

Chapter 162: Better Choice

There was something that I appreciated about violence.

This wasn't exactly a new development. I'd beaten up bullies before. I'd gotten into a fair share of scrapes with my brothers, too. Ivan, Jacob and I hadn't exactly been easy kids. I was probably a better sister for Beth now, but the boys and I had gotten home with scrapes and bruises often.

And now, all that had changed was the scope of violence. Breaking things was peaceful, sometimes. I hated that I took so much pleasure in it, but there was something incredible about exerting myself, about pouring my all out into the world. Making noise, moving, and changing things.

Back on Neamhan, when I was in college, I channelled a lot of that into going to the Gym. Eating healthy, maintaining my fitness, all of that. Cultivation was sometimes that, but right now, it was true more than it had been in a while.

The nest spawned usurpers made from stone and rock. I swung Astraeus, stabbing into them and exploding their insides with Qi.

Shrapnel of stone scraped against my face, sliding off the toughened skin of my cheeks. Mundane rocks broke more against my flesh, and I ducked under a violent, crystalline swing. A breath, and my spear lashed upwards, shattering the quartz that the usurper was made from.

Its severed arm crashed into the ground, making it shake. More of the rock-things came towards me, but a single step carried me through the air. The whole world was a mirror, and I a reflection.

Stepping *through* the attacks let me spin back around, slashing my spear and shattering more rocks. Another zurulen fell under my spear, its mineraloid body crumbling into a million pieces from a blast of Qi.

More of that ethereal power gushed out of me. It was in an endless flood, a cascade of strength that shook the world. I could feel it vibrate in the air around me. The violence of my Qi dug deep into the fabric of reality, and I didn't stop. More. More!

Evermore power poured out of me, and yet, I never manifested it. Not into a golden tide. No, it coursed *through* me. Superimposing on myself, reinforcing my body. I became faster, stronger, tougher.

A rock fist the size of a house slammed towards me, and I caught it in my palm. With a roar, I swung the zurulen, as if a bat. Its house sized body lifted from the ground, then slammed right back into it, exploding into splinters against the bedrock of the mountain. For a second it seemed as if the other rock-giants *flinched*, but that didn't make me slow down.

They died, too. And they kept running towards me. Violence reigned on the battlefield.

Eventually, the first blow landed on me, then the second, then a dozen more. Titanic blows that should have splattered me into paste, yet only bruised my dense flesh. I could feel the golden power coursing through me. Golden Glass.

Metal reinforced my bones, reflections carried my movements. I zipped through stances, blurring in combat, half-finished manoeuvres completing, leaving gashes as fast as light. Rocks splintered, shattered, broke. The world felt my wrath.

Somewhere in the middle of the battle I ended up putting Astraeus away. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to think, to get lost for a little while, by myself.

And so, I smashed in the rocks with my fist. Metallic power poured through my veins, turned me solid, immovable. My will was iron, and so was my body. I smashed the stones like a hydraulic press.

Yes, the usurpers threw me. They hit me, and it *hurt*, but I hit them back *harder*.

When my stomach got smashed in so hard I wanted to throw up, I grit my teeth and swung my fist. A blast of Qi so titanic it turned the usurper to dust appeared a second later. A hit to my back made my spine hurt and complain, but I spun with the motion, snapping out a kick. Golden armor thrashed through rock, and another zurulen exploded into a hundred thousand pieces.

I rampaged.

That's the only word for what I did. The nest that I'd chosen was just unlucky. I tore through the zurulen, bodies of granite, of quartz, of obsidian, of ice... It didn't matter, for the shattered all the same. I was too fast, too strong for any of them to keep up with.

And I was clearing up the infection. Despite breaking, despite rampaging, I felt good. It was right, right?

That was how I felt until I stopped. Until the zurulen parted and disappeared from my sight. Not because there were none left, but because they'd been directed to run. I jumped after them without hesitation, swinging my fist again, wanting more rock to shatter-

Only to have my blow caught.

The wave of Qi that followed the swing splattered harmlessly against a clawed hand. It was woven from crystals so exquisite I would have called them perfect. Diamonds and sapphires and emeralds, woven together in fibers and crystalline plates to shape a hand that withstood all my fury.

I blinked. I looked at the thing that stopped me, and saw a usurper. It was a crystalline humanoid, eight feet tall, and built massively. It had six hands, and its jagged faceplate was blank. Crystals wove and decorated its body like primalistic armor formed from jagged gemstones.

My thoughts were interrupted when its fist snapped out and caught me in the gut.

For the first time, I felt pain. My feet tore from the ground, and my abs crunched inwards with the grinding of metal against metal. A second later, the thing slammed me face first into the ground, with enough force to leave a *crater* around me.

Then, it spoke. "Leave, mirror-borne. Leave me and mine to be."

I grunted as I dragged myself up from the crater, wiping a smear of blood from my lips. "What are you?" I asked.

"A nest," it said. "A hive, a spawn, a dreamer, a taker."

