

Interlude - Choices

“Three years,” Erdania whispered.

Selia couldn't quite believe it. The child that Zach had rescued had told them that it had been almost three years since the Wall fell. Anashi had been able to pinpoint exactly how long it had been based on some of the Empire's events that the child still recalled.

Three years, that was how long it took them to get through the Ethereal. Something had to have interfered with their trip, that was the only explanation. And now with the fact that none of them could even open a way in... it was too much to be just a simple coincidence. They had no idea what was happening, but if it really had been three years then...

Why their Far-link Orbs didn't work could make sense. A lot could happen in that time. She didn't immediately jump to the conclusion that Sigmund was dead. He was far too strong for that. But... he could've lost the orb, or a hundred other things.

Selia raised her head and glanced at the other demasi.

Anashi though, was... “The Empire, gone. All of it just... gone.”

She was not taking the news well.

The child was sitting a bit away, with Nahamassa kneeling in front of him, whispering something and Zach standing above them. She studied him for a few seconds, remembering the small abandoned town. He had killed all the monsters there before they had arrived, and they hadn't been that far behind him. Him going to help the child alone didn't surprise her, he was supposed to be a Warden after all, but... She shook her head, there was no point in dwelling on what they did.

They had other problems now.

“That's it then,” Maleatus said before she had the chance to say anything.

Everyone turned to look at him. Vryull tilted his head and spoke. “What is?”

“We did what we came here to do,” Maleatus answered. “We killed the Dome Leader. We could not anticipate that it would take us this long,

obviously something is wrong with the Ethereal. But... we've fulfilled our part of the bargain."

Anashi looked at him with almost uncomprehending look in her eyes. "We need to find my people, my—"

"—That is what you can do, yes," Maleatus interjected. "We on the other hand have no connection to your Empire, we have done what you've asked of us, even if it had come late. If what the boy says is true, your people are fleeing north, pursued by Hastur's forces. What we saw in the village proves that the dome monsters will not simply stop just because the Dome Leader is dead."

"What are you trying to say Mal?" Vryull asked.

"We've been heading for the Empire that no longer exists," Maleatus shrugged. "But our concern is the core, I have stayed with you because it was prudent, but now... Without you all to slow me down, I can reach the core in a few weeks, compared to months or years it will take me with you."

Selia saw where he was going with it, and she understood. Maleatus was speeding their progress up significantly with his daily teleports, but... Alone he wasn't limited by just that single perk. The others among them could move fast, but not nearly as fast as he could.

"You will... abandon us," Vryull said.

"Let's not pretend why we came here, to find opportunities and power, and we did so while also doing this world a service. And we have done that. I've gained the requirements for my Class Evolution, I know that you have too." He was right, Selia had a new Class Evolution available, and she was sure that the others were the same, those that did have Classes. "What would me staying here, with you, accomplish? Aside from buy you a few months while robbing me of the same? I can be in the core and reach Si—our friends—find out what is happening."

Selia knew Maleatus well enough to understand him. He was still part of their group, so while he was always searching for more power, he would find Sigmund and the others. At least this way they would be able to send word ahead of their arrival.

"You are right, Mal," Selia said. "There is no point in you staying with us."

“We are still in the middle of enemy territory, behind their lines. We are safer together,” Vryull added.

Selia glanced at the people around her, then at Zach and Nahamassa. “I don’t think that we will have to worry about that.”

Maleatus nodded and then with a wave and a pop of displaced air he was gone. Selia sighed and looked around. “We go north,” she met Anashi’s eyes. “You can choose where to go once we find your people. As for us...”

“Back to the sect?” Erdania chimed in.

“Yes,” Selia said.

“I’ll come,” Vryull added. “Not like I have any better option. And there are more things I wish to talk with Ryun, once he comes back.”

That only left Zach and Nahamassa, and she wondered where they would decide to go.

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Zach listened to Naha speak as the child, Hiro, slept next to him on the ground near the fire. They had traveled with the others for a few months, until they found the first refuges of the Empire fleeing north. Hiro had refused to leave their side and go with the Empire’s people. Zach didn’t mind having him around, though, the others had... decided on going their own way. The child was slow, and they were all in the rush to get somewhere. A part of Zach understood that, they all had things to protect. They had split from the others and had been alone for a few days. Their responsibilities forcing them to move at a faster pace.

For him, though, the only responsibility was the child and learning more about the past.

Naha had told him many things, though he did know that she was holding some things back fearfully. He didn’t press, it was... hard for her, he could tell. Still, he did admire the way that she seemed to take everything in and never complain, like some of the others had.

“The dungeon was in the Ethereal?” Zach asked, keeping his voice low.

“Yes, a prison,” Naha said.

Zach nodded, he remembered something about that, words carved into stone. “I found someone there, a yeti, Ra’azel Equinar. I wrote that... that he was untrustworthy, an enemy.”

Naha inclined her head. “Just so, he gave you your right arm, he created it. And he left you in the prison to die.”

