

## Interlude - March

The camp was... glorious. At least he thought so. So many warriors, soldiers, so many factions. It had to be the largest army assembled in the recent memory. Perhaps ever. The entire might of the Sects was gathered here. The petty wars of the last few decades were nothing compared to this. It filled him with joy. He couldn't wait for the march. He had even polished his horns and put in a new ring in his snout. It was a great occasion.

"Focus, you dumb war-head," a voice from his side hissed at him.

Vesterius turned his head and gave Maleatus a big grin. "C'mon, this is... everything I ever wanted. A big war to play in. I can't wait."

"Focus horny, we need to make sure we are in the right place," Mal said.

Vesterius summoned his great axe, leaned on his shoulder and glared at the ravzor. "What did I tell you about calling me that."

"Fine, fine, just remember and make sure that we are assigned with the—"

"—I know, I know," Vesterius said. "You don't need to remind me all the fucking time."

"I need to remind you, otherwise your worthless Mind Essence will just forget."

"Ha, ha," Vesterius said deadpan. They really should try and find Selia and Erdania, he was certain that they were around here somewhere. At least that was what Maleatus said their plan had been when they returned from the Empire. Vesterius was still pissed that they didn't invite him, seeing a war fought across an entire Empire...

The camps were filled with people, and it was all so different than what he was used to. There was no real organization, no neat rows. Tents were just... placed in groupings, surrounded by rows of low planks to designate different sects. And the people, so many different shapes, different true bodies, color was everywhere and it was... clean. It was... beautiful. Tents had designs sewed into them, banners were works of art, even the people walking around were clean and touched up as if they were going to some high functions. Compared to the muddy and dirty camps that he had

walked through before... he shook his head. He looked forward to experiencing how the Sects fought in wars.

“Tell me again where we need to be,” Mal said.

“You are not going to drop this, are you,” Vesterius said, annoyed.

“Not until you say it and I am certain that you won’t forget. The moment they tell you anything about the war, that is all that you will be thinking about.”

Vesterius opened his mouth to rebuke him, but then closed it. There was... some truth to that.

“I need to get us attached to the armies heading to the Citadel, there, I remember,” Vesterius told him.

“Good,” Mal said.

“You sure that it is alright?” Vesterius asked.

“Sigmund doesn’t care, and everyone else will be too busy with the fighting,” Mal said. “It will be the perfect opportunity to sneak in.”

“If you say so Mal, I’m just here to fight.”

“I know, that’s why I brought you,” Mal told him.

“Sigmund is the one who called,” Vesterius corrected.

“As if your slow ass could’ve gotten here in time without me,” Mal snorted.

Vesterius narrowed his eyes, but then shook his head. They had reached the command section of the camp, time to find someone important and get them signed up.

“Where did you say Vryull was again?”

“With the Twilight Melody Sect,” Mal told him, his eyes narrowing dangerously on him.

Vesterius tried to commit the name to memory, though, if he was being honest, he was probably going to forget.

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Zach looked down at the slave collar in his hands. He had tried to figure it out for days now, but... It was hard. The most he could do was try to lean on his telekinesis and attempt to use Soul, Mind, or Time with it. Which was harder than it sounded. He wasn’t a Cultivator to have a source of Essence, and he had no Class perks for such a thing. Time was

easier, he could touch the Plane of Time with a thought, but that didn't help him with this.

What they assumed was that one needed a power to remove them forcibly without killing the enslaved. A specific class most likely. Though, he believed that every focus should have a way to do it. He didn't understand exactly how a Cultivator would do it, but then Cultivation was never his strong suit. Skills though... He had an idea, but first he wanted to see what the collar does.

"You sure about this?" Naha whispered.

"Yes, I trust you," Zach said.

Naha took a deep breath, then lifted the collar from his hand and put it around his neck. The sensation was... similar to what he had felt before, the wall, or rather the oppression of it on his soul. It was not the same, though, and that became apparent when he felt it squeeze his soul tighter. This was not like what Hastur was doing, that had been the gentle guidance of an unmovable will. This, this was an invasion. He wanted to flare his will, to move time to... he couldn't do anything.

