

# Battle of Rankin

The horizon burned like a furnace beyond the lavish confines of the command tent, its ominous reds and golds casting a hellish pall over the landscape. The roar of an explosion shattered the momentary silence, a concussive wave that rippled through the tent's canvas walls, making the structure shudder violently. Aurelia steadied herself against the council table, her hand gripping the edge with white-knuckled determination as a fine mist of dust cascaded from the roof, the particles tinkling against the metal fittings like a faint, unnatural rain.

At the heart of the table sat the Zenithex. Its presence dominated the room, an artifact of undeniable power. Thick, weathered leather wrapped its massive form, secured by black iron clasps that seemed to strain against the pulsating energy trapped within. The sigil etched into its cover glowed faintly, a sinister crimson light that flickered like a dying ember—its potential as volatile as the battlefield outside.

The tent flap snapped open with military precision, admitting an Erythari officer clad in blood-streaked armor. He moved with crisp efficiency, each step measured and deliberate, as though the chaos outside had no claim on him. "Commander Talus reports the outer perimeter is broken. The Third Falen has rallied alongside the pyromancers to reinforce their flank with infantry, but the Krugar warbeasts press hard. Their artillery is battering the western wards. Those lines will break—we have, perhaps, an hour."

Aurelia studied him, the sharp angles of his armor catching the dim light. *How does he stay so calm?* Blood smeared his face, and yet there was no hesitation, no fear—only focus. Strength like his wasn't innate. It was forged, hammered into every soldier who wore the Erythari crest. She envied it.

Theron turned sharply, his piercing gaze locked onto the Zenithex, and his voice came low and seething. "The Zenithex is a poison. It craves chaos. I'd sooner destroy it than drag this cursed thing everywhere we go."

Galius, leaning heavily on his staff, offered a grim smile. "I'm glad it's here." His tone was as cold as the iron clasp of the tome. "Unless you've learned to summon a reserve army in the last hour, we're out of options."

Aurelia's gaze shifted from the bloodied officer to the Zenithex. A nearby brazier, its flames dancing in unnatural hues of green and orange, cast an eerie, shifting light across the tome. Shadows, jagged and serpentine, seemed to move of their own volition. The runes etched into

the iron clasps seemed to writhe subtly, responding to the rising tension in the room. The artifact's pull was undeniable—a whispered promise of power and ruin. Aurelia's stomach tightened, the question gnawing at her. *Could we really control it?*

The officer remained at attention, unshaken. "Archmage Eldris, the remaining pyromancer detachments await your signal to begin a counteroffensive. Commander Talus requests your orders. He also recommends the Fifth Falen move to reinforce the eastern approach."

Eldris turned slowly, her silver-streaked hair catching the brazier's unnatural light, which lent an almost spectral quality to her presence. Her voice, calm and authoritative, sliced through the room like a blade. "Tell Talus to hold the Fifth in reserve. We'll need their swords here when the western wards fall. I won't risk giving the Krugar a straight path to the Stone."

Before the officer could respond, Galius interjected, his tone sharp, decisive. "Deploy the pyromancers to reinforce the eastern units. We cannot falter here. If they break through, none of this will matter."

Eldris dismissed the messenger with an approving nod, her expression resolute. "Go. Deliver those orders."

The officer saluted sharply before disappearing through the tent flap, leaving only the ominous glow of the brazier and the oppressive presence of the Zenithex to fill the room.

Theron rounded on Eldris, his voice sharp. "You're gambling with all of us, putting your faith in *this*—this abomination of a weapon!" He jabbed his finger toward the Zenithex, his face taut with fury.

"And you're gambling our lives with your hesitation." Galius punctuated his words by driving his staff into the ground. The crack echoed like a thunderclap, silencing the low murmurs of the brazier's fire. "Do you think the Krugar will give you the luxury of comfort before they relieve your neck of the burden of your head?"

Eldris raised a hand, silencing them both. "Enough. We're out of time. The Krugar are nearly upon us."

