TRUST IS THE COLOR OF DEATH
Ryun

Ryun kept firing his void beams at the mass of monsters. He didn't even have to aim that hard, there was so many of them that even if he was shooting blindly, he would kill something. The smaller monsters died under his beams, but the larger ones were tougher. He classified them into three types inside his head, the small, medium, and large monsters. The smallest were the weakest and the most numerous, the medium were tougher, but there wasn't as many of them, the last were the large type monsters, which were all the size of buildings. And also the toughest of them. Ryun had fired his beams at them from time to time, the void was doing damage, but not enough to do more than annoy them. Perhaps if he focused for a while he could bring one down from this distance, but it was all that he and Selia could do to stem the tide heading toward them. The two of them were doing the most damage, although there were many warriors around them adding their power to the fight. Although, many were focused on the skies, protecting them from the flying monsters.

Ryun remembered fighting against the swarm, and despite its size he had always felt like they could win. This... he didn't see any way to win this, they just kept coming out of that portal. He had stayed to fight because he wanted to help slow them down, because he knew that he could be of use. Because he had given his word to his sect, his people, and his word was his bond. He knew that the only way to keep his word was to make sure that his people managed to get away.

But now... it was all he could do to keep his calm. He had felt it with his sense, when the first warrior on the steps beneath him died, when the monster reached for his soul and killed him. It was... it was as if he could hear the anguished scream of the soul's death inside his head. He had nearly let the **Presence of the Eternal Hunter** out, it nearly activated on its own, slipping out of his control. And with every death since, it had only gotten worse. They were dying a true death,

and he could sense the wrongness of it. It made him remember all the people that he had killed on Earth before his perk had been put behind the wall. He killed them with the perk active, he gave them a true death before it was their time. He hadn't felt like this then, or now when he had used his perk. It was... it seemed as if his perk almost made him be someone who could decide without consequences, but when others caused true death... it made *him* angry. Or at least the parts of the Aspect of True Death that lived inside of him.

People were dying all around him, warriors beneath him, and those trying to escape the city. He could feel the few small bands of monsters behind them in the city, hunting those who were too slow.

He tried to push all that death out of his mind, to convince himself that he didn't care. And he didn't in a way, he cared more that some monstrous force was in his way than he did about their deaths. But he had still given his word to his people, and he knew that his contribution to the wall was significant. And... the time of him retreating alone had passed. Monsters filled the sky, which meant that he couldn't run away through the air, and there were bands of monsters behind them.

The only hope they had now was to close the portal, and then retreat together. There were already too many monsters in the arena for them to fight, they would get overwhelmed no matter what. They couldn't fight what was in front of them, they were barely holding back the tide as it was, and they were being pushed back with every moment. He had already downed three Qi regeneration potions, and he had felt the third one having lowered effectiveness. Just like any other potion, these consumables too could get saturated, it would take hours before he could drink another of the same type at its full effectiveness.

He could see the way that the fight was going, they couldn't survive for long.

Then, a voice spoke inside Ryun's head.

"We have a problem," Ereclaw's voice spoke through their **Send Thought** perk, a message thrown to Ryun's mind.

"What is it?" Ryun asked. Ereclaw had been in their compound when the attack started, after that he had entered the city, scouting and helping protect the retreating people.

"A large mass of monsters has gathered, those that spilled into the city around you, they met in the middle of the district and are now moving toward the walls. They will surround you."

Ryun grimaced, he couldn't sense anything but the few wandering groups of monsters, that meant that they were still outside his range. He didn't doubt Ereclaw though.

"Did the sect get out?" Ryun asked.

"Not yet, Anrosh is holding the monsters back while they move. Only a few had made their way to the outskirts of the city."

Thinking about Anrosh fighting these monsters made Ryun grimace.

"Go back to Anrosh, get our people out," Ryun said. Ereclaw sent a thought of acknowledgment.

It didn't take long for him to sense the monsters coming at them from the city. He could see the deaths of anyone in between them who hadn't yet escaped, inevitable, just as they now had no way to escape. The only thing they could do was try and punch through the army at their back.

Ryun looked around at the warriors around him, all of them had stayed in order to protect people in the city, give them time to escape. And many lives had been saved because they all stayed here. Ryun had seen a lot of cruelty and indifference in this world, but here in this moment people stood and fought. Not all, he had sensed warriors running, and there were only a handful of sects on the wall with them compared to the thousands that had sent representatives to the tournament.

But they stood. Ryun saw Erdaina towering over the monsters down below, fighting the large types, smashing the tide and giving them even more time. There were more pockets around the walls,

fighting as well, some people had decided to stand. It was worthy of respect.

