

Chapter 120: Memento

The monster, a blur of electricity and razor sharp metal wings, was lightning fast. Each of its strikes brought about a gale of wind and lashed out at me with a thundercrack. It was like a dance. My Wanderer's Key warped the attacks faintly at a cost to my Qi, and I wove past them, avoiding the arcs of power by a tiny amount each time.

Whenever I dodged, Astraeus would fly forward and smash into a wing. If he didn't succeed or was parried, there would be an opening, too, and my mind spear would slam into it. I carved apart arcs of electricity with a weapon I was holding, dissecting the thing bit by bit.

Until it *exploded*.

Even that, though, I brushed aside. I pulled forward my Ephemeral Raiment, the cloak of liquid glass instantly absorbing all the electricity and fire. It gave off light, after all, so it was pulled into the glass, refracting a thousand times.

A moment later, I infused a little Qi into the cloak, and explosion was shot right back in a similar fashion to my [Reflection] ability. This was like an amplifier of that, though, and the blast that shot back out of my cloak was enough to take me off my feet, shattering dozens of metal wings.

Not that the blast bothered me. When my feet lived off the ground, I superimposed myself on the world. The parallel reality of me that had chosen to lunge at the monster after absorbing the blast swapped places with me, and suddenly I was right above the thing. I grabbed Astraeus out of the air, and brought both of my spears, the physical and the invisible ones, down on the monster.

More of its defenses faltered against me. Its limbs broke and shattered into useless scraps of metal and power. Dozens of wings twisted to meet me, but when they collided with my skin, [Inexplicable Reinforcement] shrugged off the blows.

The damage *happened*, but then I simply superimposed myself over it, forcing my flesh to become dozens of times tougher where it was struck. My body shone with liquid gold, and more Qi streamed out of me, my wellspring producing the torrents needed to sustain the effort.

With a scream, I charged all of it into Astraeus, wielding the weapon with both hands. The Qi passed through the spear, creating a blade that was much more physical than back when I

used my golden core. Now, it transformed my spear into an enormous lance, which I brought down on the usurper.

Saying that it shattered wasn't enough. The creature was torn asunder right in front of me.

Each bolt of thunder was absorbed by my Qi expenditure, each bit of metal just short of liquified.

The usurper fell apart into bits.

I landed on the ground, standing on my feet, panting. It hadn't been that exhausting, really, at all. I still had plenty of Qi left, this battle had only taken about a third of my capacity. But I still panted, because of the adrenaline and the way the power coursing through me felt.

My Qi had always been tame. Not exactly easy to manipulate, but it was like drawing from a well. Now, it felt like a raging river.

With the way I existed in multiple realities, my Qi almost felt as though it was anticipating what I wanted it to do. A single thought with a bit of intent, and it would rush forward, barely restrained, fuelling abilities to do what they were meant to do - push me far beyond human limits.

It was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. Like the power could drag me along if I wasn't careful. The feeling was both one of control and cooperation as it was one of eagerness. Of course, by relying on my manipulation I could reign it in again, but this feeling was just... different from what I was used to.

Taking a few moments to compose myself, I kneeled down next to the mess of crackling slag and metal fragments, digging through it. The molten metal simply slid off my skin and I dug through it. The Qi inside it was mine, after all. It had trouble hurting me.

After some searching, and letting Astraeus take care of the few minor usurpers that tried to approach, I finally found the gateway fragment. I absorbed it, letting the power flow into me, and watched my gateway strength tick up again, increasing by one. It sat at 47, now. So very few points away from seeing Ann again.

I resumed the fight.

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Two more minor fragment holders died at our hands. I absorbed both, receiving only a single point in strength. 48.

Another day, maybe two, and I would be one with this. But I still had more to do today. After a quick, hour long sleep, I forced myself up again.

Of course, by then the misery had set in again. Without the adrenaline and muscle memory to take over, each movement was a terrible chore. My legs felt like someone had tied cinderblocks to them, but I moved anyway.