As if to underscore her words, the ground shuddered violently beneath their feet. The brazier toppled, spilling its unnatural green and red flames onto the ground. Sparks hissed as they spiraled into the air, the acrid stench of smoke curling through the tent and stinging Aurelia's nose. The sounds of chaos outside grew louder—the guttural roars of the Krugar warbeasts

mingling with the screams of the dying and the crash of splintering wood.

Aurelia's breath came quicker now, her chest tightening. Her eyes darted between the Zenithex, pulsing ominously on the table, and the Lumina Stone resting untouched on its pedestal near the edge of the tent. *One promises salvation, the other destruction. Or perhaps both promise the same thing.* The weight of the moment pressed down on her, the decision looming like the shadow of a blade poised to strike.

The Lumina Stone. It was serenity made manifest, a relic of harmony and balance, forged by the celestials in the forgotten ages before time began. Its lavender light was a quiet reassurance against the encroaching darkness. But now, that light seemed diminished, its glow fragile and uncertain when measured against the Zenithex's menacing pull. The cursed tome seemed to swallow the very air around it, a vortex of malevolent intent.

And yet, fragile or not, the Lumina Stone was theirs. The thought bolstered Aurelia, though doubt still gnawed at the edges of her resolve. Power like this was not meant to be hoarded, she reminded herself; it was meant to be wielded.

Surely, with the four of them united, their bond stronger than the chaos outside, they could command the Lumina Stone's light to counter the Zenithex's shadow. They could take both and bend them to their will. *Surely, that is what power is for.*

"What if—" she began, her voice breaking through the tension. "What if we could control it? Just once. Enough to turn the tide."

Theron spun to face her. His eyes locked onto hers, a storm of fury and disbelief swirling beneath his glare. "Control it?" His voice was low, dangerous. "You don't *control* the Zenithex. It doesn't bargain, doesn't negotiate. It consumes everything in its path—hope, desperation, even strength. That's what it does."

He took a step closer, his voice hardening like steel. "Do you think it'll care who wields it? That it'll suddenly spare us because we're on the brink? Desperation doesn't change its nature—it only ensures we play straight into its hands. What happens when we save the Stone but leave nothing else standing in our wake? Tell me, Aurelia—what victory is that?"

Eldris raised her hand again, commanding silence. "We can't fight both the Krugar and ourselves, Theron. But you're right about one thing. We can't give in to our desperation."

The tent fell into a grim stillness. The war-horns outside blared again, their mournful tones

rolling across the battlefield like the groans of the dying. Inside, the weight of impossible choices loomed, the council of mages standing on the precipice of destruction. Each second that passed was another step closer to their end.

Eldris exhaled slowly, the sound carrying reluctant resolve. Her eyes, sharp and unyielding, fixed on Aurelia. “Can you manage a corridor on your own?”

Aurelia’s stomach twisted. Her mind raced, cycling through every calculation and scenario. The *Corridor of Sanctuary* wasn’t just a spell—it was an act of arcane engineering on a scale few could comprehend. A single mage attempting it was akin to threading a needle in a hurricane. Even for her, the sitting archmage of the Arcane Realm, the thought was staggering.

Before she could speak, Galius broke the silence, his voice steady but grim. “She can’t. Not alone. The corridor requires a second master from her Realm to share the burden. Without it, the energy will tear her apart.”

Aurelia’s fingers tightened around her staff, knuckles turning white. The weight of Eldris’s question pressed against her like an iron band, suffocating in its enormity. But there was no time to hesitate. The war outside wouldn’t wait for their deliberation.



*Calm down.* The words echoed in Aurelia’s mind, an anchor against the storm raging inside her. She forced her breathing to steady, though the crushing weight on her chest felt as vast and unrelenting as the sea behind her. Every instinct screamed to run, to retreat, but she planted her feet firmly against the trembling earth.

*Eldris is counting on you. They’re all counting on you.*

The battlefield erupted around her, a chaotic symphony of steel on steel, the guttural roars of Krugar warriors punctuated by the agonized screams of her allies. But louder still was the relentless pounding of her own heart. She could feel it hammering in her ears, drowning out everything else. Her trembling fingers tightened around the ornate staff in her hand, the carved sigils glowing faintly in response to her touch. Another deep breath. Another step forward.

