

## Near the End

The monsters surged out of the portal, countless different types. The smallest of them, the foot-soldiers were formless spawn, shifted into the shapes of the various creatures of this realm. Shape-shifting monsters made out of black ichor, even as they charged across the ground they shifted, adding tentacled limbs to their already twisted forms. Larger shapes charged among them, less in number, hulking horrors twice the size of any human: Gnoph-Kehel—six legged beasts with curving claws, a single horn on top of their heads and tarnished black fur, Nyogtha-el—an amorphous mass of black substance with tentacles reaching out of it, letting it move slowly over the ground, Voormis-el—big bear like monsters resembling yetis and carrying clubs in their three fingered hands. Many more horrors among them, some that didn't even have names. In far lesser number though, were the great titanic forms, towering over the others, each the size of a building. Shambling slowly over the ground. Four legged beasts with legs like tree trunks, with tentacled limbs growing from their torso each covered with a hundred eyes.

From each of the monstrosities on the field an aura of faint horror spread. It did not instill the instant terrible terror, it did not strike at the mind with a hammer, it whispered, a slow building madness to all who gazed upon them.

Great worm insect like shapes crawled through the portal, dragging the sacks filled with eggs attached to their abdomen. The spawning queens, a dozen of them, sent to burrow and prepare to birth more monsters. Those who opposed them didn't know, but the threat they faced was greater than they realized.

The last horror on the field was a general. A two-legged towering figure, the size of several floored building, with four arms that ended in tendrils. It stood near the portal and watched as the army under its command continued forward. They spilled over the stepped cliffs, climbing over the walls and into the city. He felt them killing and rending all in their way.

Not everywhere though, the general saw the few holdouts along the wall. Several areas where his army was being killed before they could climb. It didn't matter at all, more were coming through with every moment.

---

The battle had lasted for less than half of an hour, and Selia could see that they weren't going to be able to stop the monsters. Already some had managed to climb over the walls in the undefended sections, and even with her sect's warriors around her they couldn't hope to keep up with the number of monsters heading their way. A few other sects had arrived, fortify their position, they were holding a piece of the wall that was at least three kilometers in length, and they covered slightly more.

She was shaping spears and sending them flying through the air. Ryun stood next to her with his avatar, firing beams of the void into the monsters, killing them by the scores just as she did. It wasn't going to be enough. The bodies were piling up at the bottom step, hundreds, maybe thousands. So many powers were flying from the wall that she couldn't even keep track.

Her sect had a few hundred warriors on the wall, slightly more than half of the amount they had in the city. The rest either hadn't yet arrived or were helping with the evacuation of the city. Other sects were next to them too, Onyx Fang Sect was here, Emar with his nephew Eari. They had several thousands of warriors from many sects, standing on the walls, some even protecting their backs from the stragglers that had breached into the city in other places. Selia knew that they couldn't stay here for long. In the distance she saw a few other areas of the wall being detected, but they had already failed to contain the monsters. No one had expected an attack from the center of the city, they didn't have warriors nearby. With the destruction of the Warden headquarter, they had lost leaders of every major faction. It was clear to her that there was barely any leadership.

She also knew and agreed with the Warden Commander. They couldn't retreat, the invading monsters came through the portal seemingly without an end. If they left such an army behind them... It was doubtful that they even could get away. They needed to hold off as much as possible and close the

portal. She hoped that someone in the city was capable of that, otherwise they were all doomed.

The battle in the sky drew her attention, the fliers were fighting the flying monsters. Awirren Goldenfeather in her evolved form was turning the night sky into a painting of golden fire. Still, there were so many dark shapes flying around her, threatening to overwhelm her.

Selia turned her eyes back to the ground, then turned to Erdania.

“Gather the warriors, head down to the lowers steps,” she told her. Erdania nodded and moved to gather warriors. She had seen the same thing that Selia had, soon the monsters in front of them would start climbing in force.

---

Erdania led a force of more than a thousand warriors down to the lowest step of the stands. Powers flew over their heads, striking at the monsters charging at them, climbing over the corpses of the dead. The warriors didn't even have the time to settle into formation before the first monsters started spilling over the edge, climbing onto the stands. She saw Emar's spear flash, and he bisected the black skinned monster. The monsters all looked similar, four legged, with elongated snouts and powerful jaws. But there were some differences, she recognized some types of monsters, only they were twisted. All of them had one thing in common, they had two sets of eyes on their heads and tentacles growing from their bodies.

As a group of three monsters climbed onto the wall in front of Erdania and she focused. As they leapt at her, she prepared two techniques at the same time. She stepped forward into the attack of the closest one pulling a large two-handed staff from her storage, the metal weight beneath her fingers was familiar and welcome. She stabbed the first monster in the head, releasing her **{Pulsing Shifting Strike}**. A pulse of Gravity Qi hit the monster and the vector it affected the monster on shifted, no longer pushing it down from above, but instead pushing it from front to back. The monster flew backward sailing through the air.

