

## Interlude - Herald

Kri dashed forward and stabbed the monster restrained by green chains, her spear took it in the neck and after a few seconds of twitching it stilled. She was breathing heavily, so tired that she could barely stand. She looked around and saw warriors around her in the same state. Many were from her own sect, but a lot were not. They had shuffled around in the fighting; their lines had broken several times.

She looked down and saw that she was ankle deep in the black tinted mud. It was soaked with blood of monsters and chosen, all different colors mixed together to turn the ground into a black ooze filled with viscera and body parts. Around her she saw the bodies of the sects fallen twitch and raise as the undead then march ahead where the undead army was cleaning up the rest of the monsters in the distance. There was so many of them, the sects had to have lost nearly half of their numbers by counting the amount of the undead.

As the battle died down and moved away from her position, she suddenly started feeling all the little pains in her body. She was injured, had cuts on her legs and arms, a spike was lodged in her shoulder. She looked around, saw healer teams moving among the warriors, helping them. Behind her, she looked at the city of Emaros. A big chunk of the wall was gone, and there was... nothing inside of it. It was as if something had consumed half of the city, just... erased it all. She didn't even know what had happened back there.

She looked up and saw a battle in the sky still raging, the thunder clouds far above were getting lighter, but the sky was still filled with clouds at varying heights. Then the world darkened, and she frowned. She turned her head and saw the clouds getting darker, drawing closer. It looked as if a shadow was creeping over the gray clouds turning them almost black. Then she realized that it was something massive moving above the cloud, casting a shadow beneath it.

The shadow reached the Citadel, and then the clouds bulged, and a massive shape revealed itself. It was so massive that even from so far away, she could see it clearly. It was the size of the city of Emaros. The clouds streamed around it as they were pushed away, revealing more of its shape. She had never seen anything like it. It was black and silver in color, narrowed at the front, then widening in the back. It looked like some of the airships that she had seen, the metal ones designed for war, though it also had tower-like protrusions that reminded her of flying castles. Yet it was far larger.

Then, more shapes left the clouds, black and far smaller, moving fast through the air around it. Then they opened fire on the monsters in the air, and the battle intensified as light flashed and monsters started to die. A great General whose size almost matched the big arrival tumbled from the clouds above it, while constantly being fired on. Its body filled with holes.

Then the great vessel fired a beam from its center, straight at the shields surrounding the Citadel.

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Yirrel landed on the walls of the Citadel, the wide battlements were filled with her soldiers operating the defenses, she immediately started using her powers, layering her boost on them and the defensive shield. Soon, the sects would turn their full attention on her. She could see the undead sweeping the field. Eratemus had done what she had thought he never would.

Nothing had gone as she thought it would. She hadn't foreseen the Sects uniting or breaking the agreements they had with the rest of the core. She had banked on the arrogance of faction leaders, their differences, and their ambition, to keep them from uniting against her.

The Classer factions had followed along the lines she had expected, the Sects haven't. Hitor had surprised her.

Still, she had held out hope that she could win, though it had always been unlikely against the entire might of the Sects. Still, she had hoped to do more damage, a lot more. Now, as she looked over the field the result became clear. She still had cards to play. The Citadel would not fall so easily, and she had the dungeon to retreat to in the worst-case scenario. She still had powerful people out there, Erik, Vuur, Lioer, to name a few. Most were too far away to arrive in time to help her, but their cause would survive no matter what happened here.

She had to—

A shadow covered the Citadel and Yirrel turned her head to look above. She watched as a shape left the cover of the clouds above and revealed itself. The great vessel loomed over the Citadel. She recognized the **Memory of Stars**, the flagship of the Exalted Fleet.

For a moment she froze, not quite understanding what she was seeing. There was no reason for them to be here, their territory was so far away that none of them had ever even seen one of her people or dome servants. It was—

A beam of light hit the top shield and Yirrel felt a stab inside her head as the perks she had been using to reinforce the shield came under assault. She fell to one knee and gritted her teeth. Then the shield broke under the assault, the beam pushed through and hit the center of her Citadel, brushing against a tower. The beam cut off and the tower started to crumble and fall.

Above, small attack craft flew through the hole in the shield. Immediately they started attacking her towers and her people turned their attention on them, fighting back. Battle exploded above her and she activated her **Avatar** perk as a craft dove and fired on her. Her spectral form blocked its attack with a shield, then she smashed her mace into it, destroying the dart looking black craft.

She pulled her defensive perks from the shield and spread them around her people and the Citadel structure itself. The shield was made to remain active even if a section fell, so they were safe for a while from the Sects attacking as well.

Another attack craft came at her firing two crimson beams. She took them on her shield and as it came close she flashed her oath and pointed with her mace, releasing the damage she had absorbed. The craft exploded in a shower of debris.

