

Elethia, Zovaal's realm of the Shadowlands, was a peaceful place. Defined by a huge river passing through it, it was where the recently departed found themselves first. It was the place where they could rest and wait to be sorted into their respective afterlives. Occasionally an unusual soul would arrive that didn't fit into any of the existing afterlives. In that case, it could stay in Elethia until similar souls arrived and an afterlife was constructed for them.

Compared to the more whimsical realms of the other Eternal Ones, Elethia wasn't particularly special. The river flowed through fields of tall soft grass, jagged rock formations, and petrified forests with long stretches of dark sandy beaches along the shore. Kyrestia kept badgering Zovaal that his realm looked too much like Bastion. He always would object that he didn't design the realm, and that Kyrestia should talk to the First Ones about it. Also, his realm had more variety in its environments, and Kyrestia didn't own the concept of cliffs and fields. As opposed to the glowing blues and pastel tones of Bastion, Elethia's colors were darker and more mundane, at least to a human eye. The grass was a cold green colour, and the rocks were dark grey. Instead of Bastion's immutable bright blue sky, a field of everchanging rolling clouds stretched above.

Zovaal and his soulbind Hawthorn lay in the grass. Hawthorn lay on their back, staring at the clouds, and Zovaal rested partly on top of them. They rolled and churned, forming shapes that Hawthorn pointed out to Zovaal. Zovaal hummed in response to their excited chattering, his face hidden in the crook of their neck. Sometimes he'd look up at the sky as well.

The clouds obscured the storm that would destroy it all. The cloud cover suddenly lit up with gold and dimmed into dark purple, and then was torn away. Zovaal sprung up to his feet, pulling Hawthorn with him. They stared in awe at the sight above them: a creature made up of golden geometric shapes locked in a fight with a being so dark that there were no words for it in any language Zovaal has ever heard. The void being tackled the one of light, and its beam attack cut through the land. Zovaal barely had time to pull Hawthorn out of the way. He scooped them up in his arms and ran towards the palace. He had to evacuate his covenant and the souls in his care!

He would do no such thing, as another void lord was toppled over, and fell onto the palace. It crumbled under its weight, purple and black bleeding all over it. And then the area was bombarded with Light before Zovaal could even reach it. He could only watch. Hawthorn whimpered in his arms, and he looked at them and his eyes went wide. Almost half of their face was burned away, the Light still seeping from the cracks in the wood of their antlers. He clutched them close, whispering calming words to them.

Zovaal looked around in desperation, searching for any kind of shelter or way out. There was nothing he could do as the cataclysm spilled across the fields and forests. His ears were assaulted by horrible crashing, and the ground beneath him shook. Through the storm, he swore he could see a piece of Elethia shatter off as two particularly large Void and Light entities clashed on top of it. With all the power Zovaal had as one of the lords of Death, in the end he could only watch on his knees as everything crumbled around him. The purple corruption of the

Void nullified by the one of the Light, leaving behind nothing but barren rock and ashes. He found a rock, and hid behind it, holding Hawthorn tightly against himself, shielding them with his body.

The battle raged across the realm, until it didn't. The storm passed, and moved on. Zovaal slowly crawled out from behind the rock and looked around. All that remained of his once sprawling and peaceful realm was a small island floating in the in-between. The sky above was an eerie orange colour, with pitch black clouds swirling around in a vortex. Being repeatedly blasted by opposing cosmic energies did something to the very anima that comprised Elethia, and it felt wrong. Zovaal's chest hurt. He felt hollowed out and drained. He fell to his knees and wept, and his tears dripped black onto the ground, the same color as the corrupted anima swirling above. Something was wrong with his own anima. He faintly registered thin arms wrapping around him. Zovaal didn't know how long he lay in the ashes, completely shattered.

He didn't remember finding his way to a waystone back to Oribos. It was a miracle it wasn't destroyed. Nor did he remember limping out of a portal and collapsing onto his knees in the soft blue grass of Ardenweald, Hawthorn stumbling onto the ground next to him.

Far up above floated the city of Oribos, the center of the Shadowlands. An attendant watched in horror as a storm of purple darkness and golden lightning raged below, obscuring the realms in that region. The Primus of Maldraxxus towered over the attendant, watching, his face impassive. He knew there were several realms in that area of the in-between, including the one belonging to his brother Zovaal. He only hoped the storm went past those realms. Incursions from the forces of both Light and Void were rare, but not unheard of, and the occasional clash of the two was nothing new, but this was far more violent than anything the Primus had ever seen before.

Zovaal's eyes opened to the star-filled sky of Ardenweald. His vision was blurry and he felt completely exhausted. His chest hurt. He sat up slowly, to see the Winter Queen seated next to him. Hawthorn was sitting by his side, their arm on his back, supporting him in an upright position. Their head and shoulder were wrapped in leaves. Zovaal took a breath, and doubled over, coughing. When the fit was over there was black liquid on his hand. He stared at it in horror.

