

Eratemus

Eratemus sat on top of his undead dragon, gazing out at the retreating army. Grey Horde floated next to him, her wings stretched wide and beating with rhythm to keep her in the air. This was not the outcome that any one of them had anticipated. A part of Eratemus wished that they had fought, at least that would've meant that things hadn't gone so wrong.

It was... doubtful that they could return to their lands in time. Not if what they all thought and feared about the domes was true. The dome that was released was on the other side of their territory, too far from here for them to do anything. He wondered who would be stupid enough to do something like that, to unleash something that they knew very little about.

“Who do you think did it?” The Grey Horde asked.

“I have no idea, some faction from their Empire perhaps?” Eratemus answered.

The Grey Horde turned her head to look at Eratemu's hand. “Anything?”

Eratemus glanced down at the Far-link orb in the palm of his hand. “Nothing, I can't reach anyone in the Tournament City,” he answered. That worried him, none of the links worked. He didn't have any undead in the city, he had taken everything with him, but he had sent instructions to his agents across the core to investigate and get back to him. He didn't expect a quick answer, everyone in the world would have seen the notification about the dome. He figured that the entire world was in turmoil.

“I don't like this,” the Grey Horde said. “We need to get back, and quickly.”

“I used the last of my scrolls to get your army here, we need to get back the old-fashioned way.”

The Grey Horde's mandibles clacked against each other in annoyance. “We better get on it, I doubt that the Empire will be an issue for a long while.”

Eratemus cast one last glance at the armies retreating at full speed, then both of them turned and flew down toward their armies.

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Zach

The sky above them was painted in golden fire, almost making it seem like it was daytime. He could see flying monsters fighting in the distance, too far to really tell what was happening. The only reason he knew was because he watched the battle from the beginning, and he knew that the small specks in the air were coming from the portal. The air was filled with noise, sounds of fighting, screams of anger and anguish, death cries. It was almost too hard for him to push it out of his mind. It was so much death, and it reminded him of Earth. Of how he had tried to protect people and failed.

There were four people standing next across from Zach, Yirrel, Naha and Bera, making for a total of eight. The plan was in one word... insane. Everyone knew it, they just didn't see another way. The Warden Commander hadn't presented a complicated plan, it was a very simple one actually. It just required them to teleport in the middle of the horde in the arena.

"That attack that you did before," Yirrel turned to Ryun. "The big void explosion, can you do it again?"

Ryun met the Warden Commander's eyes. His two pools of darkness regarded her calmly, as if they weren't all fighting for their lives and the lives of all the people trying to escape this horror.

"I can, yes," Ryun answered.

"Good, we'll send you through first to clear our landing space," Yirrel said. "The goal is to get Warden Zacharia to the portal and have him close it; everyone needs to focus on protecting him while he does it."

Ryun turned his eyes on Zach.

"This," Yirrel spoke again. "It is bigger than your past. The fate of everyone in the Infinite Realm rests on this working."

Zach narrowed his eyes, trying to keep his emotions in check. "The last world that he should've protected, ended up bare of all life. He slaughtered nearly every living thing on Earth, and you want to put the fate of this world in his hands?"

Zach saw the eyes of everyone around turn to look at Ryun. Their expressions a wide variety that Zach didn't even want to try and identify.

“We talked about this before,” Yirrel said, her voice hardening.

“I know,” Zach answered, his mind was filled with so many thoughts. He had worked so hard to put Ryun out of his mind, to forget if not forgive. But fate seemed to want to toy with him. It was unfair, and it was too much to ask of anyone, to trust the person that did the things that Ryun did with his life? With the fate of the world?

“Zach,” Ryun said slowly. “I will not ask you to forget, I cannot ask you not to hate me, I deserve it. But we do not have the time to deal with our past. People are dying.”

“And I am supposed to just believe that you care about the people? You who slaughtered my family? Who murdered the entire fucking world? And for what? Power and revenge? There comes a point Ryun, when no matter the crime, no matter the wrong, retaliation crosses all lines. You’ve crossed the line so far that I don’t think that you even remember crossing it. I am supposed to trust that you will not simply stab me in the back the moment I turn around?”

Ryun sighed, then seemed to steel himself. “You have my word, I will help you fulfill this task.”

