

Chapter 142: Shattered Paths

Matt stood in front of a corpse.

I say “a corpse” because the lady Black Swan was no longer recognizable at all. Matt’s powerset included razor sharp petals being blown into a raging storm of metal. There was no skin left on the body. I would be better served describing the remains as a meaty skeleton than anything else.

Rae was already off again, probably helping Olivia and Chris. Matt, though, still had his sword drawn.

He stood above the body, staring. His eyes were wide open, his pupils dilated and wide. His breathing was ragged. There were tiny wounds seeping black blood all over his body, but he lived.

Then, his head turned to us.

The motion was slow, each tiny movement controlled. He stared for a long, silent moment. “Are you real?” he asked quietly. His head tilted to the side. “Or another illusion?” Gently, with all that same deliberate slowness, he brought up his sword.

I looked at him, at the way he moved, and I had to wonder what the fight was like. Qi raged around him, drawn into a maelstrom, and it was clear he’d also reached that realm. Was it a lucky matchup? I didn’t think he’d have gotten Rae’s help - if he did, I think he might’ve just fought my master instead.

“Put the sword down, Matt,” I told him.

Slowly, he tilted his head. It was all done with that terrible deliberateness. Each movement calculated, not a twitch of his fingers out of place. “Why?” he asked.

“I don’t wanna fight,” I replied.

Still, the sword remained between us. He breathed out, and his breath stirred the plum blossoms in the air, dancing gently. “See, Fio,” he said. “The lady Swan used curses and illusions. And the illusions fed off my memories. So, if you’re you...” his lips twisted into a grin. “Then maybe you should show me something I couldn’t know.”

“How realistic are we talking?” I asked.

Slowly, he moved his sword through the air. It was a broken blade, half of it made from stitched together, glowing pink petals. It sang as it moved. Reality warped around it. He hummed, softly. "Say, if you manage to stop a proper swing I'll consider you real."

I rolled my eyes. "You just wanna keep fighting."

"Maybe," he admitted with a twirl of his sword. "I am also questioning how real anything and everything is right now."

"Swing at me already, Rat," I said, holding up Astraesus.

And Matt swung.

Somehow, despite him having recently broken through, that single movement was more terrifying than anything White Tiger ever did. He didn't even take a step. Space was cut to ribbons between us, and his sword reached me before the motion even finished.

Instantly, I brought Astraesus up to block. My Qi roared, coalescing around the weapon with the sheen of liquid gold. A whole storm descended on me, cutting, violent, unending. It felt like a bolt of lightning, with the weight of a lifetime of training alongside it.

Matt didn't hold back, not an ounce, so I did not either. My ruinous wings flared, the world itself gathering, growing denser. A dozen realities stacking on my spear, superimposing and growing ever denser.

I saw, for the first time, as the world flickered, torn between what to do. We were not yet at the realm where we wielded it as a weapon, yet I could feel my influence on reality, now. The way Matt was carving through it, and how I consolidated it.

The blow made my ears ring. Sparks flew from where the steel flowers slammed into golden glass, and for a moment everything went white. My bones vibrated from the impact, but it stopped.

With a resounding ringing, his sword of pink flowers hung in the air. Slowly, he took a breath, and I saw his pupils contract. Then, with that same deliberate slowness, he sheathed the sword. Another deep breath later, he managed a calm, serene smile. "It's good to see you, Fio," he said.

Finally, the tension disappeared. I managed to grin, and pull him into a short hug. "Good job, Matt. Maelstrom, huh?"

He smiled, and nodded. "They used to call me Maelstrom Matt in college."

At that, I laugh. "No they did not!"

"No," he said, smirking and shaking his head. "They did not." Then, he paused, for a moment, taking another breath, and looking at the corpse. He turned to me.

"Want me to burn it?" Ann asked.

Matt nodded gratefully. "Yeah, please. I-"

He didn't need to elaborate. As soon as the command came, a blazing inferno swallowed the body, turning the bones into ash within a moment. Then, the earth roiled, and swallowed up the blackened soot, leaving nothing behind.

"Thanks," he said. Then he took another deep breath. "Sorry," he said. "The fight took it out of me a bit." He placed a hand on the back of his head. "Illusions are messed up, girls! Seriously. I just kinda hacked at anyone I saw for a while. I've killed you a half dozen times by now."

"That sounds unfun," I said.

"Yeah, sure is. Ah, but we do still have some murdering to do, don't we? Divines, that feels gross to say," he bemoaned with a crooked, sad smile.

Ann put a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay," she said. "I... Fio and I sent someone to Eden. If we wanted to we could..."

Matt raised an eyebrow. "We could, what? Exile them? We'd need to ensure they can't really come back."