"Then I'll break you," I replied, gritting my teeth.

"You will try," it said, and sounded almost mournful. Then another blow hit me.

Diamond-woven knuckles slammed into my jaw, sending my head snapping to the side. I bought myself with a platform of Qi mid-air as I was sent flying, quickly ducking under the afterblow, bringing an uppercut to meet their jaw in reply.

My fist cracked open with a bit of blood.

The thing slammed an elbow into the top of my head, and I was sent to the floor once more. Blood streamed from my nose in a gentle pour. I grunted, then pushed myself off the floor again. When I stood, I was wearing manifested armor.

Golden plate wove itself around me, my fists covered in gauntlets of metal that was even harder than my flesh. I gritted my teeth, and set my jaw, ignoring the roaring stars in the thing's chest. Instead, I moved.

My fist snapped forward, deflected by one of its many arms. It had more than me, so when it returned three blows for each one I dealt. So, I cheated, too.

When three fists came flying at me, I just vanished. One moment to the next, I was behind it, already completing a swing that some alternate version of me had started. Golden armor slammed into diamonds once more, and both cracked and splintered.

Qi poured out of me and filled the gaps. I vanished again before the next attack could even reach me. That was the unfair part of my power - my alternate selves. They'd increased in number, and I could trade places with one of them at any time.

If one angle of attack wasn't working, one of my duplicates had taken another. If it guarded left, I struck right. Within less than a second, we had a dozen brutal exchanges. I flickered and blurred in the air, never properly moving anymore. Instead, I shifted.

Alternate self, reflections in the air, and my teleportation items made it so that I barely had to move to create force. I simply flickered from one thought to the next, and my blows landed with unprecedented violence.

Each impact sent the air quivering with a snap of noise and Qi and heat. The snow melted around us as more power poured into my motions, and still, the crystal thing simply shifted its arms.

It blocked and deflected, and about half the time it worked, even as I flickered. Then, after a dozen exchanges, it worked three quarters of the time.

After a hundred blows, the thing caught my arm.

Then it pulled.

Feeling my tendons and fibres strain as they fought to stay attached to my body was one of the most miserable things I've ever experienced. It hurt like hell. My flesh creaked and cracked, as more Qi flooded it.

Strands of golden glass held me together, but I had to move with the pull. My feet lifted off the ground, and then the world blurred. Within the span of a second, I slammed into the rock a good two dozen times. Each impact splintered the stone and bruised me. Each impact was heavier than the last, as if it was testing my limits.

Halfway through, my ribs started cracking, and the rocks around us were covered in dust and craters. My armor shielded me from the worst of the sharp rocks, but didn't do anything to minimize the impact.

My teeth rattled in my skull when the usurper finally tossed me. I stopped mid air, standing on platforms of Qi, and launched at it again, only for the crystal thing to sidestep.

I flickered in turn, and was behind it. My elbow slammed into the nape of its neck, and their sapphire shell splintered with a blast of Qi. Mythic amounts of power coursed through my maelstrom, pouring outwards into the world, blasting all the dust aside, annihilating the snow for a hundred meters around us.

It moved to grab me again, but I flickered away, landing on my feet a couple steps from it. Blood poured from the gaps in my armor. My skin had torn, but already, healthier versions superimposed themselves on me, allowing me to heal.

"You are in pain," the thing noted, tilting its head. "Run."

The words came out as a recommendation, but it just filled me with disgust. My fist rose in front of me, and I readied myself for another engagement.

"Why fight?" it asked, crystals shifting with a dull hum. "Why participate in this war?"

"Because you're where you aren't meant to be," I ground out. It felt stupid to justify myself to this thing.

Again, it tilted its head, the other direction this time. Then, it crossed two of its arms - the uppermost two - in an almost human gesture. "You fight for divines. Are they meant to be here?"

"You're a usurper," I spat. "A thing that comes from another world to this one, making it less inhabitable for natives."

At that, it nodded. "Yes," it said, in that same mournful tone. Its head hung with what almost looked like shame. "We do. And yet," its head turned to me again, "I do not wish to die."

I swallowed, dryly. There was no good reply to that.

"No matter," the crystalloid said, shaking their head. "You wish to break. If you must, then break me."

And then, it was in front of me. A fist slammed into my side again, denting my armor inward and cracking my ribs. I felt my insides lurch with the force of the blow. My maelstrom roared

within me, and properly manifested. The Qi in the air moved, lurched, and soared towards me.

The world itself backed me up, as power of all kinds was drawn in, and turned a pure, liquid gold. It shone, and I grew stronger. My armor taller, my bones tougher, and I raced in again.

I flickered through the [Hall of Mirrors], dodging one blow. Another I avoid with a twist, and a third by changing with an alternate me. Then I slammed a blow home, gauntleted fist crashing into crystal flesh. It splintered and cracked below the blow, and from inside, some kind of glittering, pale-blue liquid poured out.

