

Chapter 87: Respite

'What do you mean there is an eclipse?!'

[The information you paid for has been delivered. Your contribution is not significant enough to acquire additional intel. Please vacate the altar for interaction by other users.]

Rage. 'Jam, you can't just say that and then fucking blow me off.'

[Please vacate the altar for interaction by other users.]

'An eclipse?? And you're telling me I can't leave?!'

[Please vacate the altar for interaction by other users.]

I ripped my hand from the cool stone with impunity, stumbling aside, my legs not moving quite the same way they were supposed to. On my way out, I bumped into another Reflector, stumbling and falling to the floor. She extended a hand and for a moment I almost growled at her.

Then, I realized just how much the intel messed me up.

[Breathe, Fio.]

Cass had been talking for a while, I'd just zoned her out. Following her advice, I stumbled up, past the confused woman, and out the door of the gateway hall. I took a couple deep breaths, leaning against the stone wall for support. I saw people pass by.

In and out, a handful every couple seconds. All of them had their faces set. These were people who had chosen to stay in Eden. Despite the hordes of monsters, despite the sigils no longer working.

A rueful smile wormed its way onto my face. They'd all made their choices, to stay and fight. And me? I was whining, that's what. So *what* if there was an eclipse coming? So what if there were assassins after me? Would I run just cause I was afraid?

I slammed my shaking hand into the stone walls. No. I wouldn't just run. I couldn't, anyway, not to Neamhan. But I would choose to stay and fight.

[We'll get through it together, Bell.]

'Thanks, Cass,' I thought at her, my breathing slowly evening out. I summoned my spear, leaning on it a bit as I walked. There was one more pitstop I had to make now, before going back to my guild. The temples.

On my way there, I thought about it. The fact that there was an eclipse coming... I definitely wasn't the only one who knew. Any truly powerful Reflectors would know, and so would any Edians. Orvan? Iryel? Both, yes.

And it made sense, too. The protections failing. The monsters already coming towards the city before the hunters drew them there. A usurper at the city gates... It all made sense if it was an eclipse.

"No coincidences," I muttered, trudging my way towards the temples, stumbling over my own feet a couple times. Eventually, though, I made it there. Instantly, I walked up to Hir's altar, and placed my hand on it.

'Ah, Fio. It is a pleasure-'

'What the fuck do you mean there's an eclipse??' I interrupted the chorus of voices. I could swear I could hear the divine flinch.

There was a pause for a couple seconds. 'Well, you see,' Hir eventually spoke again, their voice almost unsure, 'we couldn't just tell you...'

'Oh yeah? Why?' I demanded.

'That's... not something I am at liberty to tell you,' they said, the resignation clear.

Not at liberty to tell me. I was acting angry, yes, but that didn't mean I couldn't think clearly. Someone was stopping the divines. And... it was probably better if said someone didn't realize I knew they were interfering.

'Sure you aren't. You wouldn't spill your secrets to save my life,' I thought angrily at Hir.

'You misunderstand-' they started, but I didn't let them finish.

'Oh, do I now? Are you divines and your world-spanning plans too big for a little mortal mind like me? So big that I'm not even worth a warning?' I demanded.

Finally, I could hear the veneer of patience crack. 'And what would you have done if we *could* have told you? Not returned to Eden?'

'I would have *chosen* to fight, Hir. You took that choice away.'

'We did no such thing!'

The divine command boomed inside my head, sending me to a knee. My nose bled, each drop onto the stone floor ringing loudly in the empty prayer hall.

A weak smile placed itself on my lips. 'Sure you didn't.' Then, for a moment, I withdrew from Hir.

'Cass. Send an information package. You know, encrypted, like computers and stuff. Make it so it can only be opened by the divines - use a cypher or something.'

[A riddle. I can do riddles. It'll only open when the divines give the right answer. Two servants, one guild, one silent, one loud. What may the silent one never speak?]

'That works. Lurelia will get it. Tell the divines we are on decent terms, but I thought this call might be monitored. Tell them I know they didn't hide the info on the eclipse.'