Looking between the two, I heard the sentiment. We were stronger, now. We had all the power. Every bit of it. Did they deserve to die? Maybe. Did I like being judge, jury and executioner? No. So what other solution was there? Sending them to Eden didn't really work, if they could just come back and after our loved ones. But there was one thing that came to mind.

"We can ruin their cultivation," I whispered.

Instantly, both their heads snapped to me. "What?" Matt asked. His fist trembled on the hilt of his sword.

"You mean to shatter their paths," Ann said, quietly. Her eyes were thoughtful, compared to Matt.

I nodded, slowly. "Yeah. They might... might still have access to Qi on Eden. Never here, though. It'd let them... live like before the gates started appearing."

"It's cruel," Matt ground out between teeth.

"Crueler than death?" I asked him, giving him a slow, sad look.

He stared at me, clenching his sword tighter until his knuckles turned white. Matt's eyes shone with that same fury that appeared when he fought. His voice came out dry, raspy, cracked. "Yeah. To me, it sounds worse."

Ann looked between us. "So we ask them," she suggested. "Death or Broken Path."

At that, Matt breathed out. A long, suffering exhale. "I guess... it's better than just killing them," he said grimly. Slowly, I saw the rage drain from him. All that was left was defeat. We'd ruin their chances at cultivation. With their paths ruined, they'd never use Qi again. Never. And to someone like Matt... that was terrifying.

I clapped a hand on his shoulder, and he looked at me. There were no words I could say to fix things, but it was a choice we could give them, at least. To defect Zinnic, lose all their powers on Neamhan, and become regular people. We'd obviously still have to report them to the government, since some of them had killed before... but we'd figure it out. With the help of Lyra and the government, we could make it work.

Matt sighed. "Right, right. We'll shatter their paths. Let's see how those Qi-cookies crumble," he said.

"I'll happily provide the heat for the oven," Ann said, rainbow flames flickering across her fingers.

I laughed. "You're both such dorks. I love you. In different ways, of course."

Matt snickered. "Yeah. You're a good friend Fio."

Ann placed a kiss on my cheek. "Love you too," she said.

Then, we all teleported, and I smacked the butt of my spear on the floor. A flood of mana poured out, a tide of gold that instantly froze anyone near me in place. I formed it into chains, and half the people from Zinnic were forced to the ground. Only a few moments later, Chris' human shell appeared next to me with a splash of water, their body covered in cuts and burns.

“Hello there, Fio,” they said with eerie calm. “I will be placing this shell near you due to being rather close to dying. I would be really rather displeased if I were to mourn one of my bodies here, so I will ask you to take good care of it.”

Then, promptly, the wounded human collapsed like a puppet with their strings cut.

I caught Chris’ body and gently placed it down on the ground. They and Olivia had been doing good work, fighting, surviving while outnumbered. The swordswoman wielded a rapier and a dagger rather well, and Chris’ leshi and rockhound shells were still causing a lot of trouble. But despite that, there were simply too many other cultivators. Five of them had been killed, but that still left over a dozen.

Not that that mattered.

Ann and Matt descended, and the fight took all of thirty seconds. It was like swatting flies.

Ice and petals roared into the field, ravaged the earth until it was desolate, and Zinnic’s cultivators were smacked against the ground, encased in chains of gold. I conjured up barriers around Chris’ shells and Olivia. Then I took a breath, and stepped forward.

In the end, none of them wanted to die. Every single Zinnic cultivator who was still alive asked to have their Path shattered. I broke their wellsprings. My Qi pushed inside their veins, golden glass invading their wekksprings, encasing them, breaking them. It was a violent, painful process, and I had Cass help me teleport the broken shards of their cores out of them. Their foundations were ruined. Their Paths in pieces. It was exhausting, gruelling work, but after two hours, it was done.

We’d told them in simple words that they were to live quietly. Help on Eden. Never show their faces to our family. Never break the law. And quietly provide an accurate report of things to the government when we were out. That was all we told them.

Of course, we were still in a category five gate. There was danger, there were usurpers, but that was fine. We gathered back up as a group, leaving the remaining grunts with Olivia and Chris. They were now far stronger than any of the ex-cultivators. And we dealt with the bodies of the upper tiers.. Tiger and Swan got burnt, Eagleeye was on Eden. Eyes was devoured by me.

In a way, it was funny. So long ago, Olivia had killed Edians, and I’d punished her for it. Now, Chris was called over onto this world, specifically to kill and guard some Neamhanians. What a strange twist of fate. I sighed softly at the realization. Minutes had passed, and there was work to do.

I got up, and soon, Rae followed my example. He stretched, cracking a few joints, and rolling his shoulders. "Alright then," he said. "Let's clear this thing so I can go home. I'm tired. These old bones aren't made for this."

With a small laugh, I raised my spear. Freedom awaited, and I was going to find it.