

Chapter 81: Effort

An attack from a raindrop and the shadows. The first used water to fight, probably. Maybe even rain. The other was shadow or mud, it was almost impossible to tell the difference in that split second, and both would allow them to step through the muddy, dark ground beneath me.

Bending my Qi, I forced my torso backward, barely evading the knife coming at my face and watching it sail through where my head had just been. I saw the silhouette of the man who swung it, a gruff human covered in scars, with a scraggly beard, unruly, wet hair and bloodlust in his eyes.

Unfortunately, the move messed with my footing. The hand sliced against Ann's barriers, and would've broken through in a moment, but settled for the much faster move of Grabbing my ankle, and dragging forward.

Before a second had passed, I felt my back slam into the ground, spikes of hardened shadow threatening to dig into my skin before Liam forced them back down. Instead, mud and stone were the only things that awaited me.

The muck seeped into my open wounds, eliciting a hoarse scream, since the impact blew all the air out of my lungs. The pain made my vision flash white for a moment, and the very instant it came back, a knife was already being stabbed toward my eye again.

'What's with everyone going for my eyes?!'

The thought lasted a brief moment, before I jerked my head to the side. The knife plunged into the ground, but a moment later, shadows wrapped themselves around my neck and *squeezed*.

My attempts to take another breath were quickly interrupted, and I ended up choking on empty air, being pulled a bit deeper into the muck. Every bit of my body ached, and the compression on my throat was strong enough to make my neck creak.

Then, a second later, the shadows lifted, Liam wrangling control of them into his arms again. I quickly activated [Reflecion] on the next stab coming for my face, and the returned slash was quick enough to leave a wound on my attacker's wrist.

Enough time passed for Matt and Ann to explode into the fight - very literally.

In an instant, petals and fire consumed my immediate area, while Marie dashed in to pick me up and drag me out. The bright light briefly drove the shadows away, forcing them to take shape.

A serpent-folk stood in the darkness, red tongue flickering across bronze scales. Her long, scaled tail slithered, already propelling her forward rapidly through the mud, the golden jewellery attached to her scales tinkling as she slithered forward.

The man clashed with Matt, whose sword slid off his dagger. A storm of petals deflected the second stab, headed for his gut.

For but an instant, we held the stalemate, then Trevor and Emilia pounced, smashing at the man. The rogue, however, simply vanished. Reappearing from another raindrop to slash at me.

I quickly raised my spear to stop the swing.

He was using just a dagger, but the force of the attack was nothing short of calamitous. The blow rang down heavily enough to send my bones shaking, and slammed me out of Marie's grasp, instead landing on the floor again.

Only our leader's quick intervention with her own shortsword stopped me from losing my head.

Then, the snake was upon me again - the shadows around me turned into twisted claws, grasping hands with fingers sharp as knives. The serpent directed them, in a bizarre act that could be borne from Qi or Mana. I even heard her hum, in a bastardized incantation.

In a moment, the claws came down.

All but one dissolved away, pained screams tearing forth from Liam's throat and mine. The rogue was wrestling the snake for control of the shadows - and she was trouncing him. The serpent was certainly at wellspring rank, probably at a higher step than me, too, and still used mana to enhance her attacks.

Liam was already crying tears of blood from exertion, yet my wound was much more mundane.

Sharp, knife-like fingers tore into my thigh, where Liam had failed to dissolve them, and tore apart my flesh to the bone. I lashed out with my spear, dispelling the illusion, but the muck beneath me was already calamitously turned red.

My whole world flashed red. I could not have even reflected that attack, I just didn't have enough Qi. Despite being at wellspring rank, the march was taking a lot out of me, and I was already only barely hanging on.

Despite the horrendous pain, I forced myself to sense the area, at least. Something stirred next to me, sinister and hateful, and I rolled aside, instinctively stabbing back, and hitting only empty air. Whatever I was aiming at, the man I guessed, was horrendously flexible, bending away from my spear with an almost inhuman movement.

A low, hoarse chuckle resounded around me. "I thought this hunt would be harder."

The second voice was beautiful, almost enchanting. "Quite. But our timing was quite fortunate."

"Indeed, who would have thought that Renvil would be overrun so soon... I thought the tide would take some time to trigger?"

"Ah, we must simply be quite excellent at luring the monsters."

The fight had lulled for a moment as the voices spoke, all of us taking the time to regain our bearings, and some power. I ran threads of mirror Qi through my body, forcing my leg to move, and raising from the floor like a twisted marionette.

But the moment they spoke... all the fear in my heart was instantly replaced with boiling, bottomless fury.

