

WINTER

WINTER KNEW THAT the Fire Warden wouldn't kill him and Cyclone. Although Sigil might have left them at her mercy, Sigil would have to save them at some point. After all, Winter was one of the four heroes mentioned in the Prophecy. Without Winter, the other three heroes would presumably be unable to generate enough dark energy for Aeno to transform into the Great Destruction and fulfill his destiny of destroying the multiverse.

Put that way, maybe it's not such a bad thing that Sigil left us here, Winter thought as he and Cyclone backed up against the wall of the Dark Dungeon, his eyes fixed on the Fire Warden. *I suppose if we die here, then the Prophecy can't come true and the multiverse will not be destroyed. I really wish there was a way to save the multiverse without me dying, though.*

The Fire Warden—a woman made entirely of hot, burning fire—had them cornered in the Dark Dungeon. Her body glowed brighter and hotter with each passing second. Winter was not sure if she intended to kill them by heating up so much that she boiled them alive in the Dark Dungeon or if she was planning to blast them both into oblivion with a single massive fireball. Either way, Winter didn't think their inevitable deaths would be very painless.

The problem was that Winter's Ice Powers were almost useless against the Fire Warden. Although the Nexus was obviously not in Capes Online, fire still melted ice both inside and outside of the game. It meant that Winter could not effectively fight back against the Fire Warden or fight back against her at all, for that matter.

Tsunami's water powers sure would be useful right about now, Winter thought. *Once again, I really need to learn a Water Power if I'm going to stand a chance against fire users.*

"You can't kill us," said Cyclone. He dropped to his knees, hands clasped together as if in prayer, sweating rushing down his face. "Sigil doesn't want us dead. He still needs us."

"If Sigil didn't want you dead, he would not have left you with me," said the Fire Warden, her hands glowing hotter, although her voice was incredibly cold. "The only reason you aren't dead yet is because I am trying to figure out how to kill you. I could blast you into pieces with a couple of fireballs, melt the skin off your faces with my hands, or maybe increase your body temperature so high that your blood will literally boil you to death. I always have trouble with lots of options."

Winter bit his lower lip. For the first time since coming to the Nexus, Winter wished that Sigil was here. He hoped Sigil finished dealing with the Castle's intruder soon so he could come back and save them.

Then again, I suppose Aeno is more important to his plans than I am, Winter thought. *He might not even need me specifically to be the fourth hero. Perhaps he could bring in some other hero from another universe to replace me. If so, then we're definitely screwed.*

No. Winter was not going to let the Fire Warden kill them, not when they were so close to finding the source of the dark energy. Though Winter was hardly an expert when it came to this so-called 'dark' energy, he suspected that if they opened the door, it might result in the dark energy pouring out of the door into the world. Then Sigil would not be able to use it to corrupt Aeno.

But right now Winter needed to deal with the Fire Warden first.

Think fast, Nyle, Winter told himself. *Few of your Powers are useful against her. If you can't beat her, then outthink her.*

"Ah," said the Fire Warden all of a sudden. She raised her hands, which were practically miniature infernos by now. "I think I'll melt your eyeballs out of their sockets, let you suffer for a while, and then replace your eyeballs with some fireballs. The fireballs will go straight into your brains, which will probably kill you instantly and with a minimum amount of pain."

"Not painless?" said Cyclone with a gulp.

"I can't promise that it will be painless," the Fire Warden replied. "All I can guarantee is that your deaths will be short and gruesome."

The Fire Warden took a step toward Winter and Cyclone. Her foot melted the floor where she walked and she was so hot now that Winter felt like he was standing an oven.

Sensing that they were running out of time, Winter said, "Sigil lied to you."

The Fire Warden stopped. She looked at Winter with a puzzled expression on her face. "What are you talking about? Don't tell me you are actually prison inspectors. I'm not buying it."

"Sigil didn't lie about that," said Winter quickly. He gestured at himself and Cyclone. "He lied when he told you we're intruders. We're not. We were summoned to the Nexus by Sigil himself to participate in the Tournament of Heroes."

"Tournament of Heroes?" the Fire Warden repeated. Her eyes narrowed, which did nothing to affect their brightness. "Is that the 'Tournament' you mentioned before?"

Winter nodded. He was sure he would suffer a heat stroke soon enough, so he needed to talk to her quickly before she lost interest and decided to melt their eyeballs. "Yes. It's a week-long Tournament where four heroes and their Teams duke it out to be declared the Greatest Hero in the Multiverse. It was created by Lord Aeno himself."

