

Chapter 141: Magic

Ann was having some trouble. A lot of trouble, even. There were three arrowholes through her, mostly in non-vital areas, but they still rather hurt. Blood flowed from her wounds in a steady trickle, well, more like a steady flood.

She grimaced. A pulse of Mana flowed from her heart, scanning through the area, touching upon every leaf, every piece of bark, every blade of grass.

A disturbance. A blur, streaking towards her.

She contorted her body, speeding up the motion by puppeteering herself with threads of magic, and the arrow, just barely, whistled past her, grazing her cheek. Of course, it was poisoned, the Qi burning in her wounds.

In a heartbeat, a flame sparked from her hand, streaking through the air and exploding where the arrow came from, hitting nothing. The wind whispered, as Eagleeye spoke.

“C’mon girl. I don’t wanna drag this out. Win or give up already. Hunting humans is no fun.”

The voice echoed in the forest, bouncing off of trees and branches, the direction scattered. It drifted into Ann’s ear with the wind and was gone a second later. She snarled.

“Then stop fighting,” she growled.

A sigh drifted to her. “No can-do, sorry. Just business. Ain’t no one else got the money for my treatments,” she said.

This was something that Ann had found out over their fight, because it was the only times she got a chance to fight back. Eagleeye was sick. Horribly, horribly sick. She would have died years ago if her body wasn’t in stasis, in the mirror. In fact, she could only come back to Neamhan now, because there was Qi, and cultivation allowed her to survive.

Just barely, though. She needed medicine, equipment, blood transfusions, everything Zinnic could throw at her. It was a shit relationship to be stuck in, but she couldn’t get out of it. It was Ann’s life... or hers.

Maybe Reya could heal her?

Ann didn't finish the thought, having to duck aside another arrow. It crashed through a half dozen slanted Mana barriers, deflecting off to the side where it "harmlessly" exploded a handful of trees.

The mage grimaced, lacing her Mana again. Threads of it wove into densely packed shields, a dozen constructs hovering around her, a storm of solid barriers that was just barely enough to weather the arrows coming her way.

She just couldn't find the archer. Ann was fighting as if blind. It was frustrating, but all she could do was set vast swathes of the forest on fire, but then, the nature of the cover simply changed. It went from leaves and foliage to thick smoke.

A dozen spells flicked out, trying to catch the elusive archer, but none found her. It was a battle of endurance, and Ann was found wanting. She was panting, bleeding, clutching at the Mana around her. The world obeyed her whims, her throat raw from chanting, her hands flickering out to form sigils, but it was simply not enough.

Another arrow came, barely flicked to the side, shattering half her barriers. She remade them, painstakingly weaving Mana threads until they were solid, making new barriers. Poison burned in her veins, and she cast a spell that manipulated her blood.

Yes, it was technically blood magic. Yes, that was technically forbidden. But it also made it so that thick globules of green-black, hissing blood dripped to the forest floor and her pain eased a little.

Magic was, in so many ways, limitless. Ann didn't have any singular element, any path she was locked into. The smoke in the forest was as much under her control as the leaves of the trees and the soil in the ground. She could manipulate the world as if clay, and yet she could not catch Eagleeye.

Another arrow, another deflection. The four rings around her heart ached, spinning as quickly as they could, dragging in Mana. The first unlocked it, the second condensed it, the third collected it, and the fourth produced it. Her mind led that ethereal, thin force, guiding it into solid shapes, manifesting it into elements, into minor minds.

Mental construct, mind magic, another forbidden one, allowed some sentience, and she created a dozen artificial smoke elementals to scour the forest for Eagleeye, only to have them instantly shot down.

Ann grit her teeth, and cast an invisibility spell after deflecting another arrow, then dropped to the floor. Another, silent casting, suppressed all sound around her. She darted into the undergrowth, running to find some space where she wasn't in a sightline.

A dagger slipped into her side, and she twisted, forcing the metal to grind against magically reinforced bones. A scream tore free from Ann's lip, and she reached out with her Burden of Lordship, causing a wave of immense gravitational power to crash down... and miss.

She clutched her side, stemming the tide of blood, and spat. "Fucking hell that hurts."

"Sorry," Eagleeye said, as genuinely as possible. "The poison was as painless as I could make it, yet you're still alive."