Then, from the corner of her eyes she saw a fast-moving object heading in her direction. It came too fast for her to react, so she triggered her armor's defenses, and a bright shield surrounded her as it crashed on the wall near her.

After the dust settled, she pulled back her shield and got ready. A hand made out of metal reached out of the crater, black with silver fingers and bulging constructs on its forearm. A second hand followed and then it pulled itself out. Yirrel watched as the Mechanical Armor Platform, better known as MAP or just Mech, rose above the crater to stand looming over her. She stood frozen for a few seconds, surprised and taken off guard because she recognized the unit, even though it was different. It had an extra set of arms than it had when she had seen it last, and there were new defensive arrays mounted on the front armor plate. It stood about as high as her Avatar's projection. The sound of shifting gears and metal clanks filled the air as it oriented itself on her.

She heard six thumps, and six canisters ejected from something on its back. For a moment they floated above its shoulders, then gas fired from its sides, and they reoriented in her direction. A moment later fire blossomed behind the six missiles and they headed in her direction.

That snapped Yirrel out of her reverie and she pulled her avatar's shield in front of her. The six missiles struck, some hitting her shield, others on her side, and two hit the ground. She absorbed the damage that the missiles hitting her avatar caused, but the ground exploded cracking beneath her feet and forcing her to jump back or risk getting caught in

the debris. As she was in the air more missiles followed and one of the mech's arms pointed in her direction then she suddenly felt herself go weightless. Gravity stopped pushing her and she continued floating in a backward direction. The missiles struck her avatar, but this time she was sent flying as she had nothing to anchor her. She slammed into the base of a tower and punched through the wall.

The force of it was enough that some damage passed through her defenses. She shook her head then pushed herself out of the crater to look at the advancing mech. This shouldn't be happening. She was tired from the fighting in the city, she couldn't afford a fight like this one would be. She was not about to fight the Herald of the Machine himself, not without any preparation.

She pointed her mace and unleashed all the stored damage she had from all of her fighting so far. The mech paused as the world in front of her just got blown to nothing. The ground peeled away from her as the blast of kinetic force powerful enough to wipe out anything in the world that she knew of exploded out of her weapon. A black shield shimmered into place around the mech as the wall they stood on disappeared and everything for kilometers in the distance blasted away. The mech vanished in the blast. She broke the shield around the Citadel with the attack, and saw mountains in the distance explode in a shower of debris. The shield around the Citadel was... that was unavoidable. It wouldn't last for much longer anyway. She turned away and immediately jumped off the wall, heading to the central pillar. She had to get to the dungeon, she could recover there and use—

—The space twisted in front of her, and the mech appeared again, one of its arms missing. Her eyes widened as turrets on its shoulders shifted and fired at her. They hit her nearly point blank, sending her into a building nearby. She pulled out a potion and drank it, feeling the healing process starting. Then, she jumped out of the crumbling building only to be assaulted by missiles. Her defensive perks flashed into existence and she took the blasts on. She had to push the mech away, get some distance

and time to reach her dungeon. She saw the mech targeting her again and roared then charged across the yard. Two beams fired from its hands and she raised her shield and activating its ability. The beams split around it and then she was near the mech. She triggered her Avatar again and used her remaining boosts. Then she smashed her mace across its side. Metal dented and whined as she sent it flying across the yard into the wall.

She stumbled, feeling the exhaustion hit her, she had to—

—Something hit her from above and she was pushed to the ground. She groaned as she felt it cut through her avatar and armor and injure her. She glanced up and saw a larger vessel over her, a turret glowing as it prepared to fire again. Then more fire came from everywhere around her. Assault craft swooped above her and fired everything that they had. What felt like the entire Exalted Fleet opened fire on her and she blasted all of her remaining defensive powers.

Her gate appeared above her, shields layered one over the other. It wasn't enough. She held for a few moments but then everything broke, and the fire rained down on her, cracking the stone and the earth beneath her, pushing her deeper. She had to have blacked out because the next thing she knew something grabbed her.

She opened her remaining eye and saw the black mech above her in the crater where she had been wedged, one of its hands grasped around her body. She focused her will and readied it to unleash an attack, when a piece of the front plate on the mech slid out to reveal a circular eye-like contraption with a black and violet gem in the center. A moment before she could attack it fired. The beam filled with the power of the Void engulfed her and she felt herself being eaten away.

There was no screaming, her mouth went first, no attempts at fighting it for she was truly spent. She died, but felt relieved that she had the foresight to prepare. She took solace in her last thoughts before she died, knowing that no matter her fate, Hastur's dream would endure. Then there was nothing.