

Past is Prologue

Selia

The moon slowly turned into the sun; light shone from above through the smoke that filled the sky. Rays of light pierced it as if the smoke was clouds, visible to the naked eye, they illuminated the city below. It... squirmed with dark shapes, far more than anyone of them had believed there to be. They had seen them coming out of the portal, in the dark, charging across the arena and they hadn't realized just how many had crossed. Towering shapes moved among the buildings; black growths were crawling against the walls of the arena covering them slowly.

Smoke was rising from the city too. From the distance no one would mistake the Tournament City for anything other than a battlefield. With her eye skill she could see into the streets, see the dead being dragged away by the monsters back to the arena, for what purpose she didn't know—but it filled her with dread. She had seen the large monsters dragging sacks, and she feared that this was not just an army, but an invasion force that could grow. They needed to stop it before it became too late, she just didn't know how to do that.

Selia looked around her, she and her people were the last to evacuate the city, but ahead of them tens of thousands were running. She didn't know what had happened in other districts, but... too many had died in the city. People were fractured, running without a goal or care, trying to save their own lives. The leaders of every major faction had died in the attack, and too many of the powerful had died on the walls or in the city. Everything was chaos, it was all that they could do to keep people moving.

She was at the far back of the retreating force, in case that they were pursued, but the monsters hadn't gone in their direction. There was an army, a sea of black charging over the ground, but not towards them. It was going north, its purpose unknown to her.

The warriors around her were all tired, many of them injured. They even had caravans moving those who were too wounded to walk on their own. They had already spent all of their healing supplies which made things worse.

If that army had been heading in their direction... she doubted that they could survive it.

The sects were so far willing to follow her direction, but she knew how sects worked. As soon as the immediate danger passed, they would all fracture. Everything was more complicated by the fact that they had people from all over the city mixed in, the retreat hadn't been orderly, people got shuffled in the confusion and panic, desperate to escape.

"What are we going to do now?" Erdania asked from her side, her voice weary.

Selia glanced at her, seeing the state of her partner's body. She was covered in small cuts, her body was so dense that only the strongest attacks could penetrate deep, but she was also covered in bruises that looked like they were beyond painful. She was hard to damage, but she was not invulnerable.

"We go home, gather our warriors, call our allies, we..." She trailed off. She had been about to say that they needed to speak with their Sect Head, but she remembered that her grandfather was dead. She didn't know what to do. They couldn't allow this army to remain here, not when it was so large. Not when she suspected that it could grow. There were millions of monsters here, more, it was impossible to tell. And she had a suspicion based on the way that they were entrenching themselves, that they couldn't afford to let them stay here for long. She just didn't know how to even begin to remedy that.

She needed to get into contact with the rest of the League, though, Sigmund would probably take care of that, once he recovered. He was the main reason why they managed to escape, the rest of them had been too drained to fight too much.

And the Cabal... she didn't know what was going to happen now.

"Everything just went to shit," Selia whispered. "Everyone just lost their leaders and their most important members in most cases. This will turn the core upside down."

She knew how precarious the peace in the Settled Territories was. This was going to throw everything out of the balance. Everyone was going to seek

to get an upper hand, to gain power for themselves and carve out a piece of the world as their kingdom.

“Yeah,” Erdania said. “You are right though; we go home and regroup.”

Selia opened her mouth and then paused as she felt emotions that weren't her own. She steeled her expression and glanced to the side where she could feel a presence in her mind. Ryun Nacht sat on a small rock, warriors of his sect surrounded him, and a ravzor with a sad expression on his face was talking to him. Ryun didn't seem to be paying attention to him though, and through his emotions she knew that for certain. She could feel great sadness coming from him, alongside with worry and a bunch of other things that she couldn't quite identify.

He was holding a burnt corpse in his lap, twisted beyond any hope of recognition. During their retreat he had stopped at his compound and taken the corpse. He didn't speak much, but Selia could tell that it was someone important to him. The only thing that he had said while they moved out of the city was to ask where the closest extremely cold place was. She didn't know why he needed it, but there was only one territory nearby that fit his parameters.

She didn't even know where to start with him. They were connected now, far more than she had ever imagined possible. She didn't regret her choice; they had needed power and he had given her a gift that was priceless. She wanted to talk with him, to ask where the perk that he had given her came from. To ask what it was and how he found it. But there just didn't seem to be any time for that. And she didn't even know how to tell Erdania about it. She only knew that she needed to do it sooner rather than later.

For now, though, they needed to get as far away from the city as possible. They weren't equipped to fight the horde of monsters, not now.

