

Chapter 131. Promise of Change

Ian found himself in a world of absolute darkness.

All around him was a heavy, oppressive pressure. The darkness grasped at him with fimbriated fingers as though trying to find purchase and pull him apart.

This is my soul, Ian realized. He began to ruminate on the words he stated previously: *At the moment of death, my strength is in mastery.*

Ian expected something to happen, but...nothing did. He didn't feel any change in the grasping darkness. A sense of cold fear came over him, but he remembered Euryphel's reassurances. He *would* succeed...it just wouldn't be as simple as he thought.

Why is it so dark? Ian wondered. The souls of Woeshiv and Zilverna were lit by phosphorescent arrows, but his was like an extinguished lantern.

Skai'aren...you return to yourself.

Ian flinched. *Woeshiv?*

Suddenly the darkness gave way to golden light, massive wings stretching behind and around Ian's location. The grasping shadows recoiled into the nether.

I thought you were destroyed, Ian thought.

I am.

And yet you're here, Ian replied, glancing at the resplendent wings spanning into the darkness.

It is not I, but we, the voice replied. *What remains of Woeshiv lies within you; such is the price of extinguishing another.*

So I'm talking...to myself? Ian didn't understand. *How do I return to the realm of the living?*

You don't. What returns is not the same.

Ian peered upward and noticed a red diadem hovering above him and spinning slowly in place. He reached up to grab it, noting that his limbs appeared to be made out of a rainbow of colored arrows similar to Woeshiv's soul avatar.

What is this? Ian asked.

We don't know. Why do you ask yourself for answers?

Ian grabbed the diadem, taking care not to touch the sharp arrow points jutting up from its central band. He turned it in his hands, each of his fingers composed of a dull-tipped arrow in a different hue.

Mastery? Ian mused.

Not mastery, a voice replied. *Domination.*

Images of Menocht Bay flitted through Ian's mind. Memories from his depressing childhood competed for attention, followed by such remembrances as meeting Euryphel, defeating Byrrh, and extinguishing Woeshiv. The memories came in short flashes without reason or order, as though someone were braiding his experiences together, strands crisscrossing on the axis of time.

His other self continued: *We were pushed down for so long. No longer.*

No longer? But we don't care what others think, Ian retorted.

But we do.

Frustration bubbled up within Ian's chest. *I've already resolved to focus on mastery of my craft...necromancy. Once I ascend, I won't need to worry about Mother or anyone else's judgment.*

What we want isn't what is. We care about the opinions of others.

Ian's arrow fingers tightened on the diadem. *I refuse to believe that will always be the case.* The golden wings flapped outward, beating back the darkness with a spray of golden light. *People change.*

The words echoed back in affirmation. *People change.*

This time, Ian felt something ripple through the space of his soul. The darkness began to contract, but the golden wings wrapped protectively around him. The diadem jerked and spun, dislodging itself from Ian's fingers and expanding in size, casting a red glow over the immediate surroundings. The redness began to condense down into what looked like a pool of suspended blood that whorled toward Ian.

People change by changing others. Euryphel stretched out his hand, offering a new future. Aunt Julia apologized in the tea house, a tear streaking down her cheek. Germaine wished him farewell, sniffing into his shoulder. And Mother...

Ian recalled the image of his Mother watching Jupiter burn, her ambition a smoldering taper flickering out.

We change by living.

The space collapsed inward. Ian came back to himself with a start, inhaling as though submerged under water. The shreds of his soul were all present, woven ethereal essence frayed but coherent.

He immediately set to work repairing the damage of death on his body, rejuvenating tissues deprived of blood and oxygen. He shifted in the hammock, opened his eyes, and cracked a smile at Euryphel.

"I'm back. Wasn't so bad."

The prince's lips were a thin line. "You know, I simulated this over twenty times, and still I feared that this would be the one time you faltered."

"Well, it all worked out," Ian replied. He paused. "Where's Bluebir?"

The avian glosSword sidelined Ian, its body landing with a thud on the necromancer's torso. "Iggy died!"

