

Interlude - Prodigy

They arrived in the new territory in the middle of the night. The divination gave them a direction, and not a location, but Kael could tell that they were close.

“This is taken territory,” Fethum said.

“Could the person we are looking for be a taken?” Tellisa asked.

Kael was unsure, his teacher had met with this warden a long time ago, before the dome. “It is possible,” Kael said after a beat. “He is a warden, and if rumors are to be believed many of them have fallen to the dome monsters or had been turned.”

He didn’t know how hard that would make their mission; he hadn’t faced many taken over the years. Regardless, they weren’t planning on rushing anything.

“Do we know anything about the territory?” Kael asked after a moment.

Tellisa shook her head. “I know that this used to be a territory focused on resource gathering. I have no idea what the taken are doing with it now.”

Kael grimaced, it was just too hard for any information to come out of the taken territories. The Unchained spies had been unable to learn much. Most of what they knew they learned from others who had more success in taken territories, not the actual taken territories themselves.

The six of them continued forward, their airship flying low with all of its stealth arrays active. Maya stood at the helm, while Kaeliss, Tellisa and Fethum stood on the prow, staring into the night. They saw no signs of any life, which worried Kael.

Then Tellisa pointed in the distance. “What’s that?” She whispered.

Kael turned his eyes in the direction she was pointing at and saw a haze of blue light in the distance and growing brighter the closer they got. Kael narrowed his eyes as he tried to figure out what it was. As they got closer, they realized that the forest was on fire. Blue flames spread incredibly fast, and beyond the fire, he saw a city, burning as well, turning the night into a day. There was fighting outside of the city, he saw shapes flying by so quickly that he could barely follow. Smoke and fire turned the air hazy, making it hard to see. Then, the fight moved inside the city. A moment after, he felt the world tremble around them.

—Burning Azure, Thine World To Cinders—

The world lost color, save for the blue flower unfurling above the city. All the fires turned into paintings, and their blaze expanded. Everything burned at only a touch of that fire. And then the center of it started spewing fire. Most went down toward the city, but licks of it launched in all directions. Long trails of painted fire, blazing with blue light.

“Maya!” Kael yelled, and their ship lurched to the side, as she turned the controls violently to the side. A trail of fire passed by them, the heat of it activated their shields. Kael watched as the fire hit the ground and spread like liquid, all it touched turned to ash.

Another bolt of fire was coming at them, too fast for them to evade this time. Kael opened his mouth to yell a warning when space warped around them. The fire bent around the ship and hit the ground. Kael turned and saw Berion standing at the entrance to the crew quarters below the deck, holding his staff high in the air. Exiled Shell ran out from behind him.

“Ber,” Kael called, and the minotaur walked over. “Can you keep us safe?”

He looked up at the flames, the entire territory was going up in them. Mountains and forests turned to ash, the ground and the river, everything was being devoured. The air filled with smoke and blue light. Berion’s eyes looked at the center of the flames, the blue painted flower. “I will try,” he said.

Kael nodded and ordered Maya to move try and move them as far away as possible. Before they had a chance to really get far away enough, a bright white light spread out from the city and shadows rose. They watched from a distance as fire battled light and shadow, and seemingly won.

The color returned to the world, and Kael looked at the devastation. Half of the territory turned to ash, and the rest was still on fire. Even the city was half destroyed.

“Maya, get us closer,” Kael said as he looked down at the device in his hand. His target was there, he knew it.

“Ber,” Kael called. “Can you?”

Berion nodded and closed his eyes. Then, space warped in front of them, a large flat surface, shimmered and then ripped, and they had a window into the city. Looking from above. Kael looked into the city, saw

the shadows retreating and light fading. And in the square he saw a man standing alone.

“That’s him, the warden,” Kael said. He studied his target and saw that he was drained from the fight. Kael didn’t know what had happened, but this was the perfect opportunity. “Everyone get ready, we are going in now.”

