

Chapter 102: Defenders of Eden.

How much blood do you think the average person sees in their life?

How many liters? Dozens, maybe? How much does a doctor see? A surgeon, stitching people back together all day everyday?

Was it enough to taint entire roads red?

Well, calling the blood I was seeing “red” may have been doing it a kindness. The usurpers didn’t sport a uniform colour of bodily fluids, see. There was blue blood, green blood, black blood, yellow ichor... All of it splattered across the buildings in a colourful, gruesome story.

Corpses were strewn about the flattened landscape. We had to carve channels that the blood could flow along into the floor so it didn’t mess with Ann’s runework. The steady heartbeat her magic created in the air was now a familiar companion.

Her deafening voice still slammed into reality at every moment, every stroke of the chalk turning the energy dense. The Mana was powerful enough to see it twist with every manifestation of Qi. It showed in the warping of the air when I swung my spear, or the heat haze I saw when I enhanced my eyesight.

We had been fighting for close to two hours straight by now.

It doesn’t sound like a lot, but... it was. Trust me. Fighting for that long, without a single break was *grueling*. It was painful. Not that we were even doing normal fighting.

Every single movement had to be done at a superhuman speed, with superhuman precision. My body had been torn open and knitted back together more often than I could count. My wells had been emptied of their whole volume twice over, and still more Qi bubbled forth. By now, the steady stream of power barely spent any time contained anymore, flooding straight into my muscles and spear.

Golden Glass shifted under my skin. The nascent spirit in my spear directed my strikes to be more precise, waste less motion, and hit the most important target. I took a step forward, leaning slightly to the left and letting a barbed claw streak by me. Then, my weapon lashed out, the Qi-empowered metal cleaving through a chitinous leg, and spilling yet more ichor onto the street.

The yellow splatter mixed with the surrounding blood into a greyish, sticky mass. It clung to my boots and my clothes. The usurper's screech joined a chorus of similar howls. My spear lashed out again, taking its head.

There was no break. A moment later, I had taken another step to the side, grabbing a pair of horns with my free hand, then flexing every muscle in my body, empowering them until they sung with golden power, and tossed the freakishbull back into the horde.

Not that it did much. Seconds later, more monsters were crawling over the body, an endless flood of flesh and blades and bloodlust. A faint aroma of plum rifted by me, and Matt took another head. I stepped forward to cover for him as he retreated.

A wound on my thigh burnt. Reya was conserving her energy, and the wound was not significant enough to need her attention. She was, instead, busy healing one of Chris' human shell's cut tendons. They could barely walk one moment, then a couple seconds later, they plunged back into the battle with reckless abandon.

Chris cherished their shells. Seeing them plunge forward with such disregard for the integrity of their flesh was a bad sign. But there was no other choice.

The heartbeat of magic rang in my ears again. I could see Ann from a dozen angles, reflected in the blood all around me. The ritual circle was beginning to close around the rift. Maybe another half hour. That was all we needed to hold out for. Another little while...

I grit my teeth stepping forward and back, engaging in a dance of death with dozens of inhuman monstrosities. Limbs that were too long and too numerous were cleaved from the bodies they were attached to. My skin brimmed with enough energy to have bones shatter when the creatures touched me.

Looking at myself from an outside perspective was an interesting perspective. I was like a whirlwind of golden steel. My spear lashed out, lengthening and shortening as it needed to. Brutally separating bits of bodies.

Some were more material and some less. My spear cared naught. A strange spirit of rotating ice met its end on my spear just the same as a living flame did. I overpowered their energy. When attacks struck, I reflected the brunt back.

A new monster attacked me from my shadow, only for Liam to descend on it like a dark deity, tearing the creature apart with claws of darkness before it had fully formed. An explosion rocked the world as Marie sent arrows imbued with power into the crowd.

I saw the earth open up to swallow great beasts, tossed into spontaneous ravines by Emilia. Divine light descended down onto the horde once, burning an especially vile thing to smithereens. Flashes of pink darted across the frontlines, a storm of petals that tore and shredded at anything in its path.

Then, there were the monsters on our side.

Roots blossomed wherever the Leshi stepped. Green flames consumed monsters. Spores paralyzed them. Mushrooms grew from their corpses, consuming the blood and infecting the living, eating them inside out.

The rock hound consumed debris, rotating boulders around itself and wielding them like giant, telekinetic sledgehammers. Monsters turned to pulp wherever it went. The earth shifted to accommodate it, and any creature that got too close was viciously mauled to death.

