

Backroom Meeting

Hitor looked out of the window of his tower, high up on the Fah Storrah peak. The city had recovered well from the attack, they rebuilt the buildings and would soon rebuild the broken wall. His people were more vigilant now, the memory of the assault still fresh in their minds. And it would remain so for the foreseeable future. Up above the city floated the armada, the best airships available to his sect. Many of them had been damaged in the fighting, and they were still not fully repaired, but their presence at least spoke to the people. Giving them a sense of security. He didn't know what more he could do. The attack had gotten through their defenses and if it hadn't been for an outsider, a visitor to their sect... The attack would've succeeded.

His Sect, gone in an instant. He still couldn't quite believe it; he had forged his sect into one of the greatest factions in the world. Few would dare attack them so blatantly, fewer still could succeed. And yet, they had been played. They had lost, no matter that they had been saved, in some different time and place they hadn't been prepared.

A part of him wanted to declare war on the Collective, attack and destroy them. They had interrogated the prisoners; they knew who they were. Powerful people were always known, always recognizable. Untraceable attacks were hard to accomplish because the very nature of powers meant that they could be identified. It would take a lot of resources to raise someone without their power being noticed. A lot of resources and patience if one was to do it right.

The attack on his Sect was provocation enough, he knew. He could declare war and attack his enemies. And... and perhaps cause another Great War. Pit Sects against Classer factions once more. A war that would cost them all.

He looked out at the thousands of airships in the city, the ones that were docked and the ones just arriving. Each carried a Sect Head or at least their emissaries, from the every Sect in the Settled Territories. The news of the attack had spread, and he knew what they were all probably thinking.

They thought that he had called them here to propose war against the rest of the Settled Territories. They were right, he wanted war, but they were wrong about the target.

Still, he had used their belief to bring them all here, where he could convince them. Among all the Sect Heads were a few, a couple dozen at most, that were part of the Council of Sects. And them that Hitor had to convince first. The rest would follow the strong.

This gathering had given him a great excuse to summon everyone without their being any suspicion thrown toward the Council members. It was all theater in a way, but a necessary one. Still, there were deals to be made, the future of the entire world would be decided here.

A knock on his door pulled him out of his thoughts and he called out for them to enter. A sect warrior entered and bowed.

“What is it?” Hitor asked.

“Sect Head,” he said as he straightened. “You wished to know when the Twilight Melody Sect arrived.”

“They are here?” Hitor asked, now eager to hear the news.

“They’ve started disembarking now,” the warrior answered.

“And, who is...?”

“Four people, one is matching the description of their Sect Head Ryun Nacht is, one is Erdania Xi Jhan, a ravzor attendant and a winged demasi woman,” the warrior said.

Hitor immediately relaxed. He didn’t know much about the Twilight Melody Sect, aside from the fact that their Sect Head had been part of the group that killed the Dome Leader, which was worthy of respect on its own. That Erdania Xi Jhan came too was a surprise, but Vitor had informed him of the rumors that some of the former Zenshuen members had gone to the frontier sect. No, what he cared about the most was the last person that arrived.

“The demasi woman, does she match the description I gave you?”

“She does Sect Head.”

Hitor smiled. Vitor had passed along rumors, and they had tried their best to investigate over the past month. He hadn’t truly believed it until Vitor found a warrior that had been part of a battle against the

undead outbreak a few years ago. His account was what made Hitor finally give credence to the rumors. Now, he had a card to play.

“Send word to the dockmaster, I want the Twilight Melody group to be ushered to the Crystal Spire, as quickly as possible, respectfully of course,” Hitor instructed. The people at the docks already knew, but it bore repeating. Most of the Sect Heads and their entourages were placed in the city itself, only a few had the privilege to be given rooms in one of the three peaks. Even if the rumors had been untrue, Hitor would’ve still granted the Twilight Melody Sect Head the honor. Killing the Dome Leader was a service done for everyone in the world.

Hitor called in an attendant and sent him off to find his brother.

A short while later, another person entered his room.

His brother met his eyes, then spoke.

“They are here,” Vitor said.

Hitor nodded. “I want to meet with our guests, now.”

Vitor took a deep breath and then nodded slowly. They had kept them waiting for a few days, and he had Vitor entertaining them, excusing Hitor’s absence as the inevitable result of the gathering and too much work. In truth, Hitor had been waiting for confirmation. The two of them left the room and Hitor followed his brother through the hallways of their tower.

They reached their destination quickly, a small and discrete meeting room in the center of the tower. There were no guards in front, not because they weren’t needed, but because Hitor didn’t want anyone to know who was inside. The occupants of the room had been escorted there through the secret passages by Vitor himself. No one in the sect knew that they had arrived.

Vitor unlocked the door, and the two brothers entered the room.

The two occupants stood up and greeted them. The first one was a young female drake. Pale skin could be seen behind her dry scales, a sign that told him that she was undead. The only thing separating her from the mindless monsters was the look in her eyes, the eerie orange light that blazed from within.

She inclined her head and spoke.

“Sect Head, thank you for your hospitality,” the undead body spoke with a voice that was deeper, tinged with something ethereal.

