

Chapter 115: Ruination

The fight had been over, the giant broken and dead, yet now it moved once more.

Flesh writhed, then dissolved as it was shedded. Black flames flickered forth from the corpse, surrounding a perfectly polished abyssal sphere. It called out to me, as if screaming for help - gateways. Corrupted and twisted, their fragments broken and melded together again, into this.

"Back," my own voice whispered in my ear.

Stunned, I still obeyed, and my allies followed a moment later. As we should, because the giant *exploded*.

Its deer skull shattered into a million bone fragments. Shards that dug into my skin despite its enhanced toughness. Where we had just been was now consumed in a raging inferno of darkness.

A moment of silence passed, when the flames collapsed inwards, around the orb. The figure that stood was imposing, as tall as the leyburn, though smaller than the original giant. It was also entirely carved from black flame, contained within a thin layer of obsidian glass.

Almost confused, it looked at its own hands, moving them. They had five fingers each, almost human like. Then, the fire within its head spun and twisted. It took me a moment to get it, but then it clicked. The monster was *smiling*. A sinister, horrible smile.

It vanished.

Charged with what I could only assume was mountains of power from the demon, the usurper moved with blinding speed. It slammed into the leyburn, still nearby on the ground, and bashed it aside with contemptuous ease, sending the creature's body flying.

The crack of the sound barrier being broken reached my ears only after it had long since stopped.

Disgusting. It was disgustingly powerful. The demon that had brought it back... why did it not just fight? Could it not stay longer?

The thought was beaten out of my head when the monster moved again. Irrithuriel, having just been next to me in the air, was suddenly swatted from the sky like a fly. One moment he

was there, the next moment a dark figure of obsidian stood, and I saw his body crash into the ground.

Fear crept in. Terror. The creature turned to me, the flame twisting with sadistic glee. We'd killed it. Almost. So close. In fact, [Transference] had begun sending its body over... yet here it was. Alive. Standing in front of me.

It took joy in that. The despair.

When it reached for me, my figments were silent, yet I saw death come. Was there no way to live? Was there-

"Fio!" Ann called.

Instantly, my eyes steeled. I refused to give up. Gripping Astraeus until my knuckles went white, I drove the spear forward. It slammed into the volcanic glass, chipping a piece of it.

And the usurper stopped. It placed its hands on the wound, the tiny chip in its exterior with surprise. Was it... fragile?

My thoughts were blown aside by a burst of magic from Orvan. His attack had landed cleanly on the distracted monster, stardust and fire slamming into it, sending it sprawling away from me.

"Get it together! The city cannot fall!" Orvan called.

So, we made the decision to fight. Because it was... the right thing to do, right? Yeah. The right thing.

The usurper faced Orvan. I saw its malice. Its contempt for us. For this world, so unsuited for them. The want to be more, to have more, to own. I clutched my spear, holding it out defensively.

And we clashed.

A single strike impacted me, and I barely turned Astraeus to block as Cass told me to. The obsidian hand impacted my spear, and I felt the shaft bend. My footing was torn off the platforms I stood on, the blow knocking the wind out of my lungs, and I crashed into the floor.

My world went white again with pain. Then I got the fuck back up.

I saw devastation. In the moment I had been gone, Liam had been knocked aside, and Matt's storm of blossoms seemed to be *burning*, the plum petals melting into slag.

Then Liam got up. And Matt fanned his storm out wide until the fire was gone, before drawing it back in. They were determined.

Emilia stood. A blow impacted her, but she simply *remained standing*. I saw the stars in her chest coalesce and burn brightly, and a new one spawned. A talent? A technique? She had grown again.

Ann glowed with divine radiance, a crown of red hot metal on her head, leaving her skin untouched now. Rainbow fire flared to life on her skin. It shot forward in thin spikes, sending more cracks through the fragile monster.

A moment later, it blurred. Dozens of magical barriers in front of Ann shattered, and she was blown aside. Chris was next, all three of their shells attacking at once, only buying a moment each even as they moved in perfect synchronicity. Soon, they were blown aside, too.

But with each exchange it grew more violent. Faster, more brutal. The stars within that darkness shimmered, a night sky of flickering flame. It vanished again, and I heard my own voice whisper in my ear. "Turn to the side."

I turned - and felt a brief touch of air at my side. Then, blood spurted from my arm, a horrendous set of gashes having carved into my biceps.

My golden skin was torn, and crimson streamed out of me, burning hot waves of pain wracking my body. A little later, and I would have lost the arm entirely. Now, it was just horribly mangled.

My eyes narrowed in pain at the wound, but then I shoved it aside and focused again. Fury ran ice cold in my veins. Murder. I wanted murder.

Apparently so did Orvan, because he cast spells again. And instead of his usual, charging, sluggish magic, the spells poured like rainfall. Drops of silver starlight that slammed into the creature like iron balls, constraining it. Dozens of tiny explosions fired off. The bright light formed into wispy strands when the raindrops dissipated, holding the thing down like chains.

