

Interlude – The Wandering Drake III

Zenker approached the fire slowly. He wasn't trying to hide his presence, but neither was he making any unnecessary noise. The small camp place was occupied by a single person, a human sitting on a rock with a black sword laid across his knees. His eyes were closed, but Zenker was sure that the man had heard his approach. So either he had known that Zenker was approaching before he came close, or he was an idiot. Zenker doubted that the latter was the case, monsters would've killed him already if he couldn't somehow sense his surroundings.

So, that meant a passive skill of some kind. One with a substantial range since Zenker hadn't seen the man react to his approach. Or the man was simply unconcerned with someone approaching him. So, someone who was powerful, at least by the standard of this part of the frontier. Zenker could see the violet cracks spreading through the man's skin, looking as if something was trying to break out from beneath. That appearance betrayed the man as a Cultivator, only they had body alteration perks that manifested in that manner. *At least Mid Lord*—Zenker thought to himself.

“Hello,” Zenker announced himself as he reached the fire.

The man opened his eyes, two pools of nothingness met Zenker's eyes. *The eyes... So Peak Monarch?* Zenker wondered, even if it did not matter much to him. The man studied Zenker with interest, his eyes looking him over. It was obvious to him that he hadn't been in the presence of many drakes. Not surprising in these parts. The drake lands were far from here.

“May I join you fire?” Zenker asked.

The man tilted his head, and then nodded. “Of course, stranger.”

Zenker inclined his head and took a seat on a rock across from the man. “I am called Zenker,” he introduced himself, looking at the man for any type of a reaction. His name wasn't that famous, most knew him as the Wandering Drake, and the name itself was fairly popular among the drakes.

“And I am Ryun, it is a pleasure,” the man added.

“May I ask what you are doing here in the wilderness, all alone?” Zenker asked.

The man, Ryun, smiled. “I could ask you the same thing.”

Zenker matched the man's expression and then spoke. "True, I guess that since I am the guest at your fire, I should speak first."

"It seems only fair," Ryun said.

"I am an explorer, I've been far beyond the frontier, searching for new and interesting things."

"Oh, that sounds interesting," Ryun said. "You must be strong if you could explore alone."

Zenker shrugged. "It seems like you are the same, I believe that a broken monster swarm infests these territories."

Ryun nodded his head. "It does."

"I came upon a city, nearby," Zenker said slowly. "It had fallen to the swarm."

The man's expression changed for only a fraction of a second. But Zenker's eyes were now powerful enough that he caught the instance of anger in his expression.

"Ven'oran, the city had fallen to treachery, the swarm was just its instrument," Ryun said.

Zenker blinked, that seemed more personal. Perhaps the man had been a member of the sect that used to rule the city. *That still rules*—Zenker corrected himself. The sky still showed the crest of a faction, meaning that the territory was claimed.

"You were a part of the defense?" Zenker asked.

"I was. Two sects met the swarm at Ven'oran, one betrayed the other. The swarm's leader was killed, but the monsters under its control rampaged and proved too much for the weakened sect to handle."

The man didn't offer anything more, leaving Zenker to question further.

"And what sect were you a part of, if I might ask?" Zenker doubted that the question would offend. The sect people were generally extremely cutthroat and power oriented. If he was a part of the sect that betrayed the other, the man would be proud in his victory. Although the man's tone and words led him to believe that he had been part of the betrayed faction. Still, it hurt nothing to ask.

"The traitors had been dealt with," the man said simply.

It was... an answer, Zenker supposed. Still, he was interested in what the man was doing here all alone. He would need to be very powerful in order to survive among so many monsters. Although, surprisingly there were none in their immediate surroundings.

“So, what are you doing here, surrounded by the remnants of the swarm?” Zenker asked.

“Hunting monsters,” Ryun said. “The city needs to be retaken.”

“And you are doing it alone?” Zenker asked. The monsters around here weren’t all that strong, not for someone like Zenker. For the man to be here alone, he would need to be really strong. Zenker didn’t know how powerful exactly he was. He had no path and so could not sense Qi, he only had the visual clues to go on. From the man’s body and eyes, Zenker was confident that the man was at least in the Peak Monarch Realm. *Could he be in the Heavenly?*

People that were so strong were rare in the frontier, unless something drastically changed in the years that he had been absent. If the man was in fact in the Heavenly Realm he would most certainly be someone in a position of power, if not a Sect Head himself. And yet... that did not align with what Zenker knew, Sect Heads and Sect Leaders did not go out into the wilderness all alone. The man was a puzzle, far greater one than what he had expected when he decided to approach. Insignificant in the grander scheme of things, of course, but still interesting. This encounter would make for a good memory for his quest.

Ryun opened his mouth and spoke, answering Zenker’s question. “I am here to cull the monster numbers in preparation for the retaking of the territory. My people are strong, but taking on such large numbers carries too much risk. I would have them fight without the chance of being overwhelmed by monsters. I am not big on holding other peoples hands, but having them die just because of numbers is not something that I will allow.”

