

## Interlude – Ritual

Genissa was alone. Tied up on a sacrificial slab, waiting for her death. She had long since abandoned any hope of a rescue. In fact, she had known that a rescue was unlikely ever since she was brought to this place and she saw the nine ringed shades serving a spirit that was more powerful than anything she had ever even heard about. Not even her father would've been able to survive that, and in fact she prayed to the Dealmaker for her father not to enter this place. She couldn't reach the shop nor the Dealmaker, which meant that she was probably inside a wild dungeon. Or perhaps the spirit that ruled this place could shut down access to such things, ultimately it didn't matter.

The bindings holding her to the slab were too strong for her to break out of, and they were also keeping her from using her powers. Not that she was powerful enough to do much against so many spirits.

Her fate had been sealed the moment she was captured. She had watched the others get sacrificed, and knew that she would follow. Marik, one of the miners that had been captured alongside with her had been the last one to be murdered. She didn't know exactly how long ago, she had lost track. At the start she had tried to keep track of time, so she knew that they killed them about a week apart. It was a horrible thing, they were taking their souls and fueling... something. They were truly killing them, making it so that they had no chance of an afterlife.

It was a terrifying thing. For as long as she had been alive, Gen had known that should she die, there would be more after. But now... There was going to be nothing. She had lost her tears long ago, now she just... waited. She glanced to the side and saw Marik's body, the blood that had seeped over the slab and to the floor had dried up long ago. His body had bloated as it was decomposing. It wouldn't be long before it was her turn. Her only consolation was that all was going to end. It was her fault that all of it had happened. Because she tried to open the wall without her father present. She hadn't thought that they would succeed, but she shouldn't have done it.

The four warden spirits in the room stood motionless, guarding her and waiting for her time to die. She stared at the ceiling, yelling at the spirits

had no effect, nor did her crying and begging. They had all tried that, the spirits didn't care or they didn't even understand. They were lesser spirits, so they probably didn't understand at all what they were doing, and if they did they wouldn't care.

She heard a noise and turned her head and saw more spirits enter the room. Seven wardens and one elemental. The water elemental was the only one of them that was a higher spirit, but the elementals were notorious for being difficult and single minded. The fact that this one was serving another spirit said much about the stronger spirit's power. She and the others had tried to beg, to bargain, her father could've done much for any spirit that helped them escape. But it was all pointless, the elemental hadn't even acknowledge them. It moved on a long, sinuous tail-like appendage, almost slithering across the floor. Its upper body had a torso and four arms with a constantly shifting blob as a head.

It held a long staff in two hands, and a dagger in one of the others. The fact that it could hold items, that the surface tension of its body was strong enough for it to be able to do that coupled with the fact that its water was golden, told her that the spirit was powerful. An evolved variant of an ordinary water elemental.

She didn't look at them as they prepared, a chorus of voices speaking in a language that she didn't understand. Then one of the warden spirits walked over to her slab, the dagger that the water elemental brought in one of its hands. She felt her heart start to beat faster, her muscles tensed as she tried to break her bindings one last time. She didn't want to die, yet she knew death approaching when she saw it.

The warden raised its dagger, the chorus reaching a new height. Gen looked away from the dagger above her, not wanting to see her death coming. Her eyes looked to the side, and there above one of the high balconies, she saw a shape flying through the air, two spectral wings on its back.

Before her mind could catch up to her eyes the shape smashed into a warden spirit, a blade made out of fire punching through the back of its head and out through its neck. The shape rolled over the dead spirit and landed on its knee in the center of the room. Everything around her stopped, and for a moment there was silence.

A short sword that seemed to almost be made out of spectral white light appeared in his left hand, even as the blade of fire winked out and another took its place. A golden blade, with a strange field around it.

Then, he rose like a giant, mist seeping through his broken armor. Cracks and gashes were everywhere, a large hole on his stomach showed his black skin beneath the armor.

Gen saw glowing eyes and mist seeping through the visor. The spirits were seemingly stunned, and then the man moved. Chains flew out of his hand and grabbed hold of the warden standing above her, the man in the center braced and then pulled.

The warden flew toward him, pulled by the chains. His short sword and the blade on his hand pierced the spirit midair and then he turned. Running with a spirit impaled on his blades. The spirits reacted, crying out and attacking, but the man charged and jumped he collided with another spirit, his blades punched through it and adding another spirit to his blades.

