

Chapter 143. Wrath II

“I suppose you can move again,” Ari sneered, seeming to revel in Ian’s distress. “But you’re gravely injured and your avian weapon is destroyed. I’m disappointed.”

I may be injured, but that means very little for someone like me, Ian seethed, thoughts clouded by rage. And while Bluebird might be gone, his whip iced over...Ian wasn’t one to rely on weapons to win.

In the crucible of Menocht Bay, it was just Ian and his affinity against the world. While he couldn’t necessarily fight like he did in Menocht, calling up hoards of risen dead to cull the infected, killing everyone around him with the slightest thought...it didn’t matter.

Ian felt a previously-unfelt knot within himself...*release*. Death energy blazed out around him like spilled ink, thick enough to be visible to the naked eye.

He collected himself and fell back on the overall strategy he and Euryphel devised. *Step one: Have Ari destroy the End arrays beneath the Cuna.* If even Bluebird’s explosion wasn’t enough to ruin them, only a direct smash of Ari’s hammer would get the job done.

Ian flung himself into the maw of the sundered Cuna, Euryphel hanging limp behind him in a wrap of Death, blood trickling down his chin.

“Am I too fast for you?” Ian murmured, face expressionless.

Ari sniffed, but followed after him without replying. In a flash of light, she was above him, her appearance faster than he could have imagined, faster than anything Ian had seen so far. As her hammer swung down, she smiled, cold assurance glinting in her executioner’s eyes.

At the moment of death...I am not afraid.

Ian puppetted himself out of the way: Despite Ari’s speed in reaching Ian, her blow was identical to that from Achemiss’ initial vision. It was the very same blow that had killed him in another version of events, a downward swing angled slightly to her left, coming for his head...but this time, he was ready for it.

Ari’s hammer impacted the ground, the earth splintering out in a rumbling shockwave.

“What...have you done?”

Maria stood above Ian and Ari on an outcrop of rock, dark combat vestments missing above her right breast and below her thighs as though they’d been burned off. Her eyes were wide, a hand clutching at her chest.

Seems like that was enough to break the End array, Ian thought, relieved. But Ari didn’t give him a moment of respite, her hammer heading for him again, rays of light streaking in front of it to deal an initial blow.

Not good enough, Ian thought in defiance, an interlocking shield of bones melding with his energy to protect both himself and the prince from the radiant onslaught.

Ian blocked the light but couldn't evade the hammer strike, Ari's hammer clipping him on the side where he'd already been injured by Chowicz's reciprocal burns. The mesh of reinforced bones composing Ian's armor absorbed the physical blow while the riftbeast soul gem on Ian's chest melded with the gambeson of half-step ascendant energy to rebuff the radiance. It wasn't enough: Ian barreled through the air like a light-soaked comet, landing nearly in front of the Eldemari outside the Cuna.

Ian ignored the feeling that his entire side body was pulverized and tried to keep himself occupied on something other than his mounting critical damage, his attention once more focusing on the unmoving Euryphel.

"He's dead?" Maria murmured, her gaze falling on the prince's body.

Ian paused, his head snapping to hers. "Not while I'm still breathing. I'll bring him back or die trying."

Ian knew he was probably making a mistake, knew that he was inviting his own death. He was surrounded by his two greatest enemies, his body just about to fail...but he had to try. Ian grabbed hold of Euryphel's soul, caressing it with strands of his ethereal body, the man's body cradled in his arms.

"For someone who's about to die, you don't seem to be taking this too seriously," Ari said, her form suddenly behind him, hammer poised to strike.

Ian threw himself to the side while continuing to form a matrix of ethereal threads to tether the prince's soul. Ari reappeared again above him, swiping down at a different angle, the hammer's face only inches from his eyes.

Shit.

But the ascendant was suddenly engulfed in flames, her body twitching against her will, the hammer prevented from finishing its arc.

"You bitch...you've ruined everything," Maria seethed, voice dripping venom. "You come for him, but tear apart my palace, threaten to level my city..."

Ari seemed newly entertained by the Eldemari's indignance, chuckling softly. "It's not personal, love. Or perhaps it is; you've invited this calamity onto yourself, haven't you?"

Why is Maria biding me time? Ian wondered, at a loss. *And why is she...succeeding?* He almost couldn't believe Ari was stopping to chat with her.

Ian peered down at the prince's pale, dusty face. He realized that his hands had subconsciously gravitated to Euryphel's chest and spine.

Again.

In a flash of darkness, Ian found himself back in Euryphel's soul. He was standing on the long, thin, high path again, a dark precipice on either side.

Eury, come back. Ian remembered the last words they'd exchanged less than half an hour before.
I'll...miss you.

A disembodied voice echoed throughout the space: *Like I will miss you?*

...In a different, but not inferior manner.

Why return? We've...lived a lifetime. This is...our...final act. I'm so tired.

Ian's lip trembled as scenes of Euryphel's life filled his mind. They weren't long, or coherent, but filaments of feeling strung along a single thread. It was burnout embodied, a feeling of fear and distrust, of living each day a hundred times.