But Ryun could see that they were all about to die, them on the walls, and those behind them who had run away. If they don't close the portal, if they don't start retreating now, they were all going to die a true death. And the window for his own escape had already passed.

Every moment that passed sent a shiver through his body and mind as he felt another soul die. He had one more thing that he could use to help, and he knew that it wasn't going to be enough, not on its own.

Ryun turned and walked over to Selia while his avatar continued firing.

"We can pull back some of the warriors, to defend against them," Selia said after he informed her of what was coming behind them.

He looked her in the eyes, not seeing anything other than the flat surface of her eyeballs.

"We need to decide if we are staying here Selia, or if we are going to retreat into the city," Ryun said. "Soon, we will be surrounded."

They would die then, he knew, the portal was still open and they couldn't overpower what was coming.

"We need to slow them down, give the people a chance to escape. And... we need to close that portal or those monsters will flood the core. We don't know how many of them there is."

He could detect fear in her words, but he could tell that despite that she didn't intend to move from the walls. She wanted to help as many people as possible to escape, but... She was looking beyond that. Ryun didn't understand, not as she did, he didn't know what that notification meant or if there was even an end to the monsters. If they didn't close the portal then they could have a never ending army marching through the entire world. Ryun doubted that his sect could just hide and remain unscathed from that, no matter how far they ran.

Ryun turned his eyes to look at the portal. "Who ever went through didn't close it yet. But if we need to hold a bit longer... we need more power. We won't survive for long as we are now," The portal and

the army spilling out of it was death, he knew it. He looked inside his storage ring, at an object stored in the corner of it.

"The Warden Commander is right, we need to close the portal. I hoped that she had some ideas, but…" Selia trailed off, he could see that she was struggling with what to do.

Ryun glanced at Erdania on the arena floor, getting overwhelmed with the sheer amount of monsters. Her form had increased several fold, but they were attacking her legs, trying to climb over them. He hadn't expected to ever meet her again, let alone find her here, to learn that she and Selia were together.

Erdania had helped Ryun more than she could ever know, let him grieve Melody properly. Helped him move on. He had never planned on using her orb, he had always felt like it would be… improper. But now, his perk was struggling inside of him, like a living thing. So much true death all around him was doing something to it, death that was not in its proper time, that was not chosen by the Aspect of True Death. It… the perk was never meant to be alone, it was one half of a single whole.

He closed his eyes, the bond that he shared with Melody had been special, made more so by the perk. He had loved her, and she had loved him back. Their bond through the perks had let him know that. But the perk itself had never held romantic entanglements. The Scythe and the Reaper weren't lovers, they weren't friends, they were literally two halves of the same being. Such things didn't matter to them. His dreams of the Reaper had shown him that.

He had been hurt by the perk when Melody died, but only because he was too weak to contain what was left of the Reaper. Now… the Reaper was gone, and he was much stronger.

If he gave the other part away now, they might be able to hold the walls for longer, or perhaps even figure out a way to attack the portal and close it. He just didn't know if he could do it. Yet… without it, death seemed certain to him.

It was in the end, just power. He knew what the other perk did, and he knew that it would work best for someone who could utilize the

speed part of the perk. It would slow those affected down both physically and increase their cooldowns, and it would give the drained speed to both Reaper and Scythe. Cooldowns for all powers, abilities and perks included. One part to him, and the other to Scythe, alone each would be powerful, together...

He looked at Selia and wondered what he should do. He liked her, respected her, more so after seeing her fight and knowing that she fought to protect her and other people. It mattered to him. Perhaps he would consider them friends. She wouldn't be his first choice if he had to give the sphere away, but life wasn't perfect, and death was coming for them all. Out of them on the wall, she was the only one who was powerful enough, and who could use the perk to its fullest. He had seen her activating abilities often, she was mainly a Cultivator, but her build relied on both her Path and Class.

He trusted her, even while he understood that she had loyalties that had nothing to do with him. Trust was a hard thing to gain for Ryun, and he knew how it could be death. Emberhorn had taught him that. He looked at her and wondered.

Finally, he made a decision and nodded his head. "I... I have something that can give us power, but it comes with a price."

"What is it?" She asked.

Ryun pulled out the sphere out of his inventory and offered it to her. She blinked as she touched it.

"A path stone? This... I—where did you get this?" She whispered as people all around them fought.

"I and my... partner, found the Twin Aspect of True Death on Earth, we were granted their powers, two halves of a single whole, bound together. She died, but the power of True Death cannot die as long is one of its halves remains. I hold the other half, if you take this it will bind us together, we will always know the direction where the other is, you will feel what I feel and I will feel what you feel, we will be able to speak with our minds. It will bind us until one of us dies. It is a great price, but it will give you a great power," he found his screens and then made his part of the perk visible to her.

