

Siege

Everyone was rushing to the walls, the airships that had attacked the city were long gone, and their infiltrator team locked up and probably forgotten about. They had bigger things to worry about. Everyone in the city, and probably in the entire territory, had seen the message, an event.

Naha knew that such things were rare in the core. They happened more often in the unclaimed territories, or those that were poorly explored. Places where secrets still remained. The territory that was the heart of the top sect in the world was anything but unexplored. She glanced at Zach, saw him staring down into the dark clouds beneath them. The mountain they were on had a pretty steep face, but it was covered in trees growing out of the side of it, a forest went around the mountain below the peak. She knew that there were lower peaks nearby, seven in total—if what she overheard Ikris say was true. He had already sent scouts down the mountain to watch, to try and locate the gates.

The countdown on the message was nearing zero, only a couple of minutes left. Then the gates would open and monsters would spill out. They didn't know where they would come from, or what they were even facing. The sect was on alert, even more so than before. She had seen people in the city taking up arms, from children to the elderly. The walls were filling up, the sense of urgency thick in the air. The attack from the Collective had been expected, and people had been put in place. This was different, this was a total mobilization, something that made her think of the Empire and what she saw there.

The night was coming to a close, the moon growing steadily brighter. The dawn would come soon. They didn't need to stay in the city, they had accomplished what they had come here to do, and they had fulfilled their part of the bargain. They'd fought off the attack on the city. No one was even paying attention to them now. Ikris was organizing the defense, and the others were spread out along the walls. She even saw Vitor Fah Storrah walking along the walls with his attendants and bodyguards, handing out

potions and creating checkpoints where he placed big crates filled with healing potions. The sect was preparing for a siege.

“Zach,” she whispered, he didn’t react, his eyes still just looked down at the clouds. She put a hand on his elbow and continued. “We could leave, Zach.”

She was trying to decide herself. Her whole life she had been a victim of circumstances. She led her people to the Infinite Realm, and failed them. She lost herself in madness and turned away from everything she ever believed in. Then, she saw a glimmer of light, and as a Warden she felt like she started to make things right. Then that too fell apart for no fault of her own. The world seemed set against allowing her to help. Deep down, she feared that remaining would only make things worse for these people.

“This is my fault,” Zach said finally, and a piece of her felt... right. He felt the same way that she did. Blaming himself, when it was the fault of the world itself.

“It’s not your fault, you can’t take the Framework’s work on yourself too,” Naha said.

“No,” Zach shook his head. “This really is. It is angry at me, despite me proving my worth. It relents, because it must, and still it found a way to punish.”

Naha froze for a moment, then closed her eyes. *Oh no, not now.* He was clearly in one of his madness bouts.

“Zach, I need you to look at me, to come back—”

Zach turned and met her eyes, making her close her mouth. He had a sad smile on his face and clear eyes. “I am clearer now than I have been in a long time, Naha. I know what it is now, I can still feel the madness in the back of my head. But not now, I’ve accomplished what it wanted me to, and I didn’t break. The madness wants me to learn, and it will push me again, as soon as it finds something else to latch on to. And when it comes again, I’ll have you,” he smiled deeper and put a hand on her cheek. For a moment, she saw the old Zach peeking out of his eyes. The one that loved her.

He turned his eyes away, back to the clouds beneath the walls. “This is my fault. I saved you all, changed what happened, and this is the response.”

His words sounded like those of a madman, but his eyes... He must’ve seen her confusion, because he touched her hand and made a couple of his windows visible. She read through them, each making her doubt reality more and more.

“**Sage of Time, Way of Aspect, And So It Was Again,**” she whispered slowly. She had never seen or heard about anything like that before.

“You died,” he turned his eyes behind, at the city. “The people in the city died. The Collective attacked, and before anyone knew what had happened, they succeeded.”

Naha remembered him coming to the tower, the things that he said, the pieces started to fall into place.

“Their weapon activated, the Reaction Engine,” Zach continued. She had seen the metal box that one of the intruders pulled out, that Zach had taken, she forgot about it. Everyone else probably did too, the event started almost immediately after. “The blast destroyed the tower, the debris from the crumbling peak fell on the city, killing everyone, you died.”

Zach closed his eyes. “For a moment, I felt... anger, grief, for a moment it felt like that was reality, and that it was as it should be. That it was part of life. That I was going to be alone again. And then, I woke up. The world is what we want it to be Naha, and I will not lose you, I will not let it take from me anything ever again. I will not let it and others play with lives so wantonly. I turned back time, to just before their attack. And I changed things. This event, it is a punishment for it, though I don’t know why the Framework cares. Regardless, even if it wasn’t my fault... You told me that we are protectors, are we not? How could we leave?”

He turned back time, for her. And for everyone else that died, she was sure, but... She didn’t remember, not like she did when he used his Time Blade. Even now, after she had read his Grand Perk and knew that he was telling the truth, it was hard for her to really believe it. She could feel his will, just standing next to him. Stronger than it had ever been. She

was certain that he had used his potion, the one that he got as a reward. *Was that how he accomplished it?* She wondered.

“You are right,” she said at last. “We should stay,” she didn’t know why she even considered leaving. They could help, save people. It was what they did. “But Zach, this isn’t your fault.”

