

Chapter 95: Wraith

Now, among my *many* stupid decisions, this one does stand out. Because, quite frankly, being out in the frontier is generally a poor choice. It has monsters, after all, and usurpers.

On the other hand, could I justify remaining in cities? When the wards were down, and I was being hunted by usurpers? No. That would be cruel. There were people in those cities that couldn't defend themselves, people that I couldn't defend, either. Those don't deserve to die.

So, into the frontier we went.

Honestly, by now, that line had moved far. We went southwest, to avoid the giant of black flame, though Saif seemed to be doing rather well at fighting it off. Not to say that this was easy, either. We had to carve our way through plenty of monsters.

Bornins were rushing across the grassy earth in droves, with drytz coming through the ground. Zurulen and scorions occasionally headed the packs, working as larger, more powerful anchors.

But we cut through them.

None of us were the same anymore. I had grown stronger, but so had everyone else. Emilia, Matt and Liam had crossed into wellspring, Ann had unlocked the fourth circle, and Marie was both in the third circle and the mid steps of the core realm. I didn't exactly know how progression among a priest's path worked, but Reya had grown too, without a doubt.

Additionally, we had Chris. We were already a decent team when I first got the whole [Gateway] thing going, but now? We could be considered elites.

So, we carved through the monsters. Emilia single handedly stopped a zurulen, a giant monster of stone and crystal, before Matt cut it in half. Emilia shot out both eyes of a scorion with two rapid fire magic arrows. Liam controlled the monster's own shadows to strange them, while I couldn't even be touched by their attacks due to [Reflection].

It was a massacre, as we moved deeper into monstrous territory, with the glow of Divinity wrapping around us, making us even faster. The weaker creatures didn't stand a chance, and even monsters we used to hunt as a group we could now take on in single combat. This last... half year or so had probably been some of my fastest growth in Eden.

Then, there was a pang of danger from the nascent spirit in my spear, and I felt Cass trigger [Mirror Mind]. My body bent, ducking under a sharp quill, soaring over my head. Through the reflection of Liam's eyes I saw what had shot it at me. A large, gorilla like thing, with sharp spikes on its back. It plucked off another one, using additional arms to balance, and threw it at me.

This time, I was ready. I caught it, enveloped it with enough Qi that the ephemeral, golden energy solidified, and formed the ghostly image of a spear, then tossed it back even faster. My Qi-spear dug deep into the monster's abdomen, as we ran on. I didn't see it do anything after that, since it was enveloped in a storm of pink plum petals.

Soon after that, we broke through the cover of the forest. Saif's storm was no longer ravaging above us, so there were flying monsters again, but none of them got close before being enveloped in gusts of fire from Ann.

Chris' shells, the stone-wolf and the wod-thing, stalked forth into the trees. I could still see them, often through the eyes of monsters, before they were torn apart. And it was, indeed, a brutal affair. The shells fought roughly, with the natural weapons that were their bodies, mauling and ripping and tearing things to bits.

We fought, and cut, and ran until we were getting tired. Until the sun started hanging low in the sky. Marie set up the campsite, we had a meagre meal, and then set up watches.

They were desperately necessary, now that repelling formations no longer worked because of the eclipse. I felt the nascent spirit imbued in my spear hum slightly as I sat in the quiet forest. The winds had settled down, by now, as if the air itself for dozens of miles had been exhausted by Saif's spells.

Nights in Eden were already eerily quiet. There were no crickets. No cicadas or birds tweeting. Only the sounds of plants and air, and even those were gone today.

So I simply sat, listening to my spear hum. No one could hear it but me, but I could tell it was there. It was absorbing Qi, drawing it from my wellspring, though at a rate so slow compared to my generation it hardly even mattered at all.

In fact, my wells had filled up again during my rest, so Cass was able to summon her avatar, too, without causing any trouble.

She didn't say anything, her shimmering, pale body simply taking a seat next to me, also staying on the lookout. Not that she really needed to. It was cold, and tiny amounts of dew had collected on the leaves already, so I could see a large area around me.

I fought that first night. I'd woken up before, when the others fought off minor patrols of monsters, and so when it was my turn, I stepped through the reflections occasionally, cutting off a bornin's or a drytz's head before they could get too close to the camp.

Then, once I was done, I went back to bed.

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When I woke up in the morning, I noticed that the world looked a little dim. It had been getting dimmer slowly, of course, but only now did that really settle in. It would get faster, bit by bit, until for about a week, Eden would face an endless night.