Zach paused at that. Even back on Earth, when he was a lot more deranged than he looked now, he had never broken his word once given. It made Zach angry, the fact that he trusted the word of a murderer. Zach turned around and looked at Naha. Her madness had twisted her, made her into a monster just like Ryun. On Earth they didn’t know about system inflicted madness. What happened to Ryun was... too fast for that, from what he knew of his power back then. Even if he had gone mad because of his power... it probably wouldn’t change a thing. The cause ceased to matter past some point, and Ryun had passed any reasonable point where his actions could be looked through such lens. Even if he had been insane, his crimes outweighed everything.

And... at some point, the answer just stopped mattering. Zach didn’t have it in him to care about what happened, nothing about that knowledge would change the past. There was nothing that it could bring.

Naha put her hand on his and squeezed gently. He looked her in the eyes, seeing through the eyes of her human form. The two of them had their own path to walk, and he wasn't going to look back and jeopardize their goals.

The sounds of battle were all around them. They didn't have the time for Zach to properly think, to try and wrestle with his emotions. He hated it all. But he remembered Naha's words.

Move forward, but be better than we were yesterday.

There were innocents in the city, his duty was to protect them, always. He had built up his power for this moment, so that he would be strong enough to protect. There was no choice for him to make, if it meant innocent lives would be saved, Zach would make a deal with the devil.

"Fine," Zach nodded his head.

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Ryun

Ryun stepped onto the platform, Selia, Emar, Eari stood to one side just below it, Zach and another woman that Ryun didn't recognize, but who stood awfully close to him, along with the injured woman who was apparently his commander stood on the other side next to the control panel where a minotaress worked on the panel. A few warriors stood behind them, making sure that no monsters interrupted them.

"Everyone, remember the tokens," the Warden Commander said. Ryun glanced at the small coin sized item in his hand. It was a token tied to the talisman stashed behind his waist. Crushing it should trigger the talismans teleportation formations without the need for them to suffer critical damage. It was their ticket out of the arena. He put it into his Void Storage for safekeeping.

"We have enough charge for the eight of us," the minotaress said.

The other defenders on the walls had pulled back, into the city, retreating. Selia had ordered her warriors and Erdania to pull into the city as

well and make their way to the Healing Building to meet up with other forces that would secure it for them. From there, they would all make a retreat out of the city, if they survived long enough. Erdania couldn't fit in the tunnels with her current size, and they needed her power on the outside. Emar and Eari had volunteered to come in her stead.

"Bera," the Warden Commander said. "You are going to stay back."

"Yirrel, I'm not letting you go out there alone, not with you so injured," the minotaress shook her head.

"You are strong Bera, but not in ways that will matter there. And it would waste my power if I needed to protect you too. I have precious little of it to spare."

The minotaress' face scrunched up in a strange expression, but then she nodded and sagged in defeat.

The Warden Commander turned to Ryun. "You ready?"

"One moment," Ryun took a deep breath, he downed two potions that increased his wisdom and Qi regeneration and then moved his Qi through his body. He pushed his null mantle fully to his wisdom then crafting his **{Void Armor}**. Crystallized void surrounded him and he started his fruit technique. Qi coursed through his conduits but he didn't release, instead he pushed more Qi, charging the technique.

He readied his mind and then nodded as a way of signaling his readiness.

A moment later he was engulfed in a storm of Essence. He was teleported a bit above the ground, above the horde of monsters. The Essence of the portal filled his vision, white and gray Essence constantly twisting around itself. And the monsters were getting through it constantly. He activated **Presence of the Eternal Hunter** and it engulfed the monsters all around him, his stats soaring above anything that he had ever had.

A moment later, he unleashed his **{Staggered End}**.

Flying monsters were diving after him, those on the ground jumping toward him. One of the towering monsters was nearby, its giant clawed limb swiping in a downward gesture toward him. Void spilled out of his body. The first wave annihilated the flying monsters and those that were leaping at him. Their bodies disintegrating into nothing. The claw of the large monster was

hit, and its black skin peeled off, the claw and bone beneath were slowly being eaten away as if by acid. The first wave expanded and consumed everything the ground included, the edge of it hit the portal. The second wave exploded, mostly to a smaller effect, it didn't have anything to consume, except for the large monster. What remained of its body disintegrated under the second wave. The third and final wave mopped up anything else that was left, and again, a big chunk of the wave disappeared through the portal. For a moment Ryun wondered if Void was going to be enough to destabilize the portal, but sadly his sense told him that monsters were coming out on the other side of it still.

