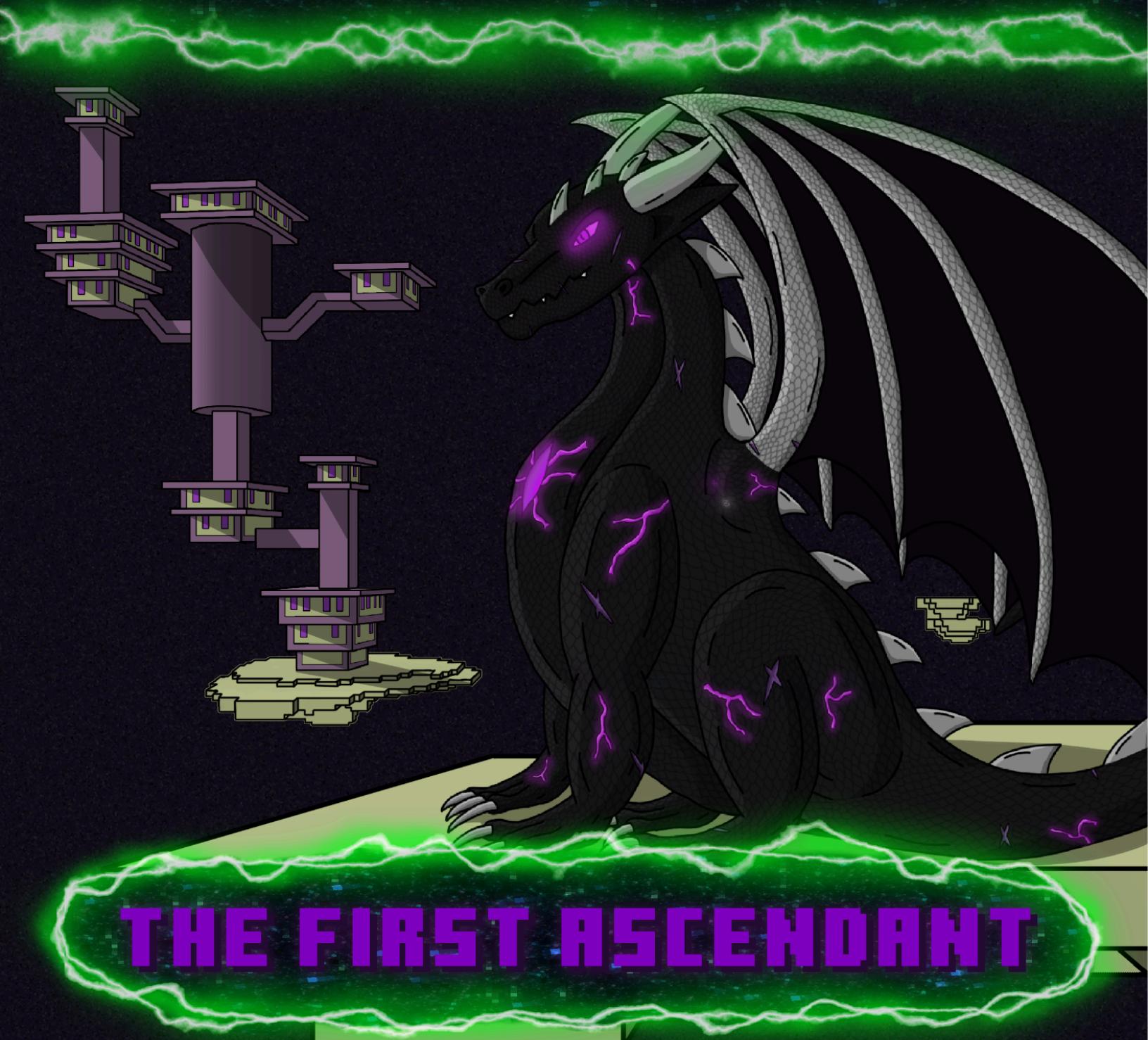


FREEFIRE HUNTER

ASCENDANT ORIGINS #1

By BorisShoes



THE FIRST ASCENDANT

Content Warning: Graphic Violence, Self-Harm, Suicidal Ideation

Chapter 1: Zeraiya

ZERAIYA...

A whispered voice called out, echoing through the dream of a waking young dragon.

"Zeraiya, wake up! It's time to go, the storm is getting close, it's about to hit the city!" a voice familiar to the young dragon beckoned. In the distance, a massive, gravity defying city of purple and pale yellow bricks stands tall. Further off in the horizon, a pitch black storm looms against the fuzzy black sky of the End. Flickers of dark green light emanate from within the clouds. Taking a moment to gaze at the oncoming destruction, Zeraiya is mesmerized by the rolling clouds and the quick verdant flashes. The young dragon gets up from her hastily fashioned nest and looks in the direction she was woken from and sees her mother waiting patiently, while a group of other dragons begin to take flight away from the storm. Beside her, another, but bigger young dragon continues to stare deep into the roiling storm with an intense focus, his glowing purple eyes dead set on taking in every detail. Zeraiya approaches the two, stretching her dark black wings wide, and taking a massive leap into the air.

"Zephos! How many times do I have to say that all that is in there is death?!" the older dragon sternly spoke as she too, prepares to take flight. Zephos breaks his gaze and uses his claw to etch into the scales on his leg. Many of the dull black scales all over his body are covered in gray scratch marks that upon closer inspection are notes, and runes of the old Arcana.

