

Chapter 116: Heaviness

My hands were shaking for the entire duration of the journey. There were no more usurpers. The giant of black fire was dead. I had absorbed the shards of its gateway, and the rest of that fire had been absorbed by [Transference], and crafted into some kind of magic item.

But I ignored the pull of the Gift. I felt entirely too numb to interact with it. My heart thumped in my chest, beating on cruelly as Ann's *laid still*.

Thoughts flowed slow as molasses and I could hardly think. It took all my effort to just keep my legs moving. I felt so damned heavy. Every movement was a chore. I wanted to simply lay down, but I stayed upright.

No one touched me. I was aware enough to see Matt think about it, about laying a hand on my shoulder and speaking, but he never went through with it. I was glad. I didn't wanna speak.

While my legs felt like cinder blocks, my tongue felt like a horrible piece of lead tied to the bottom of my mouth. I could barely breathe without choking. For most of the walk I held my breath. I only needed to draw in air every dozen minutes with my inhuman constitution, after all.

Eventually, we were upon the barrack building assigned to us. I didn't even have the strength to open the door. Emilia did so, and it took my best effort to walk inside, then sit on the side of the bed.

I let my face fall into my empty palms. Simply holding my head upright was taking more strength than I felt. Everything was so heavy. I held my breath again.

No one spoke. I heard some footsteps, some creaking, but it all was tuned out, melding into a background cacophony of noise that I only barely perceived. Minutes ticked by.

Eventually, I let out a shaky breath. My lungs felt so unsteady. I almost choked as I breathed back in, but I managed. Then I breathed back out again.

After a few more repetitions, I lifted my head. I clamped down on the despair with an iron will, looking up to see my friends. The people I cared about more than my family. Reya, next to Liam, each with an arm around each other. Liam wore a new mask, his previous one having been burnt away by fire. His hair was singed.

Matt, his sword sheathed by his side, and the scent of plums dull. His face was blank and expressionless. He turned to look at me, and simply nodded, in empathy. I felt numb, but I nodded back anyway. He'd get it.

Emilia sat across the room from me, a table between us. She was the most covered in blood. One of her arms was broken, but she didn't make a peep about it. Despite being so wounded, she seemed the most stable.

Her eyes blazed with that same stoney determination that I was used to from her. She was shaken, grieving, angry, but she was still somehow ready to fight. I wish I could have been like her.

Chris was inside with their human shell. Their face was flat like a soda, left open in the sun for too long. They were barely puppeteering the body right now, but they lived.

Olivia sat. I saw the stars move within her. I- I realized then that I still saw the stars. She seemed upset. Was that... empathy blooming within her? Care? The thought almost brought a smile to my face, but the expression crumbled before it grew.

Finally, Iryel still had his eyes closed. He looked so tired. More like a husk than even Chris' unmoving body. But still, he had not given up.

Had I given up?

The question buzzed around in my head for a few dozen seconds, until I silenced it. I took another breath, steadying myself. "I-" my voice cracked, instantly. Breaking the moment I tried to speak.

No one batted an eye, just waited. I breathed again, steadying myself, focussing. It took all my effort to speak, even somewhat steadily. "What... do we do now?"

"We grieve," Iryel said. "The loss of two incredible people. And then we fight again."

Olivia gripped the wood of her bedframe hard enough to splinter it. "Yeah, alright," she ground out. "I was looking to kill more."

It wasn't selfish or sadistic. She wanted to avenge Orvan, I knew that much. How strange. I looked at her for a long moment, and she returned the gaze, fiery as always. "What? Do you not want revenge?!"

"No." The words surprised myself, coming out hoarse and raw. "I killed it."

"The eclipse is still happening," Matt said. Somehow, even in this situation, his voice sounded melodic. The rat. "We should still fight."

Liam, absently carving lines into the wooden table with his daggers, spoke. "The frog is still alive."

Distantly, somewhere within myself, a spark of anger flitted before being doused by apathy. "Yeah," I said.

Emilia got up. With a single pull from her healthy arm, she ripped off the broken remains of her armor, crumpling the busted and torn metal in the process. She stomped over to me, heavily, her stone prosthesis scraping against the wooden floor. Then she pulled me into a hug.

She squeezed hard, enough with just one arm. Wordlessly, slowly, I felt myself raise an arm as well. I dug into her shirt, gripping the fabric hard. My throat closed up again, and I choked on sorrow.

"It fucking sucks," Emilia said. Her voice was so warm. "It hurts. Worse than any wound. Fio, take as much time off from fighting as you need. No one will hold a grudge."

I wanted to answer, to say anything, but the words wouldn't come out. All I managed was a pathetic squeak and a ragged breath.

Emilia squeezed me again. "Ann is out there, on Neamhan. I know you can't go."

Those words slammed into my body like a sledgehammer. It hurt to hear them, so very badly, but she was right. Despite it all, despite everything, despite killing the giant, there was still that abominable number.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **45]**

It had risen. Of course it had risen. But it wasn't enough, it *still* wasn't enough. Ann was out there, on Neamhan, all alone. With nothing but a few days of memories and a fucking lifetime of confusing emotions to her name.

And I couldn't go to her.

"So we'll get her," Emilia said. Tears dripped down from her onto the top of my head. "We'll go, keep her safe, Fio. It's okay. We'll take care of it. We'll hunt down more of the gateway holders, bring the shards to you."