It blurred again, and I felt no warning. Emilia received the blow, being sent skyward.

Likewise, Matt was thrown to the side again. I felt warmth spread through me, as Irrithuriel and Reya channelled Divinity into my wounds.

We fought. Move, by move, we bought time as the city was evacuated. Qi, Mana and Divinity flowed in droves. Crater after crater appeared, wound after wound as we chipped away at the glass.

But the damn bastard just kept getting *faster*.

Exchange after exchange, we kept it at bay. Astraeus and Cass used my talents to guide me to move before it did. I predicted far enough ahead to where it felt like I almost saw the future. A tiny movement told me all I needed to know.

Still, it wasn't enough.

Orvan cast spell after spell, his hands blurring as the seconds ticked by, flashing through sigils. His lips remained chanting relentlessly, to the point where he hardly seemed to breathe at all.

A thousand chains of light entrapped the thing again, but this time, something finally changed. The bright starlight dug into the obsidian, cracking it, breaking off more shards. Dark fire frothed on the inside, burning with ever greater fury. Pressure building in an unstable container.

And then there was a crack.

A horrendous sound of glass splitting. The monster moved again, fire spilling in its wake now, leaving its insides.

But when it blurred the movement was too fast. That sound of shattering happened over and over again. Power rushed out of the usurper in droves, terrifying amounts of it, and the stars within began collapsing as supernovae.

Its night sky lit up with bright light, and crimson blood.

"Oh, fuck me," Orvan whispered, looking at the hand, stuck through his stomach and exiting out his back. "That shit hurts."

I blinked. The situation felt unreal.

Malice washed over the battlefield. Dark flames sprouted on Orvan's robes and skin. Fire, consuming him, eating away at him. The usurper withdrew its hand, slashing it through the air, splattering Orvan's blood on the ground.

Iryel gasped in horror. His reaction was the first. "No!" he screamed, rushing towards the old man.

Then, Orvan laughed. Blood stained his beard, streaming down his face from his mouth, his robes red and black with ash and blood. He was on fire. With a hole through his body, and he *laughed*.

For just a second, then he stopped. Mana appeared, and I saw Orvan's stars move. They burnt up. His fading firmament lit up with bright light. "Don't waste your breath, angel," he said, calmly, quietly. "Let an old man make a last stand."

A moment later, his voice lost all that quiet. Instead, carried by mana, it boomed over the battlefield. ***"My name is Orvan Dreyfa! Archmage of Eden. Starseeker. Bringer of Ruin. The greatest damned mage this world has ever seen! And I refuse to go out like a fucking chump!"***

He grinned. A manic smile on his face. ***"Edians, Divines, Outworlders. Look closely. Witness Destruction. Witness my legacy."***

My mind went blank, then. It was hard to think. My ears rang. All I could do was stare.

Reality twisted.

Orvan was finally, in his last moments, pouring out all the magic he had. An amount of mana that was stunning. A kingdom's worth, enough to make the whole world suffocating.

A firmament of blinding stars appeared in the sky. Nebulae and suns, thousands of glittering bits of dust, infinitely far and grand pinpricks. Orvan grinned. And suddenly, I felt safe.

It was a strange feeling. He was dying, his own galaxy within himself exploding, projected outward, and yet in that moment he was *still* birthing new stars. He had just figured out selective magic. And I knew his spells would leave me untouched.

"See a dying man's fury!"

The sky fell.

I do not know how else to describe it, but the sky fell down.

A thousand stars, suns, meteors, radiant blindness and astral spectacle came down. Colours I had never before seen seared themselves into my iris. It was beautiful.

Tears evaporated from my eyes.

A firmament came crashing down on the usurper. Glass shattered. Black flames broke. Scattered. Washed away in the tides of the night sky.

And then, all at once, the sky was empty. Every celestial body had fallen. Moons and meteors and stars and dust and everything in between. It had all crashed down, into an

enormous crater. The city stood, entirely unharmed. But there was no more forest. It was all blown away into a dusty wasteland, an incomparable crater in the landscape.

Orvan coughed up blood, a single last star burning in his chest. A single bit of light still in his eyes. He fell from the sky, with that bit of light still in him, crashing onto the dusty ground he had just evaporated.

The impact was a dull, quiet thud.

Slowly, the dust settled. I could breathe again. When my vision cleared... There was a broken shell of obsidian. Volcanic glass scattered and forever incomplete. Dark flames hovered around a thin, cracked sphere. It was this close to shattering, yet still held on.

Our nemesis, the giant, was now small. Smaller even than me. Yet, despite it all, despite the sky coming down on it, it stood.

Two people, destined to die in moments, yet still holding on just barely.

But then it looked at me. And I heard my own voice. "Step back."