"If I'm right, in there is something far worse..." he slowly replies before finishing his engraving and taking flight. The older dragon finally lifts off the ground and takes up the rear of the flight as the group heads off into the dark abyss before them. The pale yellow endstone far beneath them soon drops off to leave only void as they travel further and further away from the storm. A loud electric crackle booms behind them. Zephos, continuing to fly with the group, cranes his neck and strains his eyes to catch a glimpse of the destruction behind him. Massive dark green lightning bolts thunder and fork in the air and strike towards the city. Thousands of immobile shulkers that remain are vaporized into dust. The buildings explode and collapse with each successive strike. Not long after, the once massive city is reduced to rubble, and engulfed by the umbral storm.

After a long journey, the storm becomes not even a dot on the horizon. Many of the group are reaching the point of exhaustion, and so the flight of a few dozen dragons search

for an island to land on. The leader of the pack spots an island covered with a forest of chorus plants. The larger dragons among them fell chorus plants in one swing of their sharpened gray claws, clearing an area suitable for the remaining families and providing some material to make a hasty nest out of. Zephos leads Zeraiya and their mother to a spot near the edge of the island and starts to settle down. He strains his eyes to try and spot the storm again but at this point it is too far away.

"How long will we have this time?" Zeraiya inquires. "We only got a few rests out of our last stop, and that was the biggest remaining city any of us knows of!" The exasperation in her voice was almost palpable, and echoed the thoughts of the other younger dragons in the group.

"I don't know, but when it comes again, we will move again. We have survived this long together, eventually the storm will subside and we can return to our home nest." Her mother responds, trying her best to sound reassuring. However, the doubt in her own words gnaws away at her own self-assurance.

Zephos was done fleeing. He exclaimed to everyone within earshot, "What about dad? And all the others that didn't make it! The storm is getting more destructive! We've tried to get around it, or behind it, and now all we have left is to fly away everytime it finds us! I'm telling you it is *growing* and that there is something responsible for it."

Murmurs quickly erupted from the others. Some of them had been agreeing with Zephos's claims, while others have simply been focused on keeping their family safe. His mother stays silent, knowing that her son is most likely right, but nevertheless upset that he caused a scene.

Zephos stood up from his small nest, the others turned to him, expecting another declaration. Zephos confidently blared, "I know I can figure out what this storm is! And maybe I can even find a way to stop it! No one else here has studied it like I have! None of you all even bothered to learn the old Arcana from our elders, passed down by our ancestors for eons, before they were all swallowed by the storm in their attempt to save us!" He turned back towards the edge of the island and flared his wings out, still aching from the long journey but reinvigorated by his confidence.

"Zeph! You don't have to leave us! Just stay, and continue to find a way to stop it here." Zeraiya pleaded. Zephos's primed pose relaxed, and he turned and lowered himself to be eye level with his nesting sister.

"I promise you, Zeri, I will come back for you, and mom, and all of the rest of us. But the answers I need can't be found with the group... Take care of mom for me, alright?" Zephos said with a calming confidence. He pressed his snout up against Zeraiya's and looked over her head towards their mother with unrivaled determination, sharing a hundred words in a single glance. Still pressed up against his sister's nose, he reached his forearm around her wing and began to inscribe a symbol onto a scale next to her wing. He spoke as he wrote, "Don't worry about me, wherever you are, I will find you." He finished his runes and pulled away, retaking his launch pose, diving off the island and taking flight.

Zeraiya watches from her nest as he gets smaller and smaller in the distance till her keen draconic eyesight can't pick him out from amongst the matching black sky.

It wasn't long till the storm came again. The all-too-familiar black clouds and green lightning striking down everything in its path. The inhabitants of a nearby enderman settlement passed by the island that the dragons were staying at a while before the storm was about to hit. They had to evacuate their encampment earlier to give them enough time to flee the area on foot, aided by their limited teleportation that is used to hop between adjacent islands. The dragons were far faster, and got to enjoy more time in one place before having to continue their outward trek, deeper into the uncharted regions of the outer End islands.

Ages go by, and the cycle continues... The storm approaches, and the dragons flee... Over time, Zeraiya grew to match the size of her mother and brother, with no word or sighting of Zephos. The flight would occasionally find settlements of shulkers and endermen on their journey, some were refugees like them, others were blissfully unaware of the coming destruction. As time went on, Zeraiya grew increasingly worried about her brother, but dared not say anything as to spread the worry to her mother.

As Zeraiya goes to sleep on her makeshift nest, close to the nest of her mother, but unfathomably far from her home island, a familiar, mysterious voice beckons her...

ZERAIYA...

The voice that she had heard many times before in her dreams, ever distant but growing closer, suddenly felt like it was breathing down her neck. She jerks up from her nest, startled, but finds herself surrounded by a strange void. A void not unlike the familiar one of the End, but different enough to make her feel instantly uneasy. She looks to the ground and finds her feet planted on an expansive, flat, obsidian landscape. Glancing around, she sees the storm. Surrounding her on all sides, the clouds rolling, turning, *breathing*. The storm closes in around her. It calls again.

ZERAIYA...

"Who are you? What do you want?" She queries out into the clouds. The storm churns for a moment before Zeraiya's mind is filled with images of the storm, of the cities and people it has obliterated in its path, and a feeling of visceral hatred and disgust intrudes into her.

TENBROUS... ANNIHILATION...