[Who did?] Cass asked, more to herself than out loud.

'Later,' I chided. 'Send the package, now.'

A moment later, I felt a brief flash of heat in my mind. Good, that was done. It had only taken a moment, the conversation happening at the speed of thought. My attention turned back to Hir. 'You divines. Always so self-righteous. You want us to save your world and let us come here for that only. Then, you entice us to stay.'

'We give a gift!' Hir thundered.

My head hurt, but I continued anyway. 'You give a poisoned chalice. You *want* Reflectors to get addicted. To come back here. To forsake the other world and fight your battles. Because you're *losing*. So you manipulate us, manipulate *me* into coming here, and risking my life, and-'

'Do not insult me to my face!'

This time, the blast was more powerful. It felt like a cannonball struck my stomach or something. I staggered back a few steps from the altar, showing a vicious snarl. "Yeah," I muttered out loud, "that's what I thought."

Then, I shook my head in exasperation, or at least acted like it, and shambled out with my spear as a crutch, still acting as though I was off balance.

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'So that went about as well as it could've gone,' I thought at Cass once we were a bit further from the temple. She seemed less thrilled than me, somehow.

[Well? That seemed borderline suicidal, Bell! I hope they understand your hidden message!]

'They'll get it,' I brushed her off. 'I'm sure. Otherwise, they wouldn't seem very divine.'

My keeper huffed. *[So we'll just bet on that?]*

'No, no. See, we're kinda screwed anyway, right? The keepers hid the fact that an eclipse is happening. Well, either them, or the usurpers. I don't see why the keeper would hide that they did it.' While talking, I also kept walking back towards the guild, soon stopping my limping, and dispelling the spear. The nascent spirit in it almost seemed to wave me goodnight as it disappeared.

[You think the Usurpers hid the eclipse from us?]

'Oh, there's definitely a chance, isn't there? They need to have forces on the level of the divines, otherwise they would've stopped them invading already. They have a strong motive to keep me on Eden: wanting to get at my gateway. Even more so than the keepers. If I'm on Neamhan, I can't absorb more gateways, and they'll just get the thing if I ever want to go back to Eden at all.'

[... huh.] Cass hummed. She reached to trigger the avatar technique, and I let her. A moment later, her ghostly body that seemed like a 2D sketch in 3D reality appeared on my shoulder. She weighed nothing, of course, but she loved riding on it, in the same way Butterfly often did.

[What now, then?]

"Now we wait," I answered her out loud, giving a shrug with my free shoulder. "Either one of the divines sends us some priest or angel, or they don't. It doesn't really change much. I need to get stronger, so it's time to learn to handle the new techniques. And, you know, let that potion do its work and heal my chest."

And so we did. I walked back to the inn we were staying at. I saw Emilia sit with Marie, Matt and Reya at the bar, downing drinks. Rabbit was barely holding onto his stool anymore, though, so I quickly scooped him up. Marie directed me to which bed I should deposit him in.

I left his room, then remained outside the door for a few moments. The eclipse was coming. I should tell them. All of them, absolutely. But... not today. Not when half the party was black-out drunk. I sighed. So much to do. The eclipse... could wait until the morning at least.

Shortly after that moment of contemplation, I went back down. “How’re the Edians?”

“Settling,” Marie said. She’d been overlooking that process. “They are currently staying at various inns. Houses might open up soon. Well, as long as there’s not too much property damage. The city expects that some houses might... free up soon.”

“Riiight,” I nodded along. That was a little depressing. The inns were usually where Reflectors stayed, but now, all that infrastructure for a moving population would go to the Edian refugees. Houses would also free up. Cuz of death. So that was lovely.

“It’s a bit grim,” the older woman admitted, taking another small sip from her glass, “but we make do.”

“That we do.”

I swiped my gaze over the establishment. It was reasonably busy. Soldiers and guards who’d only put off the most weighty parts of their armor, sitting in their gambesons while their weapons leaned against the wall.

Of course, there were also plenty of other people. Edians who’d just lost loved ones, drinking away their sorrows. Others, trying to find a place to sleep. The doors opened and shut every couple minutes, letting some cool night air into the warm room.