I stabbed out at the shape most nearby to me, the man in dark blue clothes, and he twisted out of the way again. It was strange watching him, the way the raindrops coalesced, and moved once they hit his skin. Rather than flow to the floor, he seemed to be collecting them.

Not that I cared.

With a huge blast of Qi, my spear expanded, becoming one enormously long blade. I swiped it to the side in a motion that would bisect him, but the man just grinned and vanished.

He appeared behind me, quite a distance away, and stabbed forward with his dagger. Suddenly, all the water that had hit him reappeared from behind his back, flowing along his blade and forming a long needle of ice.

Instantly, burning pain erupted in the same leg the shadow snake had already hurt, the needle piercing into my thigh. With another quick movement of Qi, he broke off the bit that

was not inside my leg, and recalled the rest of the ice into water before I even had a chance to retaliate.

A sinister grin was on his face as he danced even further back.

Grimacing, I stepped forward, chasing after him. The shadows around me roiled, snaking across the ground and began reaching out, but were then beaten down. I trusted my party, and narrowed my focus.

Everything vanished except for the man.

His steps slowed down in my vision, the raindrops freezing in midair. For a moment, I thought it was my focus, but then the drops turned into tiny spikes of ice and flew at me.

I gritted my teeth, and quickly made my spear as wide as I could, hiding behind it like a shield, and watching the needles tinkle to the ground as they hit it. But by the time I moved forward again, the man was gone.

Instead, he was replaced with flashing pain in my side, his knife digging into the hole left behind by another icicle.

Another scream tore from my mouth, but the fury replaced the pain, and I lashed out with my spear. He dodged the blade, but was close enough for my fist to smack him in his mouth.

He tumbled back a step, then laughed hoarsely and spat out some blood. I was panting, desperately shoving the pain aside, while this fucker wasn't even out of breath.

"Serpent!" he suddenly shouted. "Target change! She's no longer a real danger!"

Then he vanished.

Ann.

It was all I could think of to turn, and right there, in the back of the party she stood.

Her hands were extended, wisps of steam flowing off them because of the intense heat concentrated in summoning a fireball. There, only a few steps from her, the man stood.

I saw the water behind him move again, snaking its way onto his dagger to create the same kind of needle he'd made to stab my leg.

Ann would die.

She was a mage. It would just... pierce her heart, and that would be that. Death. Right then and there.

I had to save her.

My mind raced, looking for a way to get to her. Liam could step through the shadows, and the man could step through the rain, but there was no metal for me to step through with my golden Qi.

So how? How to get there?!

Then, I remembered. Right at the start of the fight. I'd thought the man moved through reflections...

What were raindrops, if not tiny mirrors?

The moment the thought appeared in my head, I saw it. Every single droplet in the sky mirrored the world around it. I saw myself in a hundred kaleidoscopic refractions, my face smeared with blood, my body torn and twisted. I saw Matt and Liam and all the others hold the snake down. Eric was close to me.

I gazed at him through the reflection, and he nodded.

An instant later, he crumpled to the floor, spent.

Every drop of divinity in his body flooded through me, fueling my broken muscles with power.

With an iron will, I drew on my mirror Qi, emptying my entire core within a moment.

The world shifted, and I was no longer where I had been before. I stood, in between the assassin and Ann.

[Reflection has reached (Intermediate)!]

Then, everything turned to blinding pain for an instant, my vision going blank. It faded a moment later, my brain overwhelmed with the signals. I looked down, and...

Oh. There was an icy dagger, right through my chest. How unpleasant.

Despite it, I gritted my teeth.

The assassin wasn't far from me. I'd stepped closer to him than to Ann.

With a push of will, I grabbed his shoulder. He couldn't step through the rain if I held onto him.

The expression on his face shifted. From cruel confidence into surprise, glee, then suddenly more surprise and a hint of worry.

I slammed my forehead into his nose, breaking it in a moment.

“ARGH!” he screamed in pain, grasping at his face, but I wasn’t done.

With a broken body, I shifted my mirror Qi, forcing my hand to move.

“You want this back, fucker?!” I asked, my hand wrapping around the ice in my chest. I broke off part of it, and stabbed it through his eyes. **“Get away from her!!”**

The man staggered back a step, screaming with pain, but I didn’t let go of his shoulder, my hand like a vice grip on him. The extra distance let me summon my spear again though, which I promptly drove into his stomach.

Water shifted, and a layer of ice went to protect him, but it was never gonna be enough.

Every drop of golden Qi rushed through my body, into the tip of my weapon. His shield of ice, made from thousands of raindrops shattered within a moment. My spear went into his gut and back out the other side.

The Qi drove through him, tearing his insides apart.

A moment later, the light in his eyes went out.