It was a slow trudge through the city. By now, it was almost deserted. The few faces that saw me smiled and waved, thinking of me as a hero. I sure didn't feel like one. Pulling up the hood of my glass cloak, it turned opaque, refracting the light to appear an unassuming brown.

With that measure in place, even the few friendly waves I got ceased. It was a quiet walk, letting me wallow a little. And then, I was at the temple.

By now, so many people had fled that the queues were short. The people who were still here had mostly received the Gift, though, so there were a reasonable amount of priests, healers, and praying soldiers about. Some were injured, too. It was the background noise of a field hospital mixed with the serenity of a temple.

Slowly, ever so carefully, I walked up to the altar, and placed a hand on the tombstone that I knew represented Hir.

'Fio,' they said, greeting me. 'I am so sorry-'

At that, I flinched. 'Save it, please,' I managed to just about grind out. 'I don't- I can't right now. I do not have the capacity for that. Please.'

The divine remained silent for a long moment. 'Of course,' the answer eventually came. Their voice was a little more formal. 'Your achievements are commendable. Your class ascension has taken much of your contribution, though. Are you here to purchase anything?'

Gently, I shook my head. 'No. I wish to make an offer.'

'Oh?' Hir asked, their curiosity piqued. 'What kind?'

If someone had told me I would be negotiating with the divines just a year ago, I would have laughed at them. Yet, here I was. I had something to offer they would want. And I had earned their respect. So, I made my offer.

'[Transference] has open slots. I can afford to integrate all your archmages into it. Maybe a few more people afterwards, too,' I said.

Stunned silence. A dozen seconds passed, and I guessed Hir was in heavy debates with the other divines. Maybe already sending out requests for the archmages to gather here as quickly as possible.

‘To clarify,’ the words eventually came, ‘being part of your [Transference] means receiving a share of the talents of all other members, as well as the ability to get unique items made from the remains of monsters which are soulbound and can be traded?’

I nodded. ‘That’s about right. I don’t know about any future benefits yet, but those are the current ones.’

‘We will call the archmages over. How many people can your network accept?’ they asked.

That question was a little more complicated. I had, until now, viewed it in terms of slots, but that wasn’t quite true. Some people held more conceptual weight than others. So, I wasn’t quite clear how many more people I would be able to hold after the archmages. After all, if it were purely based on slots, I could simply have the divines join the network.

And that was impossible. They would be far too conceptually heavy for me to share their talents. The archmages though? That was possible now. ‘Maybe a few more people after the archmages No more than five others. Even that is a guess at best.’

Hir gave me a hum of confirmation with their chorus of voices. Then another bit of silence.

‘We have picked our candidates,’ they said eventually. ‘Each of the divines will pick an angel for you to integrate. They are weaker than the archmages, so this should be possible, yes?’

‘Sure,’ I shrugged, not really knowing. ‘It’ll probably work.’

‘Good. My choice is Iryel. As he is the more near and has more than proven himself worthy of this boon. He will be here soon. So will the archmages. We ask that you stay in the temple until procedures are finished,’ they said.

I nodded, ‘Alright.’

With that, I removed my hand from the altar, strolled over to one of the benches in the temple and plonked down heavily. The weight was back, and it was crushing. I pulled Astraeus out of my inventory, running a finger along the side of the blade. I saw my own reflection in it.

The Fio in that reflection looked like a mess. I blinked, then gave a sad smile. Tapping into my new abilities, I manifested a second reality where I was currently taking a shower. By the

time this was all done, I would be able to superimpose that Fio over me, and look a little less like I'd been dragged through a sewer.

I let out a sigh, holding my face in my hands. My hold on the ability trembled as I wondered why I even bothered. But I held on, because that was all I could do.

Eventually, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up.