But he had achieved his task. The landing spot was clear. He shaped a step beneath himself and looked around. The monsters around him quickly recovered and leaped toward him. Too bad that he was in the air and the ground a lot lower beneath him than it used to be, the crater that he had left was still filled with Void Qi. With each step the monsters only harmed themselves, the over time effect of his technique taking out their legs and making them easy targets.

Ryun noticed the largest of the monsters, the one that they believed to be a general, turn in his direction, then start to move. Essence flared all around him, announcing the arrival of the others. Ryun pulled Qi from his core, getting ready for a fight.

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Ereclaw

Ereclaw was moving through the city, leaping from rooftop to rooftop. His senses weren't as sensitive as Ryun's but he could see far as well. He had managed to stay a step away from the monsters, fighting only a handful of times and each time doing so from ambush. He was a hunter, he did not fight head on. Now, he raced back to their compound, to find Anrosh and help her get out as Ryun wished. He was fast, faster than he had ever been. His stats were increased by a portion of Ryun's and his had soared.

At the edge of his senses, as he approached the compound, he heard... trouble. He activated his **Void Hunter** perk, and his presence disappeared.

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Anrosh

Kagehime came down on top of a monster's neck with **[Crescent]** cutting the head clean off and splattering black ichor all over the floor. She looked around to see that there were no more monsters in her immediate surroundings. Their tide had slowed, despite there being more monsters in the city. They seemed to be focused on the other pockets of resistance, deeper in the city, where there were more people fleeing. The Twilight Melody Sect had a compound near the edge of the city, their retreat was swift.

They had sent their carriages and servants ahead with a few warriors. While a couple of others stayed to fight and help other sects escape. They had fought for a long while, and finally Anrosh had decided that it was time for them to move too. They couldn't help anyone if they were dead, and she didn't want to allow them to be overwhelmed. A part of her was angry that they couldn't help anyone else, but her people came first. She had sent Nayra and Riodan back to the compound with the warriors, to prepare the last few transports and mounts that they had to evacuate themselves, while she stayed to keep the line.

Now, finally she saw the opportunity to retreat while the monsters no longer came at them in the same number. She turned and ran back, seeing the warriors of other sects that had fought alongside her do the same. She rounded a corner and reached the street where the Twilight Melody compound stood. She didn't see any of the transports outside of the entrance, and cursed. She had expected them to be ready to move. She entered and even through the loud clashes of battle in the distance she heard the loud arguing.

“—no! I don't know what you are doing here, but I am not leaving. This is my home, my family!”

Anrosh's hearts skipped as she recognized Nayra's voice. She entered the compound and saw the transports standing in the middle of the courtyard, her warriors on the ground, turned into black and smoldering corpses. Riodan was the only one that she could recognize, half of his face was still visible.

In the center stood three people. Daria a bit to the side with a conflicted look on her face. Then the two that were having a standoff. Nayra had her spear out and pointed at the tall and seemingly unconcerned man's face. In the light of the burning sky, she could see that his hair was the same shade as Nayra's.

Before she took more than a step, the man glanced at her and then raised his hand.

"No!" Nayra screamed and lunged forward at him.

Anrosh didn't even have the time to process anything. She spent her anchor and a wall of ice formed in front of her as her already prepared **{Glacial Shaping}** technique activated. The fire consumed the wall, but with her **|Enhanced Dodge|** she had already moved out of the way. Blue fire blasted the place where she used to be. She saw Nayra's spear catch the man off guard and open a gash on his cheek. For a moment he looked at her in shock, and Anrosh decided to take advantage of his slip. She used her last anchor and her **{Avatar of Frost}** appeared next to her. Both she and her copy jumped forward as the man's back was turned away. She raised her sword and used **{Arctic Sword Storm}** in concert with her avatar. A dozen ice swords formed around them, and all struck at the same time.