Ian sniffed. "Not dead."

"Not anymore," Euryphel corrected. The prince turned away and repeated the words softly: "Not anymore."

Recalling that he was still being recorded, Ian sat up straight and coughed. "By entering the soul of the departed—in this case, my own soul—I was able to stimulate the individual's will to live." Ian smiled. "Sometimes what we think will bring someone back isn't what really will, so it's important to be flexible."

"You previously said that at the moment of death, your strength was in mastery. Is that not true?"

Ian frowned. "It's not false, but it wasn't a complete answer."

"So what was your strength?"

Ian snorted. "Change, apparently. Honestly...I think we should cut out what I said before: the strength at the moment of death stuff is crap. I thought it sounded nice, but...it's not right."

Euryphel nodded. "And you're feeling fine? No side effects?"

Ian shook his head. "None that I can tell. What of my fate arrows? Do you still see any oath bindings?"

The prince gestured for Ian's hand. "Let me make sure."

Ian provided his hand, half expecting to see arrows instead of fingers. "I never asked before, but how will you know if this worked?"

"Verification by inspection," Euryphel replied. "There's not a single chain from an oath on you. Every person has at least one if they've ever entered into a basic agreement, whether for school, employment, or anything else. You had some of them before, but now...none."

Ian laughed softly. "That's great news."

"It is. If you're able to bring yourself back like this at will..."

"We'll stand a much better chance at reaching the Cuna."

—

When they woke up the next morning, they decided to dedicate the first few hours of the day to scouting out the rift. When they first arrived, they failed to find its perimeter after over an hour of flying. They didn't know what they'd find if they kept going, but it was an ideal way to get in some exercise.

"What's the craziest thing the SPU ever found in a rift expedition?" Ian asked.

Eurphel rode the wind around a particularly long stalactite. "Several decades before I was born they found an intelligent winged lion. Regrettably, it died only a few months after they took it from the rift."

"It could speak?"

The prince shook his head. "Definitely not. It could, however, practice the arts. It had fate and I assume it must have had a soul."

"What were its affinities?"

"Unconventional. It controlled glass, of all things."

Ian tried to imagine a winged lion wielding glass; he'd assumed it would be a wind elementalist to facilitate flight, but apparently not.

"Could it actually fly?" Ian wondered.

"I don't believe so," the prince replied, swiping a lock of hair from his face. "I honestly don't know all of the details. There have been similar strange hybrids encountered in other rifts, but the lion was one of the most bizarre I've heard of."

"I've heard that rift beasts are more intelligent on the whole, but I didn't realize that some might be able to practice."

Euryphel snorted. "To be fair, this rift isn't filled with the most intelligent specimens." He peered down at the surface of the water where a shark's fin poked above the surface, a mop of stringy tendrils wafting off to the sides. "They even look stupid."

Ian chuckled. "Did you know sharks existed before the first trees?"

The prince raised an eyebrow. "No."

"They're so primitive they don't even have bones," Ian replied. "And if they don't keep moving, they'll suffocate and die."

"You know a lot about sharks."

Ian gave him a devilish look. "I'll be honest, they used to terrify me along with just about everything else. I tried to learn everything I could about them to get over it, but it had the opposite effect." He rolled his eyes. "Mother was not pleased."

“What about that shark we saw the day before? It didn’t seem to be moving.”

Ian shrugged. “It was. It was big and we were moving quickly, but it could be anywhere at this point.”

“Huh,” Euryphel replied simply.

An hour passed without incident.

“Should we start turning back?” Ian wondered.

Euryphel hummed in consideration. “I think we should keep going. I won’t feel satisfied until we know the rift’s limits. For a rift considered potentially lethal, things have been almost too calm.”

Ian nodded and they proceeded further. Soon they were far enough from the crack in the ceiling that they could no longer rely on netherreal light. Ian was unbothered by the absence of light, and so long as they stayed above the surface Euryphel could perceive the surroundings with the wind. A full forty minutes later, Euryphel motioned for them to stop.