The words echo impossibly throughout the infinite void. Zeraiya, nauseous at the experience she just had, takes a moment to steel herself before replying, “Then what do you want with me?” Another wave of images surges into her head, but this time of Zephos, flying right up against the storm, dipping into it at times, dodging the green lightning with uncanny precision. The feeling of hatred still looms. It had been so long since Zeraiya had seen her brother, he too had grown, though still bigger than Zeraiya. Zeraiya focused on the images in her mind and took notice of the scratches on his scales that now covered most of his body, and even saw a few that were faintly glowing. She didn’t have much time to take it all in, or even process the relief and joy she felt before the disembodied voice rang out again.

BROTHER... FOUND...

Before she even had time to think she immediately blurted out with concern, “Where is he?! Take me to him!” The storm shifted again, encroaching closer, to the point where Zeraiya was almost immersed in it, but the lightning stopped. The feeling of claustrophobia was about to kick in before another flood of images burst into her mind once more. This time the images formed a path, from where Zeraiya currently was sleeping all the way across a far section of the void, over countless barren islands, to a fleeting glimpse of Zephos flying over another gravity defying city, with no storm in sight. This time, a feeling of hope came along with the visual display, which merged with Zeraiya’s own sense of hope. Without another word spoken, Zeraiya had agreed to something, and Tenbrous knew it. The storm receded, and Zeraiya woke from her slumber. Glancing around her, she saw none of the other members of her flight were awake. With emotion-fueled impulsivity, she feared that if she waited too long that the path would fade from her memory. Zeraiya took off as silently as she could and flew off into the dark sky, leaving the few dragons left, including her mother, behind.

Chapter 2: Tenbrous's Champion

Zeraiya flew along the path burned into her memory until she could barely flap her wings. She relentlessly traveled as fast and far as possible, only stopping to rest on small islands once she was at her limit. This continued on and on, getting ever closer to the city from the divine vision. It did not even occur in Zeraiya's mind that she would need to find her way back, or that the flight would have to keep moving to avoid the storm. The only thing left in her mind was finding her brother again. Settling down for what she guessed to be the last time before her arrival to the city, the dark entity greeted her once again.

ZERAIYA...

Zeraiya responded enthusiastically, "I'm almost there! Thank you for guiding me!" However, the dark clouds crept close, almost cautiously surrounding Zeraiya in the liminal void. The already deep echoing voice grew deeper and thunder began to subtly roll.

TOO... LATE...

The almost growling voice boomed back. Zeraiya sported a confused look, tilting her head before a new vision entered her mind. Within the not-so-distant city lies a broken and mangled body of a black dragon. Endermen nearby harvest the rune-marked scales and fashion various pieces of armor and weapons from them. Zeraiya wells up with rage and sorrow at the sight of her brother's remains. She never even noticed the deep feeling of hatred that snuck into her heart. She lets out a roaring loud wail into the infinite abyss that echoes for what feels like an eternity. She sits and festers in her thoughts while the clouds around her slowly pulse, still rolling with thunder. After a while, the foreign hatred sinks in and she calls out, "I will kill them all!" The clouds light up with bright flashes of green lightning and the voice calls back.

MY... CHAMPION!...

The liminal void begins to transform around the enraged, grief-stricken Zeraiya. The infinite obsidian floor tessellates, and caves inward while the dark crystal begins to glow with dark purple spots drifting within. In the distance beyond the storm clouds, the shifting floor folds upwards in all directions to form an arching ceiling centered over Zeraiya. The clouds still circle the now enclosed space. Zeraiya begins to process the sudden transformation in the landscape and a claustrophobic panic sets in. She nervously calls out, still trying to quell her emotions, "Wait! What just happened? What did you do?"

A... GIFT... IMMORTALITY...

Before she even has a chance to question the cryptic response, she finds herself awake and alone on her small, distant island. With her claustrophobia subsiding, the grief and rage resurfaces. Her vengeful gaze fixed in the distant direction of the foretold city. Zeraiya takes flight once more and continues on her journey with a new conviction.

As Zeraiya closes in on the rapidly approaching city, her mouth begins to froth with enderflame. She prepares to breathe a massive volley of the glowing, sticky, purple substance that all of her kind use for both defense and hunting. Her keen eyesight spots some of the inhabitants in the distance, wearing armor made of the familiar black scales. In that moment, any lingering doubts in her mind are silenced, and she swoops down for an assault on the ones who killed her brother. She violently spews enderflame all across the edge of the city, coating the endermen and shulkers in its path. The endermen and shulkers try to teleport out of the flame but it sticks to their skin and shells as they rapidly blink around. The purple flame eats away at the pitch black skin of the endermen and even through the tough, purple, mineralized shell of the shulkers until all that remains is the scale armor a few of the endermen adorned. The inhabitants, caught off guard by the surprise attack, quickly scramble to defend themselves. Zeraiya is able to volley a few more breaths of enderflame around the perimeter of the partly floating city before a counter attack is mounted.