Ann frowned. "Fighting's a lot less fun when you don't wanna kill me."

Somehow, despite her foe being invisible, Ann could tell the archer shrugged. "Sorry," she said again. "It is what it is."

And then, another arrow hit Ann, sneaking between her rotating barrier to strike her thigh, digging a hole through the muscle, glancing bone. Ann screamed, again, using more blood magic, to the point where she was getting light headed.

"Sorry," Eagleeye repeated.

"Fucking piece of..." Ann cursed, then resumed her chanting, desperate to survive. The fight sucked. It wasn't fun in the slightest. More flames, more water jets, more blazing bolts of power tearing through the world, hitting nothing at all.

Until, all at once, the sky split open.

Ann was, for a moment, blinded. A radiant bolt of lightning slammed down, searing her vision white. The thunderclap rolled over her like a shockwave, tossing her back, making her ears ring. It was so loud she didn't even hear Eagleeye scream.

Rae stood there, spear in his hand, in front of a bloodied archer. He hummed, softly, stroking his beard. "Hmmm. How troublesome. I don't think you deserve to die," he said.

The archer looked at him with terror and pain and disgusting and fury all at once. She threw up, onto the floor, from having her body burnt, lichtenberg figures snaking their way across her skin.

Ann, for a moment, felt bad. But then, Rae just smiled. "Well. Now with those wounds, you might be able to win. Good luck, Ann. Kill her if you want to, or don't." A bolt of lightning, and Rae was off.

Eagleeye was still kneeling on the floor, her skin charred. She looked up at Ann, then took a shaky breath, spit some blood and broke out in a smile. "Well, fuck," she said, grimly. "This wasn't how I wanted this to go."

She looked almost sad, but then she pulled an arrow from her quiver, and the world shook. Qi dragged through the air, coalescing at the tip in a cascading spiral of venom and wind. And, for the first time, Ann saw it.

There was a thought that sparked in her head.

Mana was hers to control, just as Qi was Eagleeye's. It streaked through the air, drawing into her arrow. Ann manipulated no specific element, just the world itself. So, if she demanded it, what stopped her from manipulating the Mana in the world?

A mental barrier? Difficulty? Oh, please.

She was a genius. A prodigy. The kind of mage that appears once in a thousand years, then her talents were further enhanced by fragments from a half dozen archmages.

No, the world wouldn't deny her.

For the first time, Ann reached out, and commanded not her own Mana to form a ring, but the ambient in the world around her.

There was hesitation, the knowledge that it shouldn't listen, shouldn't obey, that it was not hers. But Ann disagreed. She was a mage. Every bit of Mana was hers. If the world wanted it, then the world could wait its turn.

Ann forced the issue. She commanded, her lips moving in words she, herself, didn't understand, but they came instinctually. They were the culmination of years of practice, of hard work. She breathed, and the world listened.

A tornado of magic roared into being around Ann. Mana screamed as she dragged it into herself, around her heart. Swirling, spinning, a disc of tiny, magical debris like the ring around a planet. It spun and swirled and coalesced.

And then, the arrow reached her.

It struck through her chest, tore out her heart, and Ann grinned a blood smile. Because, suddenly, it *didn't matter anymore*.

So what if she didn't have a heart? The Mana in the world screamed, the tornado doubled in intensity, and her lips moved, her hands danced. The whole world was a puppet and she the puppeteer. Magic danced as she beckoned, and more Mana flooded her chest.

More and ever more, until the magic was so dense it was visible. A thick haze of scintillating colours, and Ann, herself, being reborn in its midst. It gathered, collected, and crystallized, until, in her chest, there was a new heart. One made of magic, made of crystalline Mana, clear as glass, with a faint rainbow sheen.

Around it, five circles of scintillating magic roared, screamed their dominance. They danced and writhed, and Ann took a breath.

The holes in her body filled with magic light. Rainbow auroras glowing in beautiful, multicolour sheens. Ann, finally, after seeing what the fifth stage looked like only once... reached it.

She looked to the sky and touched the sun, and the heat was glorious.

[Congratulations! You have stolen the will of the world in your **Burning Passion**. You have ignited your infinite flame. Wish for something and watch magic do your bidding with your **Circle of Dominance**.]

