

Chapter 13

Plan A. My original plan had been super simple, just like me. Hit that bad guys. Take their stuff. It was the kind of genius planning that had got us this far in our quest to unite the shards and save the world. It was direct, and to the point.

Of course, that plan hadn't really accounted for something like Leo, bubbling over with barely contained power and rage. Maybe I could have taken him in a fight if it was just the two of us, maybe I could have sprouted wings out my ass and taken off, but it wasn't going to be a fair fight. The moment that Orphia had the chance she was going to stab me in the back and keep on stabbing until there was nothing left. You could always rely on her that way, she was consistent.

Which left me with plan B. Take their stuff and run away.

Easier said than done.

If I wanted the Lucis, I was going to have to pry it from Leo's cold dead hands. I'll admit that was the kind of plan that normally would have given me warm fuzzy feelings, but right now it wasn't practical.

We both went for the sword at the same time, and he would easily have beaten me to it, since he was so much faster, and it was attached to him, if it wasn't for that handy new trick that I'd picked up out in the desert. I hammered my Spirit Strike into his grimacing face, carrying only one thought. One word. Fumble.

Everyone makes mistakes, even thousand year old demi-gods. He yanked on the hilt of the Lucis, making it leap out of the scabbard, then for one brief glorious moment he lost his grip on it and my big clumsy fingers wrapped around the soft leather. I hip checked him as I yanked it free.

Quest: Return of the Voidgod

Acquire Rusted Blade Shards: 3/6 Complete

400 Glory Gained

I would have had more luck trying to smack the Bastion down with my ass. All that happened when I crashed into him was good old Newton's laws kicking in with the equal and opposite reaction, bouncing me off him and out of reach of his grasping gauntlet.

It had all happened so quickly I barely even realized that it had worked before Leo was coming at me again. Seren's training kicked in. I spun away from those grabby gauntlets, bringing the Lucis around me in a circle to knock any attempted lunge away. It clipped off the side of Orphia's glaive as she tried to thrust it home. Turning the blade aside and putting me inside her reach.

She started to backpedal still flailing the glaive around, trying to bring it to bear against me and doing nothing but forcing Leo to stay out of reach. Her eyes weren't on me anyway, they were locked on the sword. The symbol of Leo's power, in my hand. That had to sting the old ego a little bit.

Leo finally got it together enough to shout, "Stop."

The impact of the word washed over me and I could feel my movements still involuntarily. That was the true power of that supernatural charisma of his. Just a word, and everyone froze like statues. Orphia was paralyzed, wide open to attack, but infinitely more worried about pissing off her master than getting a blade through her gut. I hammered my fist into her instead. Folding her around the punch and knocking her aside so I could get to the door.

This time, I knew the way out. If I could get up on the ramparts and grab a rope, I could drop down into the Ashlands and run like hell. Maybe hook back up with the Faun if I was lucky. My brain still hadn't fully wrapped itself around Mercy and Asher abandoning me to my death. That was the kind of thing that took some processing, and I did not have time right now to be getting weepy.

My shoulder took the door off its hinges and I went on running, Lucis trailing behind me, Leo sprinting after me without a moment's delay. He was close enough that I couldn't hear for the clatter of his armor. Close enough that I could feel his fingertips brushing over the blade of the Lucis until I yanked it up in front of me. The door at the far end of the tunnel was shut, and in the time it took me to get through it he would be on me.

Good thing we were in the heart of the wall now, not up on the surface where the Voidgod's death explosion had screwed everything up. Artifice washed out through the solid stone, and with a laugh I slammed it shut behind me.

Leo hit the new wall with a clang and a roar of fury, but he was too damned late. I smashed through the door at the far end and was out into the courtyard before he could backtrack or, more likely given his temperament, smash his way through.

There was still good stone down beneath the packed dirt of the next courtyard, and when I reached for it and hauled it up beneath my feet, I was launched like a rocket into the air, soaring over the guards milling about beneath me and landing with a grunt and a roll on the next shattered rooftop.

The laugh that had escaped me when I shut a building in Leo's face had carried on, and I caught myself giggling away all the way to the side of the wall. There was no rope on this one, but it would be simple enough to bound along to the next one before Leo got his act together.

Or at least it should have been, but just as I was turning away from the uproar from the square I'd just added some striking stone pillars to, I caught a flash of movement in the periphery of my vision. If I didn't already have the Lucis in hand and moving, Orphia would have spitted me on the spot. As it was I turned it away just in time, yet again.

