

Chapter 136. The Thread

Ian stared down at his feet and noticed a flame beginning to lick at his boots, turning the soles uncomfortably hot. *This is going to be bad*, Ian thought, his stomach dropping as his mind involuntarily grasped onto the only source of sensation in the emptiness.

Almost on instinct, he began to retreat into himself, repeating the same motion he'd practiced over the past week...and entering into his own soul. He didn't need to kill himself to do so; in fact, it was easier to peek into his soul when it was properly anchored to his body. The sensation of flame went away and a different, oddly-comforting darkness expanded out.

A voice resounded: *Why do we shelter from our own mind?*

What else should I do? Ian asked. *I can't overpower Kiehl. I'll wait for my constructs and Bluebird to take care of him.*

You take pride in your mastery, your dominance...and yet you've internalized such weakness.

An image of Germaine appeared in the emptiness, more vibrant than life, oversaturated so that the warm brown of her eyes almost appeared alternatingly bright copper or dark violet, the simple teal dress she wore at the Infinity Loop winery breaking off into spiraling blue and green arrows.

We lost her because of your inexperience and will continue to lose her because of your fear.

I've practiced since then, Ian insisted. The arrows composing his body began to contort and become jagged, some springing out at harsh angles. *I clashed with Ezenti several times a week for over a month. I've faced my fear many-times over.*

But still you are afraid. What is an attack on the mind but an assault on the self?

My self is still changing, Ian said in rumination. *I'm not like Woeshiv, static and firm.* The image of Woeshiv beholding his own soul's domain like an emperor fought with the vivacious figure of Germaine, golden wings interlocking with teal dress.

We know ourselves enough to come back from the final end. The response was a statement that shook the firmament, sending a flurry of arrows fluttering outward like golden feathers and shreds of blue-green cloth. The arrows paved the way for a new image, dispersing the others in a cloud of colored dust.

Ian beheld a massive sphere turning forward in a ponderous cadence. A circle ran against it in the opposite direction. They interlocked and moved against one another like a bizarre pair of gears, the flat circle somehow keeping a steady line around the unmarked sphere's plane. Soon the single

smaller circle was joined by others until Ian had the impression that an infinite number of circles were somehow all arrayed against the single great sphere, all turning in synchrony.

But the circles began to fall off, dislodged by the crush of others or even those intersecting their path...and when they fell, they began to unravel like a wound string, their innards spilling like colorful ink.

And then there was a weave: The colored ink formed threads, and the threads stretched outward, their arrowpoint needle tips guiding them forward and around other threads to form a tapestry that filled Ian's entire vision, extending out from the frame of the original image.

The weave continued to increase in size, seemingly endless and undiminishing. But Ian saw a single thread incorporated into the weave come loose and pull back, snapping like a worn instrument string. The thread fell away, dark and dim...but then began to shudder. Time seemed to reverse, the arrow-tipped thread reforming into a pool of dye. The dye then began to curdle, wriggling tendrils of violet condensing into a reel of memories and experiences, snapping into place like puzzle pieces around the soul's spool. But time wasn't really rewinding backwards: In the background, circles continued to roll forward on the sphere, while arrows joined the weave. The resurrection of the example soul seemed impossible: It was the unmixing of the mixed, the reversal of entropy, the regaining of structure from nothing.

That's not what I did, Ian murmured. *My soul didn't have time to dissociate and melt into dye, form into an arrow. There was no weave to welcome it. My soul was almost attached—all I needed to do was coax it right back. I did nothing so...impossible.*

We're dealing in a currency of symbols. What did the image make you feel?

Ian's temper was growing short. *I don't see what point I was supposed to take away. That I'm but one cog in a machine, one thread of a weave?*

Ian thought he heard the disembodied voice smirk. *We're the thread that broke away.*

The necromancer paused for a moment, letting the words sink in. *I can't be the first.*

Nor will we be the last.

The space of Ian's soul began to shake and collapse. In a moment he went from arguing with himself to returning to his consciousness. Some time seemed to have passed: The flames were now licking at his ankles, having consumed his feet.

But somehow...Ian didn't feel pain.

Suddenly the darkness faded. Ian found himself back with Euryphel, everything unchanged from before...but something was off.

“Euryphel?” Ian transmitted.

The prince turned his way, smiling. *“You defeated Kiehl. You veered off course, so you need to adjust to head back to the mainland.”*

Ian held his head. *“It couldn’t have ended so easily.”*

“Your constructs killed him.”

Ian blinked, still disbelieving. *Did I really veer off course?*

“Eury...let me test something please.” Ian walked forward over the ribcage floor of the bone wyrm, his feet settling onto the plane of its sternum.

“Ian, we’re going the wrong way,” Euryphel insisted.

Ian grabbed the prince’s wrist in a vice and probed for his soul...finding absolutely nothing but an empty husk.

The vision suddenly shifted again.

Ian felt the sensation of falling. He opened his eyes. He was plummeting towards the ocean, above him was a dark cloud of smoke and debris, the remnants of an explosion. Bones, burnt and broken bits of the destroyed wyrm fell beside him. Euryphel was nowhere to be seen.

This isn’t real, Ian thought to himself. *Kiehl is trying to trick me into doing something rash.*

But what was he supposed to do? He continued to tumble towards the water, bursts of fire and elemental attacks threatening to engulf him at any moment.

He tried to retreat back into his soul, only to find the way blocked.

