

Chapter 103: Hopeless

There were a lot of thoughts running through my mind at that moment. Maybe a few more should have been dedicated to fear... but that kind of blanked away when I saw Emilia hurt.

Marie moved faster than any of us. She was decisive, and before I'd even made up my mind, she was already coming forward, nocking an arrow, and firing it.

The usurper swatted it out of the air with ease, one of those arms moving in a blur. "Now, now. Cease the hostilities, or I snap this one's neck," it said calmly.

Emilia's mouth was opening and closing like a fish on land. "What do you want?" Marie ground out.

"I thought I'd been clear? You will stay here, donate any energy you generate until the rift is bigger again, and then you will leave."

Marie looked back at us, then slowly shook her head. "That is not really an option."

The usurper squeezed Emilia's throat harder. I could hear her skin pull tighter through the absolute silence that reigned in the aftermath of the mana typhoon. "Not an option, you say? Then I suppose I'll see about drawing out whatever I can from your corpses. I'll try to make it quick."

It spoke the words casually, with a hint of disappointment to it. Like it was talking to unruly children. I felt my blood go cold.

Once more, the creature's hand tightened, squeezing the life out of Emilia, her spine creaking. Then, there was a noise. A loud, horrible clang of metal. Matt stood next to the thing, having slammed down his sword.

He'd used a technique I'd not seen him use before, his storm of flower petals coalescing around him like a shawl rather than flowing with his strikes. It seemed to make him far faster and stronger, while reducing the area of effect of his attacks.

What he ended up doing was breaking his sword.

I could spot it, Ann still in my hands. The metal struck the creature's arm, the blade breaking where he struck, about two thirds down the blade. The tip broke off entirely, deflecting off the frog-like face. The monster... barely budged. It only left a thin scratch on its skin.

But it budged. The usurper wasn't tall, and Emilia's feet touched the ground - which was made from rocky rubble. Instantly, I felt Qi pouring out from her wellspring, as a shell of stone manifested between her and the claw, shoving her backwards and leaving the usurper with only a lifeless mannequin to break.

"Ah," it said. "What a shame. It seems you will suffer after all."

"*Run!*" Marie commanded, and both Emilia and Matt instantly followed her command. There was nothing else to do. But the usurper simply reached out again, extending one of those four arms in an almost hopeless gesture.

Some kind of twisted energy began swirling inside its palm, and a vortex appeared in front of its hand. It glanced around us as if trying to settle on a piece of meat. Its eyes drifted over Matt, and it extended the grip.

Instantly, as if driven by some kind of additional instinct, the swordsman leapt, spending another sizeable chunk of Qi.

The place where he'd been disappeared.

A crater as big as a house appeared where he'd been just a moment before. Meanwhile, a pebble of darkness appeared in the creature's hand. "Ah," it says. "Like rabbits before wolves."

It chuckled darkly, as though about to play some demented game. One of its four arms was still in the rift, keeping the door between realms open, and the usurper, thankfully, locked in place. This left it with three arms.

Dark vortices appeared in front of them. It raised an arm. At me.

My mind finally caught up, and I stepped through a reflection, dragging Ann with me, somehow. It cost a significantly larger chunk of Qi, and I was thankful that she was entirely spent on mana. If she'd had more, the transfer would've probably been even more expensive.

There was a scream, and when I looked over, Marie was missing an arm, from the elbow down.

Goosebumps raced across my skin. I felt dizzy for the first time. Fuck, that was... so much blood. So much fucking blood.

As I watched, the usurper simply tossed the pebbles aside, holding one that seemed even darker in its hand for a moment. Crimson mist swirled from it, feeding the rift, making it slightly larger, but not enough to stabilize it. The thing sighed. "Ah, shame. I'll need to feed all of you to it to get it to take, I think. Well, what can you do."

Its hands reached forward again, dragging Liam *out of the shadows* he was hiding in, only for the rogue to swiftly dissipate into thin air. The Leshi had stepped through a plant, and the rock hound through the ground.

