a title of distinction, granted to the greatest of our kind. And from all that we've learned, he is not one for rash actions. He will take the time to make sure whatever he plans, works."

"The old soul is correct," the dragon said and Zach blinked.

"You can hear his voice?"

The dragon inclined his head. "He has a will therefore he imprints on the world."

Zach took a deep breath. "Regardless, I have to return, I need to know what happened after I was pulled here."

The dragon met his eyes. "As you will, Scion of Time," he said slowly. It was... eerie, to hear the dragon speak, offer respect. It made it seem like he could see straight through Zach, perhaps he could. "But as you are, you are no match for Ra'azel, no one in your world is. You will need powerful allies."

Zach closed his eyes, remembering how uniting against Hastur and the taken went. Even now more than half of the world was ignoring the threat, and they had seen the taken and dome monsters.

"I'll do what I can," Zach said, then glanced at his blade arm. "I just wish that I could tell if he hid something else in here."

The dragon shifted and put his head closer to Zach. "Show me."

Zach glanced at the dragon, then did as he asked. The dragon sniffed at his arm, then Zach felt a great will exude pressure on his entire body. For a moment, he felt weightless, as if he was floating above a great yet unexplored world. He felt the joy of seeing new sights, and of naming things no one had seen before. And then it was gone, and the dragon pulled back.

"I sense nothing untoward remaining, the thing he used to switch your places feels drained to me, but then again I do not understand his power fully. If it is worth anything, I don't believe that he could've done more, just that would've taken a lot of power even for someone like me."

Zach nodded; he should be glad to have gotten that much at least. The only thing he could do now was get stronger and try to understand his arm better on his own.

I will remove my lock on the Ethereal Realm, I doubt that Ra'azel will risk entering it again. I would bid you return to meet with me again, if you wish to oppose Ra'azel, there many things I can teach you."

Zach looked at the dragon, wondering if doing as it asked would be smart. He had never been faced with someone as powerful as the dragon was. A part of him was... scared. Still, what happened had shown him exactly how lacking he was. He had lost a fight, and the result was far reaching. Finally, Zach nodded his head.

"I will," he told the dragon.

"I shall lock my domain and pair it with the area from which you entered into this realm, if you wish to speak with me enter the Ethereal Realm through there."

Zach nodded, then pulled out his sword and focused on his perk, **Gate Fissure**. With an effort of power and will he cut in front of himself and opened a gate into the Real Realm. He stepped through and felt the world twist and then he was back. He landed in the square where he had been fighting just an hour before, the discrepancy between the passage of time was apparent immediately.

The sun was in the sky, burning brightly. And there were all the people around him. They screamed and ran away from him, which made him glance down and see that he was still covered in armor that was half melted and filled with holes, and also painted with blood. He raised a hand and touched his face as he remembered that that too was… unsightly.

Before he could try and set them at ease, Naha stepped out of a shadow and launched herself at him.

"You are okay," she whispered into his neck. Zach returned her embrace.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," Zach told her.

They remained like that for a while, and Zach let himself finally relax. She was fine, and that meant that all was alright.

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Bera, Okim, Naha, and Zach sat around a table in a small office in one of the still standing buildings. Most of the city had been reduced to slag, and they'd been clearing the rubble and trying to recover as much as they could in terms of supplies from the rubble. They were having a shortage of food, especially with so many people who had been underfed to begin with it.

They had just finished filling him in about everything that happened since he fell into the trap, which was almost three weeks ago by their count. The yeti had arrived in Zach's stead, killed someone important who Zach had never heard about, or if he had he didn't remember. Then he left, and they hadn't been able to track him nor had they heard anything about the yeti. The people that attacked him, the Unchained apparently—the people who had opened the Hastur's dome in the first place—escaped. After that, the city was theirs. Vitor was recovering from his injuries, he had survived because the fire ideal had killed his opponent, while Vitor managed to survive the fire with the aid of his potions.

They had accomplished their mission, they had freed those who had been enslaved. But now they were responsible for them.

"Ereclaw is in the city," Naha said. "He is Ryun's contracted partner, you won't remember him, but he is a wolf-beast. He had been sent here to try and stop the yeti. He wishes to speak with you, when you have the time."

Zach nodded. "After, first tell me about the city and the people."

"We have many problems," Bera started. "The state of the city and the territory is probably at the top of the list. The food stores had been burnt down, as was the city vault, the fort is buried under the mountain so we don't know exactly what survived down there. Our most pressing issues

are the former slaves, many of them had been transported here from other territories, from factions that no longer exist. They don't have where to go, and we don't have the resources to feed them. I've been combing through them, looking for individuals that have certain talents, organizing them, sending out hunting parties and the like. But if we continue as we are, we will run out of food in two weeks."

"And your solution?" Zach asked, he was sure that she had one.

"We focus on digging out the fort, the interface is probably down there. If we take over the territory I will be able to tap into the warden accounts and the auction. I'll be able to buy everything that we need to."

"And you haven't been focusing on that because?"

"The miners that could get through the rock, are refusing to. It is understandable, they had just been released from being slaves, forced to work in mines, they are afraid of just trading one master for another."

Zach grimaced, that was an understandable fear, though not acceptable if it would cause them to starve.

"What do you suggest?" Bera asked.

"I've tried talking with them… unsuccessfully. The Warden Faction had failed them you see, but… perhaps you will have more success."

Zach tilted his head. "Why?"

"Because of who you are, they will remember your name from the list of those who had killed Hastur," Bera said. "That alone will mean a lot."

Zach turned his eyes to Naha. "Why didn't you try to do that?"

She looked away, then murmured something that he didn't quite catch.

Bera cleared her throat. "We had some issues with the... slavemasters. Once we let them wake up, some of them tried to enslave the now freed slaves. Naha, understandably stepped in, though her... methods were a bit... gruesome. The people are afraid of her."

"Ah," Zach said. "Very well then, I'll talk with them. Anything else?"

Bera glanced at the others, then met his eyes. "Yes, we've managed to get in contact with the army."

Zach raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"Well, the offensive is over," Bera said with a strange look in her eyes.

Zach could tell that there was a lot more behind those words, so he took a deep breath and prepared himself.

"Tell me what happened."