Eury...it will get better, Ian replied, tears streaking down his cheeks. He knew just how the prince felt.

But in the end, Ian escaped Menocht. How could Ian break the cycle of the prince's pain? More fundamentally, how could Euryphel save himself?

I'm cursed...a willow on barren soil. I will wither and slowly die, starved of goodness—perhaps it's best to be felled early...to die.

No. I will miss you.

Suddenly Euryphel appeared before Ian on the high road and pulled the necromancer into a tight hug, his head falling on the man's shoulder, hair obscuring his face.

Come back for me.

Ian stood frozen in place, not returning the hug, but not pulling away.

I'll miss you. He couldn't promise more, not when so much was uncertain.

The prince disengaged gingerly, the trace of a sad smile on his lips. *It'll have to be enough.*

The soul collapsed on itself. Ian found himself back in the real world, Euryphel still cradled in his hands. The prince's eyes cracked open, blond lashes fluttering. He rolled to the side and coughed, black, viscous blood pooling on the ground.

Ian flung himself to the side as a hammer blow threatened to decapitate him from behind, though rays of light still peppered his back and sent him stumbling forward.

“What do you mean, I invited calamity on myself?” the Eldemari snarled as she sent a wave of fire forward and swerved to the side on jets of flame.

Ian blinked, trying to take stock of the situation, unsure how long he’d been in Euryphel’s soul. *Seconds...?* Perhaps even less; he’d never tried resurrecting someone twice within such a short period of time.

“Ian...you can’t dally any longer: Ari’s going to kill Maria and then kill you in a single blow. Your only chance is when Maria strikes next.”

The prince groaned, then whispered: “I...believe in you.”

Ian bit his lip and pushed back his emotions, focusing on the unexpected fight between Ari and the Eldemari.

“Your city created *him*. You play with what you don’t understand. If you aren’t careful, your carelessness will destroy everything.” Ari smiled, flashing white teeth. “I suppose since I’m here anyway I might as well teach you a lesson.”

Ari’s eyes narrowed arrogantly as she swung out with her hammer. In a single bound she came close enough to Maria that the hammer needed only to travel for the briefest of moments, arriving almost faster than thought.

Veins popped on Maria’s face as she twisted her hands, twining her fingers together. The hammer faltered and changed direction, narrowly missing Maria’s head. But the Eldemari wasn’t finished: A jet of flame spewed from her mouth, scorched Ari nearly at point blank. The ascendant winced, though clearly resisted the flames, her very presence rejecting the encroachment of foreign energy.

But almost as soon as the fire appeared, a powerful gale of wind ignited the blaze into a boiling inferno, trapping the heat around the descendant. The wind compressed the flames down, turning the surrounding few feet into what felt like a pressure cooker.

Ari cried out in exasperation, summoning her light buckler before her face. Maria’s affinity protected her from fire, but the extreme heat was taking its toll, parts of her skin beginning to burn and blister.

Ian chose that moment to act.

He wielded his ethereal body as he had a thousand times against Soolemar, needles of ethereal essence embedding themselves all along Ari’s body, miniscule threads wrapping around her limbs, her torso...her head.

Each shred of Ian’s soul accounted for one of the threads. He felt Ari’s ascendant soul resisting his ethereal threads, almost uprooting pieces of soul from his own body...but Ian ignored the strain within himself and *pulled*, the threads of ethereal constricting and cutting deep.

Ari screamed and tried to swing her hammer, but Ian was swift. He tore her ethereal body, then began an assault on her soul, the threads of ethereal seeping into vessels and severing the roots of her soul. Every moment Ian spent attacking Ari's soul, he felt his own soul beginning to waver like a candle on the verge of being extinguished.

Ian closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. *This...is our final act. And I...am your ending.*

The necromancer crushed his hand into a fist. His ethereal threads severed the remaining roots as one, untethering her soul. Breathing heavily, Ian watched as a blue-green orb the color of Euryphel's eyes drifted upward like an unanchored balloon.

The flames and wind ceased. Maria collapsed onto the ground, while Euryphel fell limp to the side, barely hanging on.

Ian limped over to the descendant's still form, taking in her shocked, but ever-arrogant expression. He turned to Maria's unconscious form and shook his head, carbonized bone crumbling off to reveal his soot-stained face.

"Eury...why did she interfere? Why not just run away, leave us to die?"

The prince coughed softly. "I don't know."

"And what of the arrays? I destroyed them, didn't I?"

"...You destroyed the bindings affecting Selejans. Now everyone in Selejo is free of her yoke."

Ian felt his stomach drop, his victory spoiled. "Just Selejans?"

Euryphel chuckled bitterly. "I'm not surprised she has more than one array, in retrospect...this is why Beginning practitioners are so useful: They catch blind spots in your assumptions. Y'jeni, I'm such a fool. All this, and we still failed." He turned to Ian, his hair falling messily about his bloodied face. "Correction: You succeeded, I failed."