Marie, letting out another grunt of pain, pulled out a red potion from her inventory, splashing it over the wound with shaky fingers. Some splattered onto the ground, but it would have to be fine.

Reya, too, fell to her knees, holding her head, eyes glowing with bright amber. Lurelia had picked *now* to communicate.

I... needed to do something. Needed to help.

Undignified, I grabbed the tiara from Ann's head, quickly placing it on my own. My mind raced, trying to come up with solutions, desperately, as I already channelled my Qi.

The creature was raising its hand, and I was left without many options, or much time at all. Rather than think, I simply followed instinct, engraved in me through training, the talents from the network, and the nascent spear spirit I held.

My Qi flooded the weapon in droves, golden power thrumming through the steel. Even more energy flooded the tiara, building, ready to be applied. I leaned back, and *threw*.

It was a haphazard, imperfect throw, but the sheer amount of energy packed into it was enough to make it weighty. The usurper turned its head, curiously, and reached for my spear with a dark vortex.

There was a horrible screech as the golden aura surrounding it was peeled away like layers on an onion. The creature seemed a little surprised, catching the undamaged metal in its hand, though my spirit groaned in the connection. It had kept the metal intact.

"Huh," the usurper muttered.

With all the force in the crown, I made the spear as heavy as I possibly could. Its weight doubled, then tripled, then increased more than tenfold, and the usurper staggered for a moment. It could easily lift the spear, of course, but it was off balance. Weight was, after all, hard to resist.

This pulled its fists off course, gouging pieces out of the clouds. Winds whipped up as the air was compressed and sucked in, but we lived. I tugged on my binding connection to the spear, recalling it into my hand-

The monster held onto it.

"What a strange weapon," it mused, turning it in its hands. "Perhaps..." it began holding it closer to the rift, and I heard the metal *screech* alongside the nascent spirit.

"No!" I screamed, reaching out and *pulling* as hard as I could. The spear remained right where it was. Until Emilia appeared from underground, slamming her mace into the usurper's arm.

The metal bent at the collision, but she had not been idle underground. Since the beginning of the fight, she must've been channelling Qi into the weapon, because the strike was absolutely deafening. I saw a single scale crack, and a small trickle of black blood poured out.

A droplet impacted the floor, and hissed as it boiled into steam, dissolving some of the stone with it. The creature's pupils briefly contracted, and it swatted at Emilia as one might at a fly, but she was already a step back. Its short stature was getting in its way, given the need to keep a hand on the rift.

When it focused again, my spear was in my arms.

The metal had an imprint of its hand on it, glimmering an ashen white. It seemed as though the life had been sucked out of it, the Qi channels through the weapon feeling raw and eroded. Pitiful.

I heard the spirit squawk through our connection. It was alive. I was... glad about that, at least.

Then, a hand gripped me from below, pulling me to the ground.

Behind me, the rubble of a building collapsed in on itself, into a tiny, dark bead. The usurper looked at me from behind an outstretched claw. "Stop this charade. Just go on and *die* already!"

Liam's voice made me tune it out. "Reya got a message from Lurelia. An archmage is on their way," he whispered.

Relief flooded me at that. We could live. We could stall, create distance...

The others were ahead of me. Emilia and Matt were further out, and Reya nowhere to be seen. Liam must've carried her out. I picked up Ann, threw my spear, throwing myself the opposite direction as that dark pull once again missed. Then I teleported to the glossy steel of the weapon.

We were-

There was a bloodcurdling scream.

Distance wasn't enough. Emilia laid about halfway between the edge of the standing buildings and the monster. Her left leg was torn off below the knee, the metal armor around the stump twisted and full of jagged edges.

Marie instantly dashed for her, picking her up, and dragging her.

The usurper snarled, pointing its hands at us, looking for opportunities. It was like staring down the barrel of a gun, literally. I hadn't felt this powerless since the last time I was held at gunpoint.

