

Chapter 145: Clearing Up

The day after the funeral, I went on a date with Ann. We got ice cream, walked around the city a little, bought some more clothes, the usual.

Now, technically, using magic in broad daylight was illegal. We aren't generally supposed to use our supernatural powers in areas where they might inconvenience or hurt civilians. However, given the fact that the illusions Ann cast just stopped people from exploding with joy whenever they saw us, I think it was a worthy trade off.

We paid for the ice cream, then sat down at a decrepit, cracked once-fountain. The view was just as crappy and grey as everywhere else, though some plants had, admittedly, begun writhing up through the concrete, fed by the lingering energy in the air. They were somewhat odd-looking things; grasses that were a little sharper than normal, flowers that bloomed a little brighter, but they are a form of life.

I didn't know how to feel about that. At the end of the day, the opening of gates had killed thousands. Millions, even. My mom almost had a heart attack about thrice when I told her I was going to pick up a weapon and start killing monsters. It had introduced a new drug, and a power that I'm now rather certain that Zinnic had done human experimentation with.

And yet, despite all the very distinct suffering it caused to humans, I could see that the world was healing, little by little. And breaking, little by little, to.

Ann leaned down, and pushed some mana into the ground, making one of the flowers spiral upwards in growth and bloom, its buds unfurling to a radiant yellow. She picked it with a smile, then gently pushed the stem into my hair.

With a smile, she called me beautiful, then kissed me. Her lips tasted of vanilla and cherries.

I let the moment linger, then looked to the grey sky, seeing rays of sunlight filter through the smog. In a way, that was beautiful, too.

Then, though, Ann took my hand. "Do you remember what the sky used to look like?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I remember. Dimly."

She smiled wider, grinning a little, then stretched her hand upward, as if reaching for the clouds. I followed along, confused, wanting to see what she was getting at.

Then her lips moved. She spoke a hundred syllables in mere moments, humming a sing-song chant as her raised hand flicked through sigils. The mana around us stirred, like dancers coming alive to the beating drum of music.

For a moment, the world thrummed, resonated. Then, the magic drew taut like a string, and lanced upwards into the sky. And there, it unfurled.

Like a flower, Ann's magic blossomed. Leaf by leaf, string by string it unfurled.

The smog cleared.

I don't have the words to describe what it felt like to look at the sky and see it cloudless.

Mana roiled and pushed, the dancing threads of power pushing aside the walls of grey. The smog, the constant fog, that hung in the sky and near the ground parted. For the first time in *decades* I saw the sky of my home world.

The ice cream must have slipped out of my hands when sunlight - *real sunlight* - hit my face. I looked at the sky, seeing it as blue. I looked up and saw the sun, the way it was too bright to look at, the light no longer diffuse. And everyone nearby stopped, too.

Ann reached out, trailing a finger across my cheek and wiping away a tear. We stood there for a long, long moment. I stared at the blue.

She took my hand, and pulled me into a hug. I breathed in again, and the air felt almost clean. It had been months since I'd breathed clean air. No chemical smell from filtration, either. Just... clean.

It took me a second to even just wrap my arms around Ann, but when I did, I squeezed her. "Thank you," I said. "Can you do that anytime?"

"Yeah," she said with a smile. "After the rank up, I can."

"Can you show the others? Beth?"

"Of course," she nodded, patting my head.

"Thank you," I repeated. "It means... a lot."

Ann smiled, and kissed me again. "It's alright. Anytime." Then, she looked at the splattered treat on the ground, and quickly cast a spell to clean up the mess. "Come on," she said, taking my hand in hers. "Let's get another ice cream. You can look at the sky as long as you'd like."

I smiled. "Don't have to ask me twice." Then I kissed her one more time.

And, after a quick stop, I did just as she'd said. I sat and stared at the sky.

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Now, seeing some conspiracy theorists interpret the lovely gesture Ann had done for me as an omen of good now that Zinnic was finally off the picture was pretty funny.

Really, just seeing people post about it in general really was quite entertaining. Especially for Matt. He lost his mind laughing. Sure shut him up when he actually got to see the sky, though.

Wasn't it funny, though? Our guild was called Dawn of Ambition, and now, well - one of us was literally responsible for having the sun appear in the sky. If that was not magic, I did not know what was.

Ann and Ivan were already working together on using some of her newly made weather magic in filtration devices, trying to create things that could permanently clear the air. Mana was a valuable thing, since any periodic element could be turned into it, and it could turn into any element on the periodic table.

The transmutation wasn't easy, though, so the two would still be working on it for a little while. That was fine, too. It was a ray of hope, a very literal ray of sunlight in this dreary Neamhan. Alongside all of the horror and the killing, there was the very real possibility that in trying to take from me, the keepers had given us the pieces needed to fix our world. And something about that was wonderful and funny.

But by far my favourite part was getting to show Beth.

It was so selfish of me, but I insisted on it being just me and her and Ivan. It was entirely unfair, but neither my dad nor my mom were invited. They'd get their chance - but I'd get mine first. No politics, no arguing. Beth got to have her moment of wonder.

So worth it.

When the clouds cleared, and she saw that the sky was blue, her eyes widened like saucers. She had to hold up her hand to shield her eyes from the sun, having looked at it a bit too much, but nothing that a small visit to Reya after couldn't instantly heal back up.

"Whoa," she gasped.