Kael used his Evolved Form, turning into his Infaarg form, the others got ready too. Their gear appearing around them as they were activating their powers. Kael hesitated a moment, but then decided to better be safe than sorry—the fight they had just witnessed was between powerful individuals. He raised his hand and cast a rune on each of his people, increasing their power.

Then, he glanced at Berion. “When you are ready.”

The light in the city winked out and Berion raised his hand.

Kael felt space twist and he was suddenly inside the city, just behind the warden. He dashed, pushing his body with all the speed and strength he had, using **[Wraith Dash]**. He prepared a combination rune in his mind and went to grab the warden’s hand. Ra’azel had warned him that it would be a hand that could transform into a blade.

His hand nearly touched it, when suddenly the warden seemed to accelerate, and he moved the arm out of the way. Kael’s claws closed on nothing, he glanced up and to the side and met the warden’s eye. A side of his face was burned off, blood and what looked like cooled metal was stuck on the bones of his skull. His skin was peeled off. It was an injury that would’ve put many on the floor, writhing in agony.

The moment lasted for a moment, and then wind picked up and sent Kael flying off across the square. He beat his wings and righted himself,

just as Exiled Shell smashed his hammer into the man's back. The warden flew forward, but then floated and righted himself in just a few moments. He tilted his head and studied them.

“You are not taken,” he said. “You don't wear the uniforms of the traitors, who are you? Do we know each other? Why are you attacking me?”

The words came with a weary and tired cadence.

“Apologies,” Kael said. “But I have a task to accomplish, it is nothing personal.”

The warden's eye narrowed and then his willpower spread out, making them all shiver. Kael had never felt anything like it. The weight of it made him hesitate, and then the man blinked in front of him. His hand grabbed Kael's throat and lifted him up from the ground. Too bad that his blade arm was away from Kael's reach. But the feat of it made Kael's eyes widen at the sheer strength that the warden had.

“I am... tired, so this is your first and last warning, I have no desire to fight,” the warden said.

Kael struggled in his grip and cycled his Qi. He sent a thread of it into the man's mind with **{Dream of Tomorrow}**. The man's eye twitched, but nothing else happened. His hand tightened around Kael's neck, and he used **{Release All Restraints}**, just as his people attacked.

Chains wrapped around the man's blade, and roots around his legs, then Maya came in with her blade's intent on cutting the man's hand off. The hand around Kael's throat moved away, and freed him. Then Kael punched forward with all of his might and **{Ferocious Blow}**.

The man twisted away, but a glancing blow caught him in the shoulder just as Fethum released lightning through the chains. The Wind picked up and pushed them all away, then his blade pulled Fethum along with his chains toward him. The cthul's eyes widened as the warden kicked him in the chest, sending him flying in the opposite direction.

The warden landed just as Exiled Shell blurred forward, his hammer glowing. He hit from above, and the warden blocked with his blade. The ground beneath him cracked and he was pushed into it, down to his waist. Maya flew low to the ground, and the warden blinked away just as her wind blades came at him. Kael was watching, waiting for the place where he would appear and then sent a powerful strike straight at him, with **|Perfect Greater Blow: My Fist, Weight of A Mountain|**. The force caught the warden and sent him tumbling through the air as vines and trees grew across the ruins of buildings and rose into the sky to catch him. They constricted around the warden's body, and Kael flew in his direction, reaching for the warden's arm.

On the ground, he noticed a shadow moving faster than he could react to. And before he could even voice a warning, a dagger punched out of Tellisa's chest, and another through her head. Kael froze for just a moment, as the warden's blade blurred and cut himself out of Tellisa's vines and roots.

A moment after, he continued after the warden. The shadow on the ground stepped to move, but Tellisa's hand caught the shadow. Her head turned and flakes started falling from her face, revealing what Kael knew was hidden beneath the surface. Her body, that of a wood elemental. A dagger through the center of her body and her head would not stop her.

Roots exploded around her leveling buildings as she focused on the shadow.