*Just focus.*

Her voice faltered as she began the incantation, the ancient words hesitant at first, then growing stronger. The language of the Arcanists was not one of simple commands; it was a weaving, a bending of reality itself. With her free hand, she levitated a shard of aetherium, its

sharp edges glinting in the unnatural light. The hum of its latent power resonated deep within her, steadying her for a brief, precious moment.

An intricate azure glyph flared into existence in front of her, its lines bright and impossibly complex, carving itself into the air with precision. The very fabric of the world seemed to twist around it, warping as the glyph drew energy into its shape.

*There you go. Easy.*

She siphoned more energy from the shard, her focus narrowing to the threads of power beneath her feet. The lifeblood of Krugarlond pulsed through the ground, ancient and unyielding, a force both alien and intoxicating. It poured into her like a flood, overwhelming in its scope, nearly suffocating in its intensity.

But there was something else—something exhilarating. For the first time since the battle began, the crushing fear loosened its grip. The energy coursed through her, weaving with her incantation, shaping itself into the spell she envisioned. For a fleeting moment, Aurelia felt a spark of hope.

Then it hit—a sharp crackle of electricity slicing through the air, like a whip snapping with lethal intent. Aurelia's head jerked downward just in time to see a Krugar warrior collapse at her feet, his massive frame crumpling in a heap. Smoke curled from his scorched armor, blood pooling beneath him, the metallic tang mingling with the acrid stench of ozone and ash. Her pulse quickened, her grip tightening on the staff.

*Stars, they're everywhere.*

The battle roared back into her awareness like a tidal wave, louder and more chaotic than before. The clang of steel, the guttural howls of the Krugar, the desperate shouts of allies—it all pressed against her, threatening to drown her focus. Her eyes darted to a shadow moving through the fray. A figure, there and gone in an instant.

*An ally? Who was that?*

She shook her head sharply, her jaw tightening. *No, damn it. Focus, Aurelia!*

But the damage was done. The glyph flickered, its once-brilliant lines dimming as if smothered by the chaos.

*No. No, no, no! Stay with me!*

Her breath hitched, panic latching onto her chest like a vise. She pushed harder, forcing her will back into the spell, her voice rising, desperate. “Come on, Aurelia. Come on.”

But it was slipping. The threads of magic she’d woven so carefully unraveled, slipping through her grasp like sand. The glyph twisted violently, its edges fracturing in jagged arcs of light before shattering with a deafening crack. The corridor she’d woven so painstakingly, so desperately, imploded in a cascade of chaotic blue energy, the shards of light scattering like broken glass.

The aetherium shard in her hand crumbled, disintegrating to dust. She felt the faint tickle of it brushing her fingers as it fell away, leaving only empty air and the cold weight of failure

For a moment, she stood motionless, rooted to the spot, as if the surrounding battlefield ceased to exist. Her chest heaved with ragged breaths, and her mind spun, clawing for answers. *How? Why?* The questions battered her like the chaos unfolding beyond her reach.

Instead, the void where her spell had failed became a breach, a floodgate opening for the Krugar warriors. They surged forward, relentless, their snarling forms pouring into the gap, eclipsing her view of the weavergates she’d tried so desperately to reach. Their advance swallowed the space, turning it into a churning tide of destruction.

Her eyes swept the battlefield in desperation, searching for a glimmer of reprieve, some sign—any sign—that her failure hadn’t doomed them all. But there was nothing. No rallying cry, no miracle. Only the relentless clash of steel and the blood-curdling roars of the Krugar.

Aurelia swallowed hard, her throat dry as sand. Her grip tightened around the staff, knuckles white, the carved runes digging into her palms. Tears threatened to blur her vision, a betrayal she couldn’t afford, but she couldn’t stop them. The weight of her failure pressed down like an iron shroud, suffocating and merciless.

*This can’t be it. It can’t end like this.* But the battlefield told a different story.

A deep, resonating tone cut through the chaos, rolling across the battlefield like the tolling of an immense bell. Aurelia felt it more than heard it—a vibration that thrummed in her chest, weaving through the threads of magic itself into the fabric of her thoughts. Eldris’s call. It carried the weight of the oath all archmages take, the unbreakable vow taken by the council to unite in moments of dire peril.