Another warden swiped at his back, but then as his clawed hands neared the man's back the spirit slowed, almost as if it was suddenly trying to move through water. The man dismissed his blades and let the two impaled spirits fall to the ground. He turned his hand flying in an arc as a large two handed spectral sword appeared in it. He decapitated the spirit and then charged the two that had been running toward him. His body got a green-spectral appearance and he flashed forward, his sword blazing with white light in a shape of a wing. He dashed through them, his sword flashing all around him and cutting the two spirits down.

In less than a handful of seconds, almost half of the spirits in the room were dead. Genissa looked around, expecting more people to appear. The only person that could've come to her rescue was her father, but she saw no one else.

Her attention was brought back to the center of the room as the elemental yelled something, and six balls of water appeared above it. In the center of the room, two spirits were fighting the man, his two handed sword was now just a short one, and a golden blade was back on his other hand.

The man was moving with fluidity that Gen had rarely seen before, each step, each attack or block flowing into one another. He turned and

danced around them, blocking and attacking while always moving in such a way that the two spirits attacking him were between him and the remaining four warden spirits and the elemental. He was making sure that they couldn't attack him without going through their allies. Turning their numbers into a disadvantage.

Gen heard the elemental yell something, and the other wardens tried to surround him, but the man wasn't about to be trapped. The two wardens attacking him had become slow, even to Gen's eyes. He attacked with his blade and the warden raised its hands to block. The blade cut into the bones of its four arms, cutting through two of them and getting stuck into the last two, but it didn't matter. A wave of force exploded out of the blade cracking the bones and letting his blade reach the warden's torso. He opened up the spirit up from shoulder to waist and it fell to the side.

The elemental lost its patience, and six high pressure streams of water exploded out of the six water orbs. All six hit right through the second spirit that the man had been fighting, cutting through it and into the man, cutting him to pieces, his limbs and torso sliced right through. And then the six streams of water were slicing only through the spirit and the floor. As the man appeared behind one of the four remaining wardens, his blade impaling it from behind. Gen blinked as she thought that her mind was playing tricks on her. The man seemed completely fine as he grabbed the warden and then raised it into the air. A moment later he threw the spirit across the room at the water elemental. The elemental's water orbs sliced through the spirit and a blast of water from its palm sent them flying back at the man, but he dashed across the room again. His body spectral looking again, he dashed through another warden, killing it too.

Two wardens and the elemental remained. And Gen watched as the man danced around them, evading the elemental's water streams. She had no idea who he was, she didn't know anyone wearing such armor in the company, nor did she know anyone who used such powers. The man was a master with his sword and blade, with moving around the battlefield and reading his opponents. She realized that he didn't have greater stats than the spirits, that he was taking them on by the mastery of his power alone.

She watched in awe as he evaded the two wardens as they were trying to trap him, to sacrifice themselves so that the elemental could slice through him. A warden jumped forward, its hands thrown wide to try and catch him, but the man flickered and passed through the warden. His hand then blurred and another skill eviscerated the warden, cutting it to pieces. The last warden managed to reach the man, but then a short sword punched through its stomach and loud crack filled the air as lightning flashed out of it and cooked the spirit.

Before the spirit even fell to the ground the elemental fired its streams again. The sliced through the air and the spirit reaching for the man, but just as they were about to reach him, they slowed and the man jumped out of the way.

The elemental cried out and raised a hand, bolts of water flew out of its hand at the man who was running from the streams of water slicing up the floor. He moved his hands, blocking the bolts with his weapons, even as he he ran in a circle from the streams.

Two slabs along with the corpses of Gen's miners were cut to pieces as the man used them to hide. And then he jumped to wings appearing on his back as he leapt toward the elemental. Chains of made out of spectral light shot out of his hand and tangled up the elemental, a sizzling sound appearing as the water steamed.

The elemental turned its water streams to the sky, and the man flickered midair as they sliced through him. Then he pulled the chains and himself at the elemental.

The elemental suddenly burst, turning into a wave of water and moved around the room. The man reached the ground as the elemental turned, rising up as a great wave that filled the entire room. A moment later it fell on top of the man. She saw him getting hit the wave crushing him against the floor, but then that image flickered and the man was dashing to the side of the room. The wave still hit him, but instead of crushing him, he was sent flying across the room. His back smashed into the wall on the other side with a terrible crack of breaking bones.

