

## Aftermath

Hitor Fah Storrah sat in a comfortable chair, his wings folded through the holes in the chair's back. His brother, Vitor sat across from him. The room was small, a comfortable and private meeting room draped in curtains of gold. The formations in the walls and the floor guaranteed absolute privacy. He had been in seclusion for longer than he had anticipated, more than a decade. It didn't feel like it had been that long. The passage of time had been a nebulous thing to him with how focused he was on his contemplation. He had been trying to figure out his Eternal Inspiration, had used his skills to focus on a single thing to the exclusion of all else.

His meditation room had been set up to keep all other concerns outside. His body could sustain itself on heat and certain metallic minerals, which formations had been set up to provide. He had felt drained by the advancement, and the fight after had left him dangerously weakened. But they had successfully defended their city from the event. He had never heard about an event like that one, especially not in an already claimed and conquered territory. He hadn't asked many questions, instead he let his brother fill him in on what had been happening during the time he had been in seclusion.

"So the Collective made their move," Hitor commented.

Vitor nodded his head. "They learned about your absence, and thought that they had an opportunity."

"You should've told me the moment the Dome was opened, the moment so many High Rankers died," Hitor told him.

His brother sighed. "I made a mistake," he admitted. "I didn't see the immediate danger. And if I am being honest? I didn't think that they would fumble so much. I believed that the Classers would deal with the incursion, instead everyone turned on each other. And then the Third Iteration... everyone underestimated the Dome's power. And by that time, even we had disagreements and wars."

"Why? How did the Council allow that?"

Vitor grimaced, his eyes glancing around them for a moment as if he was trying to make sure that they were alone. “It shouldn’t have happened, but some elements went against our agreements, against their own nature even. We have... suspicions as to why.”

Hitor narrowed his eyes, there was something that his brother wasn’t telling him, but he didn’t press. There was too much else that he needed to hear.

“These Taken and the remaining Dome monsters are a problem,” Hitor said. “We cannot let them continue to fester in the core while these idiots continue to fight their stupid wars.”

“The wars have calmed down, but I agree. They are not treating them seriously enough, especially not now when they know that the Dome Leader is dead. They are all ignoring the issue, if it doesn’t impact them directly it is as if it doesn’t even exist,” Vitor shook his head. “The word is still spreading about the Third Iteration refuges, though we’ve managed to keep the knowledge restricted to the sects. The monsters coming behind them are an issue, but the other Sect Heads had agreed to send help to the Frontier and deal with them.”

So many issues, it almost felt like they were being buried beneath a mountain of problems. The Dome leader being dead was good, the Third Iteration coming to their borders was... complicated. Hitor had stood by his people during their war, the Cultivators hadn’t been that numerous or that strong back then. They had still fought them though, if at least not as hard as some others had. It didn’t matter now, it was a small issue anyway. Most of the refugees were moving north along the border, claiming their own territories. That might bring them into conflict eventually, but it wasn’t a concern at the moment.

“The Collective,” Hitor returned back to the previous topic. “What do we know about the attack?”

“The three airships that attacked were advanced array craft, too advanced for what the Collective could build. They teleported in, and airships with that capability are rare. They were not new ships, signs of wear were visible on them. From the information available to us, only five or maybe six factions have access to something like that. Three are engaged in an all-out

war with each other and could probably not afford to spare their ships. The Exalted Empire's ships are very distinct in their make and I doubt that they would care to help someone like the Collective. That leaves one or two, the manufacturing factions that build them and sell them to the other factions. The Collective would not be able to afford them, even if they were second hand. So... someone either gave it to them or provided the funds to buy them."

"A sponsor," Hitor said.

"Most likely," Vitor agreed. "There is one more thing."

Hitor tilted his head.

His brother hesitated, but then started speaking. "Their attack team infiltrated the tower, through our wards."

"That... shouldn't be possible," Hitor grimaced.

"It was a portal, I don't know of anyone that could do something like that. Except, maybe one person."

"Who?"