So I did. Mechanically, almost by myself, I took that step backwards, and the creature stood where I had just been. My companions stirred, many hurt and far away. Ann was the one who moved towards me. A barrier formed over my spear, letting me block the second hit more easily.

Still, it hurt. Bones in my arm cracked, from that single strike. A desperate last stand by the monster. How many more hits did I need to take?

A strike came from my left, and I moved Astraeus to block - my arms held, but a crack went through my spear, and I heard the spirit inside it howl.

Despair struck a chord in me. What the fuck was I supposed to do? Have my spirit die? No longer defend?

No, Astraeus deserved better. I placed him back into the unsummoned space. But I still felt him. I was a spearwoman. My eyes glowed. I grew. [Stargazer] and [Mirror Mind] burnt. I knew I could wield a spear. One from wood or metal or Qi... who cared? So what if I wielded a spear of just my will? Wasn't that fucking something?!

A flicker of enlightenment blossomed into a flame in my mind.

[Spear Technique - Fundamentals has reached (Inevitability).]

I had mirrors. Reflections. I knew what I was about, I *knew*. Did I need a real spear? Fuck it.

[Class Ascension forcibly unlocked. Path: Unification. Combining [Spearwoman] with [Gateway]. Combining [Voyage through the Golden Depths] with [Imprint upon Infinite Self-Similarity]. Congratulations.]

[You have acquired the Class **[Superimposed Paragon]** at level 20.]

[You have acquired the Path **[Stride beyond inflicted Skies]** at Wellspring Realm, 7th Step.]

When the blow came, it stopped in the empty air between my arms. A formless spear. There was *nothing there at all*, yet Astraeus was within it anyway.

Another block, another parry and backstep, as the flames sputtered and died and then... it blurred.

Ann was by my side. My lovely, too-kind, Ann. There to save me. She stood behind me, ready to cover my back- and then her blood splattered against me. I had been out of figments. Out of little glimpses of the future. Out of *lives to save*.

Ann looked at me. Glassy eyed. "Hey, Fio?" she asked, a whisper. "Please, will you remember me?" I reached out to touch her hand - then the usurper flung her back, out of reach, dead.

[Annabelle Belleflamme has been removed from your [Transference] network.]

My hand, that had been reaching for Ann, clenched around emptiness, around formlessness, and my spear slammed into the usurper's core, finally breaking it apart.

I remained standing, running to Ann, touching her, hoping to send her to Neamhan but... no. She was dead. Cold. This body. Tears streamed down my face, but there was a whisper behind me.

"Fio," Orvan croaked.

Fuck. He couldn't even die properly, couldn't let me grieve-

"Fio," he called again. "Come. Please. Grant a dying man's wish."

Mechanically, I stood up. Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine.

My [Iron Will] clamped down on the sorrow. Another version of me [Superimposed] on me. I breathed in through my nose. "Yes, Orvan."

I kneeled next to the old man as I spoke, blood trickling into the dry soil, staining it red. My companions were rising slowly, the ones still living, anyway. What was the point in that, though? I hoped they-

Orvan called my attention back to him when the last star within his chest wavered. I could already feel the hole Ann's [Genius] left behind, though a flicker of it remained within me. A tiny spark. A reminder-

"She has a body on Neamhan."

My eyes lit up. I whispered. "Oh."

The old man placed a hand on the top of my head. "Yes. I do not, Fio. These are my last moments. Are you willing to hear me out now?" he chuckled, interrupted by red blood spilling onto his beard again.

"Yes," I said numbly.

"I'll make it quick. You're like me. Wild. Strong. I want to place my trust in you, if you'll have it?" he asked, faintly.

"Why me?" I whispered.

"You've been dealt a shit lot and tried your best. That's all." He shrugged, almost imperceptibly. "C'mon. My mana's leaking. Will you take my damn inheritance or not?"

"..."

I didn't want to answer. I didn't... but my mind moved. I needed power. Get back to Neamhan. Enough contributions to give Ann her memories back. "Yes. I will."

A prick of mana touched my body, infinitely complex and magical. It was a solid crystal of it with a horrendous amount of density and inscriptions and-

"Fio. You saw the stars, right? I did everything I could. Gave it my best shot. You... you can be a little more selfish." His hand laid onto my cheek. "You can look out for yourself a little more. Take a little more time. Stay bullheaded. Stay stubborn. Stay fair - but stay kind to yourself."

He smiled. And then, finally, his hand fell.

[Orvan Dreyfa has been removed from your [Transference] network.]

I closed his eyes. Then walked over, and did the same for Ann.

There, at the end of the world, I stood. With Matt, Emilia, Reya, Chris, and Liam. Olivia and Iryel, too, I suppose, though they stood next to Orvan rather than Ann.

No one spoke. We dug graves. Did what we needed to do, silently. Then went to the city we'd saved. There. We could talk there.