Zenker blinked at that, the man’s words surprised him. This was an interesting man.

“That is... impressive,” Zenker said.

“No more than you exploring on your own,” Ryun added.

Zenker conceded the point by inclining his head. The man was right, except that Zenker was far older than this man, a child really. His eyes betrayed him. Even with the two pools of endless black abyss, Zenker could see that he had not experienced the weight of ages. Living for so long... it changed you, it made you look at the world in a different light.

Ryun was a child, probably one that had been granted Essence to rise so far. Appearance could be deceiving, but Zenker's eyes saw at a deeper level. He would've bet that he was less than half a century old. There was little chance that he had gained his power on his own. Most likely he was an Heir to a sect, who had seen great benefit from those that came before. He was not unique in the slightest.

Zenker replayed their interaction in his head again with his **|Perfect Memory|**, seeing what he had missed the first time. His time away from people had made him rusty. But now, he saw. The man was arrogant. He was alone in the wild, and had accepted the company of a stranger he knew nothing about. A classic example of young Sect Heirs. To not even think that he was in danger, to blindly believe in his own power. It was disappointing.

Still, he should at least try and see if he could learn something about the state of things on the frontier. His job in the Cabal was to explore, not to gather information, but he had been lax in his duties to them. Perhaps he could learn something interesting.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then, he saw movement in his peripheral vision. He saw clearly, even from the corner of his eye. His **|All Seeing, Leaf on the Wind|** made his entire cone of vision as clear as if he was looking directly at it. The shape froze the moment Zenker noticed it, which made him want to frown, but he suppressed the impulse.

Out there, to his left, deep in the forest was a wolf-like shape. It was looking straight at Zenker, with eyes that were familiar. Two pools of endless darkness. The wolf jumped back and retreated, and then Ryun tilted his head and his eyebrow twitched.

Ah, a contracted beast. So, not all alone at least.

The child's reaction also told Zenker that they had some form of communication. The moment the beast retreated, Ryun reacted. He had

probably gotten that power recently, he still reacted visibly when he spoke with his mind. That only affirmed the man's age in Zenker's eyes.

"Was there any purpose to your exploring?" Ryun asked as the sword on his knees disappeared in a burst of shadow.

Zenker had to really fight his frown from coming out now. The manner of the weapon's disappearance made it clear that it was an awakened weapon. He had suspected before, it was elaborately and beautifully made—there were some crafters who could make weapons that were so beautiful that they resembled awakened ones, but that only confirmed it. That was... an odd thing to do. Showing someone else that you had an awakened weapon, especially when you didn't know them or how powerful they were could be a fatal mistake.

He opened his mouth to respond. "Exploring is what I do, searching for treasures, or scouting out threats. There is not really much to it other than that."

Ryun placed one of his hands in his other, leaning them on both his knees, effectively hiding one hand. It did little to hide the actions from Zenker. His eyes saw the subtle movements of the skin around the child's wrist, the almost unperceivable sound as he turned his ring.

Zenker almost laughed, the child was attempting to look at his screens. Zenker did have a ring that would prevent such an intrusion, and could summon it from his storage with less than a thought. But he decided to allow it, just to see the child's reaction.

The child blinked, his eyes widening for a moment before he forced his face to calm. He had more composure than Zenker would've given him credit for. *Well, fair is fair.* He focused his eyes and used his **Piercing Gaze**, and the man's screens appeared in front of his eyes.

Zenker froze as he read them, trying very hard not to react. *Iteration 7... so, this is where Yirrel's lost human went. Was it chance? Or did his perk take him here? Chance, most likely,* Zenker concluded. He had been on this side of Infinite Realm for a century, this was the fastest route that he could take to get to the core, he would've always come through this way. Zenker remembered what Eratemus told him about the seventh Iteration's humans. Only two humans from the seventh Iteration arrived, both outside of the

arrival zone, presumably because they were too powerful for it. One was stronger than any other Ranker that had ever arrived in the Infinite Realm, and he made his way to Yirrel. The other's location was unknown, and the first said that he was even stronger. That he had killed the entire Iteration.

Looking at the man's screens, at his titles and class, Zenker saw how such a thing had happened. The man was an Essence Pilferer, he had been a Pilferer on the old world. That... there had been Pilferers on the old worlds, but few survived, and of those that did none survived the Infinite Realm. Pilfering powers were often self-destructive, they often went out of control. One of the reasons why High Rankers were so important was because they were always on the lookout for the unstable Pilferers. Being a Pilferer was not a death sentence in itself, all in the Infinite Realm respected strength, in their own way. It was what you did with your power that mattered.

