

Chapter 110: Stargazer, Startaker

“Fio,” Ann told me, holding her face in her hands. “You *have* to stop recruiting people who tried to kill you.”

“You know, if I had nickel for each time you brought over an ex-assassin and asked if they could join the group,” Matt said, “I’d have two nickels. Which isn’t a lot, but it’s weird that it happened twice.”

Ann had her arms crossed, while Matt raised his eyebrows.

I stood, with Olivia in tow. Emilia, for one, seemed excited to have someone else join the group. “Now we have an uneven number of hands and legs,” she said. “It’s only fair!”

Which was a statement that made Liam spit out some water he was drinking, and Reya to break down with gurgling noises that were probably laughter.

“Okay but to be fair. It turned out really well the first time!” I defended myself. Olivia simply stood behind me with a slight smirk, seemingly a bit amused at the situation.

Reya signed something, which Liam then translated. “It’s also really funny, she says,” he said.

I tried my best to hold back a blush. “Look, archmage Orvan also supports this.”

With a sigh, Ann gave a shrug. “All I’m saying is that this really, really shouldn’t become a theme.”

“Don’t worry,” Emilia teased with a grin. “I’m sure she’ll run out of assassins soon. How many more people have tried to kill you Fio? Ones we might technically still be able to recruit.”

“... Three.”

Matt let out a low whistle. “Dang, that’s an impressive number. Doesn’t sound like we’ll be running out anytime soon.”

Ann rolled her eyes. “Fine then, it’s fine just this once. I really hope there won’t be a next time.”

"I for one find this a quite interesting change," Chris said. "I already feel the changes from the new talent. The connections between my shells feel different now. More vivid. Perhaps, it'll let me use some powers between them? More testing needed."

"That's kinda creepy," Olivia said, speaking up for the first time. "Your smile, too. It's all wrong on that face. I like it," she added at the end with a grin. "I think we'll get along just fine."

Chris simply tilted their head in response, dark hair spilling to the side. The faint smile disappeared from their face, replaced by a blank, curious expression that made the corpse-pale face look almost doll-like. "It does not sound like you were complimenting me. Is that ending statement sarcasm?"

"Not at all," Olivia said. "I genuinely think we'll get along fine. I've been told I have some creepy habits myself."

"That seems like a strangely direct and unnecessary comment to make. Do humans often do this?" Chris asked.

The swordswoman shrugged. "I wouldn't say so. Just happened to be surrounded by particularly blunt people, I s'pose."

"Hmmm," Chris hummed thoughtfully in reply. "I see. Thank you for sharing your experience."

Watching the two of them engage in such a stilted bit of conversation, I shook my head and turned to face Orvan. He had found some time to visit the whole group, even in his feral look.

None of the pleasant, well-maintained wise aura of court wizards remained around him anymore. His beard was scraggly, his robes matted with splatters of dirt and blood, his hair was in a tangle. The man looked borderline feral.

And yet, he seemed entirely composed, though his eyes had a dangerous and manic glint in them. I still wanted to ask him about that. About what had him smiling, now. In the middle of an eclipse.

I shook off the question and focused on the present moment. "There," I told him. "We've integrated her into the network and the group. Are you happy now, Orvan?"

The old man looked at me for a long moment, steely eyes drilling into mine. "Not quite," he said after a long moment. "That... [Transference] of yours, it's called, right?"

"Sure, yeah."

"I want in," he said plainly. "I want those talents."

For a moment, I felt surprised at that. But it made sense. From everything I knew, one did not become an archmage without a good bit of ambition. "I don't know if it'll work on Edians," I said.

"One way to find out," the wizard shrugged. He swapped his staff from his right hand over to his left and extended out a hand to me. "So? What say you?"

I blinked at him. My slots *were* limited, but then again, was an archmage not worth one? What kind of talents did he have to become this strong. Hell, if I integrated *all* the archmages, how fast would we grow then?

"Sure. Let's try it."

With that, I reached out, grabbed his hand, and saw my entire world change.

"Curious," Orvan observed so calmly. "It seems I am offered a choice of what talent to contribute. But the strongest one seems almost magnetized to your ability. As if seeking it out."

He smiled, noticing my stunned silence. "Ah, pardon me. Perhaps I should have warned you? I think quite a large chunk of my talent was shared. Maybe there is some kind of magnification effect based on the strength of your gateway applied to that ability?"

Another silence, as no one replied to him. "Fio," he said, waving a hand before my face, which finally shook me from my stupor. "Come on. At least read the description of the ability."

I did as asked.