In comparison, Chris' human form was almost tame, but that would have been inaccurate. They fought with such ferocity that calling it bestial would be underselling it. I watched through a reflection as their arm was torn off, only for them to stick a wooden construct thrown over by the forest-spirit-shell into the bleeding wound, then tearing an insectoid head off with the prosthetic.

My spirit hummed, and I shifted my body backwards. At the same time, I lunged forward, leaning low, the spear shooting at the attacker and digging a hole through its center of mass before I could even identify the creature.

Blood trickled from a new, shallow cut on my forehead, but I ignored it. The pain didn't matter. My mind focused on the perception of the reflections around me. I stepped through one, then slashed a usurper that was attempting to stab Matt in the back in half.

A moment later, I teleported again, to Emilia's side. I fought harder, gritting my teeth, bearing the pain and exhaustion, as the warrior paused her fighting, turning her back to the horde. The ground around me turned liquid as I cut and stabbed through the horde of bodies, then the stones flattened.

Here, right next to Ann, the buzz of magic was deafening. The power was so great any mundane human could have seen it as a blue haze hanging in the air. The runes absorbed it like a sponge, glowing with magical fire. Ann's hair billowed in the torrent of power, her eyes seemingly ablaze, and her voice thundering across the battlefield.

She drew another rune, the magic lighting up the air, the mana spiking into the sky like a beacon.

Five more minutes of fighting passed, my body growing weary and exhausted. [Mirror Mind] combined with the fragments of talents from the network and the effect of [Precipice] and my spearwork improved faster than it ever did before. My mind was clear, empty of any extraneous thoughts. There was only me and the horde.

I shifted an incoming claw. It slid along the length of my spear's handle, digging into another monster's neck, while I thrust into the original attacker's eye.

[Momentum Shift has reached (High)!]

Learning at prodigious speeds, my movements became even cleaner, more perfect, with less margin of error. I optimized every tiny adjustment, guided by my hard work, years of practice, the whispers of a nascent spirit, the movements of my old master, and the talents all my friends had gifted me.

My Qi shifted, my spear moved. I advanced.

[Spear Technique - Fundamentals has reached (Great)!]

The quality of my fighting changed again. Now, my technique was able to keep up with my physical power. Qi flooded my weapon as the days of hunting and fighting yielded epiphanies. My movements were near-flawless, my spear reaping life after life after life.

Minutes ticked by and I was unable to track them. There was nothing except the spray of blood across the flattened ground, the assistance my friends sometimes needed, and the movements of steel through flesh.

Air entered and left my lungs in great amounts, my chest heaving like bellows. Qi coursed through me like a raging river. It felt like I was holding my breath even though I fought with all my spirit. The world was clear-

Then it broke.

At some point, we had finished circling the rift. From up above, there was a great, flattened ring, full of runes and the glow of magic up above it. I could see it because one of Matt's cuts sprayed blood high enough into the sky to give me a partial bird's eye perspective.

As the droplet came crashing back down to the earth, so did my awareness. Suddenly, I was seeing the world through my own two eyes again. Sensations other than combat returned.

The usurpers' flood had stopped, finally, a wave of mana rushing out and holding them at bay.

The weaker ones were torn right apart by the magical energy. Ann chanted a final few words, her voice hoarse. Her hands flicked through a final two sigils. Then, she stood up, her legs shaking almost as much as the world around us.

She walked over to me.

She laid her hand on my cheek.

"Hey, love?" Ann croaked, eyes tired and voice strained, "I'll take a nap now."

Then she collapsed into my arms like a puppet with its strings cut, leaving a single, smudged, pale handprint in the layer of caked blood covering my face.

The ritual, though, was another story.

Its power only swelled. The mana from the air trickled in more. It was a working of magic on an absolutely unprecedented scale. For a brief moment I had a thought. This must be what an archmage's spell looked like, wasn't it?

More and more mana poured into the ritual. Like liquid sunshine, the magical energy coalesced from the sky, crashing down with a physical weight, and empowering the runes. It gathered, like the selling of an ocean before a tsunami. The mana grew so thick it was no longer a mist, but a collection of solid crystals hanging in the air above the runes like permanently suspended snowflakes.

Then, all at once, it stopped.

The everpresent humming of magic in the air grew silent. It was so quiet. No screeches from the monsters, no sounds of blood or battle of magic.

I heard my heart beat. Felt my blood rush through my ears. Heard a breath enter my lungs.