Reya and Emilia were still talking, communicating with their hands and feet as best as they could. When in doubt, the priestess wrote things down, though I could tell the alcohol was helping neither her handwriting, nor Emilia’s ability to read it.

Our tank was genuinely using her Qi to empower her eyes, just so she could make out the scribbles on a piece of paper. I let out a small giggle at the ridiculousness of the situation, then sighed. “How’re the others holding up?” I asked Marie.

She gave me a long look. “Well,” she said, drawing out the word. “I think I am fine. You... seem okay. Emilia is doing well-ish,” she gave the woman a look, but she was too focused on reading to hear us. “Struggling a bit with being unable to protect everyone.”

I nodded. Heroism troubles. “Reya is holding on. I can tell she’s tough, but she’s also kind. She wants to help, and can’t, but the idea of not trying would eat her up even more. Liam has been supporting her. He’s a good kid, and he’ll deal, but he’s got a lot of pressure on his shoulders.”

“Yeah. He worries about his use, doesn’t he?”

“Mmh,” she hummed in agreement. “But he doesn’t mind the fighting. He’ll make it through. Hopefully, he can look out for himself. Matt, though, I’m a bit worried about.”

“How so?” I asked, tilting my head a little.

“The fighting. He’s gotta make sure not to get lost in it. And there’ll be a lot of fighting going forward. We should find something to keep him grounded, something he can do for leisure,” she explained.

“Ah, yeah. I agree entirely. We should get him into board games or something.”

Marie chuckled. “Hah, I, uh, doubt that would work.”

I gave a smirk. “Really? And here I was so hopeful. I might be able to get him to cook with me more often.”

“He hates it,” she said.

“How’d you know?”

The older woman just blinked at me. “Because I see him being miserable when cooking?”

I shook my head slightly. Of course she knew. When didn’t she? “Right,” I said. “But I do think we can get him into it more. Might be something he enjoys more when doing it with others.”

She nodded tentatively. “Okay, yeah. We can try. Also, let’s ask him if there’s anything he enjoys doing, too.”

“Well, I know he likes taking walks,” I said. Marie nodded along, encouraging me to keep going. “He likes talking about movies. Joking. I think it might be kinda the only thing he knows how to do, as far as I know his parents aren’t the most supportive of having many hobbies.”

“Right,” she said, leaning back a bit and taking another sip. “We’ll figure something out. Talk to him, if you can. I’ll try as well. If he doesn’t know what he likes, we’ll have to try things out.”

I nodded. There was a brief silence. “How about Ann?” I asked, quietly.

Marie sighed. She stared at the wall for a while, letting the background noise of drinking drown out the silence. “It’s hitting her,” she said, eventually. “She feels for the Edians a lot, I think. More than any of us, and I think we already care more than the average Reflector.”

"Hmm," I hummed non-committally. "Yeah. I'll check on her in a minute. How about Eric?" I asked. The question came after Ann, as if to take my mind off the topic. Maybe that was the reasoning a little.

She frowned. "Eric. He's... here, certainly. Mainly because of Reya, I think. It's hard to put a finger on it. The destruction isn't really wearing on him so much as he's afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yep," she nodded along. "Everyone is, of course. Not being afraid is suicidal," she gave me a long look saying that, "but I feel he's starting to really worry."

"Should I talk to him?" I asked.

"Maybe. Do you wanna?" She gave me a long look, then shook her head. "No. You don't. I can see it, Fio. Eric is a part of our party, yes, but he's not really established himself, to you. He's not hung out with anyone particularly much. He's not engaged a whole lot. And that's fine, but it means you don't know how to talk to him."

I nodded, feeling a small lump in my throat.

Marie sighed, closing her eyes for a scant few seconds. "Look. If you wanna talk to him, you can. But you don't have to. Don't overextend yourself. You shouldn't spread yourself thin. Go. Talk to Ann. Be there for her. I'll see about talking to Eric."

Slowly, I nodded at her. "Thanks, Marie."

She smiled, bright and happy suddenly. "It's what I do."