The words stunned me into silence.

Emilia didn't say any more, but Matt did. "Yeah," he said. "I'll stay in Eden. I- Finding Ann on Neamhan is not what I'd be good at. But I can kill things for you. I can kill as many as it takes."

"Wherever you need us," Liam said. "Wherever Ann needs us."

At that, I finally started sobbing.

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For the first time in forever I slept. Like, not just for a few hours, but really *slept*. I remember that at some point I'd laid down and cried, and then stopped, and then spent an hour staring blankly at the ceiling, and eventually, I must've fallen asleep.

It was a deep, dreamless kind of sleep. Chris sat next to my bedside when I awoke. They didn't instantly speak when I stirred, though. I could feel the open invite to just turn on my side, and sleep some more.

With a lot of willpower, I decided not to. "How long have I been out?" I asked, my voice raspy and dry.

"Twenty hours," came the reply.

Oh, shit. "That's a while."

They shrugged. "So is everything. What use is time if you cannot spend it on what you need?"

I stared back at those deep, dark eyes, and sighed, deciding not to argue. I felt less... bone-tired, but the exhaustion still weighed heavily on me. "Sure," I agreed. "I- what now?"

Chris pulled me into a hug. Their skin, stolen and puppeteered, felt warm and soft. "Now you wait. You be selfish. Maybe visit the altars eventually, but do not worry about it. The divines can wait."

"... And Ann?"

"Emilia and Liam are back on the other side. They'll find her."

"How will we know?" I asked. I moved, pushing myself out of the hug, instead sitting up and drawing my knees to my chest. "Can they talk to us?"

The triz-adu nodded faintly. "Yes. Transference is stronger than ever. It affords them a tiny bit of Qi even over there. With it, they can send off short messages occasionally."

"Oh," I said, blankly. I hadn't known that. I... frankly hadn't explored my new abilities all that much, anyway.

[I can give you a short version if it helps,] Cass suggested.

Hearing her voice in my head was both strangely alien and comforting. Now that I focused, I heard Astraeus humming within my chest, too. While Cass' voice seemed to come directly into my mind, his originated from my heart, vibrating through my bones before reaching my ears.

Knowing I had enough Qi to support it, I sent Cass a short invite to actually appear next to me. Almost instantly, her ghostly avatar wove itself from a thin thread of power, taking shape. Then she threw herself around my neck.

She weighed nothing, and her touch barely registered except a feeling of slight cold, but I still felt it, vividly. I remained stunned for a few moments.

"Bell, I'm so sorry," she said, voice cracking. "I'm so sorry I didn't- I should have- I-!"

Gently, carefully, I placed a hand on her head. "Hey," I whispered. "It's not your fault."

She sobbed, convulsing quietly for a few moments, and it left me thinking. Was this fair? Cass shouldn't blame herself. Was it hypocritical of me to think that? Here I was, feeling like trash... Ah, who cares. I still wanted to feel a little more like trash.

But she didn't deserve it.

"We got unlucky," I told her, running my fingers over her head in something I hoped was a calming gesture. "I got cocky and too comfortable risking our lives. Now we live with the consequences."

Orvan's permanent death. Ann's memories. I just hoped she was safe, hoped she found the others that she didn't-

I interrupted myself before finishing that thought. Drawing another shaky breath. Cass squeezed me tighter. "Okay," she said, voice barely above a whisper. "I... I'll try. To be kind. To do better."

"We all try. It's okay not to always succeed," Chris said. I looked at them, turning to see their usually blank face set with a heavy expression.

Once more, I was reminded that their reason for travelling with us, for finding power, was primarily one of loss. Another shell, another life, taken from them, unable to be laid to rest.

I breathed in deeply through my nose, and out through my mouth. "It sometimes doesn't feel like it," I said. The weight of Orvan's inheritance laid heavily in my chest. A revolving knot of magic. "But what can we do, except try our best?"

At that, Chris smiled. "Sometimes, just trying is enough. You don't need to give your all. Sometimes, the amount you can give is small, and that is fine, too." They paused. "To always try your hardest is to run yourself ragged."

Their words sounded hollow, but I forced myself to consider them honestly. They seemed to resonate with Cass, at least, assuaging her a little. Objectively, I could see how they were right. But personally... It was so frustrating. I didn't want that to be the truth.

Breathing in through my nose, and out through my mouth, I decided to let the thoughts go. "Okay. Let's take it from the top, then. Cass, what changed about my abilities?"

She drew in a shaky breath, too, finally releasing me from a clingy hug, and I let my arms drop again as well, no longer holding her. They felt heavy again. But it didn't matter. I just needed to listen.

"Yeah. Okay," Cass said, psyching herself up for the talk. It felt like she was trying to drop the guilt like a physical burden. "So. You have changed class, fusing both of your previous ones. Now, you are a Superimposed Paragon."

"Right," I nodded. Clear so far.

"This means that some of your abilities will have fused into new ones. Your status will be shorter. This does not mean you lost any ability; they were simply unified into a single larger framework, giving you more freedom in how you use them. Pull up your status for me?"

I smiled at the request being made so casually. Cass sounded a little like herself again. I hoped it was the last terrible moment she had to go through with me, fingers trailing through the air.

Casting off the shell of comfortable inaction, I accessed my Gift, and decided to see how the world would find me wanting.