[Stargazer: To reach the firmament, you have to see it first. Gaze into the stars, then ascend high enough to grab them from the sky.]

That was all it said, but it had, in fact, changed my entire perception of the world.

Suddenly, every member of my party was a constellation of stellar dust. Constellations swirled within every aspect of the world. The grass, the ground below, the stones of the very buildings we stood in, the tables and chairs and beds... and the people.

Divines, the people.

Ann glowed as brightly as the sun in the sky. Thousands of tiny specks of power and potential swirled within her, around a cracked core of blinding, divine radiance. The fragment of godly power she still held.

The stardust swirling around it were her own powers. Physical, mental, magical, her talents, her attitude towards life, her willingness to work hard. She was beautiful. Utterly radiant.

Everyone else glowed, too. Matt swirled with pink stardust, ephemeral but powerful. Emilia's was more subdued, but grounded, like a reliable rock in a river. Liam's was dim, as if obscured, but then the darkness itself swirled and I learnt it was part of his power too.

Reya's was bright and divine, with a tether leading to the goddess, refilling the divinity she used to fuel her abilities. But... that was not all. Within herself, there was a furnace of divinity, too. Some fragment of the stuff she absorbed was slowly changing herself, and her belief in herself was forging something in herself.

How curious.

Olivia had a strange network of interconnected tiny pinpricks of stars that, put together, created a weave of gorgeous light. And Chris' was even more strange.

Their haze was a dim background glow, with some nodes attached to it. As if held in slots. Could they take over a certain amount of abilities from bodies they possessed or crafted? How strange. But... theirs was *changing*.

Ah. With [Connections] from Olivia, [Stargazer] from Orvan, [Genius] and [Prodigy] from Ann and Matt to boost their understanding, and their own [Adaptable]... Chris was changing, fundamentally, who they were. Working these powers into themselves. I watched with fascination as their web spun and changed.

"Fio," Orvan's words called me from my stupor again, and my eyes landed on him, instantly giving me pause once more. He was... A galaxy. No, a whole universe. What the fuck-

"Fiona," he sighed. "Focus. Come on."

I blinked, and finally, reclaimed my own mind enough to respond. "Yes?" I asked, somewhat dazedly.

"You're looking, but you're not reaching," he said, smirking. "I made this talent myself. Crafted it from the ground up, with magic and wonder and desire. This is me. You've gotta build on it, too."

Distantly, I nodded, already thinking about how to work it. Then he interrupted again.

"But before that," he said solemnly. "Look upwards."

It was strange, you know. The talent was called [Stargazed], but I hadn't... taken the time to look at the star. And when I did, a shiver went through my body, and my hair stood on end.

The sky was no longer dark. It was *bright*. Five shining, radiant, blindingly bright constellations hung in the sky. A distant, dim, dead one sat over the horizon, too, forever sinking.

"Those are the divines," Orvan said, looking upwards. He was still smiling.

"They're enormous," I said.

"Sure," Orvan nodded along. "They're also *the same as us*." He placed a hand on my shoulder. "That right there? Anyone can glow just as bright. That's what I firmly believe."

It seemed impossible. Looking at the divines up in the sky, their suns, their stars were so vast and blinding it hurt my eyes to look at them, but I couldn't look away.

"Do you remember what the talent says?" he asked.

"Reach for the stars," I whispered.

Orvan nodded. "That's right. I've been getting closer. Every day in this damn eclipse. I fight, blast everything with mana until I run dry, and then I rip more from the air around me only to do it again. It's exhilarating."

He was just like Matt.

"Your swordsman," he said. "He gets it. Me and him? We're alike. Me and you, too. That talent of yours, [Precipice], right?" He grinned. "Coulda come from me. I want you to take that away from this. From your first look upwards."

"No matter how distant the stars are. No matter how huge they may be. You can always, always reach out and pluck them from the sky."

I nodded. Gripping my spear tight enough to turn my knuckles white. I felt Cass within me, also entranced by the beauty, and so was the spirit in my spear. I held the weapon high, pointing it at the sky, and the blade was wide enough to cover the blazing brilliance of the divines.

A grin spread across my face. "No matter how far," I whispered.

“No matter how big,” Orvan replied.

My spread vibrated with excitement in my hand as my hairs stood on end. It had decided on a name, then. Now, within my body, it was me, Cass, and Astraesus.

With that decision made, I looked at myself, the revolving sphere of power that was the constellation within me. Stars, blazing bright and powerfully, spreading light around me, two roaring, entangled constellations. It was gorgeous. I meditated, and grew it some more. The stars were within reach. I just needed to pluck them from the night sky.