

Chapter 113: At the Threshold

I felt like a shooting star.

Every day that passed, I could feel the constellation within me roar. I could feel my Qi scream. Feel the world buckle at my demand, feel reality itself become malleable to my power.

Every day that passed, more people survived. More usurpers fell. The walls *held*. They stood strong against any and all assault. We fought and we thrived.

It was stunning to see how the constant battle drove us to excellence. The exhaustion was wearing on us, but we still kept morale high - still somehow found time to *spar* on top of it. We were being pressured to become diamonds, and that bright shine was emerging.

So, as every other day before it in Inu, we made our way to the walls. We were welcomed by the guards, excited to finally get some rest. Some of them happily dropped their weapons and fell on their behinds as we approached, drenched in sweat and entirely exhausted.

They'd barely slept, without the inhuman constitution our group had. We were, compared to all these people, monsters by now. People who had beaten insurmountable odds again and again. When we turned up, the battle turned in the people's favour.

With a smile, I waved off the guards and reflectors whose shifts we were taking over. "Go and rest," I told them as Iryel spread his wings. "We've got this."

Grateful smiles came our way as the angel lifted off the ground. The bags under his eyes had grown deeper, the exhaustion wearing on him more than us, but still he fought. His haggard face was set with a kind of acceptance.

Somehow, despite it all, Iryel was at peace with his duty. "Time to head to work," he said, a monotone sigh in the roar of battle. Then, he took to the skies, and crashed down into the hordes with an explosion of divinity. Around him, shields bloomed, and wounds mended themselves.

Emilia crashed down, shredding apart a few monsters with explosions of stone. One beastblood warrior, who had been stuck on a usurper's horn, was freed, and her wounds promptly mended by Iryel's divine radiance.

It was a sight to see each of my allies descend onto the battlefield.

Matt jumped into the fray in a violent storm, instantly carving dozens of creatures into smears of gore. Ann sent waves of elemental destruction over the field in front of the walls, her hands moving with blazing speed as magic coursed out in droves.

Liam silently appeared from a shadow, slicing down things before even being seen, while Reya applied widescale buffs, bringing others back up to health, and increasing their power. Chris' shells each turned into bringers of destruction, occasionally cooperating with each other for even greater devastation.

And finally, there was me. When I entered the battle, the leyburn, a staunch companion these last few days, also entered the fray with me. The feeling was intoxicating. Descending to the cheers of people whose lives I was saving. Qi roared through me in droves, Astraeus reaping lives with every movement of my arm.

Cass directed me towards the greatest threats, making sure I was in the right place at the right time. Aware of everything I needed to know. Graced with supernatural strength, vision, instinct and mobility, I could appear anywhere, anytime. Stepping through reflections, or simply space itself with my sash. Throwing attacks back at those who tried to kill me.

We didn't just fight on this battlefield - we rampaged. There were opponents who tested us, yes, but one after another, they fell. Because we weren't alone. We were a group, and we were coordinated. With projected speech and telepathy, we communicated, each appearing when another needed us most.

And step by step, we beat back the endless hordes of the usurpers. It was terrifying. My life was on the line each moment out there. And it was thrilling, because my life was on the line with each moment out there.

Seeing that the hordes were endlessly replenished was still a strange sight. Despite the explosion, despite the literal meteors Orvan was calling from the sky, they streamed forth endlessly. Nonstop.

Such was the power of having conquered dozens, if not hundreds of worlds. The usurpers were hungry and ever expanding. They had forces to expend, so they flooded us in raw numbers.

Yet they still broke against us. Explosion after explosion, the outpouring of power around us seemed to never stop. We were like stars in the sky, blazing brightly and streaking our way through the world.

Again, and again, and again I came out victorious. My spear crashed through hide and scales and stone and crystal, through elemental wisps and strange illusions, and rended apart the creatures casting them. Each one fell, just like the one before it.

Each one fell.

Then I felt the air change.

For a moment, I thought the time stood still, as a gentle shiver ran down my spine, crawling over each joint. Drops of sweat on my skin suddenly felt ice cold.

It was Mana. An *ungodly* amount of Mana that washed over us. An amount only seven people in this whole world possessed - Orvan was here. Which meant that he had *retreated* closer to the walls where we were, while stilling bringing the full power of his magic to bear.

Sure enough, moments later, the Archmage appeared in the sky, wrapped in blinding bright magic circles and star-like constellation spells. He zipped through the air with precision and blinding speed. But he was not further forward, not holding back the tide.

Then I saw why.