'You can feel it too, right, Cass?' I asked her.

[Yeah,] my keeper replied. [The gateway's resonating. The boundaries between worlds are growing thin.]

With a nod, I told the party. "Rifts will start opening. We have... maybe another two weeks until the eclipse starts properly."

Everyone nodded. We were prepared for that, after all. Rifts would open. More powerful usurpers would come through. New species of them, some maybe already holding gateway fragments from other worlds.

"What's the plan, then?" Matt asked.

Marie was whittling a bit of wood into another arrow as she answered. "Simple, we kill monsters, we protect people."

"How do we find them?" Chris asked. "I can go scout." Liam nodded his agreement, clearly itching to go as well.

"No," Marie shook her head. "Cutting down weaker monsters, or looking aimlessly is pointless. But we have a technique for just this, don't we? Fio, you can find other gateways, can't you? How about seeing if there is one nearby that's moving," she said, throwing a smirk at me.

"Oh," I said, grinning, "I think I like that idea."

The usurpers had come after me for a while now, trying to hunt down my fragment. Maybe it was time I hunted theirs, then.

Closing my eyes, I called out to [Lost and Found]. I'd neglected the technique a little, but with my vastly improved control over Qi, I could still utilize it a lot better than I used to.

Dozens of gateways pinged my senses, like looking at the sparkling stars in the night sky. I felt thin threads connect me to each one. An invisible draw, a shared similarity, maybe, or a bit of fate. Not that it mattered.

Many were intact, especially pointing towards the east, where further cities still stood. There were hardly any gateways out in the west, in the midst of the frontier. Last time I triggered the skill, the hall of gateways in Renvil had been like a beacon, but now... it was like a patch of bright stars had been wiped blank.

Not too far east from us, I felt a powerful, corrupt glow. Gateways, multiple full ones, inside a single body. The giant of black flame. We would not be hunting it.

But down south, there were more. Dozens of tiny pinpricks, the threads thinner than spider silk. They would be held by powerful monsters, ones that had already survived destroying cities, without a doubt. That sounded good.

"South, for now. The nearest one is... slightly to the west, but we'll have to go east afterwards," I said, after checking again. "Actually, we want to hunt it down, right?"

"Yes," Ann said without hesitation. "We'll hunt them."

"Right," I nodded. "Let me try something."

Then, closing my eyes again, I called on Cass' help. She was a bit better in tune with the gateways, so she already added the direction of the nearest monster as a small thread and pull I could see and feel if I focused on it. But I wanted something better.

'Cass? Help me reach out really quick,' I asked her, and after a quick affirmation, we both extended our hands.

The feeling was strange. A tingle in my fingertips as Cass' smaller hand merged with mine, a bit like when she shared my sensations. But I felt the difference. The glass that was always just underneath my skin now seemed to envelop it like a fractal glove, infinitely repeating vestiges of myself in it.

My affinity with mirrors seemed to temporarily be at its peak, though I felt it consume quite a bit of Qi, so I did what I meant to do. We reached out to the string, connecting me to the nearest usurper with a gateway fragment. Then we grabbed it.

With a yank on the string, I felt the creature on the other side react. I yanked again, harder this time, and the string quivered. It didn't fray, or break, or stretch. It just made it aware of where I was, and maybe hurt it a little as I pulled on its soul.

"Come and get me," I whispered, grinning, as Cass' and my own hand separated again.

[Lost and Found has reached (High)!]

Yeah, that seemed about right.

"What did you do?" Liam asked with a whisper. "The amount of Qi you channeled just now was incredible."

"I think I pulled on the connection between our gateways to taunt the thing."

"That's awesome," Matt said.

"It seems rather useful for hunting," Chris nodded. "Is it approaching us?" They tilted their head in their usual fashion as they asked.

Another quick check revealed that yes, it was, and I told them as such. "It is. We can probably head straight south and let it come to us."

"Amazing," Marie said, patting my shoulder. "Let's head out then. Everyone ready?"

After a set of nods, and even an affirmative hum from my spear-spirit, we headed out.

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The journey south, by itself, was uneventful. We moved quickly. Chris' stone wolf was remarkably fast, helping Liam and Marie with scouting, while my vision through reflections was greatly aided by the morning dew.

Additionally, Chris' forest-guardian body, which they called a leshi, showed incredible talent at navigating the forest as well. They used nature Qi and an ability called [Plant Guardian], which let them feel when grass was crushed underneath someone's steps nearby. So they were very effective at detecting drytz through the roots of plants.