"It's cool as frick, isn't it?" I asked.

“Yeah!!” she yelled. “It’s so bright! Was it always that bright?”

Ivan nodded. “It was,” he said, somewhat melancholically. “And it will be again.”

“That’s so cool!” Beth said happily. And it would be, when the time came.

“It will be,” I told her. “It will be.”

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We picked up Liam and Emilia from the “train station”. It was nice, seeing them again. It had only been a handful of weeks, but still. When you lived with someone, that kinda absence was rather noticeable.

The two stepped out of the mirror. The one we had in the basement of the guildhouse. It was easy for me to send them to Eden, but receiving them as a mobile target was a little trickier; so we just used the stationary mirror in the basement instead.

When they stepped out, I hugged each of them. They both looked just the same as when they’d disappeared, if a bit stronger. I could tell they were also approaching their breakthroughs to maelstrom. Liam was a little closer than Emilia, but her foundation was solid, so I was sure she’d manage soon, too.

None of that mattered when I patted their backs. “Welcome back, to the two of you!”

“It’s good to see you again, too,” Emilia said with a smile, smacking my shoulder roughly. She was stronger than she should have been... had they gotten more levels?

“How was your vacation?” Matt asked with an amused expression.

Liam snickered at the phrasing. “Oh lovely. Clear skies, kind people, plenty of things to see. We did quite a lot of sports, too, see?” he asked, flexing his limber muscles.

After a short laugh, Reya pecked him on the lips, taking his hand in hers, and casting a small Divinity spell on the both of them, clearing away the nausea that usually came with changing worlds. Her hands flicked through a few signs, which made Liam smile.

“I missed you too,” he said.

“Wow, no love for your best bud Matt, huh?” our swordsman said, rolling his eyes.

Liam laughed. “Yes, yes, I missed your sny little comments too, Rat.”

Marie tapped her fingers against her arm. "On a genuine note, how are things in Eden? Chris was a bit cagey about it."

Emilia shook her head. "Not great. Not... horrible, I s'pose. Orvan's death did a lot to help the people come together. Iryel has been leading a few parties further into infested zones, and they're working on using Divinity to clear out the Echo, but it's a time consuming process, and there are quite a few nests with fragments causing trouble."

"They requested that Fio should head over and clear up a few of them," Liam added. "You'd have a much easier time closing those half-gates than any locals. Plus, it would deny the keepers the power to reclaim them," he explained.

I grimaced a bit at that. In the entire country, there were only five people capable of fighting at the fifth realm. My very retired master, Rae, the government agent, Lyra. The other three were Matt, Ann, and me. We'd just recently sent Stella to Eden - her body there was probably more healthy, but still. She didn't have a gateway, and probably didn't want one, given all the complications about going back to Neamhan.

Not to mention the target on my back...

Softly, I sighed. "I get that," I said. "But it doesn't feel quite... fair, right now?"

Then, Ann looked at me with puppy eyes. "Fio... if they need you..." she trailed off, not finishing the sentence.

And of course, I understood. It was, after all, her world. She wanted it to be safe, to do well. In the same way that I wanted to see Neamhan's skies clear of smog, she probably wanted to see Eden's world clear of Echo.

I sighed, again. "Yeah," I said slowly. "I get it. I do."

Marie nodded slowly. "Well, neither me nor Ann can really come with. But you will need backup. We also will need Matt here."

"Sorry Fio," he said with a bit of a grimace, rubbing the back of his head.

Softly, I smiled and nodded. "It's alright." Then, I turned to the others. "Emilia, Liam, Reya?"

Our cleric gave me a long look, then a somewhat strained smile. Her hands came up again, and she signed a few words for me. I looked to Liam, who was quiet for a long moment. Then he looked at me. "She's suggesting you take Eric."

Ann's eyes narrowed a bit. "Is he willing to help now that things are less dangerous?" she asked, somewhat sharply.

Reya rolled her eyes a little, but nodded. That was pretty much exactly what Eric was dealing with. He had been scared before, and now that the immediate danger to his life was less, he was willing to go to Eden like. Just the same as most reflectors.

I nodded slowly. "Okay," I said. "That's fine, yes."

"Then I'll be coming too," Emilia said with a smile. "Can't have you all on your own."

Liam looked at Reya as she signed some more. "She's saying she'd prefer to stay in Neamhan, since she's really the only one who can deal with Echo. So her absence would be very distinctly felt."

She elbowed him.

"Very fucking distinctly felt," he amended.

"Sure," I said with a smirk. "Me, Emilia and Eric, then. I'm excited to pick up my levels."

"Actually," Matt noted, "if our contributions on Neamhan count to some degree--"

"They do," Emilia interrupted with a nod. "After all, we're still siphoning resources from the usurpers."

Matt nodded. "Since those count, I'd like to head over for a quick second, too. Just to grab the levels."

"So, you'll all be going for a moment, then," Marie noted. "Except me and Ann, of course."

At that, my girlfriend grimaced a bit. I could tell she wanted the extra levels, too. Bigger numbers meant more power, after all. Still, I nodded. "It makes sense to get everyone as strong as they can be," I said.

"So long as it helps us," Ann nodded, though still somewhat upset. She didn't want to be left behind.

I gave a small sigh, then smiled and squeezed her hand. "I'll talk to the divines," I said. "Let's see if we can't establish some kind of agreement."