Every time she didn't managed to stab me, she looked genuinely surprised. You would think she'd be getting used to failure by now. "Oh will you go away."

The blade sang by my head as she made a half-hearted swipe, and I had to duck. This close, I could see she had a crazed look on her face, not the usual narrowing with rage, but googly-eyed deranged bliss at the thought of my impending death. "You shall fall, and Leofric shall delight in none more than me."

“You were so weird when we first got here.” I parried her next thrust. Too slow to follow up on it. She was testing me, not trying for a kill. “How did you manage to get even weirder?”

“This world is hell and we are here to suffer, to be refined by that suffering into living gods.” She said as if it was any sort of explanation instead of yet more insane rambling. Maybe there was just something about being Alvaren shaped that made you absolutely bug-nut crazy. Did the elegant skulls squish their brains?

She came in at me again, not the playful jabs that I’d been parrying, but a real onslaught that I had to backpedal away from rapidly to avoid becoming swiss cheese. I was just lucky she didn’t have enough sense to circle around me and put my back to the drop, or I’d have been forced right off.

Why wasn’t she smart enough to do that? I mean, she wasn’t a genius or anything, but it wouldn’t have been hard.

The Lucis was so light in my hand that it felt like I wasn’t holding anything at all, and it had me clumsy and off balance. If I wanted to waggle a fly-swat around then that’s what I would have made. I couldn’t use my strength with this thing for fear of the flimsy blade snapping in two. And the reach on the thing was less than the length of my arm. If Orphia had any Potency to speak of, the slaps I was using to turn her attacks aside would have been useless.

It was time for an upgrade.

The metal of my great-sword flowed around me in a wash that startled Orphia out of her latest attack and put her on the defensive. I hadn’t been sure if this would work, what with the Lucis being super fancy and magical, but apparently slapping a whole load of metal on top of it didn’t interfere all that much. I’d have to fiddle with the grip of the thing later to get it properly comfortable in my hands, but for now, I had a decent giant cleaver to wave around.

So I waved it. Two great sweeping cuts left to right, then back again, sent Orphia scampering back out of reach. On her heels, she had the moment she needed to think. She gathered lighting around her glaive blade as she waited for an opportunity to unleash it on me, but I was not falling for that one again. I wasn’t giving her a shield as a nice big target.

The air stank of ozone, my hair stood on end each time that it swept by, but still she couldn’t make contact. I wasn’t letting her hit me with that big pointy taser again. Once was enough for one lifetime, thank you very much. I danced back out of reach, hopping back in to make swift cuts and keep her from gaining too much ground when I could. Still getting used to the weight of the rebuilt Lucis.

Even now, with the combined weight of the original sword and my own big chunky boy, it felt lighter in my hand than it should have, flowing through the motions I was trying to make with such ease it threw me completely off balance. Maybe this was the super-power of having a chunk of Rusted Blade in your sword. Maybe if I ever actually hit someone with it, rainbows would come shooting out. At this rate I was never going to find out.

The brief sweet window with no Leofric in my life was at an end. He hopped clean across the courtyard that I'd remodeled in a single bound to land by Orphia's side.

"You come into my home..."

He raised an empty hand and a stream of luminous green lanced out from the palm. Not a zappy ray like I'd been expecting, but a continual squirt of liquid. Where it struck the stone, it ate through it. Where it clipped my pauldron before I had the chance to dodge away, it began to melt away to nothing. I had to pulse Artifice to toss my armor off before the acid ate through to flesh.

Still, Leofric roared. "You slaughter my people..."

He lashed his hand across, and the line of acid struck off the ground and splashed up at me in a wave. I had to strain Artifice to yank stone up through the dead material on top of the Bastion to intercept it before it washed over me. Even the stone wasn't enough, the moment that the acid hit it, the whole lopsided wall I'd just managed to drag up started melting away. When it smoked away, Leo was still there, with both hands upraised and some new thrum of Primal energy gathering between them. "You steal my most prized artefact..."

When he snapped his hands apart, a Khorkhoi the same size as me leapt out of the green glow. Launched at me like somebody loaded it into a worm cannon and lit the fuse. I caught it on the edge of the Lucis, splitting it half, its own momentum doing all the cutting work for me until it toppled into two parts at my feet.

When I looked up from it, Leo was there. Right there in front of me. He'd moved so fast I didn't even see it happen. His face was a rictus of fury. "And then you dare to strike me?!"

I dared to strike him again. Whipping the sword up, still covered in worm guts, to bury it in his crotch. He sidestepped it with the same disinterest that he did everything, as if I hadn't almost made him sing soprano. His fist caught me square in the chest.