With all these advantages in terms of vision, Marie having bought more nature related skills as well using her contribution, we quickly made our way down south. There were dozens of tiny skirmishes, many against monster's that were not really at home in forests.

We met more scorions, some even in packs, with powerful matriarchs, but we always had the drop on them, and were able to dispatch them quickly. There were more of the

gorilla-porcupine monsters, which Ann knew were called irideres. They lived further down south, and became more frequent as the day went on.

By the time noon came around, we must have already ran a hundred miles. Ann and Reya spent some of that time floating, and so did Chris' human body, but we were still making incredible time.

During the afternoon, we finally had to cut out to the west a bit, to meet the gateway delivery I'd ordered. We were wary, of course. Up until now, encounters with monsters that harboured gateways had always been brutal.

So, when none of us could find the creature, it was disappointing, but not exactly surprising.

I could feel it. I knew it was nearby, but it seemed entirely invisible to us. Ann didn't sense any mana, nor did it disturb our environment at all. According to Liam, it didn't even have a shadow.

Tensely, we stepped forward. The forest was dim in the afternoon sun, looking more as though it was already dusk, the leaves hanging low. Gingerly following the thread my technique showed me, we stepped into a clearing.

The grass there was wilted, and covered in a layer of mildew and frost. It smelled stale, moldy, and no wind swept through the area. A frosty mist hung just above the ground, clinging to blades of grass and small patches of mushrooms.

Leshi-Chris stepped forward first. It was what we had agreed on.

They went into the center of the clearing, brown grass crunching underneath their wooden legs, yet nothing happened. The forest remained deathly silent. Not a breeze disturbed them.

Until there was a twinge in my soul. A pang from [Lost and Found] that told me my fellow gateway was close enough for me to hug it, if I just reached out.

The spirit in my spear let out a quiet rasp, as if breathlessly asking for more Qi, and I infused it more, every muscle poised for the slightest change.

Leshi was gone.

I had been distracted for a moment, channelling my Qi, and Chris' shell had disappeared. The centre of the clearing was empty.

Without hesitation, I lashed out, slashing through the air with my spear, and things changed.

[Lost and Found] told me that the other creature was further away again. My vision had also shifted, however. A perspective was missing.

“Where’s Matt?”

A howling laughter rang out across the clearing.

The frost moved now. The mist no longer clinging to the floor, but billowing in a sudden gust of wind. I blinked for a moment, as bits of snow and mushroom spores seemed to land in my eyes, quickly conjuring a barrier of Qi to protect them.

In the moment that took, I found myself trapped in a deep mist. Suddenly, the entire clearing was covered in white fog. I breathed out and saw my own breath condense in the air before me.

My spear sent a warning to me, again, and I stepped to the left based on the vague impulse it gave me.

Where I had just stood, something strange happened. As if by itself, the fog condensed together, forming a dense cloud of freezing cold air, which then sliced down in an arc, leaving behind a crescent of pure ice.

“What the fu-” the words choked as I felt the freezing air enter my lungs. I hacked out a cough, stumbling backwards out of the way of another, similar, icy crescent. The resulting sculpture fell and shattered on the floor, before quickly sublimating into fog again.

Covering my entire head in a bubble of golden Qi, I sent it coursing through my entire body, like a raging storm. Every fibre of muscle was reinforced, and my spear itself was also included in the cycle, with Qi flooding into and back out of it, enveloping it in a sheen of gold.

[Getting flickers from reflections, Fio. Your companions are around, the mist is just reducing its range a lot!] Cass notified me.

‘Got it. Next time one pops up, tell me, so I can step through.’

[Understood!]

Another slash came, and I deflected this one with my spear. The moment the blade touched the dense cloud, it dissipated, the Qi of the technique brought into disarray by the pure power of mine.

There were a few more close calls, since I could barely see the attacks coming, but by angling my spear, and using the first on the floor, I could at least get a decent visual in a small radius around me. Then, in the middle of a swing, Cass' message came.

[Now!]

Without hesitation, I triggered the skill, stepping through the reflection, and appearing somewhere else entirely. The next moment I threw myself to the floor, and a mace rushed through the air where I'd just been.

"Emilia, wait!!" I screamed. Projecting my voice in the middle of keeping so many techniques up was enough to send my head spinning, not to mention the disorientation from the teleportation, but I did it anyway.

There was a short delay, but eventually the answer came. "Princess?!"

Not an instant later, my vision was once again filled by dense fog, though not an isolating one, but the kind that came just before an attack. But I wouldn't let this wretch separate us again so easily.