Shulkers quickly teleport from within the buildings and affix themselves to the outer walls and roofs. They rapidly begin firing a barrage of projectiles, floating, crystalline orbs that can follow any assailant in a maze-like path and inflict the target with a brief bout of levitation. Endermen ready their scale-tipped spears, waiting for the shulker's barrage to create an opening. While Zeraiya flies tight and fast circles around the perimeter of the city, far outpacing an individual shulker bullet, the sheer quantity becomes too much to avoid. Bullets impact her scaled hide, sending a sharp sting through her body. In all her life, Zeraiya had never seen combat like this. As the apex predators of the End, closely guarded by her family, she had never experienced even minor injuries before. She reeled a bit as countless bullets pelted her as she soared through the skies, not noticing that the impacts were levitating her scales slightly out of place such that small gaps in her natural armor began to form. The endermen had their opening, and began to hurl their spears up towards the black specter in the sky. The endermens' lanky stature and long arms launched the spears with such force that they were able to slice through her exposed hide and lodge themselves halfway into her body.

Zeraiya howled in pain and let out a deafening roar. She turned towards a group of endermen launching volleys of spears at her and barrelled her way towards them. She

smashed through an outer tower of the city, disconnecting it from its base and sending it slowly crashing into the island below. Zeraiya plowed into the terrain at the feet of the endermen before her, dozens of spears sticking out of her draconic form. Before the endermen had time to react, Zeraiya picked herself up and with one swipe of her claws, sliced all the endermen to pieces. However, she was wounded and winded, and there were still many layers of towers before she could make it to the center of the city. Approaching the center of the city from the sky was out of the question, as the city built like branching chorus plants made the higher levels all that more dense with structures. Despite her heart pounding with fury, the hundreds of inhabitants defending their home continued to pelt her. Zeraiya's consciousness, and life itself began to fade, with the wounds piling up, and her bright purple blood flooding the streets. As she exhaled her last breath she whimpered to herself, "I'm sorry". Her body began to crackle and burn with a searing white light coming from her core, and a screeching sound pierced the air. The endermen took a cautious step back at the strange sight, but in a bright flash nothing remained but a small, black, crystalline egg with glowing purple spots within it. Zeraiya awoke in a familiar landscape once again.

WEAKLING!... FAILURE...!

The voice roared with a novel forcefulness. "What happened?!" Zeraiya roared back. "I... died?" she continued with a calmer confusion. The voice did not respond, but the clouds grew denser, roaring with thunder and crackling with green lightning. They closed in around Zeraiya, blocking her vision, she could feel the lightning strike her, sending painful shocks throughout her flesh. She looked down and realized she couldn't move, the crystalline floor had grown around her four feet, cementing them in place. She struggled to try and free herself but it was no use. She shouted out but there was still no response. Large lightning bolts began to strike her chest in quick succession, burning a gaping hole through tensed muscles and bones. Zeraiya roared in pain, louder than she ever had before because that was all she could do, helpless at what was happening to her. The abyssal clouds poured into the wound and an immense pressure began to build, tearing the hole wider until her throbbing, dark purple heart was exposed to the air. The storm receded out of the massive wound and the clouds began to glow brighter and brighter. The building electricity was palpable in the air and the bright green light refracted off the dark crystal walls. Right when everything seemed quiet, and Zeraiya's scream ran out of breath, a singular, massive lightning bolt struck Zeraiya right in her exposed heart. One final scream echoed and mixed with the thunder throughout the space. Through the unimaginable pain, a new sensation arose. Zeraiya tried to crane her neck to look into her chest but she couldn't see what was happening. The final bolt of lightning had begun to crystalize her heart. The obsidian-like rock slowly spread from the point of impact until her entire heart

was a sharp, jagged stone. The rapid beating of her heart was replaced with the slow pulsing of a pinkish purple light that traveled outwards through her arteries. With each pulse, her wound began to heal rapidly, as Zeraiya finally got a chance to catch her breath, trying to process what just happened. Soon enough, all that was left of the gaping wound was a massive scar on her chest, devoid of scales, and a divot in her flesh with the glowing pulses from her new heart shining through. With barely a moment to rest, the circling clouds shot bolts of lightning outwards towards the tessellated walls, which began to crack. Zeraiya could feel her consciousness in this space fading as the walls shattered and burst open from the inside. Right before she completely faded away the clouds boomed once more.

KILL... THEM... ALL!...

Back in the city, only a few moments had passed since the dark egg sat where a draconic corpse should have been. A few endermen had approached to inspect it when it began to crack and burst open with a violent explosion. Before them stood Zeraiya once again, her previous spear wounds scarred over, but healed. Her glowing purple chest pulsed slowly. Her gaze shifted to the nearby endermen, her heart only filled with Tenbrous's stone cold hatred and violent disgust. Once again, with one swipe of her claws she felled those who stood before her. However, a strange energy escaped their dying bodies. Whispered screams traced it invisibly through the air as it got sucked into Zeraiya's new heart. A wave pulses through her, carrying a euphoric feeling as her muscles tense and veins throb. Her glowing purple eyes constrict and a new surge of energy overwhelms her. She stampedes through the base of another building in search of more inhabitants. The shulkers and endermen resume their attack, beginning with the barrage of shulker bullets. However, Zeraiya was paying attention, and the launch of the shulkers' barrage revealed their hiding spots. Zeraiya charges toward one of the towers and leaps onto its side, her claws easily punching through the endstone brick walls. She scales the towers swiftly and begins using her teeth to scrape shulkers off the sides of buildings, crunching them between her massive jaws and spitting out the tough shells. With each shulker slain a new wave of euphoria and energy surge through her, fuelling the slaughter. Her speed and strength grew with every life taken. Instead of making her way towards the city center, she now takes her time winding through the outer streets, searching for every last soul; Her original goal was now completely pushed out of her memory. The siege didn't last long before ruin had come to the whole city. Many of the towers had been bulldozed through by Zeraiya's sheer size, and every last enderman and shulker had been slain. However, as the euphoria faded, the bloodlust remained, and she craved more. She stretched her massive black wings and leapt into the air, flying off in search of another city. Zeraiya never even stopped to inspect the large black corpse in the center of the city. She left not knowing that

its snout was too short and the runed scales covered far too little of its body to belong to Zephos.