She froze, the echoes of her failed spell still fresh in her mind.

*I can’t face them. Not like this.*

But the call left no room for refusal. Eldris's magic pulled her forward, inexorable as the tides.

*Eldris will know that I've failed. What kind of archmage am I if I can't even hold a glyph?*

Gritting her teeth, she pushed those thoughts aside and forced her legs to move. Her staff felt heavier with every step, as if it carried the weight of her shame. She reached the rallying point first, her breath uneven as she steadied herself.

*Don't let them see you unravel. You're stronger than this.*

Galius emerged from the smoke moments later, his face carved from stone, every line etched with grim determination. He moved with purpose, his staff in hand, a silent bulwark against the chaos.

Behind him, Theron cut through the battlefield like a force of nature. His magic rippled outward in surging waves, crackling with raw energy. Each pulse shattered the Krugar's advance, scattering their ranks like leaves caught in a storm.

Aurelia's voice broke as she started, "I'm so sorry, I just—"

"Not now, Aurelia." Eldris cut her off, her tone sharp, though not unkind. The elder mage's piercing gaze swept over them, her presence commanding despite the chaos.

Aurelia's stomach churned as she fell silent, the apology dying on her lips.

*Not now. Maybe not ever.*

Eldris's voice rose above the din. "We are cut off from the weavegates. There is only one option left, and we must use it."

The words hung in the air, weighted with inevitability.

Theron's voice cut through the chaos. "You can't be serious. If we use it, we'll lose more than this battle."

Galius shot back without hesitation. "And if we *don't* use it, we lose everything—the Stone included. The Krugar have already broken the wards. When they get here, do you plan to reason with them?"

"Enough!" Eldris's voice silenced both of them. "We act now."

Her gaze swept the council, daring anyone to challenge her. “Form the circle.”

The command left no room for argument. Aurelia’s hands tightened on her staff as she stepped into position. The fear in her heart hadn’t subsided, but she buried it deep, as all good archmages must. There would be time for doubt later—if they survived.

*I will be the archmage I know I am.*

The four mages formed a circle, their back to one another, as the enemy surged around them. Arcane energy thickened the air, buzzing like a storm about to break. Aurelia’s robe, embroidered with intricate symbols of her rank, whipped in the rising wind, glowing faintly in the dim, flickering light. Each mage lifted their staff, artifacts thrumming with restrained power.

*This is it.* Aurelia tightened her grip on her staff, her knuckles pale against the polished wood. The anticipation was suffocating, the unspoken truth shared among them: this was their last stand.

Eldris’s command cut through the storm of energy building around them. “Zenithex!”

Aurelia felt the magic shift as Eldris summoned the ancient tome. A deep hum reverberated through the air, vibrating in her bones. She couldn’t see Eldris directly—none of them could—but she felt the unmistakable presence of Zenithex’s power.

The sound of worn leather groaned in her ears, sharp and distinct amid the muffled chaos beyond the circle. Aurelia’s heart lurched. She didn’t need to see the pages to know which spell Eldris had summoned. She’d memorized its sigils during her apprenticeship, though she’d prayed she’d never face the moment when those forbidden glyphs would be spoken aloud.

Her fingers tightened around her staff. *This spell. It shouldn’t exist.* She closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing. *It bends the rules of reality. It’s not meant for mortals, not even us.*

The surrounding air pulsed, heavy with anticipation. She could almost see the glyphs forming in her mind’s eye, shifting and shimmering with an energy too vast to comprehend. It was a betrayal of balance, of the natural order. Just standing in its presence felt like holding her hand over an open flame.

“Eldris,” Galius’s voice came from somewhere behind Aurelia, his tone sharp with apprehension, “we’re really doing this?” Confusion crept into Aurelia’s mind.

*Why is he uncertain now?*

Eldris didn't hesitate. "The Krugar have given us no choice." Her voice was steady, resolute.

Aurelia exhaled slowly, though her heart still raced. *No choice.* That's what they always say. But no one carries the weight of these choices like we do.

