

Chapter 119: Muscle - Memory

As every night before, Ann eventually woke up. She felt like absolute garbage. Each bone in her body ached from the hard floor, and somehow, that sensation felt strange. Like sleeping on a hard surface shouldn't bother her.

That, then, marked her first cohesive thought of the day, and it was instantly one dealing with her missing memories. Wrenching her tired eyes open, Ann pushed herself off the floor. She left behind some bloodstains from where the glass shards had cut her, but paid that no mind.

She took a deep breath - only to regret it instantly, coughing at the horrible air. She retched for a few moments, then shook her head, running her filthy hands through her hair. The red from the cuts wasn't as noticeable against the fiery red upon her head.

Summoning discipline she hardly knew she had, she forced herself to focus. Not on what she knew she'd lost, not on the pieces that were missing from her as a person, but on what she still knew.

First, she knew this place was a shithole. That memory was there. She'd picked it *because* it was abandoned and saw no humans visiting it, after all. Why had she needed a place like that she didn't remember.

Biting her lips, Ann forced her mind back on track. Almost robotically, she turned towards the exit to the disgusting hovel, a wooden door covered in dust and grime that had opened exactly twice in the last decade.

She pushed on the rusty handle, and nothing happened. Frowning, she channelled some of that pent up rage at her own incompleteness, and kicked the door.

That seemed to have an effect, sending the fragile wood swinging outwards with a crack and a groan. She'd probably damaged some of the hinges, but who gave a fuck at this point? Ann narrowed her eyes at the sky, expecting to see a sun and not finding it.

Only smog. A thick line of white and grey smoke and clouds blanketed the whole firmament, and rays of light only came down on the paved roads and towering buildings after filtering through the miasma.

Ann coughed again, feeling miserable. She still felt disoriented, and the horrendous air was not exactly improving that. Still, she focused, trying to remember. The streets were empty

just as she remembered them being. She had walked on them twice before, each time with equal parts trepidation and excitement.

What had she kept so secret? Just what-

Blinding pain rushed through her head, forcing her to drop the thought. Ann grimaced at the agony, then shook herself. She had goosebumps all over her body, and felt like shit. What memories did she have? There had to be something of use in there.

Going through what she knew, even just those few days, proved harder than she thought. Her mind felt fuzzy, like the memories she did have weren't properly rooted in there. She remembered having dropped off some of her stuff with some company, but she didn't remember where.

It was a fleeting moment, one done almost on autopilot. She had given them her suitcase, filled with all the clothes she had bought with Fio, as well as a plastic card that she'd used as money and her phone.

How strange. She didn't think that was normal. Most people kept their phones with them at all times. Why had she returned that? Or her money for that matter?

But those memories, the reasons for her actions, never came. Whenever she did something for seemingly no reason, when she remembered feeling something for no reason, she only grasped at empty air. There was nothing there. Bits and pieces of herself that were gone.

Again, it made her angry and frustrated and hurt and miserable, but Ann still focused. She didn't want to just sit down and sob. Not without something at least moderately comfortable. So, she combed through what she did remember.

And found something.

The address, the place she had spent some of her happiest times at, the place where her apparent girlfriend had lived. That place she had felt at home, felt wanted and loved and the place she had gone to with such trepidation.

She remembered where it was.

Like a lifeline, Ann clung to that memory. She knew where to go now. Where Fio lived. Maybe she could shed more light on the situation?

Before I went to fight again, I donned a mantle. It hadn't been there before, but now it was. It was translucent, and the fabric was soft but firm, like made from tiny strands of liquid glass. My last bit of growth from the fight against the giant, it had dropped an item.

[Treasure: Ephemeral Raiment

Owner: Fiona Bellum

Description: This cloak was woven by a man who disliked the order of the world. It was made with hatred for those who would suppress him. The Ephemeral Raiment bristles when struck with force, moving at its own pace only. The harder it is hit, the more it resists the blow. It twists light, capturing and mirroring it. Finally, deep within the cloak, power burns. The closer the wielder is to death, the more power it bestows upon them.]