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Zach

Zach stood in a circle with the rest of the Wardens that were the last to leave the city. Civilians were walking next to them, a large procession of

retreating people. It was hours since they had closed the portal, and he was barely keeping his eyes open. Naha was leaning on his side and he kept her propped up with his hand.

“What do we do now?” One of the wardens that Zach didn’t recognize asked.

Bera looked beyond them, at the retreating people. “We protect the people, as we are supposed to.”

“The Warden Commander—”

“—She didn’t teleport out with us, that doesn’t mean that she is dead. She is immortal,” Bera glared at the man. No one said what they were all thinking, that those monsters ate souls. Yirrel was probably dead, he had seen how injured she was, how slow and weak. He doubted that she could’ve escaped. But then again, he didn’t know much about immortals.

Zach glanced at Naha, wondering what they should do. He had nearly lost her, the only reason he hadn’t, was because Ryun was there. He didn’t know how to feel about that. A part of him wished that they could just leave, go away alone. Away from these horrors and responsibilities. But the line of people running from the monster horde in the city drew his eyes. Those people would need protection. Not all people came here with their factions, and from what he could see everyone was looking after their own. Some people were left all alone, defenseless. And Naha and he would be there to protect them.

They moved out with Zach and Naha staying near the end of the procession. They were heading west, to the nearest city that had a teleporter. Bera had sent people ahead to send messages to recall all available wardens to the Citadel. He didn’t know what she intended, but he knew that they would need all that they could gather to deal with that army in the city. He didn’t even want to think about what had remained beyond the portal.

For now, the wardens all seemed willing to follow Bera. He had never really given much thought to her rank in the Wardens organization, but it was apparently very high up.

There were no monsters coming after them, but Zach could see an army of monsters heading northward in the distance. He tried not to think about whoever had escaped in that direction or their fate. For now, he was just

thankful that he had survived, and tried to focus on what was going to come next.

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Reyla

She had never seen such frightened expressions on her parents faces. It had been days since they've encountered the Lord of Death and the Grey Horde, since they turned their army around. Reyla and her siblings had returned to their palace while their parents stayed with the Emperor until just an hour ago. As soon as they came back, her mother immediately called a family meeting. She sat with Vanessa and Emrys, in a small room with all two of their parents, waiting for father Olem.

"I've sent word to Leoric," father Ender said to their mother. "He will start buying everything that we need, increase defenses on our southern territories and ready all the guards that we left in the Empire."

"We won't get back in time," her mother whispered. "Erakael is sending orders too, but... there aren't enough people left in the Empire to protect it. We didn't anticipate this."

"Mother, what happened? What was that notification?" Vanessa asked what all three of them had been wondering since it happened. Everyone had been talking about it, wondering about what it was. She had heard too many theories about what it could be. But whatever it was had caused the stop to the Return. So many years of planning, of preparing for a war, and then... they just turned around. It wasn't a retreat, even though they had lost their swarm and were faced with the army of the Grey Horde. No, they were running back home in panic.

"The worst thing that could've happened," Father Ender spoke, answering their questions. "There are... things beyond our territory that we've been keeping a secret for fear that something just like this would happen. Someone opened one of these... territories. Inside of it is... something like a monster swarm, only far worse. It is at the edge of our territory, which is now largely undefended. If we don't reach the Empire in time they will roll over our home."

Reyla felt her heart skip a beat, not because she understood the threat—because she didn’t—but because her parents expressions told her that she should be afraid.

Then, the doors opened and Father Olem entered.

“I’ve gotten in touch with Erik,” he said as he walked in. “He reached one of our bases in the frontier. He... I don’t even know where to start.”

Reyla saw her mother take his hand and pull him to a chair next to her. “At the beginning,” she said.

Reyla’s father took a deep breath and nodded. “He executed the plan, it was a success, most of the High Rankers and leaders of nearly all factions that had been in the city were present, most of them died. But... The Speaker for the Blind betrayed him and us. He opened the dome.”

“What?” father Ender asked incredulously. “He was in the core, half the world away, he couldn’t have done it.”

Father Olem shook his head. “Erik said that he had a powerful spatial user. They opened a portal, directly from the Tournament City to the dome. He went through, opened it and then left. The hordes from the dome spilled into the core,” he whispered the last part, looking somehow unsure.

“A portal that reaches that far? That... I didn’t think that was possible.” her mother said.

“I don’t know how, Erik didn’t stay in the city for long and he wasn’t near the portal, but before he left... he said that millions had passed through the portal, they were killing everything in the city. I don’t know if all of the monsters went to the core, if our territories are safe, but...”