“What?” Ian whispered.

“There is a large creature up ahead. Larger than that shark.”

“...Can you tell me more about it? Is there a reason we aren’t continuing forward?”

“That’s the thing...it disappears before we can get closer.”

Ian frowned. “How does it disappear?”

Euryphel shrugged. “I presume it hides itself in some underwater passageway.”

“Well...let’s go and see if we can follow it.”

“Ian...I hate going into the water. I’m completely useless down there.”

“Then don’t come; I’ll be fine.”

They flew forward until Ian sensed a massive swell of vitality that disappeared only seconds later.

“Eury, you can stay here.”

Euryphel crossed his arms. “Alright. I’ll keep communicating over quantum channel.”

Ian nodded as he pulled the hood of the wetsuit over his face and secured the breathing apparatus. “*Sounds good. Talk soon.*”

Ian dove into the water and enlisted Bluebird’s aid to propel himself forward in pursuit. *There are no sharks around here*, Ian realized. *Just...darkness.* Where could the vital signature they saw be hiding? It was too large to disappear...

“*Ian, come back!*” Euryphel transmitted. “*What we saw before was a single tentacle.*”

Ian spun himself around and ascended to the surface. *“Are there more?”*

“Do you know of any creatures with only one tentacle?”

Great, Ian thought, urging Bluebird to put on more speed. *“Where are the others now?”*

Ian broke the surface to find the prince slicing a massive, serpentine appendage with glaives of wind.

“There are more coming,” Euryphel stated.

Ian lifted himself from the water just as a tentacle the width of a hovergloss smacked the space behind him, creating an explosion of water and bubbles. *That would’ve hurt.*

“What are we up against, exactly?”

“There’s eight of them so far as I can tell. The next two will be surfacing in the next fifteen seconds.”

“And each is as big as a small tower?” Ian asked as he threw himself to the side. Bluebird circled around and unleashed a beam of blue and black light. Despite the power behind the blast, the tentacle remained operational, the nasty necrotic slash along one side failing to impede its mobility.

“Yes.” The prince flew in close to a newly-surfacing tentacle and ran along its length, each footfall leaving behind a weeping gash. Bluebird’s illumination revealed the blue blood streaming into black water. *“A massive, snake-shaped tower that probably belongs to a creature far bigger than any building.”*

“Sounds suspiciously similar to something I’ve seen before,” Ian quipped. *“Eury, we should think about running for now and thinking of a better plan: Facing a leviathan beast when empowered by ambient netherreal energy sounds like a mistake.”*

Euryphel spun away from the tentacle as it smacked into the water in the blink of an eye, crushing the area where the prince had been a moment before. Ian almost couldn’t believe the tentacle moved so quickly. When the tentacle rose from the water, its impact area was a frozen crater of ice.

Y’jeni, just perfect, Ian thought. The thin scars he sustained from the Godorans’ frost damage began to ache, warning him to get out.

Bluebird, keep raining fire while we fall back, Ian instructed.

Yes, Iggy!

Ian smiled thinly, then began to send himself backward. Unlike Euryphel who reasonably needed to face the direction of flight, Ian puppeted his body in reverse and continued to cripple tentacles in range, three of them now surging after him with whip-like velocity. Unfortunately, the thick, swatting cords of muscle pursued him even when partially liquified and decayed, inured to pain.

Euryphel cut ahead, turning his head around periodically to send off a new wave of attacks on the wind, but focused on retreat.

They eventually outpaced the riftbeast. Out of caution, they continued at rapid clip until they returned to their hammocks, the two men sitting across from one another.

“Hey Eury, do you know why a bunch of sharks might be gathering in the water?”

The prince peered down. “It almost looks like there’s a field of red seaweed beneath us.”

And Eury can only see the sharks on the surface, Ian thought, eyes scanning the shark-hair-covered water. Further down, an underwater vortex of sharks lay in wait, innumerable cartilaginous bodies circling with subdued ferocity.

“Eury...”

The prince seized his hand, his eyebrow furrowed. “We need to go.”