

Chapter 170: Blood Spilled

Ion took a deep breath, brandishing Astraeus, and wiping a bit of blood from her lips. Her ribcage had been caved in a moment before, but was currently on the mend. The spear spun, just in time to deflect another lance of cold darkness.

Requiem clicked their tongue at the sight, quickly being distracted by Matt in melee. The warrior moved with an ultimate, perfect kind of grace. His sword moved, and it was almost like watching a flower blossom in real time. Each step, Requiem shifted to meet him, the demon moving far faster - but with less efficiency.

A quick movement of its hands, and a staff of perfectly black ice was held within them, helping them fend off Matt's brutal assault. The swordsman pivoted, slashing from below, only to be turned aside. He wound around, cutting for the demon's head - then it vanished into the shadows.

Where it immediately was set upon by Liam. The rogue had not been idle at all. Since the usurper tried to flee into the darkness, Liam had set traps. As Requiem dove into the shadow, they were assaulted by knives, poison, bear traps woven from liquid darkness, and more.

Half a heartbeat passed and they stumbled from the dark, a few holes in their reddish skin, already mending again. Then, they twisted violently out of the way of one of Marie's arrows, which promptly curved back around to a homing mark placed by Ann. It stepped aside once more, only to find Ion waiting there.

Astraeus shone with golden light, and the metal poured outwards, forming a cage. It swung the staff, and a spear of will parried it aside, with Astraeus heading for the heart. The demon promptly grew more hands, woven from darkness, which grabbed onto the spear.

Blood pooled from cuts left on fictional appendages. It was a small manipulation of probability, after all... to *mirror* the intangible wounds onto their physical form.

Crimson and blackness wove around Astraeus' tip before the spear was wrenched aside. Ion brought up the other side to parry the follow up, when lances of shadow-fire erupted from the ground, shearing her feet.

She kneeled, and Matt pressed the offensive, accompanied by more arrows. Reya quickly cast a spell, and Ion's injuries knitted back together, Divinity flooding her body.

She breathed, and stepped in again. Violence coursed through the song. The war drums beat in her ears. Mana and Qi flashed, barriers appearing, then shattered by an echoing resonance. That was the tricky thing about Echo. It built.

Every hit she took hurt a little more than the last. The Echo built in her body like a cloying residue, slowing her down. But her own song roared in defiance - consumed the foreign invader and ground it to bits. How disgusting that even in combat, the usurpers would do the same thing.

All they did was corrupt and take. To infest. A spreading virus with its only aim being to claim more.

Ion caught Matt as he was about to crash into the ground, a slice on his forehead tainting the tips of his hair in red. But his eyes were still razor-sharp, focused on the goal. Requiem, the reclamer, who wove more streaks of dark and cold. It flickered like fire, and lances of it shot towards Reya faster than sound.

The blows exploded the ground, sending dirt and debris flying, but Ann's barriers stopped most of the damage. Around her, a dozen spell circles flickered in the air, runes weaving and decompressing. The battlefield, slowly, was morphing under her control, smoothing over meteoric craters.

Requiem *moved* again. It was a horribly fast thing when it wanted to be, and a moment later, it stood before Liam. Still, the rogue was fast, too. He ducked one blow, deflected another - it only tore an inch from his side, rather than his heart out - and then sunk into the shadows. Requiem moved to follow, but Cass wove it into a maze of shifting light, a place where reflections replaced shadows.

A moment later, Astraeus dove through each of those manifested mirrors, a hundred blows from each side. The usurper shattered them with a horrible note from its mouth, bursting Ion's eardrums, and sending the facsimile of glass splintering. An arrow dug into its skin for half an inch, then fell aside, the wood splintering from the impact.

Marie dashed aside a moment later, barely avoiding a frigid explosion.

Cold mist covered the air. Dark fires flickered amongst the ground, lighting up drifting petals of plum, flickering rainbow magic, and the golden glow of reflections and shattered glass. The landscape around us was reshaping. The clouds in the sky had died and split, the earth vibrated from the sheer power pouring into it, and the air tasted like battery acid.

Ion licked her lips for a moment. Her legs were finally mended enough to walk, so she stepped through the mirror. At once, Requiem faced her *and* Matt. Spear and sword flew, duplicates forged from Qi and sheer will stabbing and piercing. The demon grew more hands, wielding war-scythes with brutal edges.

It stabbed and parried, moving at a blistering pace of a crescendo, when all at once, gravity crushed down on them.

A massive magic circle sprawled into existence above the fighting trio, sending them hurtling to the ground in a single violent moment. Rocks cracked and shattered against their bodies, yet the fight went on. The spell shifted, condensed, and turned into a skin-tight field around Requiem.

All at once it slowed down. A dozen cuts caressed its skin, metal and magic digging into it and drawing drops of hissing blood. Red-black and thick, it fell to the ground and pooled like cloying oil. The usurper quickly retreated into the darkness, met with daggers.

It re-emerged, missing an eye, a knife still lodged into it. Liam, for his part, emerged next to Reya, spitting blood, with holes covering his chest. The saintess hitched for a moment, but quickly began her healing, knitting the rogue's skin back together.

Marie wasted no time, an arrow slamming into the demon from its blind side. It was a brutally heavy one, hitting with enough force to break a mountain, and drove it to the side, head slamming into the ground again, leaving yet another crater.

A moment later, Ion was upon it with blade and violence, only for its song to shift. The war drums rippled and paused, the rhythm changing as the reclamer shifted what it was. "This is taking too long," it snarled. "Let me spill your blood, in turn."

Requiem, in that moment on the ground, became *Conquest*.