The cloud of cold air impacted against my [Reflection], instantly disappearing in the mirror sheen, and half a second later, an abhorrent wailing reached my ears. It made my vision swim, and was most certainly imbued with some kind of harmful thing, maybe rot or decay magic.

Emilia caught my shoulder and helped me keep myself upright. "Hey, princess, you okay? What's happening?"

"I think we're fighting an apparition!" Fuck, projecting my voice hurt, it made my ears ring even worse, but I grit my teeth anyway.

"Okay. What's our move?" she asked, calmly.

"We got shit affinities. Best case, we bait it out. It wants me, after all. Keep me safe?" I asked.

"You got it!" Emilia said without hesitation, already raising her shield high.

"Can you detect the attacks?"

She nodded grimly. "Barely."

"Cass? Get your avatar out. Warn Emilia. You're her eyes now!" I told her.

A moment later, her ghostly appearance wove itself, a thin tether connecting her to me. “Got it. Emilia, three o’clock, downwards slash.”

“Understood!” The warrior raised her shield to meet it, the cloud dispersing harmlessly against the metal wrapped in grey.

“I’ll start moving now!” I told her, then placed my trust in being safe. I closed my eyes. Cass was no longer there to direct my sensations, so instead, I focused on [Lost and Found].

Coursing the mirror Qi through my body, I yanked on that string again, which elicited a growl from the mist. There was something in there. I felt the frost and the decay try to rot away my Qi, but I ignored it, marching on.

There was the sound of clanging around me, of ice striking metal, and stirring rocks as Emilia conjured up stone to protect herself and me. I ignored all that, focusing further.

The world faded away, until I was borderline cultivating. I felt myself, enveloped in the mist, as if I was in the golden depths, almost weightless, yet confidently striding forward, as if I was walking the path into the sky of imprint.

I let that sensation guide me, walking forward through the mist step by step. The presence drew away whenever I got closer, so I walked faster. Eventually, I started running. There was the sound of wood shattering, and splinters raining on me. Emilia must have shattered a tree in my path. I grinned.

What a friend she was.

Following the tether of [Lost and Found], I spent more Qi, yanking on it. My mirror well protested at the rapid expenditure of Qi, the volume of it so great it burnt as it coursed through me, but I didn’t care. When I pulled, the thing paused.

Then I caught up.

I felt it the moment it happened. Rather than following a tether, it was suddenly just *there*. Right in front of me. I coursed even more mirror Qi through myself, emptying my well at once.

It braided with the liquid gold already coursing through me. The energies melded, reinforcing me in a way that should not be possible. I felt the liquid glass underneath my skin roil at the moment, and willed myself forward. Willed *it* forward.

The glass moved before I could.

Liquid gold, polished to a mirror sheen, leapt from my fingertips, grasping at the mist in front of me, and it caught something. A moment later, my hands of flesh and blood caught up, snatching the thing.

I slammed it into the floor, and with a horrifying wail that sent my entire world spinning, I knew the mist was gone.

A moment later, the ice that I just now felt grippin all my bones was replaced by a scorching heat. I opened my eyes, breathing heavily, and saw an inferno. Flames so bright they had turned incandescent blue raged over the mist wraith, burning away its frost, and the rest of the mist until that was gone.

Once the inferno abated, though, a storm of petals swept through the area again, and I smelt plum. It dispersed the feeling of rot that was still hanging in the air.

Still after that, I knew Marie and Chris were using nature magic to combat that vile corruption, and finally, even Divinity swept through the area, truly burning it away. Only once Liam collected even the shadows of everything in the area, and we disintegrated those down to ash and let them reform, was the cleansing done, and the thing truly dead.

[Lost and Found] cried out to me, and I stretched my hand forwards, wrapping my hand around what had been the core of the wraith, and crushing it. From within, a sliver of glass flowed into my hand, soon melding with the rest that was already inside me.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **15**
- Fragments: **19**
- Figments: **3]**

I grinned. We were hurt, of course, but everyone lived. Chris would need to mend their shells, especially the Leshi, which had taken severe damage from the rot. Reya had been hurt, and lived only because Liam was with her, having dived in her shadow the moment we were separated.

But we lived.

And we were stronger again, I knew that much.

“Blue fire now, Ann?” Matt chipped. “You know, if we keep growing at this rate, maybe you can create rainbow fire in time pride month rolls around on Neamhan, eh?”

I laughed so hard my cheeks hurt.