Kael reached the falling warden and threw his hand out, carving a rune.

Wior—contain.

The world around the warden constricted, keeping him in place. Kael saw his eye widened in surprise and then he was there. Kael's hand reached out, and the man's will flared, then he slipped through space. Kael's hand missed again, and he grimaced as he felt an attack from his side. Quickly he cast another rune.

Vhrom—protection.

The warden's blade hit the shield made by the glowing rune and he tilted his head.

Kael lashed out in sequence, using techniques and runes, striking with his fists. The man moved his body like a master, evading, deflecting, or just blocking. Then his hand lashed out in a stabbing manner, it hit his armor and it... crumbled, his fingers punched into Kael's chest, pushing all the air out of them. He used [**Wraith Lash**] to put some distance between them, as they both landed on the ground.

Kael glared at the warden, he was... far stronger than he had thought, too strong. Far above what Ra'azel had told him. He readied himself to jump in again as he felt his people approach him. Then, he detected an attack from behind, and turned, quickly etching a rune in the air, and manifesting a shield. A blaze of yellow fire hit the protection dome and

shook the ground with its intensity. Above it, in the air, he saw a man blazing with light, he raised his hand and then... Kael knew what followed.

/Oath of the Sun God: Beloved's Call/

The night turned into day.

“I’ve found you, murderer, no running now,” Heor Darkhoof said as fire blossomed around him.

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Berion watched the battle through the spatial window. He saw that his friends were outmatched. He could feel the will from this far away, could feel the space tremble, influenced by an Aspect that was close to it. It was... incredible power, a mastery of an Aspect that he envied. He watched, and he felt pieces in his soul click together at the display. He was learning from it, feeling the man reaching out to his Aspect, connecting it like how Berion did. But his connection was far deeper than Berions, an endless well, a river.

He sat, and watched, hoping that his friends would be alright. He could tell that the warden, even the shadow, could kill them, but they were not fighting to kill. Neither side was. Kael had assured him that they didn’t come here to kill the man, simply move him someplace else.

And he saw the fire, the arrival of Heor Darkhoof, and he saw the already bleak chances of his friends winning dropping further. Heor was there to kill, he would not hold himself back as the warden had.

Berion... didn't like fighting, a part of him was scared of it. Kael had never asked him to fight, only to help in any way that he felt comfortable. He never ordered; he never asked him to do something that Berion wasn't willing to do. What Kael wanted was a world of true freedom, without factions and systems of oppression. It was a world filled with chaos and death, yes, Berion understood that. But there were fates that were far worse than death.

He couldn't let his friends fight alone. He reached deep inside of himself and pulled on the Aspect of Space. He stepped into the city, and the world sighed at his arrival. He saw Kael's eyes widen, and he smiled. He let his skill out.

|I Remove All That Doesn't Belong|

Space rolled and the shadow was pushed out, a cube of space solidified leaving Heor outside of it. Only his friends and the warden remained inside.

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Ereclaw watched the battle from a rooftop. He had left Ryun and the army once their paths diverged. Ryun had told him that they had already sent some people this way and gave him the right passcodes so that he

could identify himself as an ally and part of the army. He didn't know what he would find, he didn't know what he was looking for really. But, he had arrived too late, and had nearly died to the strange fire. But now he saw his target. He didn't know what was about to happen, but he knew that he had to act. The drake had something that his teacher had warned him about, some plan of the yeti to escape the Ethereal Realm. No matter what the drake was planning he had to be stopped. Ereclaw readied himself to join the battle when space trembled. A minotaur stepped out, and then a part of the space was suddenly cut off, leaving Ereclaw unable to enter. He growled in frustration, but settled outside its boundary, waiting for a chance to enter, hoping that he hadn't failed.

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Berion felt the warden's will try to oppose him, he felt another Aspect fighting with his space, but Berion's will was... stronger in the moment. He could tell that the man was tired, so he pressed on.