"What happened?" The Queen asked, genuine concern in her eyes.

"My realm... it's all gone. There was a storm. A battle of Light and Void." he pressed a hand to his chest in pain. "I couldn't...It just swept over my realm. It's gone."

"It was horrible. He saved me."

The weight of it caught up with Zovaal, and he broke down, weeping quietly. Hawthorn cuddled up to him, burying their face in his shoulder. They weren't sure how they felt. Numb. Hollow. Zovaal's sorrow echoed over the soul bond, and they cried with him.

"I will inform the others." The Winter Queen said. "Rest. You are safe here."

She looked to the Fae in Zovaal's arms, but said nothing. Hawthorn was used to the cold treatment from the queen. They were pretty sure that she didn't approve of Zovaal saving them instead of anyone from his own covenant. They watched Zovaal as he laid back down in the grass. He looked worn out, with dark circles under his eyes and lines etched into his face deeper than before. Hawthorn noticed a darker spot on his chest that radiated tendrils or veins across his skin. They reached out a hand to it, and Zovaal took it and held it to his chest.

"How is your eye?"

"The healers said there's no eye left. The whole thing hurts. I feel lopsided."

"I am sorry. I didn't react in time."

"You saved me. That's all that matters to me."

Hawthorn curled up around their soulbind to the best of their ability, arms wrapped tightly around his waist. They fell short of being the big spoon, due to Zovaal being much bigger, but he appreciated their effort. Their presence eased the pain. They fell silent, and dozed off.

Oribos, the topmost chamber. The Primus stood in the center of the room, listening to the Winter Queen's report along with Denathrius and Kyrestia. So the storm didn't spare Elethia after all. Zovaal was now without a realm or covenant, something that has never happened before. He was bereft of his purpose. The Primus wondered if there was anything left after the storm and if it could be salvaged. The other realms in the region were likely gone, even with Elethia taking the brunt of the damage.

"I am going to visit Zovaal," Denathrius proclaimed, worry etched into his face, before disappearing in a flash of red.

"The storm has passed. I will descend into Elethia to assess the damage." The Primus said.

The two remaining Eternal Ones exchanged looks. Winter Queen was the one to voice her concern.

"Are you sure? It could be dangerous. We do not know how the storm affected the place."

"When has danger ever deterred a Maldraxxi?"

"That is true. May I join?" Kyrestia asked.

The waystone still worked, spitting the two Eternals out of the portal. Kyrestia and the Primus stood on what once was a road. Now only parts of the pavement remained, the rest torn off or choked by ash. They immediately felt it, the hungry pull at their very beings, threatening to nibble away little by little until nothing remained.

"This place is all wrong..." Kyrestia trailed off, taking off into the air to take a better look.

Of the sprawling realm, only a few islands were left. The waygate was located on the largest remnant. It had a section of the river and a road and not much else. Other chunks of Elethia's landmass floated nearby. Kyrestia saw flickers of movement across the barren landscape and flew closer. Dark shadows wandered listlessly below, seemingly unaware of her, for now. She decided to not risk investigating them closer. She looked up, and for a moment, was mesmerized by the swirl of black anima around a central point in the sky. The Primus followed her on the ground. Despite the elderly appearance he chose to bear, he easily caught up with her. He saw the shadows too, and for now, chose to stay away from them as well. Instead he walked up to the edge of the island and peered into the abyss below.

"If this is what's left of Elethia, I doubt the other realms in this region survived." The Primus said.

Pity. One of those realms held an extensive library of all the knowledge in the Shadowlands and even beyond. That definitely was a loss, the Primus thought. He'd have to see if anything was left of the library too. His mind already whirled with possibilities. There were traces of unfamiliar magic in the air, something he wanted to study closer and maybe even harness eventually.

"Maybe there's still use to be made of this place..."

"Are you sure? All that's left is one little island and the anima here is all twisted and wrong."

"All the more reason for me to study it!"

Kyrestia let out an exasperated sigh. Of course he wanted to study every rock in this new environment. That was the most Primus thing to do. She wondered what became of Zovaal's covenant. She hasn't seen any traces of them, or of the souls that called Elethia home. Kyrestia hazarded a guess that the shades she saw before could be what remained of Zovaal's covenant, his souls, or both.

"I do not think we should tarry here. I can feel the realm trying to eat at my being. As if we are inside the maw of a beast." She paused, thinking. "I think we should call it that from now on. The Maw."

The Primus nodded. The new name fit. The two headed back to the waygate. The Primus was already making plans to return and investigate the magic he had felt. And so Elethia was erased from existence, replaced by the Maw.