

Chapter 153: Hope

While Eden was safer now that the eclipse had passed, that by no means erased all the impact it had. Multiple cities laid in ruins, and the usurpers had claimed far, far more land for themselves. They'd claimed gateways that had been in those cities, and established gigantic nests, breeding more and more forces to send against the cities.

And, with Orvan dead, there was a lack of combatants in Eden. Of course, there were the other archmages and angels, but their talents were different. Healing, spatial magic, divination... they were powerful, but there was simply no other archmage who could throw a meteor at the problem.

Saif was the only war mage left. And while she was skilled at wreaking havoc, she was just one spirit. She could not be everywhere at once. Meanwhile...

I clenched my fist. I almost could. I had Ion, my other self, who could be here and on Neamhan. Emilia was with me, too, and she was approaching the transition from wellspring to maelstrom, driven forward by the network. Eric and her would be working tightly together, while I'd be mostly on my own.

Well, on my own. I almost snickered at the thought. Cass and Astraeus were with me, after all, and perfectly capable of contributing. With my golden glass affinity, I wouldn't even need Lyria, the spatial archmage, to transport me around. My sphere of influence was vast enough that I could move anywhere I needed to be myself.

"Well then, Fio. I believe that takes care of all the formalities. Are you ready to fight?" Iryel asked me.

Taking a deep breath, I rolled my shoulder. The new levels still felt a little odd, my muscles a bit stiff from the procedure, but there was no way to get used to new power faster than using it. "Yeah," I told Iryel. "Point me at the problem."

He smiled, in a faint way. It reached his eyes, and even the deep bags under them softened a bit. "Alright. Here's the deal..." he started. And then he talked. We walked to a room with a large map that had most of Eden written out, the places where there were nests, specifically strong usurper champions and their locations, as well as strategic places they wanted me to reclaim.

Effectively, I'd be a strike crew. Get in, remove the problem, get out. I'd get to reclaim all the gateway fragments I found, since there was nothing else to really do with them. Of course, the divines would love for me to give them back, but... no. The contribution reward from doing so was worth less than simply upgrading my own gateway.

When I mentioned that there was a chance of me gaining another duplicate, Iryel was quickly convinced that letting me keep them was a strategic asset. "For the duration of this mission, Chris, as well as Ru's angel, Trichtera, will be part of your squad, Fio. You'll be in charge of moving them where they need to be, and they will assist you in clearing out points of interest."

"Ru's angel?" I raised an eyebrow. "I thought Ru hated me."

Iryel gave a helpless shrug. "I believe he does, to some degree. Yet, his angel is mortal. She simply wants to see her home reclaimed. Additionally, you are a warrior of some renown, hence her respect for you."

At that, Emilia grinned. "Hear that, princess? Some renown, they say. Maybe we should get fancy titles here, too, eh, Lady Rad-"

I smacked a hand onto her mouth. "There will be absolutely none of that," I said. "I'm Fio, I won't answer to anything else. Emilia, stop licking my hand, I'll take it off if you promise not to say it."

The woman gave me a grin wide enough to spread to her eyes, but eventually nodded. I took my hand away, wiping it on my pants, then gave a sigh. "Alright. Iryel, where is this angel?"

"Trichtera will be here in a few minutes, when archmage Lyria picks her up from the frontlines," he explained. "She has already been briefed on the plan, so now it is your turn."

And then, he proceeded to talk.

I sighed, listened, and in the end, there really was only one detail that mattered. The city they wanted me to reclaim. It was far north, not one I had been in before, and part of the beastblood enclaves. A smaller town called Fyrestadt. I smiled, wryly, waited until Trichtera arrived, then picked up the grumpy woman, Emilia, Eric and Chris, and we headed off.

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"To your left," Chris called calmly, and Emilia spun on her toes, slamming her mace into another zurulen. The bitter cold nipped at her skin, digging its claws into her bones. It was biting, but she bore with it.

The crystal giants were different here, too. Rather than being made of stone and gems, they were made of ice. Parts of it were almost perfectly clear, to the point where she could see through it, which made them hard to spot despite their size. But the aberrant version also made them brittle. Her mace slammed into the thing, and the ice splintered.

Once upon a time, she had been at the core formation stage of cultivation. Back then, she had fought sparingly, knowing her power would take time and focus to regain. She was lower level, her skills were less developed, and she was altogether weaker. Now, though?

At wellspring, Qi bubbled out of her. The rocks in the ground, even underneath all the snow and ice felt right at her fingertips. Magic spilled from her almost passively, flowing into the stone, putting it under her command, malleable with just a thought. It was a mini-domain she'd constructed, an ability to automatically make use of all her overflow to gradually increase her advantage over the course of a battle.

And the battle had been on for a while. All around them, the ground was littered with broken bits of usurper bodies. It had started the moment Fio took them there - a very bizarre experience not unlike stepping through a gateway into Eden - and was still ongoing. The rocks felt soft and stretchy by now, infused with layers upon layers of her power.

When her mace struck, the ice splintered.

When her mace struck, the ground roared upwards, and a spike of rock tore the thing in two.

It was barely even any effort. Barely harder than a normal strike. Powered simply by the Qi she regenerated. She was rather solidly at the peak of wellspring, and felt the way that all the talents Fio shared with her pushed her along.

Emilia grinned, a wild, happy grin. She loved it. She loved strength, she loved the power and movement of it all. She loved bashing the monsters heads in with her shield. She loved facing brix, like in that first nest all that time ago, and simply shattering legions of them with a single strike.

She grinned, brightly, as she slammed her way through the onslaught of usurpers. There were hundreds, thousands of them in the Town. The nest had devoured three gateways - not much, when compared to a larger city, and yet, it was massive. A towering growth of dark, oily threads.

