

Chapter 107: Fragile World

It turns out not all rifts were made equal. In fact, the vast majority of rifts were small, tiny tears.

The danger was that they did not greatly enjoy *staying* small. Even as I watched the tiny tear in the air, it expanded. A hand reached through, and I felt my heart stop in my chest.

Before I had the chance to experience any more fear, Matt moved. Instantly, there was a storm of flowers. It lasted only a single moment, then it crashed into that hand - a bornin's hand. Instantly, a red mist spilled forth, and Matt's Qi crashed into the rift.

It closed under that assault of pink and plum smell. He sheathed his sword of interlocked flower petals, and slowly turned towards us. The motion was just gentle enough to hide the gritting of his teeth and look of absolute fury on his face. During it, his face slowly faded into a neutral mask, then he tilted it lightly, and gave a kind smile.

"Ah, I kind of overdid it. Sorry, guys," he said, holding that same kind expression.

Slowly, second by second my hairs laid down on my skin again. The world... it all felt so fragile. In fact...

I put a hand to my chest, and *felt* my Qi in my cores. It was bubbling slightly. Ripples spread across the top of my golden sea, and my path through the skies of reflection seemed shaky. My footsteps were vibrating as though it was a set of hanging bridges.

And my heart quivered a little, too. It felt like I'd taken too much caffeine. Everything felt raw, fragile, sharp. Ann squeezed my hand slightly and it made me feel as though my skin was paper thin and about to tear.

What a strange thing. It was almost like I could reach out... and rip the world right apart. For a moment, I even extended my hand forward, fingers curling as if to pull at the air- then I stopped myself.

I turned to Ann. "That's dangerous."

She gave me a slow, controlled nod, as if any faster movement was too much. "Yeah. It fades."

Following her lead, I took slow breaths, slow steps. The feeling of the air and my clothes felt so scratchy. I could feel each inch of my throat every time I took a breath. No wonder Matt's battle lust had taken over so easily.

It was almost impossible to keep a calm head, but I forced all that down with iron discipline. My feelings settled slightly as I took hold of them. My skin less raw, the world less wound with stress.

We took a moment, acclimatising partially to this new world, each drawing our defenses a little tighter. It was important, now that even the wind felt hostile.

Eventually, Ann spoke again. "Let's continue onwards," she suggested.

I nodded and took a step, the crunch of the forest path under my soles feeling far too loud and poignant. My mind seemed to wanna hold onto every single little detail, like a scared animal scurrying about at great speeds.

Not that it was easy to stay calm. There were rifts out there, opening and growing right now. And there would be more. A war would start between those trying to close them, and those opening them. How long would the eclipse proper last this time? How-

Ann grasped my hand again. "Hey," she whispered. "Close your eyes. Just focus on walking. I can take the rest."

Almost without thinking I listened. It was such routine, since I had a habit of cultivating while walking, this really was just like an invitation to do that. So, I closed my eyes, shutting out the outside world.

It didn't come as easy as it usually did this time. The world itself felt frigid on my skin, the wind like needles, and the ground like sandpaper against my feet. Hell, I could even still faintly feel light against my closed eyelids despite knowing it was perpetual night out there.

But I kept them closed, and, ever so slowly, those sensations faded away. Minutes of silent walking ticked by, not interrupted by anything. In fact, I think at some point, I unconsciously put up Qi barriers over my ears, and the world grew a little quieter.

Slowly, ever so faintly, it grew bearable. Until, eventually, I found a gentle brightness against my eyelids. I opened them, and found myself in the golden depths.

Honestly, opening my eyes to that familiar scene of dull sunshine and pretty coral was comforting. The feeling of floating weightlessness helped me forget about the way my skin had felt just minutes before. Like paper about to tear.

Now, I was simply floating in a soft, golden embrace. Weightless. Free.

I breathed, even though I was “underwater”, and dove deeper. Deeper and deeper and deeper. Until the sunlight winked out and I found myself in blissful darkness.

This was my realm. I felt safe, and knew I was. Out there, Ann was walking with me, and I trusted her with my life, much less preventing me from stumbling as some distant part of my mind moved my legs.

Luckily I was used to cultivating like this. I slowly converted the absorbed energy into golden Qi, which worked even for the influence from beyond the rifts. It would have been a little troublesome if that turned me into a usurper, but I was safe.

So, for a while, I simply swam deeper down, until all that was left was silence and darkness and weightlessness.

A long while passed like that.

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When I opened my eyes again, it was still dark outside, as it would be for weeks, but I felt better.

My skin still felt strange, and so did the whole world, but after being given some respite, I was more prepared to handle it. Emilia took it in stride, always having been brave, and Ann seemed to deal with it almost routinely, but besides them, everyone was struggling at least a little bit.