A cloak of blue fire came into being around the man and the sword evaporated in an instant. Anrosh grimaced as the heat hit her and forced her a step back. She raised her shield to protect herself, but it wasn't enough.

She heard Nayra scream, and she looked over only to see her fly through the air and hit a wall. Her avatar continued to advance under her guidance, and the man flicked his hand consuming it in fire. He turned his eyes on her then and glared.

"Erik," Daria's voice interrupted. "Stop, you don't know—"

The man glanced at her and she shut up, her mouth closing almost forcibly. Anrosh saw his attention turn back at her and focused, activating

several of her perks and getting ready. Her **|Threat Sense|** was going off like crazy, had been since she entered the courtyard. But she couldn't run, she didn't know what was happening or who this man was, but it was clear that he was related to Nayra and her past. She couldn't just leave her.

She noticed the moment when the man decided to move, and she sprang into action. With **|Enhanced Dodge|** she moved out of the way, and then she used **[Dash]** to close the distance, unleashed her **Absolute Cold Aura** and then attacked with **{Arctic Onslaught}** and **[Crescent]**. Kagehime sang through the air heading straight for the man. She saw his expression twitch, as the cold hit him, but as her sword reached him it just passed through. His body turned to blue fire and flashed to the side. He turned back to normal and raised his hand toward her undefended flank. And then a flash of red came from behind him, and something ripped through his side.

Anrosh blinked and saw Ereclaw appear as if out of nothing. The man blurred across the courtyard, a hand on his side where Ereclaw had opened his flesh up. He glanced down, and then Anrosh saw him look up at them. Anger filled his eyes.

"Run!" Ereclaw growled, but her own **|Threat Sense|** was already telling her the same thing. Before she could react, fire consumed her, her **{Glacial Armor}** melted and the water boiled, scorching her skin. She couldn't even scream as the fire reached her and consumed everything.

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Nayra

She watched in horror as her brother burned Anrosh and Ereclaw before her eyes. She had barely been able to wrap her mind around what had happened. Erik had arrived in the middle of their preparation to retreat. He killed the warriors around them before she could even react. And then announced that he was taking them back to the Empire. He had been surprised by Daria's presence, she had seen that, but it didn't change what he wanted.

Nayra tried to reason with him, to tell him that she was no longer a part of the Empire, but her oldest brother didn't care. When Anrosh had arrived... Nayra had seen what he was going to do immediately and attacked. She hadn't even seen the attack that sent her into a wall. Her power didn't matter, he was stronger than her even with all the death around her that boosted her stats. She tried not to look as she recovered and got to her feet, tried not to think on what could've already happened. Anrosh was strong, and she was immortal. Her perks activated and she closed the distance with **[Dawn Dash]** and **{Mist Burst}**. As her brother turned his head back towards her, she stabbed forward.

Erik's eyes widened as he saw the attack, his head moved out of the way, and Eri'shi Resav followed. Her spear twisted in the air and stabbed him in his upper arm. His eyes darkened, but she didn't stop moving, she reached Anrosh and knelt down trying to put out the fire. She was burned horribly, her regular armor melted into her flesh, an entire side of her face was a mangled mess.

"Anrosh? Can you hear me?" She spoke as she pulled out a healing potion, trying to pour it down her throat but her lips had melted shut. She didn't know what to do, but she heard the sound of faint breathing through Anrosh's nose.

"You ungrateful brat," she heard her brother say.

She turned just in time to see something flash and then smash into the side of her head, turning everything black.

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Zach

They arrived in the air, a crater beneath them. A moment after they arrived, everything exploded with light. Silver spears flew at monsters rushing at them, Ryun fired beams of black and violet as he stood on a step in the air. Yirrel and the two spear wielders dropped to the ground and immediately rushed toward the portal, Zach dropped just behind them with Naha next to him, then followed.

He could've blinked at the portal, but the monsters were coming out of it. The silver skinned demasi was in the air, standing on a black step just like Ryun did. They were unleashing an incredible amount of firepower all around them. Then, Ryun created something, a copy of himself made out of Qi, grabbed it and threw it at the portal. It reached the edge and unleashed his big AOE attack. Clearing the monsters around the portal and sending a lot of the attack through the portal. Giving them some time.

