

Warning

Zach reflected on how he reached this point. Barely an hour ago, he had passed through the wooden gates that surrounded the small town, that was the new home of the Great House Ishtal. He was being escorted by two of their patrol members that had found him walking at the border of this territory. The initial meeting had been... tense. Zach had wondered what would've happened if he wasn't as strong as he was. If someone else had stumbled on them. If he was being honest with himself, he didn't need to wonder, not really. He had seen what was in the cave behind the stone, where these people's scouts had tortured two of Ryun's people. Nothing he saw now made him think that the patrol would've acted any way different if they were able.

His strength bought him time, enough to introduce himself. They recognized the name, most people in the world knew it. He was yet to get accustomed to that, but it did have its uses. His name gained him access.

The town was... it had clearly started as a camp; the signs were there. And their headquarters was a sturdy and blocky building raised by the power over the Earth and Stone. Inside was sparsely decorated, unlike what he had experienced in the sects. It was clear that other things were on the minds of people living here. They were refugees, trying to survive in the world. He had sympathy for them, which was why he felt so disappointed by what he was hearing.

It hadn't taken them long to take him to their leaders, for them to offer false respect and to question his presence. They knew of him, but they didn't really know him. All that these people knew was that he was part of the team sent to kill Hastur. A team, that in their eyes at least, failed. They had killed Hastur too late to save their way of life. The Empire had lost.

Zach felt sympathetic, he understood. He felt as he always did when he saw people that were struggling. He wanted to help. And yet, there was

no way for him to do that, not when the world they lived in had such harsh realities.

And not when they lied to his face.

“We assure you,” their leader, Lord Farrey of Great House Ishtal, spoke and Zach pulled his wandering mind to reality. Focused his attention on him and the other people in the room staring at him. He did not miss the fact that most of the people in the room were armed, that they watched his every move with attentiveness. They were in equal measure scared and resolute. “We had no knowledge of any acts such as you accuse us of. I can give you a promise that we will get to the bottom of it as soon as you return our people to us.”

Zach sighed and shook his head. “Your people are dead, executed for their crimes.”

The Lord of the Great House paused, Zach felt the air change inside the room. “You executed my people without allowing us a chance to ascertain their guilt?”

“Their guilt was not in question,” Zach said slowly.

“That was not for you to decide,” Lord Farrey said.

He was strong, that much Zach could tell, he had a high tier, definitely tier nine Class. The people in the room were too. Even the ones that pretended to be servants. He saw the flaws in the way that the air moved through the room, the gaps where they had carefully concealed killholes, and other traps. They had escorted him beneath the ground, beneath their headquarters. Zach had to wonder what kind of people built something like this when they didn't even have a proper city. Why was such a thing a priority? Perhaps he just wasn't as acquainted with subterfuge as they were.

He felt the Aspect of Space and even some time in the walls, active arrays. He sensed the flaws in the proper harmony of the world, as the vibrations shook the space from the footsteps above.

“You misunderstand,” Zach said as he shook his head sadly. Perhaps it was his fault, for not making it clear from the beginning. “I came here in order to try and save your lives.”

Lord Farrey’s eyes narrowed. “Save our lives? Are you threatening us?”

Zach sighed. What was it about power, that made most people become... this. A warped person so blinded by themselves that they did not entertain anything beyond their sphere. It was a failure of this Infinite World, a glaring blight that only a few could see. The people in this world were brought up on the examples of power. It was all that mattered to them. If they had more of it, if they felt confident, then there was no allowance for a meaningful dialog. It was their way, or death. Simple.

Zach abhorred it. “You sent your people to prepare the way and protect the territory. You are expanding rapidly, and that territory was a key in your plans. It contains enough resources that you need to fuel further expansion. It would’ve allowed you to build better defenses, to settle the territories you already have. You knew that you were close to the borders of the Twilight Melody Sect, and you knew that they were expanding. You had to claim the territory before them. You gave them the orders to capture anyone that came to scout the territory, to make them disappear and make it seem like they died to monsters. To delay the sect from taking the territory until you were ready,” he shook his head. “And why? Just because House Ornn, who were your rivals, are part of the sect? Because you didn’t think that you could work out a deal. Well, now it is too late for anything.”

“I don’t know what you think you know but I will not have—”

Zach stood, interrupting him. Everyone in the room tensed, Zach just continued talking. “Your people were executed a month ago,” then, he looked around the room, at the walls, exactly where their arrays were. “You have some arrays that prevent scrying powers. But it seems that most of them are geared toward a certain type of power. Though, in the end it didn’t matter, not really. You have rooms that can’t be observed or listened in on, but you still speak outside of them. A whole month of you

discussing your plans, of digging a deeper hole for yourselves without knowing it.”

Zach turned his head and met the Lord’s eyes again. “I can’t delay this much longer. So, surrender, take responsibility for your actions. It is hard, I know, but it is right. You tried to walk over the lives of others, you should’ve known that blood spilled always comes due. Do the right thing, and you might find mercy. Your people will continue. This is all that I can do for you, because I believe that a chance should be given to everyone.”