Rampaging without a cause would get you put down quickly. It was a balance, wars happened constantly, but there were rules. They had put them in place after their war with the Third Iteration, strict enough to prevent what happened back then, but loose enough that the factions could war with one another. They had no choice, nine different races, different Iterations, all with their own beliefs and agendas. They couldn't force them all to play nice. It got even worse as time passed and the racial lines got blurred. Now they had factions based on ideologies, not race—in most cases anyway.

Zenker looked the man's titles over carefully, seeing the titles that he had gained on the old world. There was no doubt that he was a major part of why Earth of the seventh Iteration had only two survivors. But, Zenker saw no such titles since the man arrived in the Infinite Realm. Judging him on what happened before... Many of the Rankers still living in the Infinite Realm had done similar things, some had done them in the Infinite Realm even. The Grey Horde...

Zenker's impression of the child didn't make it seem like he was a raving lunatic. And he had at least been smart enough to limit his Class's level. But the rest... He was talented, a prodigy in his own way. Zenker had seen better, but never those who were also Pilferers. The combination could be something... dangerous. And then there was that one perk—**Eternal**

Hunter: Reaper. He had never seen something like that. And two perfect skills...

The child could grow to become a great threat. And with what they knew was coming...

Zenker could end it here, he could reach out and crush his head now, before he got more powerful.

And it would've been a waste. Eratemus, Yirrel, and the others always cried about how they needed more people who were strong and worthy of trust to face the future. The child could be an ally. If Zenker was right, Ryun was probably a leader of a Sect. The wolf contracted beast and the crest would suggest something like that.

Ryun was looking at him without moving a muscle, and Zenker realized that he had been doing the same. He forced himself to relax and smile.

“So, what is the name of the faction that holds this territory?” Zenker asked.

Ryun blinked, and then after a long pause answered. “It is called Twilight Melody Sect.”

Both of them were clearly in agreement about not speaking about what they saw of each other. Zenker doubted that the man was even aware that his screens had been seen to. Zenker was glad to pretend like he saw nothing. He tried to think about what the best way forward was. He wasn't a schemer or some great tactician, not like some of the others were. So, he asked himself; *What would Yirrel do?* The Warden Commander liked to cultivate people, to give them opportunities. Those opportunities often got them killed, but at least she gave a fair chance to everyone. Even those who might not seem redeemable. Her belief was that even if one of those she had tried to cultivate blossoms, it was worth it.

This child could grow to become a powerful ally, or a powerful enemy. And Zenker would much rather have an ally. Of course, he was also aware that he was not the right person to guide someone like this. So, that meant that he had to get him to someone that could.

“Twilight Melody, huh. That is a strange name for a sect,” Zenker said.

“It is... personal,” Ryun answered.

Zenker blinked and saw an opening. “It was you who named the sect?”

The man looked at Zenker intently, but then nodded his head. "It was."
"Ah, you are a Sect Head then," Zenker concluded.

"Yes, we are a small sect. Compared to people you must interact with, insignificant," Ryun said.

Zenker wondered if Ryun worried that Zenker would kill him and destroy his sect. What kind of things did he experience since coming here that he thought that could happen. Then he shook his head, Ryun was entirely correct, such things did happen. *I've been away for too long.*

"Perhaps, you are strong enough to protect your sect I gather."

"Not strong enough," Ryun said, then barely whispered. "Apparently."

Zenker chuckled inwardly. "Still, I can see from the cracks in your body that you utilize a Void aspect, right? That must be hard, having to go so far up to gather it. You are strong indeed if you can survive there."

Zenker said slowly, almost nonchalantly. *There, a tiny bit of help. He must be awfully ignorant of everything, and the people who live in the Frontiers are barely any better.*

Ryun blinked and turned his eyes up to the sky, frowning. He opened his eyes to speak, but Zenker stood up.

"Thank you for sharing your fire with me, Sect Head, but I must continue my journey. May we meet again in the future. I would like the chance to talk again," Zenker bowed his head. Then he turned to leave, walking away as the man looked taken aback.

Zenker paused after a few steps, turned around as if he forgot something. "Oh, right. Perhaps we might meet in the core, at the upcoming tournament. I will be attending, and you, as a faction leader, will probably want to appear as well. The rewards are great, and sometimes just the experience itself is enough for the trip to be worth it."

Even if the man knew that all faction leaders were invited and could enter along with their underlings, not all choose to go. Him, having just arrived might make him unlikely to go. Perhaps it would be enough if he thought that he could speak with Zenker again.

Ryun face was a jumble of conflicting expressions. "A tournament?"

"The Centennial Tournament, of course, all the factions are welcome to participate, and most always do. It is an event that offers great

opportunities. I will be a part of the tournament's overseers, if you wish to talk again.”

With that, Zenker waved and walked away, leaving the man flabbergasted. Hopefully he would come, and Zenker could push him on to one of the others. He really wasn't much of a mentor, the last one threw herself in a volcano. He still wasn't sure if she was just mad or if she just wanted to escape his training. In any case, he would probably need to report that he found the missing human. And give his recommendation for how to proceed.

Ugh, annoying.