The tome's energy thrummed louder. Aurelia's gaze darted toward her staff as it vibrated faintly in her grip, responding to the pull of the spell. She couldn't see the others, but she could feel their power threading together, winding tighter with each passing moment. The connection between them, as intricate and fragile as the spell itself, was all that kept them from unraveling.

Her stomach twisted, a sickly knot of dread and determination.

*We shouldn't be doing this.*

The hum of Zenithex rose, its power threading through the circle, binding their efforts into one. Aurelia forced herself to focus, her voice trembling, but determined, as she joined the chant. Whatever fears she harbored, she knew one truth: there was no turning back now.

Eldris didn't flinch, her voice unwavering. "Begin."

Aurelia lifted her staff. The spell's first word caught in her throat—was it the power thrumming through the circle, or her own doubt, choking her? Forcing herself forward, she spoke the ancient incantation. Each syllable dragged her deeper into the void between fear and purpose.

*This is madness. One mistake, and it will consume us all.*

The others chanted with unwavering resolve. She envied their certainty. Her voice faltered for half a breath before catching again, louder, desperate to prove she belonged here. To herself. To them.

There was no hesitation in Eldris's chant, no faltering in Galius's or Theron's voices. They pressed on, each syllable a defiance against the chaos closing in. Aurelia forced herself to focus, her voice steadying as she added her power to the spell.

The chaotic battlefield dissolved around her, the screams of the dying and the clash of weapons receding into a distant echo. It was as if the world itself had paused, holding its breath. A peculiar calm seeped into the circle, fragile and unnatural, like the stillness before a glass shatters.

Time wavered.

Each heartbeat stretched into an eternity, the relentless march of moments unspooling into an endless thread. Aurelia felt the shift in her very core—a ripple through her veins that whispered of something vast, ancient, and watching. The magic surged around her, not just a force but a presence, beckoning her to step deeper into its current. Her breath caught as her awareness expanded outward, unfurling like the petals of a flower drinking in sunlight.

She saw everything.

The weave of magic spun out before her like an infinite tapestry, each thread shimmering with possibility. The paths of future, past, and present twisted and converged, revealing a kaleidoscope of outcomes. One step here, one word there—and the fate of the world could change. She glimpsed victories already lost, defeats yet undone, and a thousand fragile threads leading to ruin. The enormity of it threatened to overwhelm her.

*This is what it means to be an archmage. To stand at the precipice of destruction and see the infinite roads beyond. To reach for one—just one—and dare to weave it into being.*

The hum of the staffs became a symphony, each note resonating through her like a melody. The energy around them surged, its rhythm slow and deliberate, matching the crawling tempo of time itself. She could feel every thread of magic entwining, the fragile balance of the spell stretching tighter with every pulse. The air thickened with power, heavy and electric, brushing against her skin like a storm about to break.

Aurelia's grip on her staff tightened. She felt the power coursing through it, vibrating in rhythm with her own trembling resolve. Each word of the incantation left her lips with measured precision, drawn out as if she were writing them into the very fabric of the world. Immense and unyielding, the weight of the moment pressed on her shoulders.

*We cannot fail. Not here. Not now.*

Above, the heavens shifted, bleeding crimson that spilled across the sky like an open wound. A caustic magic burned the air, its sharp tang searing her senses. Raw and untamed, the vortex of energy coiled tighter, spinning faster with every breath she drew. Pressure climbed to a crescendo, an unbearable force crushing her chest, invading her thoughts, and consuming her very soul.

And then—

Reality snapped taut, a thread pulled to its breaking point. The vortex released, an unstoppable

tide rushing outward. Time roared back into motion, its relentless march slamming into her awareness like a thunderclap. The muffled chaos of the battlefield surged back with a deafening clarity—shouts, screams, the metallic clash of weapons. The fragile stillness shattered, leaving her gasping, her senses reeling from the intensity of what she'd just glimpsed.

Aurelia barely dared to breathe as the mages turned to witness the enchantment's outcome. For a moment, nothing moved. Then the spell faltered, the vortex shifted unnaturally, its edges fraying like a spool of thread about to unravel.

"What's happening?" Aurelia's voice cracked, her heart thundering in her chest.