I donned the treasure, and felt that it was made for me, laying itself onto my shoulders gently, the translucent fabric drifting lazily in the air. It was unbothered, but when Matt tried to poke it with his sword, the cape suddenly froze in mid air, not letting his sword through at all.

And, strangely, I didn't even feel any pressure from it. The force wasn't dispersed, it was simply resisted solely by itself, maybe shunted into another reality? The part of the cloak he stabbed glowed faintly with some strands of light, and I could feel it at my fingertips, ready to be turned into illusions or flashes of brightness to blind someone.

In short, the cloak suited me rather well.

Breathing deeply, I stretched out my hand and called Astraesus into it. The spear had mended, mostly, since I'd pushed all the Qi my wellspring generated into it for a few hours now. I still reinforced the damaged area specifically, but he would hold.

The spirit inside hummed as I held onto the weapon, seemingly eager to see me back on my feet again. "Missed you too, buddy," I said, and Astraesus chirped in response. I would fight, and then I would visit the divines, see about including more people into [Transference], and then I'd head to Neamhan for Ann.

Reya offered me a hand, and I gratefully took it, pulling myself up from the bed I was still seated on. She smiled and I nodded back at her, then the two of us went outside.

Matt and Chris were already there, preparing their weapons. Even the leyburn laid there. It gave me a long look, then huffed as if to tell me it was about dang time I got up again. I held back a snort in reply, but the joy died down quickly.

Everything still felt so damn numb. It was the best I could do to just stand and hold my weapon. But I would do it anyway.

Matt laid a hand on my shoulder softly. "Hey. You ready?" he asked.

I shakily nodded, but he responded with a bright smile. "Let's head out then."

This time, we weren't headed for the walls. Instead, we would be listening to [True Mirror], the ability that [Lost and Found] had been subsumed into. It resonated faintly, telling me the locations of other shards more accurately than the other technique ever did - and letting Cass access it, too.

[Marking it for you. Visual modification in progress.]

With my new skills, and some testing, she'd found out that she could alter what I saw a little. So, Cass had done me the favour of installing a minimap in the corner of my vision for when I tried to focus on it. Absolutely wild.

On that map, she now had a few dots show up, indicating the usurpers holding gateway fragments. They were much, much less plentiful now, with many of the other shard holders retreating to build nests or feed rifts.

The shards were necessary for those to some degree that was not quite fully transparent to me, but I didn't need to understand entirely. Luckily, the waves running against the city had finally abated a little.

It seemed as if the giant had been a rather substantial commander of the enemy force, so taking it out was a big blow and let the Edians evacuate much more freely. By now, the entire city was almost deserted, turned into an outpost for fighters with only the bare minimum manpower to sustain it.

A few people had stayed to prepare meals, and repair gear, but nothing much else. I discarded all of that, though, and stepped forward. Slowly, one foot in front of the other, we made our way through the winding streets.

They hadn't taken too much damage. That was what we had fought for, after all. I breathed in deep of the air, filled to the brim with energy. It all broke down and got absorbed into my own Qi.

My actions resonated with my path. Stride beyond inflicted Skies was about that, after all. Walking right at those who would try to keep you down, then smashing past them.

I clenched Astraeus, feeling nervous. Almost apprehensive. But I would fight, anyway, and soon we found our way to the city walls. At our arrival, we were celebrated as heroes. The ones who fought on par with the archmage, they called us. Despite the losses, the people felt like victory was at hand.

How strange it was, seeing their moods contrasted to mine.

There was one person upon that wall, though, who mourned just as heavily as me. Archmage Saif Zolycc sat in her wheelchair with a blanket over her legs, leaning back and watching the battles underneath unfold.

I walked up to her.

A long moment passed before she turned. "Ah, Fio." She sounded older now, sadder. Mourning. Grieving. "I am glad you're alive."

Her words rang true, despite it all. She did not blame us for the loss of her friend. It had been selfish of me to leave her like this for the last while, but... I thought it was okay to be a little selfish. Orvan had even asked me to.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I told her.