"I'm not sure I've succeeded yet," Ian muttered. "What am I supposed to do now that she's dead? How am I supposed to ascend?"

Euryphel looked at him blankly. "Search her body. Ascendants arrive one away, but return another, in an instant. There must be something...yes, I see it. Look on her belt."

Ian nodded and knelt before the ascendant and tugged the girdle around her waist free. The belt had several sealed compartments.

"Each one of those opens to a void storage," Euryphel explained, "except for the one with the small black circle at its center."

“Julian Ignatius Dunai,” a gleeful voice sounded out. From Euryphel’s lack of reaction, Ian realized that only he could hear. *“Before you press the return beacon, I’m going to pass on a single word of advice as a show of my gratitude. The return beacon takes two people. Choose wisely.”*

Ian took in a deep breath. He could take Euryphel with him...but then what? Ian knew not what waited for a non-ascendant in the ascendant world. Would his tag-along be killed on arrival? Imprisoned? There were no guarantees, and Achemiss unhelpfully provided no other information. But really, Ian felt that their separation might be for the best: Spending more time with Euryphel would only hurt the prince more, draw him in closer to someone who could only love him as a friend.

Ian knew Euryphel’s pain. He’d *felt* the prince’s pain, the prince’s...affection. And he knew that bringing Euryphel with him would be just as much a curse as a blessing.

Alternatively...he could take the Eldemari.

As though reading his mind, Maria began to speak, slurring her words; Ian was surprised she was even conscious.

“Kill me...if you dare. Bodies will fall. You’ll win this single battle but have no one left to finish the war.” She tried to laugh but burst into a fit of wheezing coughs. “I’m close enough for you to kill. I’m in your range. I dare you.”

Ian narrowed his eyes. He didn’t know if the Eldemari was bluffing, but...if he killed her, and the SPU’s officials all died, Euryphel would be in a terrible strategic position. Not to mention the fact that Ian personally hated the idea of the princes and Guard dying. He envisioned Diana keeling over, her youthful visage turning blue and stiff, imagined Urstes finally returning home to his wife, only to fall to the floor with lifeless eyes.

“Eury, when new ascendants depart...do you know what happens to their End arrows?”

“As far as I know, they disappear; they’re no longer on this world, and all fate is severed.”

That was what he needed to hear. Ian’s finger hovered over the return beacon. He grabbed Maria’s hand in his, then turned his head back toward the prince.

“I’ll miss you.”

The prince didn’t respond. Ian could see his shoulders wracking forward with silent sobs, his face turned away and hidden beneath his long hair.

Am I making the wrong choice leaving him behind? Ian wondered, struck by indecision.

The Eldemari moaned by his side. Ian shook his head and steeled himself for whatever was going to come next. He breathed in deeply, then pressed the return beacon button.

He and the Eldemari disappeared in a twist of space and light.

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In the real world, Euryphel didn't hear anything when Ian left, didn't see his last moments on the earth. For Euryphel, only the disappearance of the golden arrow in his hand marked the necromancer's passing. Along with the disappearance of Ian's End arrow, Euryphel sensed the end of the Eldemari's control over the SPU.

The prince crawled over to Ari, pulling himself over by sheer force of will. He propped himself up next to her, then pressed the same button Ian pressed to escape the confines of the world.

Nothing happened. The prince hung his head and smiled. *You stupid fool*, Euryphel thought. *You stupid fool...*

For the first time in a long while, Euryphel allowed himself to fully cry in the real world.

Be happy, he told himself. *You've won the war. The SPU is free, yours to take back, and Selejo is headless, weakened. This will go down in history as a day of greatness, a triumph over the impossible.*

If only he could believe his self-assurances like he believed in Ian. If only he didn't feel like his heart was the Cuna: cleaved in two, set on fire, and caved in.

The worst thought of all?

Maybe if he didn't know my heart...he would have taken me with.

END

Author's Note: (goes onto the next page so keep scrolling)

Thank you to everyone who has supported The Menocht Loop (that's all of you, Patrons!!!)

Your encouragement and support has been invaluable and I cannot stress enough how much I appreciate all of you.

Book 3, The Eldemari's Wrath, is now over. If you haven't already, I would greatly appreciate if you left a rating/review (especially review!) on Royal Road. Please tell me what you thought worked, what didn't, and your overall thoughts and constructive criticism. I think the series has only gotten stronger as it's gone on and a huge part of that is the wonderful feedback I've gotten from encouraging readers.

The story will be going on hiatus for the next month. If people are interested in shorts or little extra scenes through the end of January, please let me know in the comments. If you want another author face-to-face talk, that's also a possibility.

Since the story is taking a brief break (conveniently aligned with the first month of my grad school semester), I will be FREEZING/DEACTIVATING the Patreon ONLY for the month of February (because book 4 will be resuming promptly in March). That means you won't be charged for February even if you keep your subscription to the story.

For those curious, the tentative name for book 4 is The Samsara Crucible, though it might change :)

Thanks again and hope everyone has a great next few weeks!