Like a horribly dark omen, it was there. On the horizon. A pair of antlers crested the sky. They were dark, almost invisible against the everlasting night of the eclipse, but I saw them - because they rose high enough to block my line of sight to the stars that were the divines.

Next came that horrid skull. Two pits, filled with darkness and fire and hatred. Limbs that dragged on the ground. Multi jointed arms that uprooted trees.

Somehow, the horrible giant had grown even larger since our last encounter. Its arms, too, now sported the flames, the blazing bow manifested in its hands seeming to almost suck in the air around it.

A wave of disgusting, misaligned energy washed over me. The kind that spilled over into this world from the rifts. I felt it *eat* at me. Like the giant was trying to pre-digest me. Turn me into a morsel before it even reached us. Before it even got to the wall.

I dragged burning hot energy from my wells.

Qi roared through me like never before, and the fear was torn asunder by the power blazing through me. I roared in the creature's face. Carved through the hordes, breaking usurpers at unprecedented speeds. I stormed through them, watching as a thousand tiny pinpricks of light appeared around Orvan.

Star after star connected, a beautiful dance of radiance, forming a thousand geometric shapes. Each one another magic circle.

The power stacked on each other, and the eclipse itself seemed to shudder. Pinpricks of sunlight hit the world for a moment, radiant beams of golden light. The giant raised its second arm to the bow, carrying an arrow of black flame.

I ran, as fast as I could, towards it. No more fear, no more waiting. Just murder.

With a horrible roar, the arrow of dark fire was drawn back. Then, moments later, Orvan's spell completed, and a blazing star wove itself into existence.

Suddenly, the night turned to day.

A second sun blazed in the sky.

Massive amounts of mana and heat roiled off it, enough to set the fur of those who were too close on fire. The mana rolled through me, as Orvan's constellations stirred. The man was lit up like a sea of sparkles.

Then, the air exploded. Noise like no other hit my ears. The arrow was released, the titanic bowstring crashing forward with a shockwave of dark radiance, sending my ears ringing. Darkness washed through the light, and the arrow slammed into the sun.

Almost instantly, the entirety of the dark fire was devoured - then the sun dimmed, and dimmed. Moments later, it was barely half its original size. The giant nocked another arrow.

I stepped through space, through reflections, through every eye I could see, and then I was suddenly in the forest.

It was dark. The light of Orvan's second sun didn't reach here, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. It was quiet, too. The chittering of teeth and claws suddenly silent. They kept their distance from the giant, probably for fear of getting crushed.

Through the canopy, those stygian flames still blazed. An abyss that seemed hungry to draw me in. Now, so close, I felt that resonance. [Lost and Found] rang out with gateways - ones I hadn't felt approach before because the giant had hid that.

Another shiver ran down my spine. It was smart. Not at all mindless.

More crashes rung out in the sky, Iryel and Orvan battling the creature. Divine light and blazing fire roared against the darkness, each crash spreading enough Mana and malevolence to make the soldiers up on the walls throw up.

Silently, I stalked through the forest. Always closer to the giant. A moment passed, I blinked, and suddenly Liam was next to me. Then Matt came from above, and Emilia rose from the stones below. Even the leyburn, storming through the woods behind us.

We only nodded at each other, not speaking a word. Striding forward, faster and faster and faster yet. Towards that abyssal draw, towards those all-devouring flames, hungering for light.

It was our purpose here to fight, and fight we would.

Waves of power roiled over us, but it was truly only seconds until we reached the giant, the world warped by my sash to let us get there faster. I was terrified, ice coursing through my veins right alongside bright, hot power. But I wanted to, no, I needed to kill this thing.

There were still people in Inu. People who deserved to survive. People who relied on us to save their lives. I *needed* to do this.

Gritting my teeth, I took that last step, my companions with me. Divinity flowed through us, courtesy of Reya, and I already saw the glimmer of spells from Ann forming in the distance, even through the trees. We stepped past broken wood, and cracked earth, and finally, I was right in front of that giant.

For a fraction of a second, I looked upwards. The giant was, in all words I can say, titanic. It was bigger than anything I had ever fought before. Bigger than most people could reasonably imagine. It towered over buildings. Over city walls. Over ginormous trees. Calling it a force of nature would have been generous.

Yet, I did what I always did. I roused my Qi, coursing blazing gold and shiny glass through my veins. I gripped Astraeus tight, and heard Cass speak calmly in my head.

I would make my mark on this world.

[Mirror Wellspring advanced to **6th Step**.]

No matter what.