She spun and smashed her staff into the second one before it landed, releasing a **{Reverberating Blow}**. The monster's entire body rippled from the impact and exploded to the side. The last monster landed and lashed out with its claws and tentacles. She took a step back, exerting influence on the gravity around her with her **Master of Gravity** perk, making it harder for the monster to move. Its speed slowed and she activated her **Gravity Orb** perk. A black orb made out of Compressed Gravity Qi manifested into existence next to her, orbiting her. She moved it closer to the monster and it was pulled from the ground by the orb's gravitational pull. Floating in the air, it was shambling, trying to grab a purchase on air. She whirled her staff and hit it over the head, pulverizing it.

She looked around, seeing warriors fighting monsters. A warrior of some sect that Erdania couldn't identify immediately fought near her. Then, he stumbled, his spear missing its target and monster's claws raked him over the chest, a pair of tentacles grabbed him and pulled him close. The monster's jaws closed over the warrior's head. A moment later, as the body fell to the ground, the monster lashed out at empty air and Erdania watched as the space rippled, its claws grabbed purchase and pulled a glowing form in the shape of the warrior. It opened its jaws and ate the soul.

---

Yirrel watched as the monsters advanced. Too many of them had already gotten into the city, too many people were dying as they tried to stem the tide. She stood on top of the wall, as ranged fighters around her rained hell on the monsters below while her melee fighters stood at the bottom of the stands with the few geomancers that had showed up. They were creating fissures that slowed the tide, but it wasn't enough, there was just too many of them. She kept the Warden Zacharia and his partner next to her, she couldn't risk him dying. She could see that he wanted to fight, but he didn't complain.

Gemheart stood nearby, holding cannons in his arms and firing down at the arena floor along with his people that had shown up. Sigmund stood on the wall, balls of blue energy orbiting his head and then shooting off to strike

monsters in the distance. On the steps below them, the melee fighters were finally engaged in combat themselves.

She was surrounded by the wardens, fighters from many other factions. The Adventurers Guild was here, their ranged fighters firing alongside her wardens. The fighters from several kingdoms and empires as well. There were thousands of warriors on her side of the wall, all fighting the monsters. But her call had not been heard by all. Many parts of the wall were bare, no one defending them. The monsters were inside the city, and it was only going to get worse.

She glanced at Zenker, she could feel reality rippling around him. From time to time she could see... something around him, but she couldn't identify what it was. She wanted to rush him, but she knew that she couldn't, so she focused on what she could do. She used her perks and her abilities, strengthening their defenses.

A gasp from her side made her turn her attention back to the fight and she saw what had made Bera exclaim. Several monsters ganged up on a knight wearing white armor someone that she recognized as a competitor in the High Division. They ripped the knight apart, and then she saw one of the monsters attack the empty air above the corpse. "Heavens," Yirrel whispered as she saw the knight's soul get pulled into the real realm and then devoured by the monster. The knight had immortality, she was certain about it, yet it didn't help him now.

"Bera," Yirrel said. "Mass communication, start now: *Attention everyone. The monsters are capable of pulling souls to the real world, they are capable of causing true death.*"

She knew that that information might discourage people from fighting, from coming to the wall, but she also knew that they needed to know. She raised her eyes and saw six major areas of the wall being defended, there were holes all over the wall, but they were slowing the attack down, with every monster they killed here they saved a life in the city. Despite the portal constantly letting in new monsters, they had to stand.

She took a deep breath and focused, her head was killing her, but she couldn't allow her injuries to slow her down. It took her a good several

seconds before she managed to activate her perk, and when she did it nearly left her breathless.

**True Might of Wardens Call** spread from her to everyone under her command in the city. Every Warden in the city felt the increase to their stats, the boost to their defense, but also everyone else who had listened to her command and came to the wall. A white citadel blazed in the air above the arena, announcing her perk for all to see. The bare minimum requirements for her perk to consider them under her command. She had wanted to wait for more people to get to the wall, but she couldn't afford to wait now. It was one of her greatest perks, and perhaps it would give them a slight edge.

---

The white citadel glowed for a few moments in the air above them, but Eari was too busy fighting to focus on it as he felt himself get stronger. A faint white glow surrounded him, and he realized that he was faster, stronger. He didn't dare check his notifications, but he knew that he and everyone else around them had been boosted. All of them were glowing. He stabbed his awakened spear into a monster then ripped it out to the side, with a **|Spatial Evade|** he got out of the way of an attack from the monster near him, and then he released his **{Army of Spears}** at it. The monster exploded into pieces from his attacks.