Word of the storm soon stopped, replaced by the whispers of the rampaging black and purple specter that had swiftly wiped hundreds of cities off the map. Unlike the storm, this new scourge of the End was fast, precise, and vicious. Zeraiya no longer needed to rest after long flights as long as there was a city or encampment for her to slaughter. With her getting faster and stronger over time, she could soar over hundreds of islands in a flash in search of ever more scarce inhabitants. However, her newfound strength was not infallible. Some cities got word of the rampaging monster before her arrival. Those who practiced the old Arcana gathered in an attempt to use any power they had to put a stop to the monster once and for all.

As Zeraiya approached the largest city she had seen in some time, at a speed where not even sound caught up to her. She barrelled towards the city, unknowing of the protective barrier that some old Arcanists erected around the city. At breakneck speed she slammed into the barrier, instantly dazing her and knocking her out of flight. She was looking forward to smashing through the center of the city like usual, but soon found herself being assailed on the ground by hundreds of endermen wielding weapons and armor enchanted by the old Arcanists. Her blood was spilling all over the outskirts of the city before she even had a chance to collect herself and get up. Despite managing to finally pick herself up and fight back, it wasn't long before the constant barrage of shulker bullets and brutal swings of the endermen had her back on the ground. She hadn't felt like this in a long time, and a fear washed over her as she lost consciousness. Her body cracked and burned with a searing white light and a deafening shriek as a familiar black egg remained. The inhabitants celebrated a near lossless victory against the seemingly indomitable force. However the old Arcanists, remaining vigilant, placed their strongest binding arcana upon the egg, and tossed it into the void.

Zeraiya found herself once again in a familiar crystalline prison, the black storm circling around her. Fearful for what was about to happen, she steeled herself, knowing that any resistance would be futile. The black clouds stayed at bay, circling, with small crackles of green lightning. Zeraiya felt uneasy before a vision forced its way into her mind. This vision was of the last time she found herself here, forced to relive every moment's agony. The lightning searing her flesh, the smoke tearing her open, and the blast that turned her heart to stone. She felt disgusted at her weakness from that moment, and her hatred swelled. She let out a roar of anger and the clouds once again struck lightning against the black and purple walls. The booming voice echoed the familiar phrase...

KILL... THEM... ALL!...

The old Arcanist's magic wasn't nearly enough to stop the divine lightning from rupturing the egg as it plummeted into oblivion. Zeraiya burst forth and felt her descent into the void. She steadied herself in her freefall and with her wings, unleashed a massive sonic boom, sending herself rocketing upwards towards the island she was thrown from. The old Arcanists, just turning away from the edge, sensed their seal break and ushered everyone back inside the barrier with mere moments to spare. The black-winged goliath rocketed up from below and adjusted her gaze to the invisible barrier around the city. Focusing her draconic eyesight and power within, she could now see the barrier and the Arcanists it was tied to. Around their necks, their wrists, their fingers were trinkets that lent energy to the barrier. She reached out one claw and with a pulse of her heart sent a blast of energy into the items. The Arcanists reeled in pain as pinkish purple energy traveled through their veins from their trinkets until they collapsed motionless, and the barrier fell. Zeraiya focused herself with a few breaths as her mouth began to froth and foam with enderflame. Not only had Zeraiya's form swelled with her new strength, but her flame's potency had been massively increased by the power surging through her. With one breath from above the entire city was coated, and began to crumble. The flames ate through buildings and inhabitants alike until only a steaming pile of rubble was left. A continuous torrent of energy came barrelling into Zeraiya as the screams from below died out, and Zeraiya continued on her way into the darkness beyond.

Over time, her destruction spread far and wide. It did not matter whether a defense could be mounted, for each time she was slain, she would be reborn again, healed and reinvigorated with rage. Ages passed as Zeraiya killed millions and millions more across the land. Zeraiya had seen no sign of Zephos, her mother, or her flight in eons until she stumbled upon a chorus forested island that had been felled. Landing and taking a whiff of the air, she smelled the fresh scent of her kind. However, there was no joy or hope left in her heart, simply hatred, disgust, and the euphoria of the slaughter. She leapt back into the air and began to follow the scent trail. It wasn't long with her unnatural speed that she caught sight of the flight from behind, counting only ten dragons. Increasing her speed even further, she targeted the leader of the pack and before any of them had time to react, she skewered her claws into the dragon's neck from behind. She quickly decapitated the leader and kicked their body into the void. As was habit for her, she unleashed a torrent of flames at the closest grouping, but even now, her enderflame was no match for an ender dragon's scales. Breaking out of her momentary confusion she used her size advantage to whip her tail into the head of the nearest dragon, crushing their skull in one blow and sending their lifeless body falling into the void.

The dragons finally had enough time to process the shock of a massive ender dragon suddenly attacking them and quickly dropped out of the sky and glided down to a nearby island. However one dragon from the rear of the pack remained flying, stunned. Zeraiya

was too focused on the task at hand to hear the elder dragon whimper, “Zeraiya?” before her teeth were in the elder dragon’s neck. Another lifeless body plummeted into the abyss... Looking below she saw the seven remaining dragons on the lower island. It didn’t take long for her overwhelming strength to overpower the rest. Their claws and teeth were unable to pierce her scales, while hers cut through theirs like there were no scales at all.