"There's a perversion in the spell!" Eldris's shout broke through the mounting tension, her steady voice betraying an edge of disbelief.

Aurelia's throat constricted. Her hands shook. "The incantation... it's twisted." Her strained words broke through the chaos.

*What did I do?*

"Impossible!" Galius's tone, sharp with disbelief, betrayed his confidence. "We performed it flawlessly!"

But Aurelia knew better. She could feel the wild energy tearing itself apart, a storm spiraling out of control.

*Flawless? No spell is flawless when we are the ones weaving it.*

The vortex unraveled like a tempest, its tangled threads crashing into the battlefield with unrestrained fury. Krugar warriors scattered like leaves, their screams swallowed by the roaring magic. The ground convulsed beneath her feet, reflecting the violence of their spell. The destruction reached a crescendo, then stopped.

Silence fell.

Aurelia's breathing came shallow as she surveyed the devastation. The battlefield lay unrecognizable. The Krugar, once proud warriors, reduced to twisted, broken remnants. Even the land itself bore the scars of their spell, charred and torn, as though it had turned against its own essence.

Theron's gaze pierced through the silence, finding Aurelia despite the chaos still lingering in the

air. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes held something that made her chest tighten—was it disappointment? Pity? She couldn't tell.

When he spoke, his voice was low but unyielding, each word landing like a stone dropped into deep water. "The spell isn't just words or power," Theron said, his voice calm but edged with something heavier—like a blade drawn halfway from its sheath. "It's a mirror. It reflects the one who casts it—their will, their intent... their fears."

The silence that followed stretched unbearably, pressing down on her like the weight of the heavens. His words echoed in her mind, repeating louder with each passing moment. Will. Emotion. The realization sank in, sharp and bitter.

*No. That can't be right. We were perfect. I—*

Her thoughts stuttered, caught in the tangled web of doubt. She gripped her staff tighter, her fingers trembling.

It hit her like a blow, a truth she couldn't ignore.

*My fear. My doubt. They were there all along, festering beneath the surface. I should have been stronger.* Her legs felt unsteady, her knees threatening to buckle as her breathing quickened.

"We must withdraw." Theron turned to the others.

"To where, Theron?" Eldris gestured at the ruined land, horror etched in her voice. "To the comfort of our sanctuary while this—" she motioned to the battlefield, her words faltering as she finally let go of her stoic façade, "this is what we leave behind?"

Aurelia's eyes darted to the twisted forms scattered across the field. Krugarlond's proud people, reduced to grotesque shadows of what they once were. A sickening wave of guilt surged through her.

*We're supposed to protect.*

"Yes, Eldris." Galius's gaze was cold and resolute. "We can't do anything for them now. We must return to Arvandor." He stepped forward, his hand resting on Eldris's shoulder. "We're not done. Not yet."

Aurelia felt the weight of his words settle over her. The idea of leaving felt like a betrayal. As the others moved, her feet stayed rooted in place, her mind screaming for answers.

*What have we done?*

Eldris steadied herself, her gaze hardening as she gave a firm nod. “Indeed. We came for the Stone, so we must deliver it.” Her hand moved with purpose, slipping beneath her robe to retrieve the concealed relic.

She murmured as her hand emerged, cradling the artifact. “Curious.” Unease and fascination laced her voice. The stone, once a serene lavender, now pulsed with a sinister red glow. Its light beat like an unseen drum, casting her face in shades of blood and shadow.

Aurelia’s breath caught at the sight, a chill coursing down her spine.

*That’s not right. That shouldn’t happen.*

Eldris studied the artifact for a moment longer, her expression unreadable, before slipping it back into her robe. Her composure returned as she turned to Galius. “Reorganize the forces. Have Commander Talus get everyone to the weavegates.”

Galius gave a curt nod, his face grim, and disappeared into the chaos.

One by one, the remaining mages turned their backs on the destruction they had unleashed. Each step felt heavier than the last, a silent condemnation of what they had wrought.

Aurelia’s gaze lingered on the battlefield. The once-mighty Krugar warriors were no longer a threat. Most lay dead, their bodies twisted in unnatural contortions, while others clung to life, their forms grotesquely warped by the spell’s fury.