When I finished breathing in, the world turned black and white. All colour leached from it. Matt's pink hair turned a dull grey. The sky was no longer lilac but a dull white. My own golden glow was stifled down to a colourless smudge, too.

"Ah," Ann murmured sleepily from in my arms. "The spell is called 'Chromatic Aberration', by the by."

Another whole second ticked by after she spoke, before the world shifted again.

Like a torrential wave, magic spilled forth. It was in volumes great enough to be absolutely horrifying. It was a wave great enough to eclipse all other senses. For a brief moment, I was blind and deaf and tasted nothing but dry ash. I could faintly feel my feet leave the ground as I was tossed into the sky, my whole form wrapped tightly around Ann.

The world spun, and I could not tell where I was anymore. I was weightless, yet crushed from all directions by the sheer volume of magic. For a moment, it felt like my skin was heated up from friction, as though ropes of ethereal power dragged across it.

Then again, it turned into a frigid cold, as if my entire being was tossed into an icy bath.

The mana was so dense it seemed to ionize, losing cohesion and shape. It grew so chaotic, that some of it shifted its alignment into what seemed like almost pure power and poured into my golden well.

[Golden Wellspring Qi Purity increased to (Superior)!]

And the flood was over. It left me gasping for air. In two seconds, both my wells were refilled to about half full. The mana had finally passed me by, and I opened my eyes, finding myself a few dozens meters in the air. Quickly, I spun my body, summoning ethereal platforms of Qi under my feet. They wavered a little, the residual mana seeming to drag them along, but I managed to hold them in place and stand in the sky with the rest of my party.

In front of us, the mana slammed into the rift. It was like a blizzard, crystals of raw power digging into the shard of reality, overwhelming the corrupting influence it had on this realm. We watched as the other side, alien and strange, was twisted into something more akin to eden.

Green trees and grass sprouted as the edges of the rift twisted, growing more narrow, the empty space filling in. Inch by inch, metre by metre, the dimensional gap was closing.

It went from towering, to the size of a building, then shrunk down until it was barely person sized. Then, it shrunk a little more, the storm of mana finally beginning to die down a little.

Until a hand poked through the gap.

It was small, like that of a human. It sported wickedly sharp black fingertips, attached to a three fingered red appendage, with an oversized, bulbous wrist. Through the rift, that was not only a little over a metre tall, stepped a figure.

The creature had to duck a little to pass through. It had four of those arms, each of its joints slightly bulbous, looking oversized for its thin appendages. Its head was spherical and

almost frog-like, but somehow simultaneously sharp and spherical. Its eyes were large, protruding, and entirely black orbs, four of them. Its mouth was filled with razor sharp teeth.

On its alien, emaciated body, it wore... a black suit. With a suit jacket, a waistcoat, even a tie and a folded up little napkin in the breast pocket. There was a watch attached to the collar with a golden chain. Its ticking was quiet, yet I heard it even from where I stood.

The thing took a deep breath from two thin slits on its sharp, frog-face. One of its hands was still stuck in the rift, that was now almost entirely closed. In fact, it was only a small circle around the usurper's wrist that remained.

It was small, somewhere around a rather small human adult. It was thin, like its muscles were underdeveloped. And yet... somehow, looking at it gave me goosebumps. There was deep seated malice in that eternally smiling face.

Those pits of black that served as its eyes swerved around the battlefield, surmising the extent of the carnage. Meanwhile, it seemed to hum an almost peaceful, contemplative, and deeply disturbing tune.

Soon, the eyes landed on us. "Ah," the creature spoke. Its voice was sharp, hissy. "You up there. Hail, fighters. Are you the ones that closed this rift?" It blinked, slowly. "Ah, you must be. There is no one else around."

It looked behind itself. "Oh. I should say. Almost closed." It wiggled the hand stuck in the dimensional gap, as if to show off. "See? All open. No harm done. Now. How about you all simply behave and hand over all your energy until the rift is rebuilt? No harm no foul, that way."

The words from its mouth were polite but nonsensical. I blinked. While my eyes were closed, I noticed something. To my gateway perception, I felt a connection with this thing. Stronger than anything I had ever seen before. This thing... held a gateway more powerful than the black-flame giant.

"Cat got your tongue?" it asked. "Come on. Say something."

One of those hands extended forward, grasped the air, and pulled. A moment later, it held Emilia by the neck. "Come on. *Defenders of Eden, speak.*"