"Lord Aeno?" said the Fire Warden. She looked at him suspiciously again. "How do I know you're telling the truth? What if this is another lie, like when you told me you were a prison inspector?"

"I will admit that that was a lie," said Winter, "but this isn't. The Tournament of Heroes is real. Ask the Cyborg. He's probably heard of it."

The Fire Warden, however, lowered her burning hands, a thoughtful look on her face. "You know, the Cyborg *did* mention something about a big 'Tournament' happening this week in Nexus City when I was torturing him. I thought he was referring to a sports tournament or something because Nexus City is home to many stadiums where sports from all over the multiverse are played, such as basketball and, my personal favorite, fireball."

"Fireball?" said Cyclone. "What's that?"

Winter, however, shot Cyclone a 'shut up' look to let him do all the talking. Luckily, Cyclone seemed to understand what Winter was trying to communicate because he shut his mouth and folded his hands behind his back with an innocent look on his face.

"Perhaps the Tournament of Heroes is real after all," the Fire Warden concluded. She pointed her right hand at Winter. "But that doesn't mean I have to spare you."

"It absolutely does," Winter said quickly. "I forgot to mention that Lord Aeno is one of my biggest fans. He personally chose me to be one of the four heroes in the Tournament. If he learns that you killed me, though ... he'd be very upset and I don't think you want to see Lord Aeno upset."

A look of panic appeared on the Fire Warden's face when Winter said that. "You're lying. You can't be one of his favorites. I would know."

"Would you?" Winter asked. "Who would tell you that if you never leave the Dark Dungeon?"

"Sigil, of course," said the Fire Warden. "He tells me everything that goes on outside the Dark Dungeon."

"Except for the Tournament," Winter said. "Seems like a rather important thing to neglect to tell you, doesn't it?"

"I-I am sure that Sigil has his reasons for not mentioning that to me," said the Fire Warden, though the doubt in her voice was obvious. "I mean, I am obviously not involved with the Tournament, so why do I need to know about it? That must be why Sigil did not tell me about it. There was simply no need for me to know about it."

"Are you sure?" said Winter. "If you had known about the Tournament beforehand, then you would have known who Cy and I were and you wouldn't have tried to kill us."

"But ..." the Fire Warden seemed at a loss for words.

Sensing his advantage, Winter pressed on, saying, "It seems to me that Sigil didn't tell you about the Tournament because he doesn't trust you. He lied to you because he doesn't respect you or all of the work you do in protecting and maintaining the Dark Dungeon."

"He does," said the Fire Warden. "Sigil has told me so himself several times before. You don't know our relationship."

"You're right," said Winter. "I don't. But I do know that if you killed me, Lord Aeno would be extremely upset with you. He might even destroy you outright."

"Lord Aeno would never destroy me," said the Fire Warden, although there was a hint of panic in her voice now. "He might punish me, sure, but I've done a good job. He is proud of the work I do as the Dark Dungeon's warden. Killing me would not make sense."

"Has Lord Aeno himself actually told you he is proud of you?" said Winter. "Who told you that?"

"Sigil," said the Fire Warden, though she almost choked on his name. "Sigil did."

Winter stroked his chin. "Tell me, Warden, have you *ever* spoken to Lord Aeno personally?"

"Of course I have," said the Fire Warden with more than a hint of defensiveness to her tone. "I met him when he created me thousands of years ago. He knows who I am."

"How about recently?" said Winter. "Have you actually spoken to him face-to-face? Or have you only ever 'interacted' with Lord Aeno via Sigil?"

The Fire Warden said nothing to that, but the expression on her face told Winter everything she was thinking.

"Listen, Fire Warden, you are obviously a very skilled and intelligent woman," Winter said. "Your dedication to ensuring the safety of Lord Aeno from the criminals held in the Dark Dungeon is admirable. Really, as a former police cop, I can respect that. But I think you're also a bit naive, especially in regards to Sigil, and that you might want to think about whether Sigil really has your best interests at heart."

The Fire Warden looked down at her feet. She was silent for what seemed like an eternity, although it was probably just a few seconds, before she looked up at Winter again. But she was scowling now, practically snarling, a response which took Winter by surprise.

"Your lies are cleverer than most, but they are still *lies*," said the Fire Warden. She raised her hands again. "You almost got me there, but fortunately, I am cleverer than I look. You are clearly enemies of Lord Aeno, and for that, you must die."

Before Winter could come up with something else to say, the Fire Warden fired her fireballs at him and Cyclone. A magical barrier suddenly appeared in between Winter and Cyclone and the Fire Warden just then. The fireballs exploded against the magical barrier, but the barrier held despite the impact of the fireballs.