The two spear users reached the portal and started fighting the monsters that came around, Ryun's avatar stood in front of it and fired a beam of void straight into the portal. They didn't know what was on the other side, only that the person that went through in hopes of closing it hadn't come out. Yirrel had said that they couldn't risk sending anyone through to look for them. For all they knew he was dead the moment he passed through. Closing the portal was their only hope, and Zach was the only one who could do it.

His perks were already active, and there were many: **True Link—Nahamassa Planerunner, Phantom Avatar, Last Heir of Terra**, Qi was coursing through his body and he held his **{Charged Focus}** technique.

He saw the two spear users holding off and creating room through the middle, with Yirrel standing behind them. A blast left out of her body, and Zach felt himself move faster. He reached the portal, with Naha right behind him shifted in her ravzor form and holding her dagger in one hand and a short sword in the other.

Zach's right hand was already in his **Time Blade** form and in his left he held a an **Ethereal Sword** in the shape of a rapier. He focused on his **Rift Seal** as monsters died around him. He reached with his hand toward the portal, and then the ground shook and he stumbled back. It rolled underneath his feet and he struggled to stay upright. Then, he saw the source of the attack.

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Yirrel

She saw the general coming around the portal, its steps shaking the ground as it charged. She had thought that they would have more time—they had purposefully teleported to the other side of the portal from it so that they would have the time to close the portal without needing to fight it. It was faster than they had assumed.

“Go! Close it!” She yelled at Zach as she ran toward the general. The two sect warriors had recovered enough that they had started to fight monsters again, but the few moments of being staggered had cost them. There were more monsters around them, and they would soon get overwhelmed. Nahamassa stood next to Zach, killing a monster that had gotten near them. The other Ranker’s avatar stood in front of them, firing its beam into the portal and preventing more from coming through that way. Zacharia reached out, but Yirrel couldn’t afford to keep her attention on him anymore.

She stopped in front of the charging general, other monsters swiping at her and killing themselves as she activated her **Shield of Retribution** perk. She was too injured and too weak to do much. It was taking all that she had to keep her few defensive perks active to help the others. But she knew that that general could probably kill Zacharia if it managed to reach him, and they needed him.

The general slowed as he saw her, his four limbs rose above his head, and red energy crackled around them. She pushed her mind through the pain that she felt deep in her soul and she raised her remaining hand.

[Pure Depth Shield]

Followed by **|I Held The Abyss|** to strengthen her ability.

A pale blue shield made out of light appeared in front of her, then reality itself bent to make it more solid. The monster threw its attack, a sphere made out of cackling red energy, glowing like the sun. It smashed into her shield and exploded, turning everything red.

The monsters all around them were killed, the ground cracked, and the sound filled her ears—but, her shield held. She collapsed on her knee, breathing heavily. She had known that she was too weak, her soul was savaged, it was a miracle that she was even able to move. The general monster was forming another attack, its black eyes looking at something

behind her. She knew what it was looking at, it knew what they were trying to do. Her senses told her that the monsters were pushing the two spear masters, that Nahamassa was trying to protect Zach, that the two behind them were doing all they could to hold back the greater horde.

She pushed herself up and took a deep breath.

She had many regrets, but she had done all that she could to keep people safe. It had required many sacrifices, but because of the things that she and the others did the world hadn't collapsed into an end war between all the various factions. She had upheld her **Oath**.

Now, she reached for it, knowing full well that it would be the last thing that she ever did.

She reached for the last power that she had gained, her reward for reaching the last tier of her main focus. Deep inside her, she found that connection to her **Oath** and she grabbed hold of it and used the active part of it.

/Oath of the First Shield: Call The Gate of Grand Order/

And then light fell from the sky.

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Eari

His spear flashed through the head of a monster, killing it. It collapsed into formless ichor, leaking over the ground. Eari was moving constantly, fighting next to his grand-uncle, killing monsters and protecting the warden that was supposed to close the portal.

Above them, he could see Ryun and Selia standing on steps made out of void, power flashing all around them constantly. Silver spears were being created and fired at an alarming rate, the blue and red aura surrounded them, but it didn't affect them—only the monsters. It was why they could handle so many of them. Eari didn't stop moving, he couldn't, to stop would mean death. Even with the two of them raining death from above, Eari and his

uncle couldn't stop all the monsters that managed to get through. The other warden was the last line of defense, the shapeshifter stood next to the human that could close the portal, killing anything that came close.