She read through it and he could see her eyes widen.

"The monsters surround us, there is already more of them than there were people in the city before today. We cannot hold like this, and we cannot win no matter what we do. So, make a choice."

He watched her thinking it over, his eyes blind to her expression and the emotions in her eyes. She looked down at the arena, where her partner was fighting, getting pushed back by two monsters taller even than she was. The monsters behind them had nearly reached the other side of the wall, everything was falling apart quickly.

Selia turned and met his eyes. Then she picked the sphere up.

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Zach

Zach wished that he could get into the fight, but he understood why he was being held back. It didn't change the fact that it frustrated him. He was seeing people dying on the steps of the arena, wardens, adventurers, soldiers. Naha stood near him, her hand gripping his elbow tightly. He could tell that she was... frightened, and who wouldn't be? A never-ending army of monsters was spilling through a portal made out of light. He knew that there was some kind of mental effect that was impacting everyone around him, he had heard them talking about it. He didn't feel anything, but he had his **Enlightened** perk, it probably shielded him from the effects. Naha only had her **Clear Mind** skill.

This was a battle on the scale that he hadn't seen before. The sky was set ablaze, golden fire painting everything and making it seem almost as if it was a day. An unending horde of monsters was charging and powers flew from the walls. In the distance he saw more people fighting, just as he saw monsters climbing the stands in the areas where there was no defenders. The arena was massive, and too few people had come to defend the walls. He saw an attack that he recognized, beams of void hitting the monsters and killing them far in the distance.

Knowing that Ryun was there, fighting... He didn't know how to feel about that, he had tried so hard to push him out of his thoughts.

"He should've done it by now," Zach heard the Warden Commander's assistant, Bera, say.

He turned his eyes in her direction, seeing her mangled body. He wondered how she was even standing. Her left arm was gone, her armor twisted and melted into the stub that was just a few hand-spans beyond her shoulder. She was battered, and clearly in pain.

"Zenker will do it," Warden Commander responded.

"Yirrel," Bera whispered. "If we don't close the portal soon..."

The Warden Commander closed her eyes tightly, as if she was in great pain. Then she opened them and turned around, looking straight at Zach, she motioned for him to approach and Zack walked over.

"It looks like we might be forced to use you," she said.

Zach glanced over the wall at the arena, the endless moving mass of monsters. The fighters on the walls and the steps were throwing everything at them, it was as if a wall of all kinds of powers was falling down on them, killing them, and still some managed to get through to fight the people in the stands.

"I am willing," Zach said. This was what he had always wanted to do, to fight in order to protect other people. This was his calling. "But, I can't get through that."

The Warden Commander nodded her head. "We would need to escort you," she said.

"Maybe not," Bera added. Everyone turned to look at her. She met the Warden Commander's eyes and continued. "The teleportation platforms beneath the arena, they weren't charged, since there weren't supposed to be any matches this week, but..." She pulled a small plate out of her storage and looked at it. Zach recognized it, he had seen the arbiters holding something similar in the teleportation rooms. "There is enough charge to send maybe a dozen people through."

The Warden Commander's eyes widened and then she nodded. "And Eratemus' talismans, we can use them to escape, they are keyed to send people to the Healing Building."

She turned her eyes to east and grimaced. "Which is in the area of the city that is overrun."

"Still better than being in the middle of all that," Bera said. "We can send a group there to secure it, we can retreat from there after it is finished."

The Warden Commander looked around and then called out.

"Sigmund!" She yelled and the human man standing on top of the wall and firing orbs of blue light at the horde turned. He walked over and moved his hands in elaborate ways. It took Zach a moment to realize that it was some kind of sign language.

"I need you to take a small group and secure the Healing Building in the Eastern District, I'll go and to try to close the portal," the Warden Commander said.

"Yirrel," Bera said quickly. "You are in no—"

"There isn't anyone else who can keep Zacharia safe for long enough," the Warden Commander said.

Zach looked at her and saw her resolve.

Then, before anyone could say anything else stars appeared in the distance. Zach looked in the direction of another group that was fighting on the walls, he saw a large cloud of red and blue aura mixing together, what seemed like a thousand stars shining above them with silver light. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn't stars at all, but something that at a distance resembled slim spikes. Then all of them blasted through the air toward the monsters, and two wide beams of void exploded out behind them. Everything they hit, they erased. A couple of the towering monsters got hit by it and after a moment or two of resisting, the beams burned through them, slicing them in half.

Then, something flew through the air and landed in the middle of the horde. A moment later the monsters died as a massive sphere of black mist enveloped everything in three waves.

For a moment, everyone was silent.

"I think," Yirrel started. "That we should try and get the aid of a few other defenders."