

Chapter 168: End of the Line

There is something truly unsettling about seeing one's home break down.

I'd not lived in the guildhouse with the others for very long. Just a few months. It was getting close to a year now. We'd begun to prep for a small celebration. Nothing big, just a movie evening. We could afford it without trouble.

Now, the TV laid in a head of rubble. The windows had all shattered. Shelves hung open, doors barely hanging on. It wasn't just the earthquake, it was the person causing it. The oppressive, horrid weight that the frog-demon had.

It walked inside, the door falling off its broken hinges, adjusting the tie on its suit, loosening it a little as if coming into a casual business meeting. Its eyes drifted through the room for a moment, before landing on Ion. The goat-pupils narrowed, and it grinned a wide smile, full of teeth, as it stepped forward.

Underneath its feet, the ground shattered. Floorboards broke and gave way to a cracked foundation of stone. There was an echoing noise to those cracks, and a moment later, the demon was right in front of my alternate self. It looked up at her - since it wasn't particularly tall - but that didn't stop it from being intimidated.

"You're the priority target," it said languidly. "I've been tasked to eliminate any copies of dimensional entity 'Jailbreaker'. I'd say nothing personal, kid, but..." it grinned wider. "We'll, I'd call what we have really rather personal."

Then, it stabbed forward.

A blow that was so quick the world shuddered. It created a sonic boom that made the walls shake, a blow coated with the echoing resonance of a discordant melody. A haunting noise almost like a scream - and it met empty air.

Ion stood further away. Wings spread behind her back, drops of liquid gold interlaced with bands of song. She was panting, mouth slightly open, a drop of sweat beading in her face. There was a hole in her shirt, and blood pooled from it, but the cut on her stomach was shallow. A thin, frail thing, already healing.

The demon scowled. "Fast," it said. "Come, now, designated target. Let's not drag this out for longer than it-"

Ann moved before it finished. The earth split open, writing pillars of it growing to encase the demons. Clouds gathered in the sky, lightning cracking down. Fire spilled from the heavens, setting the air ablaze, turning breathable oxygen into violently hot plasma. It was a torrent of destruction so swift and brutal it splintered what remained of the house.

Walls crumbled, one after another. The pantry caught fire. Food burnt to ash in moments. The foundation cracked and caved in on itself. The ceiling fell down on Ion's head... and no one even cared. They all brushed off tons of wood and stone, glass and steel without so much as a hair out of place.

And in the centre, a step aside from the pillar of destruction Ann had wrought, a few steps offset from molten glass and a glimmering heat-haze stood the usurper. It dusted off its suit. "Now, that's no way to talk," it frowned. "Let's start over, please. Designated target, if you just surrender yourself..."

"Not happening," Matt interrupted. He crawled from the rubble in his pajamas, loose jogging pants, and a shirt with a rabbit on it. They were torn and ragged, and dust nestled in his brown hair, but he still rose like a phoenix from the ashes. Sword intent spilled off him in cutting waves, and the air hummed the song of blades just from standing near him. "What's your name?" he asked the usurper.

It tilted its head. "Name?" it asked, then scoffed. "I have no need for a name. My designated identity is Requisitioner. It *used* to be conquerer," it said, lips twisting into a mean scowl, "yet there was some *trouble* with that, you understand. However, if you must insist, please do call me... Requiem."

With its 'designated identity' given, the demon actually gave a bow, placing a hand above its heart. It would have been easy to mistake it for a butler, but it was not. When it rose again, all three of its fingers were phasing through the suit, reaching within its chest, withdrawing a war-scythe.

Matt looked at the weapon, then back at Requiem's grinning face. He took a deep breath, held out his hand, and a storm of petals coalesced a sword in his hands. The smell of plum blossoms spread from him, and he held the blade forward, tip pointed at the usurper. "May you find value in your death," Matt said coldly.

Requiem barked out a laugh, and *moved*. The world ground against it, pulled and twisted as the demon disappeared. It was fast, horribly, blazingly fast, to the point where each movement was like a minor bomb going off - but Matt matched it.

Ion could hear it. The song thrumming through his blood. The drums of war beating. She shifted smoothly, taking a step to the side. The war scythe lashed out - first at Matt, carving an arc through the air at his head, only to be deflected. The back end, cloaked in black flame, brushed by her face by an inch.

The worst part was the cold of the flames. Ion could still feel it, like fingers of the dead reaching out and digging into her. Chunks of ice formed on her cheeks, the heat leeched from the air in seconds.

Despite that, the demon huffed in disappointment, vanishing again for another exchange. Liam slunk into the shadow before the glaive could strike him, and a blink later, an arrow bounced off the scythe, giving Reya a chance to step back and bring up more barriers. A drop of sweat ran down her face, and a line of frozen blood sat on the other side.