It was a nest in the truest sense. Threads of sticky, flexible, *living* tissue wrapped around the rubble of the city. Broken buildings ensnared in a trap, ready to snap shut on any adventurers. And yet, despite all of that...

Emilia breathed out, her breath fogging in the cold. Her blood rushed through her veins. They were in the north, the ground covered with snow and ice, her boots crunching with every step she took, and yet. The rock rose up from the ground to support her steps, launching her into the sky. She grappled a vulture-lion looking thing right out of the air, slamming it into paste with her bare hands.

The rubble of broken buildings reacted to her wishes. The town itself moved, shaking off the snow and webbing, flowing and rumbling as it fought back for its own freedom. It was as if some ancestral spirit reanimated the buildings and made them devour their destroyer. But Emilia knew better.

It was just her. Her own strength, alongside her companions. Doing what she did best.

Breaking shit.

CW: Mention of Suicide.

Ion stepped out from the gateway and onto Neamhan. It was funny. She had been there before, of course. She had spent basically an entire life there. Even Fio had summoned her there before. And yet, despite that, it felt unfamiliar.

The air that was clean with a chemical aftertaste, and stank of smog outside. The cloudy sky, grey rays of light drifting lazily down from above, the sun covered by clouds of pollution.

It felt so much like home, and yet not home at all. She took a deep breath. The mechanisms for this kind of duplication were a little wonky, dealing with parallel universes and all, but they were something that Ion had more insight into than Fio. It was something she understood, at her core.

There were infinite worlds out there. An unlimited amount. That meant that there were, consequently, unlimited worlds in which Fio died. In which she was a different person, in which she failed and got killed by the usurpers. Worlds in which Ann mourned her death,

worlds in which she forgot, and worlds in which she died to the Tiger or the blackflame giant or the kamaitachi or a simple car crash.

Ion was from one of those worlds.

She'd died.

She'd seen Ann cry over her cooling body.

She'd lost her memories of Eden, and then thrown herself off a building on Neamhan.

And now, she was here again. Smelling the smoke. Knowing what she'd done. It was... Strange. A mixture of hope and terror, that she simply transitioned to a new realm after death. That she could begin and cease to exist whenever needed, withdrawn into that slip-space in between.

Ion took a long, shaky breath. Slowly, she steadied herself. For the moment she'd look Ann in the eyes again. Not her Ann. A person who'd never seen her die. But still, Ann.

Somehow, that was hopeful. Somehow, there was a chance. If she could return to this reality, perhaps, if even just one of the infinite Fios grew strong enough, she could return to her Ann. Maybe, if she got lucky, everything would someday be alright. Maybe.

And then, she stepped out of the gateway hall. In front of her, Matt, Liam, Reya and Rae were already walking back up the steps. Her teacher, who was not *her* teacher, looked back for a moment and gave a soft, awkward smile. Then he turned back around and walked upwards.

Following along with mechanical motions, Ion did the same. She walked down the hallway, up the steps, towards the chattering voices of people she'd known in another life. Memories she now had back, that stood in stark conflict with the end of her life. Another deep breath, and she pushed open the door, face to face with people she'd once forgotten.

It wasn't the first time back on Neamhan. But it was the first time there wasn't a problem. Nothing for her to stab, no one to kill. Just... her and everyone else.

"You good?" Matt asked her. "You've been standing and staring for a sec there," he noted.

"Right," she said, shaking her head. "Sorry. I'm... good, mostly."

"Fio?" Ann asked, confused. "Weren't you supposed to stay on Eden?"

Her voice was so soft it almost broke Ion's heart. She forced her lips into an awkward, inadequate smile. "She is," she said. "I'm not... *your* Fio. I'm the duplicate from another world. For ease, call me Ion."

Ann's face fell slightly, and it hurt. "Oh," she said. "I see."

"I do have good news," I said. "Fio has negotiated for Neamhan to get a contribution altar. So you can grab all the rewards you deserve, Ann. Marie, too, of course," she added.

At that, the mage's face lit up. No gift like more spells. "Yes! That is good news!" Her smile was just the same as Ion remembered. "How do we do it?"

"Just grab my hand," Ion said with a crooked smile. "That's all it takes."

Without hesitation, Ann moved her hand, quickly floated over the couch, and grabbed her hand. The mage's touch was warm, a hint of the fire hiding underneath her skin. Ion swallowed, even as Ann muttered to herself.

"Amazing, it really works just like a keeper altar," she whispered. "Though it's Cass helping me make the selection," she noted more loudly.

Ion smiled as she ran through her thoughts, then shook her head. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, but smelled Ann's perfume. It hurt. There was a lot of longing still in her heart, but she knew it was not the same. Despite everything, she brought her iron will to bear, and mastered herself.

She just stood there, a little awkwardly, as Ann made her choices. Then, suddenly, the mage locked up as the levels set into her. A moment passed where she leaned on Ion for support, and the duplicate helped her remain standing. Then another moment passed.

The two locked eyes, and Ann gave a bright smile, wrapping Ion in a hug. "Thank you," she said. "This is awesome!"

For a second, Ion stood there, shellshocked. Then, very slowly, despite everything, she returned the hug. It lasted a handful of seconds, then Ann pulled away, already excited to play with her new abilities. "Yeah, no problem," she said.

Marie shot the duplicate a look that spoke of faint amusement, shaking her head. "Young adults, eh?" she asked, then stepped forward. Ion glanced at Ann for another moment as Marie moved to grab her shoulder.

Yeah, maybe... Maybe she could live with this world. Maybe seeing Ann be happy was enough. Maybe she could allow herself a little bit of happiness and hope.