To my senses, it felt resonant, as if multi-layered and twisting in on itself. Echoing repetitions turning inside and outside, spreading into the void.

“Ah, my crystal cage cracks,” they said, regarding what was... not quite blood, but close.

“You are strong, mirror-borne. No wonder they want you.”

“Who wants me,” I ground out.

“My people,” they said. “The usurpers.” There was no love lost in those words. “They echo and ripple and reproduce. They splinter into fractured selves and spread to become more than they were ever meant to be. That is the true trap of Echo. It is the loss of identity.”

I blinked. “What?” I asked.

They sighed, a long, drawn-out hum of chiming crystal. Then, they punched me again. My face-plate dented inward and my nose broke. It hurt, and my world turned white from pain. Another blow slammed into my abdomen, and I felt about ready to break in half. The air dragged against me like a physical blanket, until I slammed into the mountain.

Almost on instinct, I tilted my head out of the way, and another blow tore into the stones next to my face. It shredded the side of the mountain, crumbled rock and ice. A rockslide quickly descended to bury me, but I blinked out of the way.

Instead of me, the rocks simply descended on the usurper. Half the mountain caved in, and covered them in rubble. I stood there, holding my breath, the Qi in the world pouring into me. I knew it wasn't over, I knew.

My nose mended, and the pain ebbed as I breathed. One breath, two, then half a dozen, until the rubble shifted. The crystalloid walked out, entirely unbothered. One of their arms was slightly cracked, and the wound I'd dealt was still bleeding that strange, almost resin-like substance, but they stared at me all the same.

"I do not wish to die," they said, and again, the words hit me. "Will you spare me?"

The notion sounded idiotic, when looking at our injuries. It was barely cracked, and I could hardly feel one of my arms, the muscles still knitting together as the joint slowly pushed back into its socket. My nose was broken, my skin cracked, and my blood steamed as it hit the remnants of snow that the avalanche brought.

Cold flakes settled in my hair. I stared at the usurper. "Why are you so different?"

"Ah, that is the question, is it not?" they asked, looking to the sky. There was a faint, sad amusement in its voice. "Because you are judging creatures on the merit of worlds," the answer eventually came. "You judge me as a usurper, and because others of my kind have killed your kind, you wish to kill me."

It was a cruel truth, and the knowledge of it stung. "So what?" I asked. "You're 'one of the good ones', then?"

They shook their head. "No," they said. "There is no good. I am in this world, and that makes me evil. I pollute it. I bleed echo out of my crystal cage. I am a virus, and that is the tragedy, isn't it? Because I live, I am poison. Because I require resources, and outcompete natives. I eat their mountains, and spread my Echo, and that makes me pollutant.

"I can do this world one kindness, and that is the greatest cruelty to myself. To die." The words drift away, like flakes of snow hitting the ground. They look at me. My rage all but extinguished in front of the ice. "What would you do, mirror-borne. Would you-"

"Fio," I said. "My name is Fio. What is yours?"

A curious look passed them over, their hands falling to their sides, their head tilting. "You grant me personhood?"

I gritted my teeth, summoned Astraeus, and laid the spear in my lap as I sat down. "Sit," I told them. "Sit, and speak."

The crystalloid shifted. Hesitantly, they moved forward, step by step towards me, eyeing the weapon. Despite the hesitation, despite the *fear*, they sat down. Frankly, I think they're stronger than me, but that doesn't matter. Because for just a moment, when they sit, and cross their legs, and the jagged, crystalline claws settle with comfortable clicks, we do not meet as enemies.

It gives me the strangest feeling, but I follow my intuition for once. To hear it out, because apparently, usurpers aren't all bad. Leyburns, like the one that had originally almost killed me, could fight on the side of Eden. This one, in front of me, wore a "cage", it said.

And for once, I listened.

Perhaps the divines would not have done so. Perhaps they would have asked me to simply kill it, but after their little stunt, I didn't trust them either. No one playing this game was doing it out of kindness. And so, it was up to me, then. Up to *people* to find a better way.

"I have no name," the crystalloid said, eventually. It came out as a quiet, breathless hum.

"We are nest. We are poison. We are Echo. But what am I? Who am I? This question is not one I could ask. It is not one I can answer."

My breath comes slowly, and I take a moment to compose myself. Deep breath in, then out. As gently as I can, I ask. "Would you like a name?"

They look at me, and simply nod, silently. "Saph," I say, quietly.

"Saph?"

"Sapphire. For your blue gems," I said, pointing at them, trailing down their neck, ringing their shoulders, woven patterns of sapphire blue threads across their body. They smile, gently, tracing them with a clawed finger.

"Saph..." they repeat, feeling out the words. "Yes. I will take this name."

"Well then, Saph," I said. "Tell me a bit about usurpers."

"So you can kill them better?" they asked.

I shake my head. "No," I said. "So we can find a better solution." My mind is iron, unyielding, after all. And I won't settle for anything other than the best option.