My Space, My Rules

The space inside calmed and Berion swapped the man with air, bringing him next to him. Warden frowned, his mouth opened, but Berion didn't let him do anything. The warden was too strong, stronger than Berion, even tired as he seemed to be there was no way of knowing what he could do. Better to get this done quickly. He opened himself to the Aspect of Space, grasped at the knowledge and secrets it held, and pressed them on the man. Space solidified, keeping him trapped.

Berion pulled Kael next to them.

“Do it, quickly, his will is about to break my power,” Berion said as a pressure was building inside his head from opposing the man's will. He

had no chance of pushing back the ocean of power that the man had, only hold it off for a moment.

Kael grabbed the warden's blade hand and carved three runes.

The space trembled, then twisted around the arm. The man was pulled into a rift and something else arrived.

Berion's power slipped through his fingers, and he sagged to his knees, completely spent.

"Ah," he heard someone say, and raised his eyes to see a tall... yeti? White fur and armor covered in runes that pulsed with eerie gray light.

"You've done well, my student," the yeti said.

"Thank you, teacher," Kael inclined his head in respect.

"I consider your part of our bargain now fulfilled," the yeti said.

"MURDERER!!!" A voice thundered from above, a blazing beam of fire and light blasted in their direction. And now that Berion's skill was gone, there was nothing to stop it. Berion marshaled his remaining will and moved to raise his hand, but he was too slow.

The yeti put his hand in the air and runes flashed. The beam hit a wall and stopped and froze. Silence reigned for a moment, as the yeti tilted his head. And then a wicked smile appeared on his face, showing sharp teeth. A black rune flashed, and black cracks spread through the beam, up toward its source, eating at the fire and light. Heor's eyes widened, but before he could react the black tendrils hit him in the chest, then spread all over his body.

Heor let out a terrifying, earsplitting scream as the cracks in his body expanded, and then his body was torn apart in an explosion that cracked the air. The sun above them winked out, and night returned.

“Until we see each other again, my student,” the yeti said. “There is so much to see, so much to do.”

Six rotating runes sprang into the air around him and then space constricted, and the yeti was gone.

The world seemed to sigh in relief at his departure.

“Take us out of here Ber, quickly,” Kael whispered, and without hesitation, Berion obeyed.

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Zach arrived in what he could only assume was the Ethereal Realm. As he was passing through, he felt an impression of something... terrifyingly powerful move by him. A force that scared him more than Hastur ever had. As the teleportation drew to its end, his senses threw him for a loop. His flaw sense was screaming at him, and time made him feel sick. He landed on the ground, and he saw runes appear around him. Time and space churned and it took Zach only a moment to realize what they were doing. They trapped him, but he flexed his will and felt them cracking under his power. The ones that were meant for Time worried him more, he could tell that they were doing something to the Time inside this place, widening the gap between the passage of time. Already hours could've passed in the Real Realm.

He tried to break those runes, but it was taking too long. Then, he felt a force of will attack the runes from the other side, from outside this prison. The runes cracked under their combined will and Zach was free. He groaned on his knees, and then raised his head to look at the one that helped him.

Stretching far above him almost touching the sky was a dragon.

“He escaped,” the dragon whispered.

And Zach felt fear grip his heart. Whoever had escaped was too powerful and obviously dangerous. *Naha*, he thought. He stood and focused on his perk, preparing to open a rift back to the Real Realm.

“It’s too late,” the dragon said. “He made sure that this place moved slower, days have passed in the Real Realm since your arrival. Whatever happened, happened.”

Zach deflated, but he believed the dragon, he could almost taste the truth of his words. He focused instead on his True Link, and found it dim, but *Naha* was still there. She was alive, at least.

“I’ve pulled time back,” the dragon said. “Reversed the flow, hours here will be seconds there. Please, I need you to tell me what happened.”

Zach looked the green dragon in the eyes. Then pushed his worries aside, controlling himself. He needed answers too.