Then, as he stabbed *Grudge* into another monster, his venom killing it quickly, a wall of light smashed into the ground from above. Eari glanced at it for just a moment, he saw what looked to be a door made out of white light, with a crest in the center—a shield with a recognizable symbol of the wardens in the center. The general monsters attack hit it and was stopped. The gate was massive, but it was just a single wall, the monsters could come around it but it had bought them time.

Selia used her spears to attack all the monsters behind the gate on their side, giving them some room from there at least. It let Eari focus on the monsters coming from the portal and the other side.

He was having trouble using his powers, something was... exerting pressure on his mind, making everything just a tiny bit more difficult.

He turned around just as a monster three times his size jumped at him. He stepped out of the way, his spear cutting into its side as it passed, but the monster caught his spear unexpectedly. It pulled him forward and then one of its limbs struck him, sending him flying back. His armor protected him, but he landed in a group of a dozen monsters, all which jumped on him immediately, their claws tearing at his armor.

He tried to push them back with **Overstrike**, kicking up with his spear and sending one flying away, but there were too many of them. Just as he felt a claw pierce his armor and get through his skin, words echoed inside his mind.

—*Onyx Form*—

A large black spear, covered in jagged lines over all of its length shredded through the monsters above him, and Eari found himself looking up at his uncle. He was covered in black glossy and jagged armor, holding a spear that was twice his size that looked more like some kind of a strange lance.

“Up, nephew, don’t hold back,” Eari pushed himself up as his uncle fought monsters around them. He saw the dozens charging at them and focused.

—*Last Spear*—

The pain he hadn’t even known he was feeling disappeared, the fog in his mind lifted, and everything seemed far clearer. None of his wounds bothered him anymore, and he felt like he could continue fighting forever.

He hefted *Grudge* and jumped back into the fight.

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Naha

Nahamassa stabbed one more monster with her **|Perfect Lacerate|**. She was constantly in motion, moving from shadow to shadow, killing anything that got past the two spear users. Killing anything that came close to Zach. A part of her wished that Zach had refused this mission, that he could’ve done it. But she knew that it would go against everything that he was, and this was why she loved him. Because he would risk his own life to protect, to try and save others.

It was why she was going to stand by his side no matter what. Even though she could feel the growing terror inside her mind. Her mental defenses were not yet quite as powerful as she had led Zach to believe. But... she had spent the majority of her life with the horrors inside of her mind, seeking to cause fear. This much was not yet enough to overwhelm her, not nearly so.

Another of the larger monsters came, and she stepped through the shadow, her sword and dagger stabbing behind its head. As her blades pierced the sticky skin, she realized her mistake. Tentacles from the monster’s side reached up and enveloped her, pressing her on top of its back, keeping her restrained. She saw other monsters move around them, heading for Zach, who was unable to protect himself.

A beam of void killed one, spears killed another two. But five jumped on Zach's back.

She focused her mind as she pushed with her legs, then finally managed to find purchase with her right leg and used **|Spatial Step|** to get out. She moved through the shadow, but she was too late.

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Zach

As everyone around him fought to protect him, Zach reached for the portal again. He activated his perk, and immediately something started to burn inside of him. He felt the portal resisting his perk, and he pushed back. It was threatening to tear him apart and soon all other sensations disappeared, leaving him only with the burning agony inside of him.

He didn't know how much time passed, or if the people around him were still alive. He focused only on his perk, on closing the portal. He felt the vast power behind it, the distance that it bridged in an instant. It was... amazing, glorious even. Something that he hadn't ever imagined possible. He felt the thing that kept the portal open, the desire put inside it, the basic component upon which all of that power was built. The desire to be free, to go wherever you wanted, whenever you wanted. It was... familiar, it was something that Zach himself wanted.

It helped, somehow, to understand at least a piece of how the portal was built. He felt his perk pushing the power of the portal back.

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Eari

Eari had a claw stuck inside his stomach, with a bit of the monster's paw hanging off of it. He had cut it off, but he had been too slow. His ideal made him ignore it, move as if there was no pain or injury at all. The Ideal perk that he had gained with his **Unyielding Spear** made him... well, unyielding.