I stared at the dark vortex, and the world seemed to slow down. In a moment of thought, I grabbed a roll of fabric from my inventory, and tossed it. Instantly, it unfurled, hiding me from the monster.

A moment later, I heard a terrible noise from behind me and kept running. It had done its job, valiantly.

Around me, Matt was quickly releasing his petals in a storm, and the shadows grew darker, all in an attempt to obscure lines of sight. I had mirror powers. I could help here.

Violently coursing Qi through my abilities, to the point where the energy almost burned under my skin, I created [Reflections], not of attacks, but purely visual ones.

Suddenly, another Matt stood near the original, darting the opposite way. Another Emilia, carried by another Marie. They looked virtually the same to me, but without the ability to dodge... half were torn apart by the next attack.

I was still running, holding Ann, desperately digging at the energy bubbling up from my wells, channelling it into any ability I could think of to help. What else was there, what else-

With the sound of glass shattering, all my illusions were broken. A storm of pink was surrounding the monster, but it blasted the nuisance away with raw magic. The shadows boiled, and it summoned a *miniature sun* to banish them.

Scorching light hit my back, and I could smell my clothes begin to smoke. Finally, though, I ducked behind cover - only to have the entire house behind me compressed into a tiny sphere within moments. My heart was racing, but I was drawing blanks. Another blood curdling scream. He'd targeted Emilia again, and Marie hadn't managed to get them both out of the way. It was unwinnable.

But then, *finally*, space twisted a different way, and two regal figures in robes stepped out. It was an old, blind man, someone I recognized because my master used to have tea with him. Erasmus the seer.

Next to him stood a lady dressed the same way. Her back was a little straighter, her hair a little more wavy, and her eyes more vibrant. The air hummed with a dull purple around her.

"Worry not, kids, the geriatric cleanup crew is here," she said, smirking.

The usurper simply scoffed, extending a hand at the woman, that same dark vortex twisting forwards... then stopping. It was locked in place.

Around the woman, even more dense mana radiated. "Now, now. I just teleported us all the way here. It would at least be polite to let me refill my mana."

It sneered. "You can feed it to the rift when you're done, grandma."

"Oh? Let me see you talk shit when I send you to space," she replied, twirling an oversized staff carved from pure amethyst.

The old man appeared next to me. "Are you alright, child?" he asked, offering me a hand up. "Come, come. I apologize for not having foreseen this sooner. We came as fast as we could."

I simply blinked, blankly taking the hand he offered. A moment later, we stepped through space. There was a small clearing with all our party.

Well, all might have been an overstatement.

Emilia was still missing her leg below the knee. But that was by far not the worst. Marie...

"Ahhhh, this really hurts," she muttered, even as Reya's healing enveloped her. "Like, really, really hurts."

On the left side of her body, a huge chunk of it was carved out, from her leg all the way up to her waist. Blood was pooling on the ground beneath her. No amount of healing was going to close up those wounds.

I kneeled down next to her, red staining my clothing. She looked at me, eyes blurry. “Oh, Fio. Hi there. I feel a lil woozy. I dun think the sky’s meant to spin like that...” She slipped back into her accent.

Gently, I put a hand on her shoulder. I smiled, even as tears formed in my eyes. “Nah, it’s not,” I said.

Marie smirked at me. She reached up with her stump, then frowned, and reached up with the hand that wasn’t just torn out. Her smile returned. “You’re so brave, girl. Don’t let anyone tell ya otherwise. I’ll...” she coughed blood, droplets of red smattering against me. “I’ll fuck ‘em up!”

“You would, yeah.”

“Take care of ‘em all for me, will ya?” Marie asked, looking into the sky, smiling.

“I will.”

“See ya on the other side,” Marie said. “Sky’s so pretty here. Lemme remember it.”

“I promise.”

The others kneeled somberly in the pool of her blood, giving her some last smiles. “Bye Marie,” we all said. Her last sight must’ve been all our faces against Eden’s lavender sky. Then, I activated [Gateway], sending her home.

“Later, y’all.”