Black fire swirled with foreboding mist around Requiem. The world seemed fragile and brittle at their touch, but it still wasn't quite pleased. With each motion, more of that casual ease bled off of them. The usurper frowned, clearly unhappy, twirling their weapon, sending shards of obsidian ice flying, while muttering to themselves about 'inefficiencies'.

They tapped the butt of the scythe on the ground once, twice, then moved to take a step - yet, before their foot landed, Matt was there. Within its range. His blade was already mid motion, the world *screaming* at its edge. It was honed to such perfection that the air split cleanly.

Requiem brought the war-scythe up to meet his blade, beating it away with greater leverage, then stepping forward to send an uppercut crashing into Matt's jaw. But their fist only met Astraeus. [Unyielding Metal] activated in tandem with [Inexplicable Reinforcement], power stacking on top of itself just to keep Ion standing.

The blow was brutally violent. Darkness and obsidian tore at Astraeus, the cold grinding away at the gold, but his maelstrom kept drawing more power from within. The little spirit was nascent no longer, and just as unyielding as Ion herself. It dragged and thrashed against the power, anchoring itself in the world by its will in the moment it took the clash to pass.

A blink later, Requiem leapt back, an arrow tearing through where they had just stood, vanishing in mid-air, before it could crush another building to rubble. Ion bit her lips. That was the trouble, after all - they couldn't properly go all out. The city would shatter. Not that the usurper cared.

Their face simply twisted into a snarl, as they stepped forward again, only to be met by a tide of shadow. Blackness spilled over darkness, the cold embrace of the night smothering their dreadful flame, and Liam manifested as a monstrous thing of nightmare.

He lasted about half a second before losing two of his six arms, diving back into the shadows after tearing some of the demon's suit. Then, Requiem's eyes landed on Ion again. They licked their lips, reaching out a hand, coalescing a dark vortex. Freezing cold spread across the battlefield in a moment, a freezing, obsidian haze.

Ion breathed in once, and then her heart stopped.

It froze, right within her chest. She looked down for a moment, seeing the patch of black ice with an almost confused look. Then, Divinity spilled into her.

Cold was banished, and her frozen heart thawed within a moment, returning to beat. Requiem simply clicked its tongue, stepping forward again - but Ion vanished. The air was a mirror, and a single step carried her far, far into the sky. A moment later, the usurper was next to her again, that horrid screech of a song accompanying its every move.

But then, Mana spilled into the world. So much mana it made the air tremble. "Thanks, Ion," Ann said, almost gently. "Couldn't really cut loose down there. Let me show you what I've been preparing."

A spell circle sprawled out behind the mage's thin figure, sending her lilac shirt fluttering in the wind. It was a massive, horribly complex creation - more like a spell sphere, utilizing a full three dimensions. Inscriptions, runes and magical symbols coated the firmament, a thousand pages spelled out in magical ink.

"Uh-oh," Requiem said for a moment.

Ann grinned. "Let's see if I have the talent for war-magic," she hummed with amusement, then intoned the spell. "**Nova.**"

In front of Ion, the sun blossomed.

Light spilled forth in a thousand beautiful arcs, and with it, horrible heat spread from it. The spell instantly turned its own incantations to ash, the Mana itself burning away at its abhorrent heat. Ion closed her eyelids, only to have them scorched, before Ann dragged her away in a teleportation.

Twice more the world shifted, bringing them far, far out of town. Still, that second star shone in the sky, with all the incandescent horror that such a thing might bring. Solar flares covered

the surface of the ball of mana, a spell that had been in the works ever since the fight started.

Matt appeared a moment later, the edge of his sword honed ever further. The melody played between us, now. Ion heard the connection, the way their steps played into each other, the way the music led them forward. A breath passed, then a second, and her grip around Aestraeus tightened.

Darkness cracked the sun.

A black blot, spreading outwards, echoing resonance infesting and eating away at the bright star. It was like watching a virus spreading in a timelapse, crawling tendrils of ink eating away at the second sun, before the entire thing crumbled away in obsidian flakes.

Requiem took a while to spot them, frowned at their designated spot, then sighed and moved. "Must we do this?" it asked, war-scythe so casually on a shoulder, motions exaggerated. "Must we fight? It is inevitable that you fall. My every breath infests this world. Your leaders are but puppets," they sighed. "Give yourself up and we may yet make it merciful."

"Never," Ion hissed.

"Ah, a shame. I hoped not to tell you this, but indeed, the news has just reached me. Mr. Terril, acting CEO of the company formerly known as Zinnic, has just now established contact with one Mrs. Bethany Bellum." Their lips twisted into a cruel, horrid expression. Steel and pain flashed behind Ion's eyes. "No," she whispered.

"Indeed," Requiem said slowly. "It's the end of the line, designated target. Your life or your family. Choose." The smile reached their eyes, glinting with cruel joy. "And make sure you won't regret it."