The other occupant was a human male, with blond hair and striking blue eyes. He inclined his head and gestured with one hand in a way that Hitor didn't understand the meaning.

“Necromancer,” Hitor used the title that the being in front of him was best known for as he inclined his head toward the undead vessel of Eratemus Prideborn, the Lord of Death. Then he turned to the other person. “Shah,” he greeted Sigmund Otensson. “I apologize for the delay in meeting with you. I had a lot to catch up with since my seclusion and with the gathering...”

“It is understandable, Sect Head, no offense is taken,” the undead drake said. “Your brother has proven himself as a great host.”

Vitor bowed in respect and Hitor gestured for them to sit.

“I thank you for coming, I know that it is hard for you to leave your own territories, especially with everything that is happening in the core,” Hitor said as he took a seat across from them.

“We were... intrigued by your invitation,” Eratemus said. “I assume that this has something to do with the attack on your sect, and the gathering you've called for?”

Hitor wasn't surprised that they knew, rumors spread fast even with the size of the core.

“Yes, and no,” Hitor said slowly.

“I guess that to most in your lands, the gathering would seem like we are readying for war,” Hitor said slowly.

Sigmund raised his hands and gestured. Eratemus then translated. “It does seem that way, especially since the Sect had faired a lot better the last few years. Your wars haven't been nearly as bad as some of the others in the core.”

Hitor shook his head. “It's madness, it never should've been allowed to happen. I never believed that the peace in the core was so fragile to be broken like that.”

“There are some... circumstances, that influenced the events,” Eratemus said slowly.

Hitor met the undead's eyes. "Like?"

"The Dome Leader," Eratemus answered. "I believe that many of the... weak minded individuals in the world had been influenced by the monster. Its mental power was significant, out assault on it nearly failed because of it. If one of use hadn't managed to free himself from the mental prison... All of us would've died."

Hitor blinked. "The monster caused the wars? You are certain?"

"It pulled on the animosities that were already there, fanning the fires. I don't think that no wars would've happened without its influence, but they wouldn't have reached these heights."

"The Dome Leader is dead," Hitor added.

"The influence might still be there, or it might be gone, but the events of the past cannot be erased. Too much death had already occurred," Eratemus said sadly.

Hitor wondered why the Sect hadn't been as affected if what Eratemus said was true. Some protection unique to Cultivators? Or was it just cultural. Sects abhorred death on such large scale. Honor and obligation meant that the death of the few was enough to establish superiority and proclaim a victor. Lives were a resource that the Sects considered far more important than the rest of the world.

"Regardless, the reason why I invited you; the Taken. That should never have been allowed. They never should have been able to expand so far and take so many people. The fact that the rest of the core turns a blind..."

"I agree," Eratemus said. "Sadly, everyone looked for their own interests instead of coming together. Alliances that had lasted for centuries had been broken."

Hitor knew what Vitor had told him of the events. He despised the way that the rest of the core acted toward the Taken. If the abominations had been in the Sect lands they would've been burned out long ago.

"These Taken are not just an inconvenience," Hitor stressed. "They are a threat to the entire world. If they won't deal with the enemy right at their doorstep, we will. I will not allow an infection to remain in the heart

of the Settled Territories and fester until it kills us all. It is insanity that the others ignore it.”

Sigmund tilted his head, then gestured quickly at Eratemus. The undead drake frowned, then looked back at Hitor. “That is what this gathering is about? You do plan a war.”

“I’ve had a long conversation with one of the people that killed the Dome Leader with you,” Hitor said. “Zacharia Gardner. I know what happened to the Empire. I am not allowing that to happen to the Sects, if I need to march and level a thousand factions in my way to reach the Taken, I will.”

“They will see it as war regardless of what your target is,” Eratemus said.

“Yes,” Hitor sighed. “Which is why I called you. I need influential people to secure passage for me and the rest of the Sects, after I convince them to go. Perhaps even convince some of them to join us.”

“That...” Eratemus paused. “It might be possible, but it would be... costly.”

“You can bribe them if you must, and,” Hitor turned to look at Sigmund. “I am sure that you can convince many factions just by asking. Though, I would like to use your territories as a staging point.”

Sigmund’s eyes narrowed, and then he signed.

Eratemus didn’t translate immediately, instead he spoke with the man. “Sigmund, it was three hundred years ago.”

The blond man signed again, and Eratemus shook his head.

“His price is...” Eratemus paused, glanced at Sigmund, then finally continued. “Awirren.”

Hitor had expected it. Not many knew of Sigmund’s past, and his animosity toward Awirren.

“Awirren is many things,” Hitor said. “But she upholds the laws of the sects, she never shied away from fighting threats. And while she might be insane, she keeps herself in control. We are going to need her for what is to come.”

Sigmund cut through the air with his hand, then signed again.

“That is my price,” Eratemus translated.

Hitor nodded. "Perhaps I can offer you something better than her head."

Sigmund narrowed his eyes.

Hitor continued. "I have something, someone, that I am very much sure you would want more than Awirren."

Both of them tilted their heads in expectation. As a response, Hitor only smiled.