There had been no wind up, no indication that a blow was even coming. One second he was standing there, the next I was hit.

Surprise took the air out of my lungs as much as the impact. The pain arrived after I'd skidded back a few feet over the ruined rooftop. Whatever got popped and healed earlier was still tender and the broken ribs jabbing down into it were not making things better for it. There was a visible dent in my chest when I looked down, and worse yet, that same acid he'd been spraying around willy-nilly was splattered right in there, burning away at me.

It wasn't the worst pain I'd ever experienced, but it was right up there with demon-spider-god poison.

He must have enjoyed the look of horror on my face when I glanced up, because he didn't immediately punch my whole head off. Instead he crossed his arms and smiled. The acid was eating out from the point of impact. Sizzling away my skin, my bones, my everything.

Orphia took her chance while I was distracted by impending death and swung for me, the flat of her blade hitting the side of my head and discharging with a thunderclap.

Everything went black.

If it had just been the glaive smack, I probably would have been out for the count, but the lightning racked down through my body, lighting up every nerve with agony on its way to earth. If my heart had stopped beating, that zapped it back into action.

Every massive muscle in my body contracted as the storm passed through and I was in mid-air by the time I snapped awake again. That helped with springing back to my feet, but not much. Most of the muscles I'd usually use for sitting up were gone. Eaten away by Leo's acid. I was well on my way to having the flattest tummy on Amaranth, and I couldn't do a single sit-up. I pulsed Restoration through my body and it was almost immediately overwhelmed by the sheer power disparity of the Primal acid arrayed against it. No sooner did something heal than it was eaten away again. Giving me all the pain of having it eaten away again too.

Still, I managed to twist and stumble to my feet, lashing out with Artifice to throw up a wall between me and the murderous smug expressions on Leo and Orphia's faces. It didn't work quite right. I fumbled it, and instead of hauling up stone from beneath the Void-touched rock, I just shot out random spurs of stone from where the wall was still alive to my senses. They crisscrossed and jutted out at weird angles and did nothing to stop Leo taking careful aim with his palm and readying another blast of lethal acid.

My body was in ruins, only grim determination was keeping the Lucis in my hand, but none of that did anything to dim my divine gifts. This time I made the same mistake again, on purpose. Reaching with Artifice, not to put a barrier between us, but to hit them with the up-thrust of stone.

Where the rock burst up into Leo's godly flesh it stopped dead, but my girl Orphia hadn't been buffing herself up nearly as thoroughly. When the rock pushed at her, she flew. One spike taking her in the thigh and launching her sideways, the other hooking under her armpit to spin her around, another just jabbing her in the back for some extra height.

I'd hoped that getting whacked with all that rock might have thrown Leo's aim off, but the spray of acid caught me square in the back all the same. There was nothing in this world or any other like a chemical burn for its pure pain potential, and I am not ashamed to say that when it washed in a searing line from my hip to my face that I screamed like a tiny baby that had just pooped itself. I mean it was high pitched, it was grating, I was having a real bad time.

The acid poured into the hollow where my torso used to be just sped up the destruction of whatever internal organs I still had left. The popped thing from earlier was just straight up gone now, along with all the wibbly sausage looking coils that I'd been trying to hold in as I ran. The ribs that had been crushed in had fallen to melt into paste on the stone. When I looked down, I could see spine glistening in the sunlight of Leofric's gaze.

[42/1270 Health]

Leofric brushed aside the stone around him like cobwebs and began to advance once more. Not even bothering to part the stone when he could walk right through it. My back was to the empty sky and I had nowhere left to run.

Dying didn't scare me. I knew it wasn't the end. I knew that I'd be able to come back again and again until whatever I was up against was ground to dust. But I hated defeat. No actually that wasn't true, I could roll with losing a few times. I just hated losing to this asshole. Leo strode towards me in his shiny golden armor, acid and poison dripping from his fingertips as he closed in on me and I knew, I just knew he was going to try to make this as slow and painful as it possibly could be. He was going to revel in it. I'd shown him up, I'd done the things that he could never do, and now he was going to hurt me to make himself feel better about it. Well screw that, I was nobody's punching bag.

My legs were done for, lost to my senses and possibly detached by this point. It didn't matter, I still had two strong arms attached to a body that was a hell of a lot lighter than I was used to, I flipped over to drag my raw dangling ribs and guts across the ragged stone. Oh that hurt a lot.