What!? Ian thought, beginning to panic. He’d never faced resistance before. *Is this myself trying to teach myself a lesson?* Ian felt like tearing his hair out. *This is the worst possible time to try learning something new!*

Ian felt a spear of ice puncture his ribcage and scrape across a lung while an orb of light seared his retinas. Flames licked his skin; he could see his arms blackening and peeling, somehow heard the sound of his own skull cracking from the heat. Unlike before, when Ian blocked out the pain completely, it had slowly grown in intensity indistinguishable from real life. As the pain continued to worsen, time seemed to slow. Ian felt himself tumble through the air, each turn of his body shedding an ashy composite of ruined flesh and smoking hair.

Kiehl has given up on tricking me, Ian realized. *He is trying to break me.*

And it was working. Ian tried to recall the images that had saved him before, the tapestry of fate that defended him against Nixia, Ezenti, Caffrey, and every other Remorse practitioner he had faced...apart from Kiehl. Somehow, Kiehl's illusions forced Ian into his own mind, making it impossible to imagine anything outside of it.

Throughout his time in Kiehl's illusions he'd resisted by abandoning his body, retreating into his mind. After all, the carnal body and soul-bound mind *were* separate: Judith's body had lived on, preserved by Ian's control, but her mind fled, never to return.

Ian could cut himself off from sensation, kill every nerve in his body, force the pain to disappear...leave only his consciousness, effectively disembodied. But here, in Kiehl's domineering domain, he was out of options.

Perhaps the path forward isn't in resistance, Ian thought, the pain driving him delirious. *Our identities are forged in the opposition, by the soil of the hills we die on, the thoughts we wield to attack and defend our ground.*

There's beauty in opposing the inevitable. It's a symbol of tired, tragic defiance.

Perhaps I can take a lesson from Euryphel. Physical pain isn't inevitable: It just hurts. Why keep it out?

Ian gave in, letting the pain course through his body, hijacking his mind to the point that nothing else seemed to exist. He had given in to pain before in the Infinity Loop, had let it control him to the point that he had done unspeakable things to both himself and others.

But Ian wasn't sure giving in helped: He was still trapped in Kiehl's illusion, and he was still *hurting*. Deciding to stop resisting the hurt was a symbolic gesture; it didn't have a miraculous effect.

But perhaps that's the point, Ian thought, a last spark of realization poking through the curtain of unconsciousness. *The war for control of the mind is fought with symbols.* His mind began to race, flaring like a fanned ember. The image of the circling souls and the infinite tapestry filled his mind.

He imagined himself as one of the souls falling away, a coil of time vomiting its innards and dissolving into fluid. He saw himself condense and self-assemble into the shaft of an arrow, the point extending out into the infinite weave, braiding itself between nameless others.

What happened to the body in the moment of death, or even when Ian escaped into the haven of his soul? It didn't disappear: The nerves of the body continued firing signals without his consciousness. But what was pain without an observer? Ian was intimately familiar with the body's biological responses to pain, but the question was asking something more fundamental.

Ian realized he might have been thinking about pain the wrong way. Resisting pain wasn't resisting something trivial like physical hurt but resisting non-existence itself. For wasn't that what pain truly was? It was the threat of nothingness reasserting its control over the body, wresting back control of matter from the realm of the soul, which had filled it with desire.

He could see the tapestry now, imagining it in all of its shifting and shimmering detail. The pain was gone, for his mind was dissolving, his sense of self stripped away. The last thing to go was the image of the thread, the thread that somehow represented *him*, and the unfortunate course that his short life had taken.

I'm the thread that broke away, Ian told himself, *the thread casting off the mantle of infinity*. From within the tapestry, he pushed back. Wisps of essence rejoining and reforming. The pain returned, but the image was already strong within his mind, strong enough to ignore the pain that clawed at him. The thread had returned from the infinite, weaving its way back into the world of souls. The tapestry glowed with golden light, threads sparkling like a kaleidoscope of mirrors, light bouncing back and forth, endlessly reflecting rays which grew stronger and stronger and—

Ian took in a deep breath and found himself back on the wyrm, though this time, he had the feeling that he'd actually returned to reality.

"Took you long enough!" the prince replied, apparently prepared for his waking. *"They're protecting Kiehl with everything they have, but they're taking him away now that you managed to break his hold."*

"How long did it take?"

"Nearly two minutes. Seriously, I was getting nervous that you wouldn't wake."

Ian was thankful that his expression was hidden behind his mask. *Two minutes* was a small lifetime in their current straits. The prince had to have been terrified, at least for the first minute.

"We passed over the mainland," Ian observed, his head whipping around. *"Plan A worked?"*

Euryphel gave him a tired smile. *"I was able to fend off the End bindings on the border, so yes. It took a lot of energy out of me, though. My End avatar feels like it ran a marathon."*

Academia Hector was North of Cunabulus so they wouldn't pass over it on their way, but as Ian stared down at the ground, his mind unhelpfully imagined that every town they passed held an Academia Hector filled with bright-eyed college students and small stores with nice old ladies who sheltered strangers from the cold. What did the average Selejans think as the bone wyrm soared overhead, barely visible behind a wall of clawed, shrieking wraiths, a small armada of misshapen monstrosities filling the skies in all directions?

Suddenly Ian felt a piercing pain in his head. *Kieh!*? He held the side of his head and winced, Death energy flaring defensively around him.

“Ian...it’s Achemiss,” Euryphel transmitted, his eyes widening. *“He’s going to show you Ari. You just...need to watch.”*

Watch?

Ian’s vision turned black.