Zach blinked, then looked down at his hand. It looked like it was made out of metal, or some type of organic variant. He could move it the same as he could his other hand, but there was no doubt that this one was different. It was pale green for one, and it changed color based on what type of power he held in it. It was... one of his greatest tools though.

“Do you know why he gave it to me?”

“Yes,” Naha answered. “You set him free.”

“Ah...”

A payment for a debt then. Zach shook his head, then took a deep breath. His willpower had fully recovered, finally. And he was... having some trouble. He always saw the flaws in everything around him, it was... overwhelming. It had taken him a while to get used to it.

“Where are we going Zach?” Naha asked, and he realized that he had gone silent for a while. He did that often, time slipped by him without him realizing. It wasn’t that much of a problem for him, but others... Their lives all seemed to move so much faster than his did.

“What do you mean?” Zach asked her in turn.

“I mean, where are we headed, what do you want to do?” Naha asked.

Zach met her eyes. She had told him about their trips, hunting bounties, saving people when they could. That they were part of the Wardens. And she told him about their dreams, their plans. They made... sense to him.

“North, to this... Core. If what you’ve told me is true, there are people there that are caught in between monsters and people who act like ones. We will go and help where we can.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t that what we have done before?”

“It is, though, then... we understood that we didn’t have the power to do much. I don’t think that you quite grasp that now. And... are you doing

that just because I told you that we used to do it? Because I said that we wanted to help people?”

“Of course not,” Zach said. He took a few moments to compose his thoughts, and she thankfully waited for him to gather himself. “I’ve spent a lot of time alone Naha. I am... uncomfortable here, being with people other than myself. But I am also grateful. You cannot understand what it means to live in a world where you alone are the impetus to everything around you. Other people, their lives are... precious. The ruins that we saw, the dead, it pains me Naha. Everyone is so... wasteful, so callous with other lives, so obsessed with their own growth. I see it in your words, I see it in the lands that we’ve crossed, and in the way that the others acted. I can’t understand why they wouldn’t want to help, why they...” Zach shook his head. It was hard to find the words for his feelings, he had rarely needed to express himself in such ways. “We will go north our way, and we will help those on the way, because that is right and good. Because feeling alone, like I was, is not something that I want anyone ever to know.”

Naha looked at him for a few moments, and then finally she smiled.

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There was nothing but the Void.

An emptiness without start, or end, or meaning. Just there. Nothingness. It cradled him softly, it was in him and around him, it was him. He was part of it, a piece of something that he could grasp and understand, more than he ever had before.

But as time passed, and consciousness formed, the understanding seeped away leaving only an impression.

When Ryun finally found himself, he understood that something was lost. He wished that he could grasp it again, but... his thoughts were slow.

He remembered; he died. He didn’t know if they had won, but... in the corner of his mind, he still felt Selia, far away, a sheen of something in between them, but she was still there. If she was alive, then... it was more likely than not that they had won. He was glad, he wasn’t one to throw away

his life for nothing. And if they had killed the monster then... They had done what they came there to do. The danger to Ryun's sect would be lessened.

He was in the Void, his immortality triggered. He had no body, it was... a strange sensation. Like he was floating in nothingness. The Void around him didn't hurt him, but then again, it hadn't hurt him since he cleansed his body of all non-tier 9 Void Qi. He remained there, not knowing exactly what was happening, but faint sensations would spark from time to time, that he assumed was his body being reconstructed.

Time too was strange, he couldn't tell how much time was passing, and his mind would... slip away from him. As if he had some grave head injury that was making him woozy.

It was also... boring. He couldn't know how long he had already been in here, or how long he still had to go. So, in the times where his mind seemed steadier, he tried to think of ways to pass the time.

It was not like him to sit still, to waste time. So, he tried to take count of what he could. After a while, he was able to feel parts of his body, bones, maybe, he wasn't quite sure. It didn't feel the same way as when he was regenerating an injury. This was... as if his body was far away, not fully connected to him. Perhaps that was it.

With death, his soul was no longer connected to his body, he needed a new one. He wondered why he couldn't just recreate it from the Void, why it took so long now compared to when he did it with his Qi.

Where even was a core? It was inside of his body, part physical and part Ethereal? Or something like that. Obviously connected with the soul, yet... He didn't know, and that made him wonder. He would have to take the time and research, perhaps others knew more than him.

Still, he couldn't take it, just sitting there and doing nothing. He was himself, at least some of the time. And so, when he could, he tried to reach out to the Void around him, to will it to speed up the process. Nothing really happened most of the time, until he wished that at least his core would reconstruct faster.

That gave him an idea, perhaps he couldn't speed things up, but guide and choose what was recreated first.

He didn't know how long it took him, but eventually the process started focusing on his core. He waited impatiently, his focus slipping a few times, making the process return to evenly reconstructing all of his body. It was hard, but it was working.

After a time that almost seemed like an eternity or just hours, his core was back. Empty but there. He rejoiced inside his mind. There was a lot more of his body to be reconstructed, but now... now he could do something while it was recovering. Slowly, he let his will touch the Void around him, and started to pull in the Essence. Fill his core, and then... cycling. He had all the time in the world for it now.