I was trailing a smear of Maulkin slime behind me like a snail as I dragged myself closer and closer to the edge of the wall. Leofric sounded like he was yawning. "I do not wish to climb down to retrieve my stolen property. Stop him."

I was so lost in becoming sauce that I hadn't even noticed Orphia make her crunchy landing, or whenever she'd climbed over the top of my little stone fence to stand beside me, sneering. I looked up at her, blood and liquidized organs dribbling down my chin and despite it all, I still pitied her for what she'd become.

Her face was twisted in a mask of delight as she swung her glaive blade for my face.

If she'd just stabbed me, I would have been done, but Orphia, she hated my face, she absolutely had to go for the flashy face smash. Plus, I'm sure she wanted to do something impressive in front of her new sugar daddy.

I surged Vitality and caught the blade in my teeth.

One side of my face already hung open from the acid, the glaive cut into the other, opening up a wider grin than Faun faces were ever meant to have, but the top of my head did not pop off like she'd wanted. I surged Potency too, and bit clean through the metal as Orphia gawked at me.

More blood poured from my ruined mess of a face, but through it all my laughter gurgled. Even now she couldn't beat me. Even now, I was better than her.

She tried to jerk her shattered glaive back, but I caught hold of the haft and we had a little wrestle until finally she worked out that she could brace the back end on the rock and haul it straight up until my weight worked against me.

I was hefted into the air for just a moment, one eye still functioning well enough to see the ash dunes spread out before me, and I used every last drop of my surged Potency to fling myself forward. I didn't

know how much of me was still attached by that point, but I guess there was still enough to belly-flop off a cliff.

The wind whipped by me, whistling. The world spun end over end. I closed my eyes before I saw the ground leaping up to meet me, and I turned all that was left of my focus inward, lighting up the Pillar of Aether in a blinding column of moonlight.

Then everything went dark.

[0/1270 Health]

It had been a while since the last time that I died. I hadn't actually done it since I first arrived on Amaranth despite the best efforts of literally every living thing I'd met. Which meant that I wasn't actually all that sure what would happen next. The pain stopped. So that was nice.

I kind of figured that I'd just open my eyes and be in my shiny new fresh built body. Apparently it didn't work like that. At least, not immediately.

My other senses, the ones that weren't tied to my body, slowly came back to life, and I could see my upper body lying there at the bottom of the wall. My legs lay a distance further along, having finally snapped off in the breeze as I fell. My face was almost all bare skull thanks to the ever advancing acid. Even that bone was perforated and crumbling, adding to the ashes piled up at the base of the wall.

"Could have done without seeing that."

I didn't currently have a stomach, so I couldn't feel sick, but watching my body like that made me uncomfortable in a whole load of other ways. Thankfully I didn't have to watch long.

Death was by my side, like he'd been there all along and I just hadn't noticed before now. He swept one sleeve of his robes through the air, a glint of bone protruding past the edge of the rough black fabric. My body was wiped away by the motion. Now you see it, now you don't.

"Thanks."

Death inclined his head towards me in a little nod. Then abruptly I felt a tug. Like a big elastic band had just been attached around my middle. It was the same sensation I felt when my awareness lingered in a part of my Sphere of Influence that my body was moving away from. Like I was off center. The only difference was, this wasn't my dumb meat staggering away from me as I tried to do some Artifice work. This time the body I was meant to be attached to was half a world away.

I managed to yelp out, "Bye," to Death before the world started whipping by.

With no body, I didn't have to worry about hitting anything in between me and my destination, but that didn't mean seeing it all fly at me at supersonic speeds wasn't a little bit disconcerting. I was through the Bastion and soaring over the kingdom beyond I had time to recognize a thing, then there were fields and forests and ruins and cities and a massive ravine. Rivers and ponds. Swamps thick and buzzing. More desolate muddy nothing with some great beasts loping about, half-hollowed mountains, grass, water. All

flying by so fast I couldn't comprehend the details. The ocean lingered a little longer, then I was back to Talon's Keep, to my Shrine. To my body.

I sank gratefully into my flesh as it formed. Sighing like an exhausted man flopping into bed. A base need was driving me to nestle inside it where I belonged, my poor spirit rubbed raw by exposure to the world outside. Hermit crabs. That was what it reminded me of. Eternals were hermit crabs, and bodies were shells.

One staggering step forward was all I managed before I was slammed off my feet. I had a sword in hand, but my armor was gone and this thing was inside my defenses already. Grappling with me as it bore me to ground. Pinning me for just an instant before it reared back to strike and my brain caught up. Seren smiled down at me before hammering a kiss home.