Even Chris’ rocky wolf-like shell seemed to shiver occasionally, whenever I saw it weave in and out of the forest. But we bore with it, and marched.

When the time came, we slept. There was no longer any point of keeping track of morning and evening. We simply marched on through the darkness. And marched. And marched.

Occasionally, we’d run into some minor fights, but by now... the kind of monsters we found outside of the main hordes and the powerful rifts were easy. Well, that wasn’t to say we couldn’t get hurt.

Emilia sometimes stumbled, her footing not quite sure after losing a leg yet, as was expected. Reya had trouble controlling the stream of divinity, sometimes pumping out far more divine power than necessary, and sometimes only bringing a thin stream to bear. The barriers between realms fluctuated.

It made her dizzy, too. She threw up more than once when we received some lighter wounds, and the world shifting seemed to treat her pretty roughly generally.

The same went for Iryel, the angel, when he finally showed up.

He looked like shit. Even more than usual. His appearance could barely be called a landing. Rather than flying it was more like his wings made a clumsy parachute, making him slam into the ground rather than splat into a little more than a spear.

Rising from the impact, he coughed dirt and mud. His eyebags were even deeper now, and frankly, he looked like he hadn't slept in days. Tattered wings and robes, and hell, he was even covered in some minor injuries.

"You look like shit," I greeted the angel.

Iryel shot me a look between astonishment, offense, and great humor, then laughed, then hacked out a cough. "Hahahaha- ack!!" He held his chest for a few seconds, then flashed me a slight smile. "Lovely to see you again as well, Miss Bellum."

"Reya, can you heal him a little?" Matt asked our cleric, who nodded, and laid a pair of shaky hands on the ragged angel. His wounds mended a little, and we spoke as his treatment went on.

"So," I asked, "you here for any reason?"

He gave me a somewhat rueful look. "No good news, I fear."

"When's it ever," Emilia commented with a scoff. "Just give it to us straight, holy man."

With a faint smirk, he leaned back. "Not dealing with sycophants is lovely. So many nobles need a gentle delivery of their evacuation notice when I'm dragging them away from their death. So averse to life."

Slowly, he drew a deeper breath, even taking the time to wipe some dirt off his face. Or at least smear it around. "You've grown into an elite team by now. Two events of note have happened. One is a one-handed swordswoman asking to meet with you, miss Fio." He held up his hands, stopping me from interrupting.

"Surprisingly, to both of us I assume, she is doing so *politely*. In fact, she was determined to seek you out herself, until I asked her to stay put. She seemed amicable to help, in fact, so long as I delivered this request to you."

My face hardened a little. "I will try to heed it."

Iryel nodded. "I am glad to hear that, since she is currently placed in the same city the divines would have sent you to defend. Almost evacuated, just west of the capital, there is Inu. It will fall to the horde, but we must hold it until the innocents can run. We have archmage Orvan stationed there, too."

I tilted my head. "He won't be able to hold it?"

Mournfully, Iryel shook his head. "Archmages have their limits. Numbers are one, exceptionally powerful foes another. Orvan's spells cause massive amounts of destruction, too, so the fighting will take place further from the city walls. Otherwise, he might accidentally break the town before the usurpers can."

"Ah," I said. "That's... surprising." I turned to the others. "What do you think?"

Matt's knuckles were white as he grabbed his sword handle tight. His face was a stony mask, and his words came out hard pressed. "Yeah. I'm ready for another fight."

"What else would I do, Princess?" Emilia asked with a smile. "Let me beat 'em down. It's what I do best."

Liam gave a soft shrug, seemingly uncaring, while Reya just faintly nodded. As long as people were helped by this, they were fine with the idea. Chris, too, seemed to like it, ready to face more of the horde. And, perhaps, eager to pick up a new shell capable of speech.

Ann, for her part, laid a hand on my shoulder. "We're ready, Fio. Whenever you are."

A series of nods later, I turned to Iryel. I smiled, a faint, fragile smile. "Yeah. What's one more fight, right?"

The angel looked at me for a long, quiet moment. His wounds were better now, returning some of that calm, aloof presence. I held his gaze for the long, quiet moment.

All the way until he turned away.

Softly, he clicked his tongue. "Alright," he admitted. "I do not know what I expected, but... I am sure you will do good things for the city. All of you. Regardless of what anyone else says, the divines are grateful for your help in these trying time."

I held out a hand to him, and he took it. I raised him from the ground, placing the unkempt man back on his own feet. He stood, if a little shakily. Once more, he met my eyes.

My words came out calmly. None of the shaking in my voice that I felt, not at all reflecting the knot in my throat. Apprehensively, I made perhaps the worst decision I would ever make.

“Lead the way, Iryel.”