Iryel stood there, tired as usual, but there was a thin smile on his lips. "I've been told you have a gift for me, Ms. Fio."

Seeing a smirk on his sunken face, even with the circles under his eyes, I couldn't help but brighten up a tiny bit, too. "Yeah, I do. Give me your hand. And a needle, I need some of your blood," I said.

"... Okay?"

"Ah, and a bit of your hair. I'll need a handful, please," I told him, deadpan.

Iryel now looked somewhat worried. "Uh, Ms. Fio, that sounds a little sinister..."

"You can drop the honorifics," I told him. "We've been over this."

"Right, right," Iryel nodded. "Force of habit. But is this really necess-"

Before he could finish the question, I snatched up his hand, and integrated him into the network. Instantly, I felt another talent blossom in that not-space, impacting my perspective on the world. [Diligence], it was called. It allowed you to excel at your duties, even when exhausted, and you would improve faster the more dedicated you were.

Iryel's experience, on the other hand, was having the collective talents of everyone in the network flood into him. Everyone else's hard work. And, surprising me, a little bit of Orvan's [Stargazer] seemed to flow into him, too.

The angel's eyes widened. He stiffened for a moment, his pupils dilating. Then he stared at me, probably seeing the stars. He looked up, where the divines burnt like suns in the sky. A tear trickled down his cheek. Iryel smiled, and for a moment, all that tiredness seemed to vanish from his face.

"What a delightful gift," he said, giving me the most genuine, sad smile I had ever seen on him. "Thank you."

"You were close with Orvan, weren't you?" I asked.

Iryel smiled. "I am older than I look. Yes, we were close. For a while, we had a thing, but for most our lives, we were good friends. Losing him has been painful. This..." He looked at himself, placing a hand on his chest. "What a wonderful memento."

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry for your loss."

His smile turned even sadder at that. "Ah, it was but a matter of time. Everyone will die someday. Orvan and I knew this day was coming. He'd actually asked I hold onto his inheritance when he died, until there was someone worthy. I suppose that wasn't needed in the end."

We let the silence hang in the air for a little while. After a bit, Iryel took a deep breath and wiped his cheeks. The thin streams of wetness vanished as though they'd never been there. "For what it is worth, I'm sorry for your loss, too. I've been struggling to express that empathy, but it's warranted."

"I'll get her back," I told him, not believing the words.

"There's no doubt about that," Iryel said, much more sure than I was. "I fear for anyone in your way."

Having nothing to answer, I just smiled and nodded. Iryel sat down on the bench next to me, not speaking either. He just sat there, quietly, patiently, and somehow, I appreciated his companionship.

Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes, before the next person I should deal with appeared. In fact, it was multiple all at once.

A rift in space tore open, and ten people walked out. Six archmages of Eden. Four angels of the divines. I took a deep breath, bracing myself to face them.

Ann made her way through the half-familiar streets. It was so strange. They were so dim, despite the sun in the sky. It was a gloomy, grey concrete jungle. Everywhere she looked, she saw more deserted buildings. Dozens of them stood empty, only a few of them having the lights on.

There was a constant humming in the background as what she remembered being air filters ran to clean the air in those houses. Occasionally, a car would drive by her. One, filled with boys, honked at her and slowed down, but she was quickly left alone when she dipped down

a side alley. It took a few seconds of quiet before her fingers loosened around the brick she'd been holding onto.

Ann found herself jumping at almost every noise. The lack of memories made her feel even more on edge. It felt like being so *powerless* was unfamiliar - but she also didn't understand how she could be stronger? She was just human, after all. Reasonably fit, sure.

White pain began building at the back of her head again, so Ann dropped the thought, focussing on placing one foot in front of the other as she walked down the streets. Only one more awkward moment followed, where she was almost run over when trying to cross the road at an intersection.

Then, after about an hour or two of walking, she found herself in front of the house she remembered.