He glanced around, seeing the warriors of his sect fighting, some dying. Their souls ripped from the Ethereal Realm to be killed fully. He fought as hard as he could, trying to help those warriors around him. His uncle fought next to him, his black spear and armor almost melding him in the dark. They followed the same paths, but he could see just how great mastery his uncle had over his paths. He was a one man whirling storm of death. What his spear touched, it died.

Eari turned his focus back as more monsters climbed on top of the first step of the stands.

---

Anrosh released her **Absolute Cold Aura** and the ground around her started to freeze. The monsters jumped at her, two at the time, she triggered her **Defensive Stance** and saw their attacks. Her shield rose and she blocked the attack from the first monster, which allowed her to attack. Kagehime soared through the air and she cut the side of one monster as she stepped back, taking the claws of the second monster on her shoulder, letting the **{Glacial Armor}** protect her.

Her **{Avatar of Frost}** attacked the monster from the side, stabbing its sword into its side. A spear wreath in fire hit the monster in the neck, punching through and exiting through the shoulder. It disappeared as the monster fell to the ground, returning to Nayra just in time for her to stab another monster on the other side of the street.

They were fighting in front of their compound, protecting the caravans that were leaving the area and fleeing the city. A monster leapt at Nayra and was caught mid air, a net of spectral threads catching it. Anrosh glanced at Daria standing behind them, her powers were not useful against these monsters, not when they could attack things in the Ethereal Realm. Nayra's sister didn't want to risk any of her soul related powers, not after they saw a warrior get its soul ripped apart.

They had encountered only a few dozen or so monsters, and they were barely able to hold them off. She couldn't imagine what was happening around the city.

Two monsters jumped at her and Anrosh spent one of her anchors. Her **Arctic Sword Storm** was unleashed around her, ice swords came into being and then attacked in a flurry, cutting up the monsters. She finished them up quickly and waited for more to come.

---

Yirrel glanced back as she felt something stir. Zenker opened his eyes and stood up. Behind him and around him the air wavered, like a heat haze it danced. A mirage with shapes in it. It was murky for a few moments, and then it solidified into a clear image. It was a landscape, and it changed from

one to another, a forest to a desert, then to a mountain and a cave. Different places, different landscapes, but one thing was always the same, a winding path cut through the middle, making it seem as if Zenker was treading upon it.

His eyes met hers and he spoke.

“I’m ready.”

---

Zenker Broketail felt the pieces of his skill come together. Pushing a skill to tier 9 was both more complicated and simpler than anything that came before. It required a firm idea of what one needed and wanted. And enough willpower to hold it of course, to force it into shape. He focused on the idea, on the moment in his memory when he understood the concept of what was at the very center of his skill. The idea, the image took shape, then it took hold. His will was throbbing, in pain, exhaustion, in... it didn't matter. He had done it.

The last of his skills came together and he felt everything change. A notification flashed in his vision.

<p><b>Congratulations!</b> <b>You've achieved the pinnacle of your focus! And you have gained great power.</b></p> <p><b>Image formation unlocked.</b> <b>Skill synchronization — 89%</b> <b>Image formation — <i>Nascent</i></b></p>
---

Image: The Wanderer	Your skills and path are those of one who wanders the world. The image of the wanderer surrounds you and based on your will can influence the reality around you.
---------------------	---



Current Image formation grade: <b><i>Nascent</i></b>
---

Zenker opened his eyes and stood up. He felt his image start to form around him, his willpower pushing it upon reality. Even after all this time, of carefully selecting skills, he hadn't gotten more than 89% of skill synchronization. It didn't matter, he didn't have the time to worry about it now. He met Yirrel's eyes and spoke.

"I'm ready," he said and started pulling items from his storage ring.

First, he pulled three glowing elixirs, each a different color. He downed them in an instant, his scales hardened, his stats soared, his willpower replenished. Next, he put on his armor, a blue and white glowing piece of interlocking plates surrounded him, covering every part of his body. The helmet didn't even have a visor, but from the inside, Zenker could see everything as if it was see-through. The **Armor of the Last Star** boosted his stats and its set effect hit him like a boulder, but he gritted his teeth and focused.

Next, he pulled out a weapon, the **Staff of Ten Thousand Storms** settled into his right hand, followed by the **Wand of the Mountain's Force**. He walked over to Yirrel and her assistant. Few of the warriors on the walls paid him any heed, too focused on the fight against the monsters.

"You are sure that you can close it?" Yirrel asked.

"I can, the only thing that worries me is what I'll find on the other side," Zenker said.

Yirrel gave him a long look, then placed her remaining hand on him.

**[Inspire: Shield of the Depths], [Inspire: Power of the Shield], Battle Roar, Greater Strength, Greater Power Regeneration.**

Her power seeped into him, and he inclined his head, thanking her. Then, with a glance at the others fighting the horrors below he stepped onto the wall and looked at the portal in the center, then he triggered his **True Step** perk, and stepped across the distance.