He killed another two monsters with his **{Army of Spears}** technique, and then noticed that a group of monsters was headed for the human warden. He pushed his Qi, but he was too far away, he knew that he couldn't reach him in time, not with monsters in his way.

Then, he saw a black shape charge through the monsters. His great spear cutting them down as he charged. He killed the monster closest to the warden just in time, then turned and swiped his spear in a crescent that killed the others. But the line had broken, more were coming at them, and Eari tried to push through, but he could see that it wasn't going to happen. Monsters were everywhere, carving his armor apart, pushing him in directions that he didn't want to go.

He saw his uncle, a bastion of black stone, fighting next to the warden. A ravzor stepped out of the shadow near him, covering his side, but Eari saw it coming.

One of the larger types of monsters, a mass of hundreds of tentacles dropped on top of them. It lashed out and threw the ravzor aside, then gathered its tentacles around his uncle.

"Uncle!" Eari screamed as he unleashed a barrage of attacks all around him, killing monsters and managing to make three steps in his uncle's direction before more monsters filled the gap.

Distantly he saw his uncle's spear shred through the mass of tentacles, but more were there to wrap around it and wrench it out of his grip. He heard the groaning of stone and saw the tentacles bending his uncle in the ways that a demasi body was not supposed to bend. Another monster jumped and sunk claws into him from behind, ripping the stone armor off and then...

He saw his uncle's body ripped in half, and then a glowing claw swiped the air, pulling a soul of the Ethereal Realm and closed its jaws around it.

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Ryun

Ryun saw Emar Ji Van die, unable to do anything to stop it. One of his hands was pointed at the ground, killing a monster that had gotten close to

Zach, while spears of silver killed another two. But the rest of his attention was on the sky. It was filled with flying monsters, all diving in a suicidal to reach Zach. There were so many, and it took all of his power to stop them. He had already used his **Field of a Thousand Cuts**, and he was depleting his core fast with his beams and the spikes plus walls he was shaping in the air to kill or just slow them down enough for Selia's spears to kill them. If it wasn't for the Eternal Hunter and Huntress perks, both he and Selia would've faltered by now.

A big flying monster with tentacles instead of a head dove and Selia put a dozen spears into it, which then detonated blowing it apart and making it rain black ichor.

Down on the ground, he saw the monsters closing in on Zach. He called his avatar back, had it abandon firing through the portal. It was a bad move, he knew it. As soon as the avatar stopped firing monsters came through, but he didn't have a choice. The avatar fired a beam next to Zach's head, killing a monster that was about to kill him.

The ravzor, the shapeshifter that was his partner managed to recover and get near him, slicing through another two monsters to reach Zach. Monsters were all around them, in the sky and on the ground. His avatar was tackled and savaged on the ground, broken apart in seconds.

Then, a large crack sounded through the air as the gate that the Warden Commander had summoned broke apart. The general walked through and she stood on unsteady legs in front of it, a one handed hammer in her remaining hand that she had been using to beat the monsters coming around her gate away.

Then, his sense caught the portal trembling.

* * *

Zach

He felt the portal give, and his perk pushed through. **Rift Seal** activated fully, and he felt the portal wink out. He collapsed on his knees, breathing heavily, feeling something warm leaking down his face.

“Teleport out!” A voice that he recognized as that of the Warden Commander yelled so loud that for a moment his vision went black.

His head was killing him, but he could still think at least. He raised one leg and looked around, seeing only monsters around him. Spears flashed down and killed those around him, and he turned his head. He searched, looking for her and then Naha was there. She pulled him up and Zach opened his mouth to thank her as he reached down to his token.

A clawed paw ripped her away, sending him to the ground. He saw her roll over the ground and another monster jump on top of her. A monster stabbed a claw through his stomach and he activated **Rewind**. The second time he rolled beneath the attack and cut up with his blade, opening the monster’s side. He crawled forward, then stumbled to his feet heading for Naha, seeing her fighting, and struggling as the monsters attacked her.