"You okay?" Naha whispered.

Zach nodded quickly, and then he focused on the collar. He had already seen all of its flaws; the issue was that he didn't know what to do with them. Now, he couldn't touch his powers, probably not without explicit permission. But, his passive powers still worked. He looked around himself, trying to see the flaws of an active collar. It was obviously doing things to the soul, but he had already known that. Powers come from the soul; the body was a conduit.

So, that meant that it put some kind of a block on that conduit. It was... similar to his nullifying slash in many ways. It prevented the power from being touched. His idea could still work, though he didn't know how to test it without endangering someone's life. And he didn't know how to accomplish it. Not yet. He would need a skill, one tailored for that purpose. The tools in his skills could be of use though.

He waved at Naha, and she reached up, whispered a word and took the collar off. He shook himself, banishing the terrible feeling all over his body and soul.

"That... was terrible," Zach said. "It squeezed the soul."

"Did you learn anything?"

“I believe that I have.”

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Their airship was lifting slowly. The armies would soon go on the march, and Zach and his people were heading for the city of Helse. He didn't have many. Naha, Bera, Okim, and a couple of the remaining more powerful wardens. And surprisingly Vitor Far Storrah, had decided to come along once Zach made his intentions known to the War Council. When Zach asked him why the man had given a simple answer.

“I've already supplied the army with all that I can make. And I am not a great fighter in such a big group. Besides, you will need a way to incapacitate everyone in the city without killing them, and that I can do.”

A small group, but they knew that they couldn't fight an all-out battle in the city. Hiro they had left with the wardens, the boy wanted to help, but he was far too weak for what they would attempt. And he could help the crafters, perhaps even learn something.

Zach spent his time beneath the deck, practicing his skills. Using telekinesis, he tried to do as manipulations that were complicated and fine, that required delicate touch. He knew that he could force an evolution, but he needed a bit more practice for what he needed. At night, he practiced his nullifying slash with Naha, trying to narrow the areas of power that he took with nullify. He had already improved it to the next tier—**|Perfect Nullifying Slash: My Slash, Precise Nullification|**. He had a lot of willpower, but his mind was straining to use them. He had too many skills which took up his mind. Constantly seeing all flaws was the largest drain, but other skills were too. He had to focus on skills which he could scale to what was needed, not always overextend himself.

If his idea was going to work, he would need to be very precise. The idea was to join nullifying slash with his telekinesis. Make it so that he could reach out to a specific power and smother it. The collar was a power, if he could cut it off, then just destroying the collar should work. Things of a similar nature had been tried; he knew. But Zach still believed that this should work, it was only the question of the amount of power. Perhaps only a high tier power could do something like this, which was why it was rare. Zach did have power, what he needed for this to work

was understanding. They would see soon enough. They had some time before they reached the city, and their plan was to wait for the war to start in full, for the city to empty and the enemy to send reinforcements south. The slaves were used for gathering and as labor, so they doubted they would send them, at least not initially. Once they had their chance, Zach and his people would start their plan.

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“So, what was the decision?” Ryun asked as Tali entered their command tent. Everyone important to the war effort was already inside.

Karya stood to the side with Narya and her sister Vanessa. Ryun and Tali had sent Daria out to scout the enemy. He trusted the other Sect Heads, but he wanted to have his own source of information. Selia, Erdania and Vryull were to the side. The cthul hadn’t exactly joined the Sect, but Ryun believed that he would eventually. He was just hesitating for some reason. Kri and Lesamitrius were in a corner, trying to stay out of view.

“We continue as one army, for now,” Anatalien said slowly.

Ryun tilted his head. “Didn’t you say that they will split us?”

“It is still the plan,” Tali answered. “But moving one army is easier than moving several. The mercenaries will need to layer their perks for it to work. We will continue as one until we are noticed, and the swarms move on us, then we will split the army and have two fronts.”

Ryun nodded. “When are we heading out?”

“The march begins tomorrow.”

Ryun looked around at the people in the room. If he was a better kind of leader, he might’ve said some inspiring words, but he was who he was. He said only one word instead.

“Good.”