

The **goggle** was knocked off the head of Samson and cracked on the floor. Despite this, the commander readied his halberd and prepared to attack. He spun and slashed towards a newly manifested figure behind him, but pulled up when he saw the pair. His eyes, hardened bloodshot from rage and the fight, softened.

“What are you doing? Get out! We need to regr-”

A shadowy black claw slashed through the commander, from left shoulder to right hip. Samson’s eyes zoned as he registered what happened to him. Vivienne cried out for him, but they fell on his dead ears. His halberd fell to the floor, evaporating on contact. From each cut seeped a deep blue mist and from each tear bled pieces of flesh and gore. Finally, three segments of the once great commander slid off his legs as he collapsed to the cold tiles below.

Loki hadn’t moved since the slash, his long, raven hair shrouding his face. Yet through the strands of hair his eyes still glowed an ominous purple. Slowly, he lifted his head to face Vivienne and Gerron. He broke out into a toothy grin, chuckling to himself before giving in to a haunting laugh. He vanished into the Abyss again, his laugh still echoing throughout the near empty main hall. The **Sign of the Abyss** that hung in the sky disappeared with him.

Vivienne stood petrified, her hairs standing firmly on end. She couldn’t process what just happened to Samson. He was the most powerful mage she knew, and served as her father figure when she had none. Now, to see him struck down so effortlessly, to be reduced to a pile of flesh and Aether, to be gone from her life. Hopeless, she collapsed to the floor and began to cry.

“Samson... I’m so sorry...” Vivienne croaked through her tears. “I should’ve done something, anything...”

Gerron was motionless by her side. She knew she needed to be strong for them, but she couldn’t hold it back. It was her fault Samson was dead. If she’d thrown the bola, if she’d cast a

spell, if she did anything, her commander would still be here. But now, she felt lost, deep in a mansion they didn't know with a mage they couldn't overcome.

Gerron knelt down beside his sister. She felt his hand rest softly on her shoulder, but she could tell by its shaking that he wasn't alright, either. Samson filled the paternal role for both of them in the wake of their parents' deaths. He was their strength when they needed it. Now, she had to take that role herself. Vivienne took a deep breath and tried to hold herself together.

"We have to stay strong. If we stay like this, we'll be easy pickings for that monster." Vivienne rose to her feet and turned to face Gerron. Though he hadn't made a sound, she saw his pain and fear in his eyes.

"But what about—" Gerron started before choking on his grief. He motioned to what remained of Samson.

"There's nothing we can do now but stop this bastard once and for all. It's what he would've wanted from us." Vivienne held back her tears as she finished and took another deep breath. They needed a leader, now more than ever. "We need to look for the others. We'll move together and search for the rest of the squad. If any of them are left, we'll need their help."

Gerron, still unnerved by the scene, nodded. They took one last moment to mourn the loss of their commander. Vivienne noticed the goggle on the floor and put it on. If nothing else, it would give her the strength to finish the job.

They made their way out of the main hall and started down a hallway to the left. Vivienne could see the faint blue emanating from the rooms where their compatriots placed Aether wells, and could feel her energy strengthen as she passed more of them. After passing a number of rooms, she noticed a door that remained closed at the end of the hallway. She moved towards the door and began to open it before she was grabbed by her arm. Fearing the worst, she created a

sword out of Aether and swung around before catching herself. Her blade was positioned an inch from Gerron's neck.

"Shit, don't do that to me," Vivienne said as her sword faded away. "What's wrong with you?"

"I d-don't think we should go in there," Gerron replied, shaking a bit more than usual. "It f-feels like i-it's draining me from here."

Vivienne couldn't feel it. The nearby wells were producing so much Aether energy, that she couldn't notice anything else.

"We don't have much choice. They placed wells in every room leading up to this one. If they're still here, they'd be behind this door."

"I guess you're r-right," Gerron conceded. "B-but I still don't think it's a good idea."

"I know it's scary, but we have to check. If anything happens in that room, remember to use your **necklace**." Vivienne pointed to the charm around her brother's neck. It was a gift to her from her mother before she passed to provide her strength when she needed it. However, Vivienne gave it to Gerron on his first day at the Academy to reassure him he always had support.

"I will." Gerron looked down at the charm and took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

"Alright. On three. One, two, three!"

Vivienne threw open the door and was met with a wave of emptiness, strong enough to throw her back. She crashed into Gerron and sent them both hard onto the floor. The nothingness blew down the hallway, extinguishing each Aether well in every room as it moved. When she came to her senses, Vivienne couldn't shake a dull droning in her ears. It was a sound without note, a noise without tone.

She began to rise and turned to try and find her brother, but he wasn't there. She called out for him, but nothing seemed to happen. She tried to conjure a well, but something suppressed her Aether. Vivienne turned back around and saw the door was now opened. Whatever disoriented her must've disoriented Gerron, too. If he wandered in there without knowing, she had to find him before Loki did.