“We lost contact with the fort,” her mother said. “So that is unlikely, but... if the dome was split, then perhaps we have a chance.”

“On the bright side, the core probably thinks that the Speaker is the one that triggered the Reaction Engine,” father Olem said.

“It doesn’t matter now, we can’t continue with the Return with the dome opened,” Reyla’s mother said.

“What does this mean?” Vanessa asked. Reyla understood exactly what Vanessa meant, she wanted to know what this meant for... everything.

“Erakael had wanted to avenge his brother’s death for so long,” father Ender started. “But this is about our survival. We cannot continue on our previous path; we might not even survive this.”

Everyone grew silent then. After a few moments more, Father Olem spoke again.

“There is more, Erik said that he has retrieved Daria and Nayra from the city, he said that he rescued them from the sect.”

Reyla blinked at that, then immediately reached out to her sister, but got no answer. It meant that she was probably asleep. She knew that Nayra was there of her free will, Daria... less so, but if Erik thought that he was saving them... She didn’t want to imagine what had happened.

Her mother took a deep breath. “Tell him to catch up with us as fast as possible, I... we don’t need any more problems. We’ll talk more once he arrives.”

Reyla had spent her entire life preparing for one moment. And now... everything had been turned on its head. She had no idea what the future held.

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Ryun

The mountain was cold and covered in snow, though that didn’t bother him. He was at the summit, on a small clear space surrounded by nothing but the sky and peaks of mountains beneath him. He was sitting on a small rock, his eyes looking forward with all of his attention. He was surrounded by corpses; monsters had found him. Some from the mountain itself and others from the horde that came from the portal. They were scouting surrounding territories, and he knew that he didn’t have much time. But he knew that he couldn’t move no matter what.

On the ground in front of him was a mangled and burned form. He had felt the dead in his compound during their retreat. And he recognized Anrosh despite her state. He tried to speak to Ereclaw but couldn’t reach him. He didn’t know if he had met the same fate, there was no sign of a body, just a pile of ash. He knew that Ereclaw had immortality too, and he didn’t know if he would retain his perks if he died or not. But... Anrosh had suffered damage

that was deeper than physical. One of her arms was just charred bone. Her armor was gone, melted and burned away. He could see bone in many places, it was... hard to look at. But he didn't look away. Anrosh had immortality, and he had to believe that it would work. He had brought her to the coldest place that he could find and waited. It had been days since he had arrived on the mountain. It took him ten days to find this place, traveling at his top speeds. He had to leave his people in Lesamitrius' hands, despite the man's protests. He had to, he couldn't waste time. Anrosh's immortality would only work 12 days after her death.

Yet, since he arrived there had been no change. Her body remained the same. He knew that it took seven days for her to return to life, but he didn't know if her body was supposed to regenerate over that time or if it happened at the end of that time. For now, he would wait. He had a reason to believe that she was still there. Kagehime was nowhere to be seen. If she had died, the sword would've been next to her body. As it was... with her not being awake or even in this transitional state, the sword would've gone back to her soul.

What worried Ryun was soul damage. He could see something that resembled what he saw in Tali, and he didn't know how that would impact her immortality perk.

For now, he sat and waited. At the edge of his sense, he noticed monsters climbing the mountain and heading in his direction. Slowly he moved Qi through his body, getting ready.

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Yirrel

Everything hurt. She couldn't move, couldn't open her eyes. Her hearing was filled with chattering noises and notes in a language that she couldn't understand. Whispers in her mind were getting louder and louder, making her doubt her own thoughts. She couldn't reach her power, it was as if something was between it and her.

She didn't even remember how she got here. There was... fighting, she had a purpose, but... Everything was blurry now, there were moments when she didn't even know who she was. Something was crawling over her body, seeping into her. A part of her felt the wrongness and wanted to resist, but the whispers made it all so hard.

She tried to focus on something, anything that could help her keep her sanity. She was... she didn't know who she was. But she did know that she served something more, an ideal, law, order, protection. She clung to that. Time seemed to be passing at a glacial pace, yet she felt like she had been in this state for ages.

She served law.

A law that she herself had made.

The whispers spoke louder now, making it hard for her to think.

She was forgetting thoughts halfway through them now. She was getting confused, unable to think. There were only whispers inside her mind.

She served—

She knew that it was important, everything told her that it was.

She served—

The whispers turned to loud voices, and the meaning of their words now clearer.

Ah... she thought to herself, remembering.

I serve... Hastur.

And the voices stilled.