"Our loss, Fio," Saif told me with a sad smile. "You may have not known him for as long, but you knew him well. In all his facets. When he was caring, when he was happy, when he was angry. You got to see him die. How were those last moments?"

"If I remembered right, he said he 'refused to go out like a fucking chump', then cast the biggest meteor I'd ever seen, and learned how to keep his spells entirely harmless to allies at the same time," I told her.

Saif laughed. Her head tilted back, she barked out laughter towards the skies. "Bahahahaha! The fucking monster," she laughed. "What after? Was that the last thing he said?"

"No," I shook my head. "He survived for a little while longer. Until the threat was well and truly dealt with. He said-" I choked, feeling wetness on my cheeks. "He made me his inheritor. Told me I was like him. Told me to take my time, to stay headstrong, and to be kind to myself."

"Yeah," Saif said. "That's like him, alright." She reached up to her cheeks, wiping away some tears with each of her right arms. Then she barked out a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob. "Old fool. Thank you for telling me, Fio. I think he chose a good person to give his inheritance to."

I didn't know how to reply to that, so I just didn't.

For a few moments, the world was quiet, only a faint sound of wind accompanying us. Then, Saif raised both her right arms, pointing them at the crowd of usurpers below, and releasing an absolute torrent of mana, power, and wind.

Her storm magic crashed into the horde like a hurricane, sending bodies sprawling and breaking. The old archmage took a deep breath, then smiled at me. "This has given me some closure. I'll grieve Orvan for years to come, and there won't ever be a mage quite like him again. But that is the nature of death, isn't it."

"Yeah."

"I heard what happened with Ann," she then said.

My world broke a little, all over again. There was another version of me, at my fingertips, on her knees, sobbing atop that wall at the reminder. I could be that me, with just a single use of my new shifting ability, but I remained standing, tears gathering in my eyes. "So you did," I eventually got the words out.

"Ann used to be my primary communication with the divines, you know that? Back when there were still seven of them. This is the second time I've seen her die, now," she said, then sighed for a long moment. "Fio. Have some faith in her. She's strong. Fight for her, try to get her back, and know she'll meet you halfway there."

Unable to get out a single word in response, I just nodded.

Saif gave me an empathetic smile, and rolled a little closer to me, just so she could lay her cool hands onto my arm. "Take as long as you need, Fio. Fight when you feel ready. I'll watch over you."

Again I nodded. A long moment of silence elapsed, as I slowly worked through the thought and the numbness and the unending desire to just lay down and give up. Eventually, after a few minutes, the feelings abated somehow.

"Thank you, Saif," I said, simply.

"Go get 'em, Fio," she replied, still smiling.

Nodding, I jumped down into the horde of monsters. There was a ping close to the walls. My new essence roared through my veins as liquid gold, and feeding my sash, the Wanderer's Key, with that power, I stepped forward.

Instantly, the world bent and warped around me. The ability of my item magnified by the inherent property of my Qi, made for twisting reality, and travelling between them. It was as though I'd swapped with a version of myself that had started walking far earlier.

Matt, Reya, Chris and the leyburn were fighting, too, but I wanted to do this on my own. The usurper I faced in challenge for another bit of gateway strength was a twisted abomination standing twice as tall as me. It was made of a dozen razor sharp wings, connected by strands of crackling lightning.

I took a deep breath, grasping Astraeus tighter, and coursing my Qi through myself. I felt [Inexplicable Reinforcement] trigger in full force, power washing over me. The motions were familiar, and came easily, but I still tested myself.

Another version of me, after all, was currently applying different Qi shaping exercises to the Skill, courtesy of Orvan's inheritance. And whenever that Fio made some improvements, so would I.

The usurper didn't even know what was coming for it.

Channelling all my built up fury and frustration, I appeared before it, already leaning back, my spear held in one hand, and then I launched it, with all the power in my body, I tossed the weapon. Instantly, it shattered two of the creature's wings, bolts of lightning crackling in horrid screeches.

Then, I took hold of the empty air, as Astraeus came coursing back around, and fought the creature with a flying spear by my side and an invisible one in my hands. I would break it, thoroughly.