The notes changed, drumming and droning with notes of horror. Ion stepped back - and yet, the war scythe cut the air, splitting her stomach and spilling guts. The blow carved through the armor with agonizing slowness, saving her from being cut in half as the gold mended, threads of it stitching the wound closed, but it still hurt.

Matt covered a moment later. His sword danced around the brutal war scythe, even as the pace went from fast to *frenetic*. Even when the blows were strong enough to pulverize his bones if he blocked them, the warrior fought.

He even laughed. Laughed in the face of brutality, as he turned aside strike after strike. Each could have shattered steel into pieces, split diamond in half, and yet he weathered them like a leaf did a storm.

The swordsman bent and shifted, dancing through the attacks. He avoided things by a hair's breadth, the plum blossoms dancing in his steps. He compressed his will on the edge of his sword, and carved through the song. His own brilliant notes spilled from him, a harmonic, beautiful symphony of mastery. Mastery of killing.

With a glint in his eyes, he shifted forward, pivoting into an attack... and the shadows caught his legs. An icicle grew to envelop his lower body, killing his momentum at once, as his foot lagged.

And still, he bent like a reed in the storm, blazingly fast, just enough to avoid a blow to his skull. It impacted a dozen barriers, shattered them, dug through, and slammed into Matt's shoulder, cutting deep into him.

Bones cracked and broke from the force of the strike, and Conquest grinned with unabated bloodlust. "Die, varmint," it snarled gleefully. "Feed my song." It drew to strike again, to kill.

The swordsman vanished.

In a puff of blossoming leaves, he disappeared, moving to their healer's side. Ion moved in instead, blood and gold mixing in her veins. She shifted like liquid metal, forcefully, inevitably. The movements were graceful, but not quite as much as the swordsman. Yet she was strong. Unbroken. Unyielding.

Bone-crushing blows landed, and were turned aside. Astraeus reinforced her armor, a tide of gold spilling forth to constantly weaken all attacks. It was a little like making the usurper fight underwater. The Qi flooded the area, even as its trickling blood hissed against it, even as the resonance dug into the world.

It was an infectious symphony. Loud and hard, declaring its superiority as world-conquerer. As someone who had taken planets and subjugated them, torn them to their will. It was the power of a divinity, a divinity of song and blood.

And yet, Ion held.

Her own song was quiet in comparison. Not loud, not brutal, but it ran deep and wide. An ocean of worlds, a tower of small triumphs. It sang of wings, and they spread. It sang of the

stars, and the sky shimmered. It sang of friends, of love, and of other selves. Of never giving up... and of relying on others.

Ann changed the tune of the fight. Her own heart beat in tune with that of Ion. The music danced in her magic, masterfully weaving through the runes, and in a single moment, her grand enchantment was complete.

Runic circles turned from dozens to hundreds - duplicating, mirroring. Cass had helped her, and the magic spilled forth.

Mana poured into the world as an endless torrent. Her heartbeat turned so loud it drowned out the blood. Steel sang against steel, but Mana drowned the world. It was liquid power in its purest form, twisted by the absolute perfection that it demanded.

Ion watched as the stars within Ann's chest blossomed. Her inner nova flared to life as the sky above Neamhan did. She had cast it before, but never this way.

When the sky fell, it was not one or two stars. It was all of them. A torrent of bright, rainbow light. A thousand colours, descending like divine lances, with all the fury and force of meteors.

One after another dug into the ground. Conquest roared and shifted. It fought, deflected them by the dozen - but then its weapon cracked. Ion still stood, and slammed Astraeus into the barrage, shattering the war-scythe completely, before the darkness could repair it.

Then the first star dug into the usurper's flesh.

A heartbeat later, it was riddled with a hundred holes.

The magic was violent and brutal. It dug through flesh, and through the ground. Each falling star eradicated the earth for dozens of meters down, turning the ground into a pock-marked hole. It was like watching a section of the world eviscerate in blinding light, simultaneously burning and burying the usurper.

And it continued for an entire minute.

Thousands of stars fell. Perhaps tens of thousands. Each of them violent, each of them concentrated and targeted. Each time Conquest tried to drag itself from the hole, more stars fell. The circles roared, runes burning themselves into the world - then burning themselves out.

When it was all over, Ion's ears rung. Her eyes stung, streaks of light having burnt themselves into her retinas. It was violence like nothing ever before.

And then, a hand appeared at the edge of the crater.

Black blood dripped from it. The suit sleeve attached to that hand was blood-stained and torn. But still, Conquest dragged itself out of the hole.

They looked ragged. Riddles with holes and burns. Blood streaked down their face, and one of their arms was missing entirely. Their legs shook, and the ground hissed beneath them. And yet, a shiver ran down Ion's spine.

Echo poured from those wounds alongside the blood. It stained the world, shed the usurper's song. It dug its claws into this world, resonating with every drop of magic the gates had spilled.

Conquest grinned, despite everything. "That hurt, I'll give you that," they said. "But I'm not done yet. I've a job to complete, see. And I don't plan to fail."

And then, in the warped world, infected by itself, Conquest moved. It shifted and tore forwards, crumpling the resistance that would be posed by the world itself. Limitations were shrugged off, and it showed what a true world-conquerer was capable of.

Its hand lashed out, and tore Ion's heart from her chest.

And despite that, it kept beating. And Ion laughed. Her heart outside her chest, she still laughed. "You know, dying really doesn't feel too bad when you do it this much. Here, let me show you what presents I've brought."

With a grin, her skin rippled. Flesh turned to glass, and Ion... Ion became a mirror.