Vitor met his eyes. "The Tournament City, the Dome monsters were brought in through a portal that bridged an insane distance. It was done by one person."

Hitor was surprised, he would assume a new type of array or a formation, not a person. His brother continued.

"We don't know much about them, only that they are a member of the Unchained," Vitor added.

"We've never had issues with the Speaker," Hitor said slowly.

"They are known to sell their services from time to time, and... them opening the Dome and attacking the core changes things. Who knows what they are planning? And there is more,"

"More?" Hitor asked.

"Ikris just told me... The attackers in the tower were stopped by two... guests of the Sect," Vitor said slowly.

Hitor already knew about the two, though not much. Only that the sect respected them, that they were part of a group that killed the Dome Leader. It was something that Hitor respected a great deal, especially with what he heard about the rest of the Settled Territories actions.

"I'm aware," Hitor said.

“Before they were disabled, one of them pulled something out of their storage, a box. Ikris believes that it was a... Reaction Engine.”

Hitor’s eyes widened, and his hands gripped the table. For anyone to bring such a thing into his sect... He should destroy the Collective just for that alone.

“Where is it?”

“One of the guests, Zacharia, he has it,” Vitor said.

Hitor’s first impulse was to try and get it, but... He knew that the two had been responsible for killing the other two of the events big monsters. His sect had a debt toward them.

“How did the Collective even get their hands on it?” Hitor asked. “You said that the Unchained stole the one that Goldenfeather was entrusted with? Did they sell it or—”

“—I doubt it. They used theirs to assassinate the High Rankers. I don’t know which one it could be, eleven were made, two were used centuries ago, the Exalted Empire keeps four, Awirren’s was stolen and probably used. Eratemus’uses his as a deterrent, he would never actually get rid of it. That leaves three, one unaccounted for, one with Hallios Kingdom, and the one given to the monks.”

“Could this be the one that was lost?” Hitor asked.

“Either it is that one, or someone has it in for us,” Vitor answered.

If they could secure this one... it was a lot of bargaining power. He was still miffed that Awirren managed to convince the others to be granted one for safekeeping. He was never going to understand how she managed to do that, though she had kept it safe for a long time.

“We need to talk with our guests,” Hitor said.

“Of course,” Vitor said. “Just be aware, they are not... weak. And they have earned a lot of honor and respect through their actions. When the world itself turned its back, they were the ones that fought the threat to us all. And they had done more than they had to for our sect, my contract with them was to keep you safe against the Collective. They had no obligation to remain for the event.”

Hitor tapped his claws against the stone table, then nodded his head.

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He watched as the two entered the small meeting room, a human and... someone who looked like they had a True Body made out of parts of other races. He studied them as they walked in, neither wore anything resembling sect clothes, but he had expected that.

What Hitor knew about them was very little, only what his brother told him and even that was barely anything. Prior to their names appearing across the world as they killed the Dome Leader no one knew anything about them. The man, a human by the look of him, was apparently a Seventh Iteration Ranker. He had a hard time believing that, especially when looking at the man. There was an air of power around him. And Vitor had told him that the man had gone down the mountain and fought one of the Great Forgotten on his own.

The woman wore black tunic and pants, modest and not at all impressive. The man carried a sword on his hip, it didn't have a scabbard, but it was hung on a hook on his belt. It was wide and had a curved T shaped tip, at the base there was a round hollow that had a pale blue and yellow light suspended in the center with lines trailing out of it and touching the edges of the circle. He had his thumb hooked around the handle, but obviously not in any threatening manner.

Hitor was surprised that he was allowed to enter with a weapon on his person, which probably spoke a lot about the trust that he had earned in the sect. Hitor was not about to dishonor his sect by acting distrustful, besides, meetings without visible weapons were just symbolic in a world where spatial storages and awakened objects existed.

Vitor introduced him and both of them inclined their heads. Not a full bow, but still respectful enough for someone who the sect owed a debt. They were both also extremely powerful, if what his people told him was true. His skill confirmed their stories.