He was too drained, but he didn’t hesitate. He blinked across the distance his blade sinking into a monster that was on top of her, he activated **Old Heritage** and kicked it off her. As he reached for her, another monster hit him in the chest, tackling him back and to the ground. There were so many of them all around them, he didn’t have the room or the time to use any of his powers. He saw Naha stumble up only for a monster to open its dark jaws wide above her, then lean down to bite her head off.

* * *

Ryun

As the portal collapsed, Ryun heard the Warden Commander give the order for them to leave. Eari flashed with Essence and was gone in an instant. Selia sent spears at the monsters around Zach, then she too used her token. Ryun reached for his, but he saw that Zach and his partner hadn’t gotten out yet. The Warden Commander was in a confrontation with the general monster, but he didn’t have the time or the need to wait anymore. His core was nearly fully depleted, and he had already used his Essence to restore it. His mind was drained, and he felt like he was barely standing. His sense was barely functioning from how many monsters were around them.

He had done his part, fulfilled his promise. He saw Zach searching for his partner, and then as they found each other, the monsters overwhelmed them.

They fought, but it was clear that they weren't going to get away. Neither would leave the other.

Ryun didn't think, he moved.

[Inevitable Step] moved him through the air, just as a flying monster dove from above, no longer held in check by Selia.

He arrived near Zach's partner and shaped a wall separating her from the monster about to eat her head. He shaped spikes all around them, impaling the other monsters and creating obstacles for the rest, buying them time. Zach reached his partner, both taking their tokens out and preparing to break them.

Zach raised his head and met Ryun's eyes. For a moment, they were all alone, standing in silence. So much had gone wrong between them, Ryun had done irreparable harm to Zach. It was his fault, for being arrogant, for being the way he was. For not talking more, for not being willing to listen to others to find common ground. For always thinking that his way was the right one. So much could've gone better on Earth if only the two of them had talked more. Now, it was too late.

Zach's partner cracked the token and disappeared. Zach was about to break his as Ryun was pulling his own. Then, his eyes widened. In the chaos around him, his sense had missed it. A monster had managed to reach him unannounced. He turned and saw one of the larger types, six limbed and a monstrous head with a horn on top. It swiped at him from above.

A winged shape smashed into it, a blade piercing the monster's head through its open mouth. Ryun recognized Zach a moment later, a testament to how tired and drained he was.

Zach pulled his bladed arm out of the monster and dropped to the ground, he pointed his arm and something exploded, blowing the other monsters around the two of them away. Ryun saw Essence enter the real realm in a great wave.

“Break it!” Zach yelled and Ryun snapped out of it. He reached for his token, and together they broke them. A moment later they were teleported somewhere else, to safety.

* * *

Hastur

The portal winked out somewhere far behind him, but the being that was Hastur the King in Yellow barely paid any attention to it. Half of his body was turned into paste, and the other was covered in lacerations. His robe was in tatters, and his mask shattered. His wounds were slow to heal, it was as if reality itself opposed him changing state, healing his wounds. It was... annoying.

He looked at his foe, lying in a crater. The area around them was destroyed beyond any recognition. They had blown the sand away and reached bedrock and cracked it to pieces. They’ve created a canyon that stretched far in all directions. Their fight had killed many of his soldiers, had damaged the fort that he planned to use as his base of operations. They had even killed one of the limited number of breeders that Hastur had under his command.

It was... a fight that he would remember for all time. Even now, he couldn’t help but laugh.

“You almost killed me, you bastard,” Hastur whispered to his foe as the drake’s eyes closed for the final time. By now, Hastur knew exactly what was wrong with his opponent, so he didn’t bother to stay any longer. He turned and started walking back to his army, he had a lot of work to do.

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Ethereal Realm—Unknown Regions

Deep inside the Ethereal Realm, in the place where no soul or shade had ever set foot, where the rules changed at the whims of spirits that inhabited it. Where the terrain reflected sights never before seen, in colors

so rare that no living soul had ever experienced them. Where secrets and knowledge yet to be known hid and waited for those brave and lucky enough to find them. On a mountain that was as tall as the largest of the old world, piercing the sky that was endless. In a cave deep inside its heart shrouded in the dark, hidden from sight, something stirred.

As the Wandering Drake closed his eyes for the last time, the Explorer's Soul's slitted eyes slid open.