Lord Ferrey stood as well. “You are alone, inside my territory, surrounded by my people. I don’t know what you think you’ve learned, but you will tell us everything about what the Ornns are planning.”

Zach sighed, the man signaled, and his people got ready. Zach shifted his right hand; the gray skin of the Greater Windsong Aspect gave way to the darker green of Time. He found that using the Shade Reaver as a focus made it easier to connect to the Planes of an Aspect. It did make a lot of sense, his arm was connected to those planes on high level, one that was part of the Framework but also extended deeper into what was there before. The foundations upon which the Framework was built.

The image of the River of Time blossomed inside of his mind as people in the room started to move his way, as the trap arrays in the wall started to activate. The River had countless currents, all moving forward, each representing a person who could impact its flow. A single current was often helpless before the might of the combined stream, unable to change anything. Though Zach has learned how to differentiate the stronger currents, those who could affect the direction of the stream.

He found himself in the stream and expanded his senses beyond his own current to those around him in the real world. Affecting the stream with his will was... hard. He discovered that trying to control another person’s stream was incredibly difficult. Akin to an ant trying to move a mountain. It took a great amount of will. Using his power on the world was easier.

He didn't touch their currents with his own will, instead he activated **Time Stop**. Now, he understood better what it was that the ability did. It froze the currents around him for a short time, preventing them from moving forward. As they froze, he moved forward, faster as his will seeped into his **|Of Time, Movement, and Space|** skill, as his mastery over the **Aspect of Time** let him accelerate his own current.

They were frozen for a single second, relative to the time the world moved forward at. But Time was not the same for Zach as it was for them. He stepped around them and blinked out of the room to the corridor outside. Then got out of their headquarters by the time his ability ran out.

He switched his back to **Greater Windsong Aspect** and then moved the wind around him, flying into the air at great speed. He saw the commotion bellow him but didn't pay much mind to it. He was... disappointed, as he often was, by the hubris of people.

"I tried," Zach said to the empty air, then flew away, landing on a hill overlooking the small town. The clouds in the sky were churning, moving in a circle directly above the town. Zach watched, knowing what was going to happen.

The sky split open, a round hole appearing above them letting the light shine down on them. Then the clouds started to fall, twisting around in a circle, like a massive tornado. A black shape fell through the center, hitting the ground where the headquarters were just a few moments before the clouds touched the ground and separated the inner part of the town from the rest, obscuring everything from the view.

It was both to keep the guilty in, and to keep the rest of the people out. Most of them were guilty only of following unworthy leaders. Though it had taken a bit for Zach to convince Ryun of that. In his eyes, it was their fault as well, for deciding to follow them.

Zach sighed but didn't turn his gaze away. Naha stepped out of his shadow.

"What are you thinking about?" She asked.

“You know what I’m thinking about,” Zach answered.

“Their failures are not on you, none of this is,” Naha said.

Of course, he knew that. Ryun had spent a better part of a month listening in on these people, gathering enough to know if he could pass a sentence. He had decided that they should die after the third day. The rest was Zach trying to convince him to give it more time and allow most of the people to live. They were people put in difficult circumstances, no matter the crimes of their leaders. Even though under some laws many of them would’ve been guilty.

“This shouldn’t have happened; it is all so... pointless.”

“They don’t know any better,” Naha said.

Zach nodded. “Sadly,” he closed his eyes. “But they should. Yet they don’t even have the opportunity to learn. It seems like every person in this world strives only for power, so much so that they never learn anything else. And I see now how the river has shaped the path through time to arrive here. They never know any real peace, don’t they? Even those who are somewhat *safe* are exposed to the horrors and the constant need to get better. It makes them all like... that,” he waved his hand at the cyclone of air and clouds.

“It is the way of the world,” Naha added. “There will always be evil in the world.”

Zach glanced at his hand, he opened his fist, and looked at his palm. “I’ve been trying to think of a way to change the world. To help people grow, to keep them safe and give them a chance. But even with my power I can’t change the world, not enough for it to matter, not now. So, I’ll do it. I’ll make a small place, that I know I can keep safe. A place where anyone can come and learn and be confident that nothing and no one is going to threaten them. A place where they will have the time to grow. I can’t change the world on my own, but I can shape people, influence enough generations, raise enough exceptional people, and they will shape the world in my stead. And I’ll gather those who think as I do, like the

Wardens, those who want to act and protect. A group that I can send out to fight that evil while we nurture those that can shape the world. It might take a hundred, or even a thousand years, but the world will change from this eat or be eaten hellscape.”

He had been trying to put the pieces together for a long time. Now, it finally felt like he had a true purpose to work towards.

“And I’ll be there with you, your shadow, as always,” Naha said.

The cyclone stilled and the clouds broke and rose, revealing what was behind. The Headquarters and the surrounding buildings were gone, only ruins remained.