"I wanted to give you my gratitude personally, for your actions both against the invaders and the monsters," Hitor said then bowed his head just enough. "You will always be friends of the sect for what you've done."

"It was the least that anyone should do," the man, Zacharia, said.

“Not everyone would agree with you there,” Hitor added.

The man shrugged.

Hitor cleared his throat, it didn't seem like either of them were big on talking so he continued.

“Aside from thanking you, I wanted to talk with you about the intruders. Your swift actions had saved the lives of my warriors, I am beyond grateful for that. But... I've been told that before you disabled them, one of the invaders pulled out something, a metal box, out of their storage.”

“The Reaction Engine,” Zacharia said.

“So you know what it is?” Hitor asked. He hadn't been sure, few people have ever seen one in person, though most all knew what they looked like from the stories. He had hoped that a Ranker wouldn't know.

“I do,” Zacharia nodded his head. “You want it?”

“These things are... very regulated. We have rules in place for them, agreements between all the major and minor powers in the world. Just having it makes you a target, and leaving it in the hands of individuals is—”

“—I won't give it to you,” Zacharia interrupted.

Hitor stopped, he saw Ikris shuffle on his feet and Vitor look at the two with narrowed eyes.

“I understand that you were the one that stopped them from using it, but it was brought here to be used against my sect. If it had been activated, then—”

“—It was,” the man interrupted again. He saw the woman, Nahamassa, glance at him with a frown. “It was activated,” the man finished.

Hitor blinked. “I assure you, if it was then we wouldn't be having this conversation.”

Zacharia glanced at Nahamassa, for a moment there seemed like something passed between them, and then she sighed and nodded her head. Zacharia turned his eyes back on Hitor.

“The only reason I am telling you is because I was responsible for the Event that the Framework threw at you. The deaths of those people are on my hands,” he said.

“We've been over this,” Nahamassa tugged at his hand. “You are not responsible for what the Framework does.”

Hitor exchanged a look with his brother, not understanding anything that they were talking about. He had been told that the man had been severely imbalanced. Had his madness progressed so far?

Zacharia met her eyes and then turned around looking at the other three people in the room, Hitor, Vitor, and Ikras. He nodded to himself, almost as if he made a decision and then took a step closer to Hitor.

“The Reaction Engine fired, it destroyed this peak, it rained rubble on the city, and then it swallowed it as the blast expanded. Naha, Ikris, the two of you, all of you died. And then I change things.”

“Changed things?” Hitor asked slowly.

As an answer the man simply waved his hand and made a window visible, showing a perk.

<b>And So It Was Again</b> (Grand Perk)	Once a year, turn back world time. Amount of Time turned depends on your understanding of Time and willpower.
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“Such weapons... the fact that anyone would even consider using them,” the man spoke, but Hitor barely heard him as he read through the perk. “I am not comfortable with allowing anyone I do not know to hold such a weapon.”

It took Hitor a few minutes before he could answer.

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Hitor remained in the meeting room as Ikris escorted the two.

“Turning back time,” Vitor said.

“How could someone arrive in the Infinite Realm a handful of years ago and become that?” Hitor asked.

“I don’t know,” Vitor said. “But I don’t think that we should push this, we don’t want them as enemies.”

“We owe them our sect,” Hitor added. “Even with the event, he saved far more lives. The fact that they used it...”

“I know,” Vitor said.

“I need you to send out messengers, call a summit,” Hitor said slowly. “It seems like too many problems have festered without anyone doing anything.”

“What are you thinking?” Vitor asked.

“The core cannot be allowed to remain as it is, I’ll see what the others think, but perhaps we will need to involve ourselves directly.”

Vitor didn’t respond, instead he just nodded.

“Keep an eye on those two,” Hitor gestured at the closed doors. “Keep them close, help them with anything they need. People that powerful are better kept as friends than enemies. And if he is going to keep that box, it would be best if they become close with the sect.”

“I’ll see it done,” his brother said.

Things were changing, and Hitor wasn’t about to let the sects fall.