Gen's heart fell as she saw him tumble to the ground, lifeless. The elemental returned to its other form and slithered closer as it recreated its

water orbs. Two orbs appeared over its shoulders and Gen saw it prepare its streams to make sure that the man was dead.

The streams fired and sliced through stone as the man blinked across the room and next to the elemental. His golden blade flashed and then he was standing on the other side of the water elemental, his blade now white-blue and looking as if it was made out of ice.

Gen blinked, trying to figure out what had happened, but she couldn't. She had seen people moving faster than the eye could follow, but that usually left after images, there was nothing like that here. The elemental shrieked, as the man's blade flickered with a skill, striking its body multiple times. Gen saw that every attack left a part of the elemental's body frozen. Two streams of water sliced through the air again, but the man blinked again to the other side. With howling and fury, the man stabbed his sword into the elemental.

The ice spread and covered all of the water elemental, turning it into an ice sculpture. The man, turned as soon as it froze, and started moving toward her. She didn't know if the elemental was dead or just frozen, and she put it out of her mind, it was neutralized in any case.

The man reached her and without speaking started to cut her bindings with his sword. She saw him struggle, his sword not able to cut through. She heard him curse.

"It is something powerful that I have never seen before," she said. "Who are you? How are you here?"

"I am Zach, a warden. I came with the High Ranker Gemheart, to rescue his people. I assume that you are one of them?" The man said as he summoned a blade on his hand that looked like it was a plant. He stabbed it into the slab next to where the bindings were attached to the stone.

"Dad came? Where is he?" Genissa asked as the blade on his hand grew, trying to push through the small opening in the stone, growing and widening it. Trying to break the binding free of the stone since he couldn't cut through it. The stone was cracking and then one of the bindings broke free of the stone. The man immediately started working on the other.

"We got separated, we were attacked by shades and spirits. That was almost a month ago. I saw no signs of him or the rest of the party so I believe that they escaped out of the Ethereal."

Genissa deflated. "So there is no hope, we are trapped here."

Zach shook his head as he freed one more binding. "No, I was the one that opened the way in, I can open the way out. We only need to survive until it comes off cooldown."

The prospect of freedom and now escaping made Genissa feel hope for the first time in a long while. "How long?"

"Less than half a day. I found you almost a week ago, I apologize for letting you stay prisoner. I had to wait the last possible moment, they will know that you escaped and we will need to run and hide. I decided that the less time we have to survive while the spirits and shades search for us the better."

Genissa nodded her head as he finally freed her. "It was a good decision."

He helped her off the slab and she stretched her stiff body. Finally, she got a good look at him, and was startled by the state he was in. His body was covered in blood and grime. The claw marks in the armor were apparent even more now, as was the hole on his stomach. She saw the way he carried himself, barely standing straight. Zach had been fighting and surviving in this place for a month. Gen couldn't imagine doing the same. Then she noticed slashes in his armor on his shoulder and thigh, and fresh blood seeping through the holes in his armor.

"You are injured," Gen said, as she realized that he had taken damage during the battle. The elemental had to have managed to graze him, judging by the slice on his shoulder.

"I'll survive, come," he said and he pulled her along toward one of the corridors. She heard sounds coming in from behind them, as more spirits came to investigate the noise that the combat brought.

"Do you have any healing potions?" Gen asked.

"No, I'm out," Zach answered.

Gen cursed.

"What are your powers?" Zach asked. "Anything that can help us survive?"

"I'm a miner," Genissa admitted. "I have a Geomancer Class so I can break through earth and stone. If we need to take down a wall I could

probably help. My Path is formation based, and I have no materials to build anything.”

Now it was Zach’s time to curse.

The howling intensified behind them and both of them turned. “I guess that they found the room.” Suddenly a dark blade appeared on Zach’s hand. Gen looked at it intently, she had never seen anything like it. She didn’t know what it was. Something connected to his Class? A Path? It didn’t look like any skill that she had ever seen.

“I never had the chance to try this with someone else, so try not to freak out,” Zach said.

“What?” Gen asked just as darkness gathered around him, completely swallowing him. Then it moved over and enveloped her as well, startling her. Gen looked down, seeing that her body was just a dark spot in space that swallowed all light.

“Now, we hope that we can survive and outrun them,” Zach said and tugged on her hand.

Gen followed, her heart thundering in her chest. Praying to all she held dear that they survive this.