Her stomach churned, and she forced herself to look away.

This isn’t victory. This is ruination.

The air was thick with the acrid scent of scorched earth, burned flesh, and spilled blood, the remnants of their magic clinging to the battlefield like a curse. Aurelia tightened her grip on her staff, her heart heavy with guilt.

*How do we come back from this?*

Aurelia moved silently with the survivors toward the weavegates, her steps heavy with the weight of failure. She replayed the catastrophe in her mind, every moment a vivid, unrelenting reminder—the spell’s chaos, the screams, the tapestry of ruin they had woven.

Theron stood at the center of the weavegates, his staff raised high as he mustered the last of his strength. One by one, the portals shimmered to life, their brilliance a stark defiance of the grim desolation surrounding them.

“Everyone through the gates!” Galius’s command cut through the air. Survivors passed through in silence, their faces etched with exhaustion and despair.

When the host had gone, the archmages lingered, their eyes scanning the poisoned land one last time. The ruined battlefield stretched out before them, a graveyard of what once was.

Aurelia hesitated at the portal, her gaze lingering on the broken earth and the remnants of the Krugar—their proud forms now grotesque shadows of their former selves. A sharp ache clawed at her chest, a mixture of guilt and helplessness.

*We came to save them from themselves, to protect them from the Stone, and this is what we leave behind.*

At last, she stepped forward, her hand trembling as she held the weavegate open. Her gaze lingered on the broken earth, the twisted forms of the Krugar scattered like ash over the battlefield. She had done her job. She had stood by her colleagues. And she hated herself for it.

“You don’t choose these decisions—they choose you,” Eldris had once said. “The weight never lessens, but if you falter, others will bear it instead.” The words returned now, cold and hollow. They were meant to prepare her, to steel her against moments like this. But they had never promised she would survive them unbroken.

Her breath came unsteadily, caught between shame and the need to move forward. This wasn’t survival—it was endurance. With a breath that felt like surrender, she stepped through the threshold; the portal snapped shut behind her, leaving only silence to mourn what they had wrought.



Dawn bled across the battlefield, a cruel mimicry of life spilling over Rankin’s scarred landscape. The earth was blackened, split by jagged wounds that seemed to exhale the last breath of a dying land. In the stillness, a sound stirred—not the whispers of wind, but a low, guttural murmur that grew with every passing moment.

From the ruins, they rose.

The remnants of the Krugar, once proud warriors, now twisted echoes of what they had been, pulled themselves from the ash and rubble. Their limbs bent unnaturally, glowing veins of crimson webbing across gnarled flesh. Their faces, hollowed by despair, were unrecognizable—masks of anguish fused with rage. But within their disfigurement, something new burned.

A hot wind swept through the desolation. It raked over the Krugar's misshapen forms, their shadows jagged and monstrous against the shattered ground. They did not flinch. They stood, unyielding, as if defying the very forces that had broken them.

What began as fractured sobs, low and trembling, grew to a crescendo—a chorus of agony that morphed into something fiercer. Their voices rose in unison, carrying not only their grief but an unquenchable resolve. Each note was a promise etched into the air, a vow that the pain would not end them. It would transform them.

And yet, they endured.

A silent witness to the devastation, the land seemed to hold its breath. Furrows and craters pulsed faintly, as if still carrying the memory of the spell that had shattered them. Broken like the Krugar, the ground bore their pain like an unhealed scar.

One by one, the Shattered Kin turned their gazes over the sea toward the horizon. Where once their purpose had been to reclaim the Stone, now something greater drove them forward. Vengeance coiled in their veins, sharper than any blade. The Order had fled to their sanctuaries far from these ruins, but the Shattered Kin would not forget.

They would rise again—not as warriors seeking redemption, but as a force shaped by destruction, unbound by what they once were. The world would remember them. Not as victims, but as an unrelenting storm born of suffering.

As the sun climbed higher, its light seemed hesitant to fully reveal what the Krugar had become. Crimson rays cast their warped forms in a harsh glow, highlighting every jagged edge, every twisted contour. The Shattered Kin did not move, not yet. They waited, their silence more haunting than the cries that had preceded it.

But when they did, the world would tremble.