He gave her a doubtful look.

“No, listen to me,” she told him. “You saved lives, if you hadn’t done what you did, then... they would be dead. The city, me, everyone. You saved our lives, and this event... even if people died, you still saved some. Don’t put blame on yourself for things that are outside of your control. The Framework will always do as it wills, nothing we do will change that.”

After a second, he nodded, accepting her words.

The timer on the event ticked down, it was nearly zero. The city fell quiet, and they waited along with everyone else in silence. The timer reached the end, and everyone held their breath.

Seconds passed, then turned into minutes, and nothing happened. There was no bright light to announce the opening of gates, no attack.

Then, her crystal chimed and Ikris spoke.

“I lost contact with my scouts,” he said quickly. “Do either of you sense anything?”

Naha glanced at Zach and passed the question. Her shadow sense had a big range, but not big enough that she could feel anything further down the mountain. Zach’s sense was more powerful, but its range was situational. He saw flaws, and how far he could sense depended on what was happening around him that influenced how those flaws were presented.

Zach narrowed his eyes and gazed into the darkness below. If there was something moving down there, eventually the ripples of disrupted air would get high enough for him to notice that something was wrong. Flaws in perfect movement of air currents would alert him that something was wrong. But... with the city so close, with so much movement up here...

“There is too much senseless noise,” he voiced what she thought. She touched her crystal to respond back, when Zach frowned.

“Wait,” he said. “Something is... The temperature is dropping below us, and quickly.”

Naha blinked, then told Ikris that. Suddenly Zach turned around and looked at a section of the Wall across the city from them.

“Naha, how does the shield around the city work? When we came in, I remember seeing people coming into the city with no issues.”

She frowned, but answered. “It doesn’t stop living things, most of them do not. I don’t know the specifics, every system is different and this one is formation based. It probably has conditions that an array one can’t have.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but then a horn sounded from the direction he was facing, and sounds of battle filled came from the distance. She saw flashes of fire and light as people started fighting tall shapes on the walls that she couldn’t quite identify at the distance. Zach straightened and turned around back to their side of the wall.

“They’re here,” he said as a screech came from below the walls. The clouds parted and flying shapes rose out of it at high speed. Big monsters, most the size of their airship, with a couple that were larger. She removed her filters and looked at them.

Frost Wyvern (Tier 10)

Some were higher tiers, others lower. A few were Greater Frost Wyverns and were of epic rarity. The beasts were mostly white with some being pale blue, large, with two clawed feet and wings for arms. Their necks were long and heads smaller and narrower but arrow shaped like many similar monsters that she had seen before. But that wasn’t what immediately caught her eye, it was that they were armored and that there were figures riding on top of them. She looked at one of the armored riders that she couldn’t quite identify at a glance, and saw their windows.

Ancient Yeti Warrior (Tier 11)

Ancient Yeti Grand Priest (Tier 13)

Ancient Yeti Great Warrior (Tier
12)

There were many different types and rarities, but she knew that the real danger was that these were smarter and equipped monsters.

Zach grimaced and then stepped back just as a glowing ice arrow the size of her entire arm smashed into the wall. The wall was unharmed, the reinforced red stone shrugging off the impact, but they were pelted by ice shards. She dashed into Zach's shadow as he used the wind to divert the shards.

The wyverns flew over the walls, some going into the city while others attacked the wall itself. Fire arrows and techniques responded, and she saw one of the wyverns get hit by a dozen arrows, then release a death cry as it tumbled down along with its rider.

Airships above the city opened fire, killing scores. The wyverns had to get close to the wall to fire, otherwise the city shields prevented them from getting through.

A wyvern carrying a basket-like contraption flew over the wall and yeti's jumped out of it, landing on the wall. Three of them rushed at Zach, their armor was made out of tough furs and leathers, and they carried large two-handed clubs that seemed to be made out of bone.

One of them rushed forward ahead of the others, using a power of some kind that made him double in size. He swung at Zach and missed as Zach moved out of the way. A moment later, his large sealing blade was in his hand, and he swiped, cutting the yeti in half. He rushed at the others, swinging and killing them too.

A moment after they fell, he stopped, and just looked at their dead bodies.

"Zach?" She whispered from his shadow.

“It is such a waste,” he said. “They are forced to do this, to be monsters, and there is no way to save them.”

Naha had told him what she knew, what he knew before about monsters and the Framework. Some things that he learned in the Ethereal Dungeon, others that they had uncovered together.

She knew that he wanted to help people. To protect. He hadn't killed any of the attackers on the tower, they captured them. But monsters... even those like the yeti before them... there was no trying to help them. The Framework didn't allow them any other choice but to try and kill you.

He shook his head and opened his mouth to speak. The start of his words was drowned out by a roar that echoed of the mountain peaks, and both of them looked across the city, at the third section of the wall. Large shapes flew up in a blaze of fire, larger even than the yeti's wyvern mounts. They were red and black in color, light reflecting off their scales, with two sets of wings on their backs and four limbs. Horns curved back over their heads and four eyes glowed in the night. She watched as dragons fell on the city, spewing fire, and winged drakes flying up to meet them.