Just as Zeraiya was about to take flight, one last dragon came soaring through the eternally black sky at a speed thought impossible to all but her. The dragon opened their mouth as they got closer. Expecting a breath of enderflame, Zeraiya was unphased. However, some of the dragon’s scales began to glow a bright blue and a massive bright blue beam came shooting out at her. The blast caught her completely off guard and she was almost knocked all the way off the island. The last dragon came to a screeching halt on the island before shouting “Zeri!”

Zeraiya stood shocked, reeling from the paralyzing blast. “Weakling filth!” she shouted back.

Zephos took a long look at Zeraiya, who was now double his height and covered in scars, her muscles bulging with glowing purple veins and her heart pulsing unnaturally. He took another look at the carnage around him. He closed his eyes and winced his snout, trying with all his might to restrain his rage. He opened his eyes and responded, “What did it do to you?”. He noticed Zeraiya begin to regain control of her movement so he hit her with another blue beam of paralyzing energy.

Zeraiya let out a roar, “I WILL GUT YOU, DISGUSTING CREATURE!”. She continued to struggle against the paralysis.

“I’m so sorry” Zephos responded in a low voice. “I knew for a while that you had fallen to its madness. I’ve kept tabs on you all this time, like I said I would.” he paused for a moment. “I... I... figured out a way to stop it too. Just like I promised. I... just am not powerful enough yet. I wanted to help you, to save you, but after seeing what you did all across the End, I knew I wouldn’t be strong enough to stop you either.” he continued to say slowly, his voice filled with regret and sorrow. “I even found one of us lost in the storm, following the same thread I was, but she was injured by the lightning and I couldn’t save her either. I even tried bringing her to one of the cities away from the storm to see if they could heal her, but it was too late.” Tears started streaming down from Zephos’s purple eyes. burdened by his repeated failure. The paralysis began to fade once more, which Zeraiya had been patiently waiting for.

With one swift movement she embedded her claws deep into Zephos’s chest, punching through the other side. He spat purple blood onto Zeraiya’s forearm lodged in his chest. He let out a blood-choked chuckle, “Maybe I might just be able to pull this off after all.” He felt his life begin to fade and his essence being sucked into the goliath in front of him. A lone red rune engraved onto a scale on his chest flared bright, his consciousness felt somewhat restored. Zephos flared out his black wings, activating dozens of green runes etched into the scales all over his wings. A barrier around his body shimmers into visibility

and then shifts to wrap around Zeraiya. With his muscles going limp, he used the last of his strength to grab onto Zeraiya's massive forearm with both his claws and closed his eyes in resignation. Another dozen bright white runes all over his weakening body glow bright white, as does the singular engraved rune next to Zeraiya's wing. Both of their bodies begin to crack and burn a familiar blinding white. As Zephos crumbles into ash he mutters, "I'm sorry Zeri..." A lone, shimmering black egg sits atop an island surrounded with the corpses of the last ender dragons.

Chapter 3: The First Ascendant

Inside her egg, Zeraiya feels... different. The shimmering barrier around her expands to fill the whole space, pushing outwards against the black clouds surrounding her. The hatred in her heart begins to fade as the clouds swell and struggle to push back against the encroaching, shimmering wall. Eventually the storm is pushed all the way back into the crystalline walls of the egg and green runes appear, fortifying the barrier in place. Zeraiya, stunned at the sight of the storm being opposed, glances around and sees Zephos standing before her, the bright red rune on his chest glowing, his wound healed. Zeraiya's confusion grows, and she realizes for the first time, in a very, very long time, she feels like herself. Zephos cautiously mutters "Zeri...?"

Zeraiya responds with a cautious curiosity, "Zeph! What did you do? ... What happened?" She takes a moment before a look of horror washes over her face and she glances down at her swollen form, "What have I become?"

"It's not your fault! But don't even think about that now. I don't know how long I can hold it back..." Zephos said reassuringly in a quickened manner as he gestures to the green runes. "...I also don't know how long I can hold you back" he continues, looking down at the red rune and tracing his sight up to Zeraiya's purple heart. Zephos explained, "I hoped that I could save you, and we could defeat it together, but I was far too weak for Tenbous, and too weak for you... But you're so powerful now, you can finish what I started!", his sorrowful tone turning to hope.

"I don't want to go back to being that monster! Tenbrous won't stop until everything is dead!" Zeraiya pleaded in desperation.

"That's why you have to stop Tenbrous! I can't stop Tenbrous from filling you with hatred, but you can choose whose hatred it is." Zephos began to approach Zeraiya. "Listen to your heart, every soul in there screams with rage. I can hear their voices, as I will join them soon... They hated you with all their being, swearing revenge in their dying moments! But they see through your eyes now, and their vengeful gaze has turned to something far bigger than you." Zephos glances to the side at the dark clouds raging with silent lightning behind the crystal walls, the green runes begin to shake with instability. He presses his head up against Zeraiya's chest, and dims his red rune to stabilize the ones restraining Tenbrous. A sorrowful look reclaims his expression and he lets out a sigh of realization. "It's not enough, not even you are strong enough yet. You will have to gather more souls to stand a chance." Zephos states with remorse, as his body begins to fade.

