

Responsibility

They walked along the riverbank. The gentle sounds of the water filled the air, the chirping of birds in the trees nearby, the sounds of training in the distance. He rested the palm of his hand on the pommel of his sword, feeling the reassuring sensation of peace from the soul trapped inside of it. On one side of the river was a small town, built what seemed yesterday to Zach, but was in fact a decade ago. Even now, he still struggled to account for the passage of time, every once in a while he would be overcome with a feeling that he had just blinked and that the world around him had changed. Perhaps it did, it was what Ra'vallim had taught him, everything is **change**.

The town was still expanding, wooden buildings springing up what seemed like daily. On the other side of the river was the small fort that the Wardens called their home. It was not imposing, nor did it hold the sense of importance that Zach was told the name of the Wardens once held. It was to be expected, of course. They had lost much of what they once were, but they remained. Such as they were.

A few Wardens had returned after the war, when the teleporters were turned back on and the wars ended, but most had not remained. Their numbers fluctuated, some returned for a time only, while others left entirely, until they numbered roughly a hundred. It was a fraction of what they used to be.

Zach glanced up at the fort on the hill. He knew that there would be people there, Wardens, training in the yard just

outside of the fort, obscured from his sight by the trees surrounding the hill. They kept up with it, preparing for the future, even though it was uncertain. He felt Naha over there in the same direction. He had started keeping his True-link perk on at times, just to be able to tell where she was. It grounded him.

Bera kept his pace, which was leisurely, he did not invite for her to speak, letting her choose the moment herself. He could almost feel it when she made the decision, the river of time flowed ever onward, but the moment was marked on its banks, as all choices were.

“I wanted to bring up the... old matter, again,” she said, her voice even and steady. Not showing even the ounce of the frustration that she had to feel.

“I’ve given my answer already,” Zach told her.

This made her sigh. “It would help us immensely. My powers are meant to be used as support; they are not for leading. The Wardens need you.”

“You can put others in the position, Okim is a solid pick,” Zach told her.

Bera stopped walking and Zach did the same, then turned to face her.

“You know that it isn’t the same. Your name would bring people to our faction, and we need them.”

Zach tilted his head. “I am already part of the Wardens; my name is already helping.”

“It isn’t the same and you know it. You’ve seen it.”

He had, of course. A few had tried to join the Wardens over the years, simply because Zach was in the faction. They left once they realized that Zach didn’t do anything for the faction. That he spent his time in the grove, sitting in the same spot and contemplating Essence.

“The Wardens have lost too much,” Bera continued. “You could help us rebuild.”

Zach knew that, of course. What wealth the Wardens had, Bera had sold from the Citadel’s vaults to help them survive the wars and buy safety for her people. All except Yirrel’s private vault that she had been unable to get into, and which was now probably in the hands of the Exalted Empire. They had lost it all, their territory, people, influence. Bera had known that they had lost it all even before the Exalted Empire arrived, it was why they hadn’t contested their ownership. The Wardens as a faction remained only because of the respect their previous actions had bought them. And perhaps in part because of Zach and Naha.

Bera had tried to rebuild, but... The time when the Wardens could have a role in other factions was passed. The wars had bred distrust among them all, few would allow Wardens the freedoms that they enjoyed before. Zach knew that Bera had trouble seeing it. He had noticed that many people around him had the tendency to live in the past, refusing to accept the present. He might be slow to move and act, but he understood change. It was a certainty, the river changed with every piece of land it consumed in front of it, it carved something new. Ra’vallim had shown him the truth of it.

“I do not know if the Wardens should be rebuilt, if I am being honest,” Zach said. He had felt that way for a long while. Seeing the confused look on her face, Zach continued.

“I do agree with the ideas behind what the Wardens stand for, Bera. I believe that I joined because it was the right thing to do, and I remain here because it still is. We are still a force for good, even diminished as we are.”

“But we could be so much more!” She said, her expression intense. “There are still people out there suffering, there are still criminals inflicting pain. Just because the wars ended, does not mean that it all stops. I know that you are looking at the domes, I understand that they are a great danger, but there are people who are focused on them. There is no one who is looking after the regular people!”

“How many do you think that we could save or help?” Zach asked.

Bera frowned. “With the right resources, with more people? The Wardens are capable of keeping millions of people safe.”

Zach glanced away for a moment, looking at the river flowing gently next to them. “I believe that we differ in the scope that we are looking at. For you, these last few years look like a long time. A long period during which I had done nothing but sit in my grove, and exchange missives with other world leaders from time to time. Yes?”

“Yes,” Bera said.

Zach nodded, then turned to look back at her. “For me, it is the Eight Iteration arrived only yesterday. It is how it feel to me.

Time moves quicker for me than it does for you. Or at least my perception of it does. Where we differ, I believe, is in scale.”

“Scale?” Bera tilted her head.

“I want to protect people; I want to give everyone a chance to be free and to make of their lives whatever they wish. And I fear that the longer we speak, the less I believe that the Wardens can help me achieve that.”

“Then take the spot of our leader and change it!” She stomped on the ground with one of her hooves. “We will change into what you want us to be.”

Zach smiled. “I do not think that you would like the changes that I would make. We, you, would not be Wardens anymore.”

“If that is what needs to happen, then so be it,” Bera said firmly.

“You say that, but you don’t really know what I am talking about,” Zach added.

“Then explain it to me, tell me and let us choose.”

Zach looked back at the river, thinking. It was... hard for him to accept the way that this world worked. The way that everyone attached themselves to those who had power, how they looked at them to lead them. Perhaps it was inevitable, it was a reality of the world, that those who had power could enforce their views. Zach had always wanted to use his to protect people, it was all he ever wished for. Back in the mind prison, and even before. It was one thing about him that never changed, and that he did not believe ever would.

But there were many different ways to protect people. And when different leaders said “people” they referred to different things. Some meant only *their* people, others only *their* race, those that they liked, or those that were loyal to them. So many factions, so many differing opinions and sides. It was impossible to protect everyone. And Zach had seen what evil looked like, a band around the neck. He had struggled to find a way to keep them all safe, to prevent such things from happening.

Until he realized that he couldn't, no matter how much power he had, he would never be able to reach to them all. Not even if he could command Time to stop. So, he had spent the years contemplating, learning, mastering himself and his Aspects. And thinking, trying to find a purpose that he could put his all in.

He had found it, and Hiro was his first step onto a path that he was planning on embracing. The Wardens... if he was being honest, he struggled with them, with what he owed and what they deserved. They were people like him who wanted to do good, and who had suffered because of their desire.

“It would mean the end of the Wardens,” Zach said slowly, feeling the thrum of encouragement from the sword on his hip.

“All things die in the winter and then in the spring they feed the growth of something new,” Ra'vallim's voice whispered in his head.

The old soul was right, as he often was.

“We trust you,” Bera said slowly. “We believe that you would not lead us awry. And we need something to believe in. We are

barely hanging on as it is; the end of the Wardens is coming one way or the other.”

Zach took a deep breath, and then he nodded his head.