"What the—?" said the Fire Warden. "Is this a power of yours?"

"No, Fire Warden," came a chilling monotone voice above. "I simply had to step in before you could treat the intruders with your usual level of enthusiasm."

Winter, Cyclone, and the Fire Warden looked up to see Sigil floating above them, his arms folded across his chest. The tip of his wand was glowing a soft green color, the same shade as the magical barrier which had protected Winter and Cyclone from the Fire Warden. The green light from the wand tip was reflected in his glossy black eyes, making him look even less human than he usually did.

"Sigil?" said the Fire Warden in surprise. "What are you doing here? I thought you were going to deal with the Castle's intruder on the surface."

"The intruder has been dealt with and Lord Aeno is safe, although many of the Security Armors were destroyed in the process," said Sigil in an offhanded way, as if he didn't care to discuss the intruder. "I came here for these two."

"But I thought you had left them with me for a reason," said the Fire Warden. "I can kill them myself."

“I do not want to kill them, my dear,” said Sigil. “Lord Aeno has summoned these two to his personal quarters. If I do not bring them, Lord Aeno will be quite upset.”

Winter could tell right away that Aeno had not summoned them to anything. Sigil was just saying that so the Fire Warden wouldn't question why he was taking Winter and Cyclone with him.

I wonder if the Fire Warden realizes that, Winter thought, glancing at the Fire Warden, *especially now that she knows about the Tournament.*

The Fire Warden looked more than a little upset with Sigil's abrupt return, but she finally nodded. “Fine. If Lord Aeno wills it, then I suppose I can't refuse.”

“Exactly,” said Sigil. “While I appreciate you keeping them occupied, I am afraid I will have to take them from here. In the meantime, you must stay here and ensure that none of the Dark Dungeon's prisoners escape, as usual.”

The Fire Warden bowed. “Yes, Sigil. Lord's Aeno will be done.”

Unless Winter's ears were playing tricks on him, he thought the Fire Warden sounded perhaps a little sarcastic, maybe even cynical, when she said that. But it might have been nothing.

Sigil certainly didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. He just snapped his fingers and Winter and Cyclone suddenly found themselves standing in the courtyard of the Universal Castle, which was currently empty of everyone except for the two of them and Sigil.

Looking up at Sigil, Winter said, “What was that about? Why did you save us?”

“I thought it obvious,” said Sigil. “The Tournament isn't yet over. Until it is, I need to keep you and the other three heroes alive. If you die before the end of the Tournament, that would ruin the Prophecy.”

Winter bit his lower lip. “I see.”

Sigil tilted his head to the side. “You seem upset. Aren't you glad that I saved you?”

“Not if it means the end of the multiverse,” said Winter, shaking his head.

Sigil smirked. “Worry not about that, my friend. When the end comes in two days, you won't feel anything. None of us will, in fact. Which is something to look forward to, for sure.”

“I dunno,” said Cyclone. “Not feeling anything doesn't sound that good to me.”

Sigil shook his head. “Destiny doesn't always ‘sound’ good, Cyclone. But it is what it is. One's destiny can never be escaped.”

Winter smiled defiantly at Sigil. “I'm not sure. I've never been one to put much stock in so-called ‘prophecies.’ Maybe the future isn't written in stone.”

Sigil, however, smiled back. “The future has not been written in stone, that is true. But it has been written in ink, which is nearly as permanent. And besides, you might want to be careful when speaking about a prophecy that is being fulfilled as you speak.”

Before Winter could ask Sigil what he meant, he heard Bolt's voice behind him suddenly say, “Hey, Sigil! What's up?”

Relieved to hear a friendly voice, Winter turned around to face Bolt. But he stopped speaking as soon as his eyes fell on Bolt.

Bolt looked different. The glowing red lines on his costume now glowed a sickening green color. The black parts of his costume were even darker than before, almost pitch-black, and the exposed parts of his skin were as pale as snow. His hair was now a sick green shade and his eyes glowed the same color, with the smirk on his lips making him look far more ghoulish than handsome.

“Bolt?” said Winter in a puzzled voice. “Is that you?”

“Bolt?” said Bolt. He chuckled, a sound that didn't sound like him at all. “Nah. Bolt is dead. Only Dark Thunder—Herald of the Great Destruction—lives.”

“Dark Thunder?” Cyclone repeated in shock. “When did you change your name?”

Sigil landed behind Winter and Cyclone, an amused smile playing across his lips. “Much has changed since you two delved into the Dark Dungeon. Perhaps it would help if I explained to you exactly what happened ... and why you will wish the Fire Warden had killed you both when she had the chance.”

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