Zeraiya, who had been trying to comprehend everything her brother just revealed to her, is snapped back to reality with his final statement. Zeraiya screamed "No! I don't want to kill anything else! Please!" her scream turned to a whimper, "...just kill me instead!"

Zephos, pained at the words he just heard, hugged his sister tight with his fading form. He could barely stretch his front legs and wings around the front of Zeraiya's massive chest. He, too, let out a whimper "I'm so sorry Zeri, even that is beyond me now." Zephos

steeled himself and stood up on his hind legs, knowing that he had mere moments left before his soul would be claimed by Zeraiya's heart. He climbed up onto Zeraiya's shoulder while taking up a stern tone, "When my barrier falls, you have to make a choice. Either Tenbrous's hatred overwhelms you, or you open your heart, and do some tiny fraction of justice to each of those stolen souls." Zephos climbs further up, until he is right next to the rune that he carved next to Zeraiya's wing. He continues as he begins to carve a new rune next to it, struggling to get his ever so faint body to leave a mark, "When you are strong enough, this rune will give you a vision of a ritual to be marked in blood. My studies have led me to develop an entirely novel form of Arcana, which Tenbrous should have no knowledge of. If your will is harder than obsidian, the ritual will free you, and the End itself of Tenbrous..." Zephos's shaking claw finishes the last mark, and he falls off Zeraiya's shoulder, but he never hits the ground. With his last, fading breath he whispers, "It's okay... I'll say hi to mom for you..." The faint red light from Zephos's rune remains and traces through the air on the echoes of his last words as they get sucked into Zeraiya's heart. Unlike the countless souls before that have effortlessly been absorbed, this one struggles against the dark stone. The magically reinforced spirit of Zephos had one last gift for his sister, and as his soul's resistance ultimately proves futile, a small crack forms on the surface of her heart.

Shocked, grief-stricken, and filled with despair, a single tear breaks through the crack in Zeraiya's stone heart and rolls down from her purple eye. A massive roar erupts from her very core as all the emotions she hasn't been able to feel for eons echo around the confined space. Tenbrous's seal that had stopped Zeraiya from feeling any empathy or remorse for her actions, that was embedded into the surface of her new heart, had been broken. The green runes and shimmering walls from Zephos's fading arcana begin to flicker again, as Tenbrous rages to reclaim the space in their champion's mind. Zeraiya, knowing that this would be her last chance to free herself, takes a breath and appreciates the last moments of her rageless consciousness. The shimmering barrier shatters and the dark clouds rapidly close in with explosive velocity. Zeraiya closes her eyes and heeding her brother's dying words, listens to the screaming voices in her heart. She hears the wails of every soul's final moments, and she feels the hatred they all share for the dark clouds before her. Zeraiya lets all the rage pour through the crack in her heart to fill the entirety of her being. The billowing storm consumes her once again, and the bone-chilling words echo...

KILL... THEM... ALL!...

Waking on the island of her fateful encounter, Zeraiya looks at the broken bodies of her kin. The hatred she felt towards them had been replaced with a singular hatred for Tenbrous, and the disgust she felt towards all living things replaced by a virulent disgust for

herself, and what she had to do. The mindless rage she used to be consumed by now had been mixed with the bottled emotions of sorrow, self-loathing and regret that she had accumulated over lifetimes. Her massive black wings, veins pulsing with purple, stretched wide and Zeraiya rockets back into the dark abyss.

As eons passed and the black scourge slaughtered city after city, settlement after settlement, only one goal was in Zeraiya's mind: Kill Tenbrous. The euphoric rage continued to fuel her destruction for an eternity. With every life taken, a tiny drop of power was added into Zeraiya's stockpile, but she needed an ocean capable of defeating an entity she knew nothing more of other than its unending hatred and disgust towards the life in its domain. However with each new soul, Zeraiya's sorrow and despair grew as well. As millions grew to billions, Zephos's rune lied dormant. Zeraiya began to question whether it would all be worth it, whether Tenbrous's destruction could make up for the toll being paid for the tiniest chance of defeating it.

Soon, even the euphoria granted by Zeraiya's wicked heart and boundless fury wasn't enough to fuel the destruction against her self-hatred and doubt. For a while the attacks slowed, doing just enough to keep Tenbrous satisfied, but Zeraiya knew she had to make a definitive choice. She perched herself upon the edge of an island, looking into the endless abyss below. She lamented against her undying form, wishing she had the power to rip her heart out once and for all without Tenbrous's 'gift' reforming her body around it. Even an endless plunge into the void would find her being tormented for all eternity by Tenbrous for her betrayal. She found it disgusting that she was beginning to wish to return to how she was before her heart cracked, a remorseless monster. In that moment of despair she found no other option than to allow Tenbrous back in, just a little bit. Zeraiya let Tenbrous's disgust overtake her own, and wash away all of her self-loathing and regret. Tenbrous once again took away her remorse and her pain so that she could keep her hatred focused on her ultimate goal. The cost of her bargain was bringing back the merciless monster she once was, and so the slaughter continued...