Vivienne stepped through the door and let out a scream in horror. On the bare wooden wall across from the door hung a Covenant mage, hanging down from their feet that were staked to suspend them. From the stake sprawled out a web of Abyssal tendrils that descended like ivy down the body. The skin was atrophying around the points of contact, and the stench of rot hovered over the room. Above the body was the Sign of the Abyss, illuminating the room in a purple glow.

Vivienne rushed to try and identify the Covenant member, but the face was distorted beyond recognition. She tried to concentrate her Aether to combat the Abyss, but she couldn't muster any. She looked down at her hands and felt a sense of dread overtake her; she was powerless, and the droning had only gotten louder. Suddenly, she was struck from behind by a heavy force that burned her shoulder blades on contact. She tried to cry out in pain, but couldn't muster the strength. She rolled over and saw Loki standing over her, his deep purple eyes staring straight into her soul. She went to scream for Gerron, for help, for fear, anything, but nothing came out. Loki flashed his twisted smile as he raised a dagger above his head, until a bright blue mace nailed him in the chin.

Vivienne looked to her left and saw Gerron standing strong, brandishing a mace and a shield. The deep mage recovered and turned to face his attacker. He lunged, but was caught by another blow, knocking him down. As he rises, Gerron channels the Aether from the necklace.

He creates a human-sized shield in front of him and charges, picking up the deep mage and driving him spine first into the wall with a huge crunch. When the energy of the shield disappeared, Gerron was the only one there, standing over a puddle of Abyssal fluid. The Sign had disappeared from the wall, and the droning in Vivienne's ears vanished.

Gerron was shocked at what he just did. Vivienne, too. All this time, she thought she had to be his protector, but within this moment, he was her savior. She watched as Gerron looked at the necklace around his neck and began to beam with pride. Through its power and a newfound courage, he overcame a Child of the Abyss and finally became what everyone knew he could. He turned to his sister and made his way over.

"Are you okay, Vi?" Gerron asked as he began helping Vivienne up.

"I should be, yeah." Though still shaken by the blow, she was feeling better. "You did it, Gerron. You took down Loki!"

"I-I guess I did," Gerron said. He was still trying to make sense of the situation, but his eyes betrayed how proud he was of himself.

"Samson would be so proud of you. So would mother and father. So am I." Vivienne embraced her brother and began to cry. She had long known how capable her brother was, but he had always struggled to show it. Now, he finally got to, and would be able to go back to the Covenant with proof.

"What about them?" Gerron asked, pointing to the body still hanging from the wall.

"We'll make our way back to the Academy and ale-" Vivienne began, but started to trail off. She started to feel drained again. She began to stumble backwards when she realized she could hear the droning again. She looked around and saw a black portal opening in the wall where Gerron made contact. The same point where Loki disappeared. Suddenly, it clicked.

“Behind you!” Vivienne tried to warn Gerron, but it was too late. A dark portal had opened on the wall where Loki had disappeared, and from it came two large claws, blackened and pulsing with the void. Gerron shrieked as the claws dug into his ankles and began dragging him towards the ominous gateway. Vivienne knew if he went through, he wasn’t coming back. Summoning all her strength, she leapt towards Gerron, grabbed hold of his arms, and began to pull him back.

The claws continued to drag Gerron in, but Vivienne wouldn’t relent. Her strength wasn’t what it could be, but it was all she had. Gerron screamed in agony and fear as his body was stretched by the two forces. As she fought, Vivienne watched as Abyssal tendrils began extending from the claws and working their way up Gerron’s body, pulling him in with greater force. With it, she could feel her brother slipping away.

Slowly, the claws pulled Gerron into the void. First his feet, then up to his knees, and then to his hips. Vivienne began to channel her Aether to try and give her more strength, but couldn’t muster enough to overcome the Abyss. In a last ditch effort, she let loose a primal cry to summon all she had left. The call resonated with the necklace around Gerron’s neck, which was still beyond the void. The amulet glowed a bright blue and filled the air with Aether, which encircled the siblings. Filled with the new energy, Vivienne finally began to drag Gerron out from the portal. She finally had enough strength to overcome the Abyss, finally had the hope to bring her brother back until...

The portal closed, severing Gerron in two at the waist. With all the strength she had mustered, the lack of resistance sent her and Gerron’s upper half flying across the room, spraying the wall in his blood, guts, and Abyssal sludge. Vivienne quickly gathered her senses, and soon realized what had just happened. In a panic, she turns to find her brother, only to scream in terror

when she sees what's left of him. This can't be happening, Vivienne thought, this can't be how it ends. She scurried over to what remained of her brother, but saw only the emptiness of his eyes. She'd lost him, too.

As she broke down again, she heard the haunting laugh of Loki echo throughout the room.