Ann's eyes changed, with the same rainbow resonance of her crystalline heart, pumping blood through her. Eagleeye looked at her with mild horror, and yet, the archer nocked another arrow.

But the mage reached out. The Mana listened. Coalesced.

No longer did she weave a barrier, she simply wished it into being and the world listened. She didn't even feed it her Mana, all she used was willpower, and the environmental Mana listened. It coalesced into a scintillating barrier, almost invisible, like magical glass.

Ann smiled, dubbing it prismaglass in her mind, and watched as the arrow pinged off of it.

Eagleeye looked on, then lowered her bow. "Well," the older woman said, "shit."

When I got to Ann, the fight was already over.

There was a hole in the middle of her chest, filled with colourful glass, and I could see a crystalline heart beating in its middle. Her Mana was a storm, consuming the world around her in a storm of magic.

This fragment of reality, a temporary pocket dimension, was ripped apart at its constituent parts and dissolved into Mana. The trees disintegrated into less than ash as their molecules became magic, the ground was slowly evaporating away, adding to the streams of that radiant circle spinning in her chest.

Eagleeye knelt on the floor in front of her, and I saw the familiar traces of my master's lightning still arcing around her. She turned to face me with a bitter smile. "Oh," she said. "Tiger's dead, too, then?"

"Too?" I ask, arching an eyebrow.

She laughed a horrible, dark laugh. "Ah, yeah. Seeing as I'm facing my execution."

Ann looked at me, and smiled. Brightly, for a brief moment. Then, she withdrew her Mana. All of it flooded into the pounding heart in her chest, spinning among those ruinous circles. They glowed with a faint light that hid away all the destruction they could do. It was terrifying to think about, but a few more minor steps, and Ann would be able to throw spells like that meteor Orvan summoned.

"No," Ann says. "I don't think I wanna kill you."

The archer snorts. "What're my options? Don't kid around. Once you're out of here, Zinnic's fucked," she spat. "And if Zinnic is done for, I lose access to the treatments. And I fall apart, again. Nah. Just kill me."

"Do you have family?" Ann asked.

Eagleeye glowered. "Yeah," she said. "What's it to you?"

"Think they'd miss you?" Ann asked again.

At that, the woman frowned. "Yeah, they would," she said. "But so what? I've killed people before. Having family doesn't just absolve that."

I tilt my head at the conversation. She seems... surprisingly reasonable. But also very bitter. "How've you survived if cultivation can't heal you?"

She snorts. "I didn't. I was dying until the world changed. I could only cross over once I was able to get a core in this body, and that wasn't even. A wellspring isn't enough, nor is a

maelstrom." She spat blood. "No, all that's keeping me going is specialized Echo-resonance chambers. Stuff that you can't do, plain and simple."

And there, she's right. We don't have anyone with capabilities to handle Echo. But Zinnic... does? Have they been experimenting with it?

"Yeah," Eagleeye said. "Look on your face tells me everything. Kill me."

"No," Ann refused. She looked conflicted, so I waited for her to continue. "There's a whole other world out there for you to save."

"I'll die before I make it to my mirror outside the gate," she said with a shrug. "No point."

Ann looked at me, and I nodded. "I can send you to Eden," I said.

She just stared at me, blankly, for a second. Her eyes shone. "Oh," she said. "So that's why we wanted you dead so bad, huh."

"Yep," I said.

Eagleeye gave me a long look. "My name's Stella," she said. "My only remaining family are my brother, Emil, and my niece, Bernadette." Then she gave me their addresses. She coughed up a handful of blood. "If I can cling to life a little longer over in Eden, then I'll head there. But you gotta promise to take care of them," she said.

I nodded. "We will."

Stella smiled. It wasn't that grim determination to face death anymore. Apparently, a single bit of hope was all it took for her. "When your Saintess reaches the fifth realm, call me back, alright? I'd like to know... well. I'd like to see my brother again, if I can."

Ann nodded. "Okay."

"Cool," Stella said, slowly closing her eyes. "I'll be off then. Uh... beam me up, or something?"

I almost laughed at that, but in the end, just used the Wanderer's Key to step to her side. Then I placed a hand on her shoulder, and she vanished, turning to rippling glass before disappearing through my gateway.

Two down. One to go.

Ann kissed me.