Unrestrained by her own moral quandaries, Zeraiya obliterated city after city. She took joy in eviscerating the worthless creatures before her. With every massacre she knew the time of retribution grew closer, but she no longer concerned herself with how long it would take to get there. Eventually, after plowing through a nearby building in the city currently being ravaged by Tenbrous's Champion, Zeraiya chomped down on an enderman before her. A bright flash blinded her vision and she felt a searing heat next to her wing. When her vision returned she saw the city she was standing in, completely reduced to rubble. She glanced around and saw no one in sight, but when she looked down, a massive circle had been carved into the ground. Lines and runes and shapes were scattered about in a beautiful pattern that had also been carved through the end stone. She looked towards the center of the circle and saw herself, carving out the final marks beneath her. The image

of herself at the center of the circle raised both her front legs and slammed her claws into her chest, sending purple blood splattering in all directions. The image before her craned her neck in pain and let out a roar, which is when Zeraiya realized that everything was silent, except the unnatural pulsing of her own heart. The image of Zeraiya ripped her chest open and blood poured out like a waterfall into the carved trenches, filling every nook with blood. The vision ends abruptly and Zeraiya spits out the lifeless corpse of the enderman she just crushed. The vision gifted to her by her brother from eternities past had granted her the clarity of mind needed for her to recognize what she must now do.

Zeraiya reduced the rest of the city to rubble in a matter of moments, and soon found herself carving the same trenches and markings as was foretold. Zeraiya sat in the center of the completed circle, looking into the distant void, her mind still filled with rage but for a single moment she found a speck of tranquility. After all her massacres, she never stopped to notice the serenity of the silent ruins of each city. Looking down at the circle, she thought of her brother, and how he had spent so long fulfilling his promise, designing this intricate pattern carved before her, only for herself to be the one that stopped him from seeing it through. With a giant breath, she gathered up all her fury, her pain, her sorrow felt throughout the eons and in a single motion, plunged her claws deep into her chest and ripped it open. Zeraiya let out a massive cry filled by the fury from every life she took in Tenbrou's name, with all their hatred for the dark god harmonizing in Zeraiya's agony. Rivers of her blood filled the circle and began to glow a rich purple-pink. The pale yellow endstone turned to obsidian as Zeraiya's caterwaul continued as her blood ritual grew brighter and brighter. Her heart began to shine brighter than a star when her wail fell silent despite her still forcing air out of her massive lungs. Debris and rubble outside the inscribed circle floated gently into the air before time itself froze. Zeraiya's lungs emptied and she drew a new breath in. She looked down and saw her scarred chest intact, the blood in the circle frozen like glowing ice. Beyond the ritual she saw two small, black-winged creatures with piercing purple eyes playfully gliding through the sky. Every moment of Zeraiya's life played out in imagery beyond the circle's perimeter, getting faster and faster. She watched as an innocent, playful young dragon became stricken with fear, loss, and then hatred. She watched as she was twisted into a weapon wielded by an unknowable, wretched entity that enjoyed every moment of her agony. She watched the face of her beloved brother as she stabbed him through the heart. And she watched as she sat above the void in dark reflection, giving a part of herself back to Tenbrou. The final moments of her endlessly long life came so fast that they hit her with the force of a thousand stars gone supernova. With Zeraiya's last breath she became her rage, and cast aside her mortality.

A gentle, loving voice from beyond the world itself, speaks softly.

I see you . . . Zer-

NO!

A rumbling draconic voice interrupts...

I am Enderia! . . . The Goddess of WRATH!!

The booming voice echoes through the heavens, and the gentle presence fades back into nothingness.

...

In an infinite obsidian landscape, where the sky is filled with endless void, a small dark cloud with electric green highlights drifts. The soft black background grows darker as something enormous looms in the void's fog. Emerging into sight is a gigantic ender dragon, with eyes a soul-piercing piercing purple, and a scarred glowing chest which sends pulses of light through its swollen, glowing arteries. The dragon's monstrous black wings engulf the area around the small dark cloud. For once in Tenbrous's entire existence, it knew true fear. A rage-filled roar loud enough to shake the heavens erupts from the dragon.

TENBROUS!!!

Epilogue: Divine Ripples

Far away in the Overworld, a large, dark wooden tower pierces through the roofed canopy and scrapes the sky. Massive vines and branches crawl up the side of the tower as if the structure itself was carved from a singular, enormous tree. Within the tower, hundreds of allays swiftly glide through the air, rushing busily while carrying various items. Chimes ring throughout the halls, from both the amethyst trinkets hanging from the ceiling, and from the allays' playful sounds. Inside the top floor of the tower, a variety of contraptions are being worked on by dozens of allays. Some work on inscribing runes, while others affix metal plating. Facing one wall is a desk with no chair. A handful of allays write on a collection of notes strewn across the desk. Silently, a dragon's roar sweeps through the Overworld. Every ally within the entire tower stops as they sense the silent roar. In unison they all cock their heads to the side, their pale blue eyes widened and murmur, "Fascinating!"

Deep within the Nether lies a blood-stained blackstone citadel. Lava flows freely along the walls and glimmers of gold sparkle from within the dark stonework. The halls of this citadel are empty, save for the scattering of various bones and some dim blue lanterns that hang from the ceiling. Sounds of lava drips and swinging chains echo through the vacant rooms. A lone black skeleton emerges from a corridor and strides towards a distant room carrying three skulls similar to his own, but missing a distinctive, large gash. The skeleton enters a room where a golem-like construct is being assembled from dark bones and muddy-brown soil. Just as he begins placing his gathered skulls atop the construct, a dragon's roar motionlessly rocks the Nether. The skeleton senses the static earthquake and looks up towards the ceiling in amazement and mutters, "Brilliant!"