Ann was cold. It was an early spring morning but the winter chill still hung in the air and her fingers were numb. She wore a thin shirt and a jeans jacket over it - not exactly clothing made for this.

Gently, she brought up her fingers and knocked on the door. No one answered. Of course no one did. Shaking her head, Ann turned to the doorbells. And she discovered that the symbols there were entirely unfamiliar.

That was... strange. She distinctly remembered being able to read. Yet, here she was. And everything there was unintelligible.

Slowly, she raised her hand, and simply picked one at random. Waited a few seconds. Nothing.

Ann tried again. Nothing.

On her fifth ring of a doorbell, someone picked up. "Hello?" came the voice through the speaker.

"Hello? I'm here to visit a friend," Ann said, unsurely.

"You musta gotten the wrong button," came the answer. "I didn't exactly invite anyone over."

"Ah! I'm a... foreigner," she said, and it felt true. "I can't... read."

The voice replied with a scoff. "You speak mighty fine for being unable to read."

Ann clenched her fists. "Please," she said. "Please. I'm... I just need to see her."

This time the pause was a lot longer. Then, came a bit of dull yelling, and when the speaker sounded again, Ann heard an old woman. "Sorry young Ms., my grandson is a bit of a donkey. Here, here, let me help you in."

Then came the telltale buzzing sound, and Ann pushed open the door. It clicked, and she gave a quick "thank you" to the old woman, who laughed her off. The door swung shut behind Ann.

She gave a quiet sigh, looking at the stairwell. It was both sterile and a little run down. Stark white, but the pain had chipped a little, tiny pieces of it crumbling onto the stairs themselves. Ann remembered it. Hesitantly, she set foot on the first stair.

Feelings she barely understood welled up within her. Hope, despair, fear, anxiety. The first time she'd ascended that staircase was so vivid in her memories, and the second time was even worse.

Ann felt her heart clench. It thrummed in her chest like an engine. By the end of the first flight, she had sped up. By the end of the second one, Ann was desperately sprinting up the stairs. She was out of breath, hungry, and dehydrated, but she still felt like she *needed* to run. *Needed* to know what was at the top of that staircase.

More steps disappeared underneath her feet, flight by flight - until she stopped dead.

She recognized the door. It was... no different than any of the others, but it had burned itself into her eye, because of who waited behind it. It was a little scuffed up, and had a little mat to clean your shoes in front of it, saying "let me be very queer".

Yes, that was just like her Fio, Ann thought with a smile. Then her heart skipped a beat. "Her" Fio? She barely knew this woman. Biting her lip in conflict, Ann walked up to the door.

She hesitated. Her heart beat so intensely she thought she might suffocate. She took a deep breath, and brought her knuckles against the wood, tapping it loudly thrice.

Then she flinched, remembering that there was a doorbell. Holding her breath, she waited. For a few seconds there was silence. Then shuffling. Her heart lightened.

More clicks, and then the door was open, and Ann felt incredible elation. For a brief moment, she thought the person behind that door might be Fio. All the features were in place... but things were wrong. Fio had shorter hair. Fewer wrinkles. Fio was taller, more fit. And... her eyes weren't green.

The person who was *not* Fio eyed Ann up and down with a frown, then clicked her tongue. She crossed her arms. "Hello, who are you?" Agatha asked.

Ann froze. The words were stuck in her throat. "Uh... is- this flat. It belongs to Fio- Fiona Bellum, right?"

No-Fio tilted her head. "You know my daughter, then?"

The breath caught in Ann's throat. "Y-yes. I, uh. I'm her girlfriend, I think?"

Agatha eyed her suspiciously. "You think, huh?" Then she seemed to catch herself, drawing in a hissing breath of air. She muttered something about dragons to herself, then gave the most crooked smile Ann had ever seen. "You uh... seem like you had a rough time. Would you like to come in? I'm sure I can get you some water. Maybe some food from... somewhere."

And that is how Ann met her mother-in-law.