

Chapter 174: Aftermath

The evening, eventually, ended. Hours drifted by. I loved it.

Despite everything, I loved it. So did my alternate selves. So did the others. And then, eventually, as it drew too late, Bat closed up the bar.

We went home. It was kind of funny to see how quickly we shook off the buzz. Alcohol couldn't really do much to anyone with even a bit of power in them. We let it affect us, just a little, to enjoy the moment more, I suspected. But when I rose, a single flare of my Qi burnt it all away.

And so we went home - To the guild hall that was still ruined.

I winced as I saw it, but then, Ann clapped me on the back and showed us a new trick she'd apparently picked up. Chronomancy. Because why *wouldn't* she manipulate time at this point.

The entire house rewinded. Shattered shards of glass fused back into smooth panes. Splintered wood became planks, stone and brick glued themselves back together with mortar. By the end, Ann's mana was spent, and she leaned on me, but she still shot me a satisfied smile, giving me a faint kiss.

"You saved my home," she whispered. "I thought it was only fair I save ours."

My eyes teared up, and I just nodded, smiling brightly. Matt gave a wide grin, and quickly rushed inside. "My pajamas!" he called happily, excitedly ruffling through his closet before giving a gasp of happiness. Liam simply sunk into the shadows, Emilia climbed up the stairs while half-carrying Eric, who struggled to hold his liquor a bit more.

Still, one by one, we went into our home. Chris got the guest room, because of course they did, and I gently helped Ann into the bed. It was... all there again.

The place I'd spent the last year living. The place that had become my home, filled with the people who'd become my home. I smiled, feeling overwhelmed, and for a long, long while I just sat on the bedframe, staring at the wall. Cass eventually appeared again, petting my back gently, and I smiled at her, too, pulling her into a hug.

"We did it," I said.

"We did," she returned with a smile. "We won. We're free."

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Eventually, the moment faded. I changed into my pajamas, and went to sleep, covering myself with blankets and cuddling up to Ann. Then, I closed my eyes, and let it all fade away.

A moment later, I awoke on a snow-covered mountain peak, sitting across from Saph.

And Iryel.

The angel of death sat peacefully in the snow, his wings turned a black as dark as the abyss, looking almost shapeless. They lost all their depth as they embraced him gently. When I opened my eyes, blinking wearily, Iryel, too, opened his, and I was met with pools of abyssal light.

“Ah,” he said, and his voice rang with a chorus. “Fio, friend. Your focus rests here again.”

“Oh,” I said. “Hir?”

The divine smiled, and it was a beautiful thing even on mortal features. “Yes. We are glad you recognize us. Iryel has lent us his body for this, but we are still we.”

I nodded, slowly. “Why are you here?” I asked, carefully.

At that, their smile widened. “I fear saying to congratulate you wouldn’t do it justice, would it?”

“Was... that a joke?” I asked, blinking in confusion. When Hir just nodded gently, I shook my head with a snicker. “You’re impossible.” Still, the tension drained from my shoulders. I would not be fighting them.

“I would like to be added to your [Transference]. And then I shall see if my idea goes well,” they said, smiling.

The words shocked me. My heart stopped for a moment, I blinked, then shook my head.

“What?”

“You heard me, Fio,” they said. “This is a request, and you can refuse, but...” they held a hand out to me, tilting their head faintly, “I think this is a good deal for the both of us.”

For a moment, I felt fear. At what might happen, what brought this about, but then I looked at Hir’s face. They’d granted us an altar for Neamhan. Had apologized and admonished the other divines when they messed up. They’d been polite to me, and I trusted them. Even Iryel had always been fair to me, even saved my life once or twice.

I took a long, deep breath, then grabbed their hand. "Alright," I said.

"You won't regret this, I promise," the divine said, and I chose to trust them one more time.

[Hir'ythel, Chorus of the Damned has been added to your [Transference] network.]

A change rippled through it. Until now, the network had been laced thick with a song. A shared melody that thrummed through all of us, grew with every added individual, and now, it skyrocketed.

Notes of music resonated in my chest, and I felt my talent grow once more as Hir shared theirs. The talent at the core of who they were. [Corpsewhisperer].

Despite the ominous name, it was far simpler than it seemed. Simply, it allowed one to hear and learn from the passive death that pervaded a world, as well as more specifically from any recent, nearby death. I looked at Hir for a long moment as they leaned back, and breathed.

The Echo, the thrumming song, was still perfectly contained. Crystalline music coursed through the divine's veins now, but they did not mind. There were no adverse effects. Echo, itself, truly wasn't bad. The usurper's use of it was.

"Is that proof enough?" Hir asked, facing the sky. For a long time, it was quiet, and then, begrudgingly, the answers came.

Archiva, hungry to learn more, instantly agreed.

Argus, wanting to grow, tentatively gave his affirmation.

And Lurelia, scared of change, was against it.

But that was fine. She'd been outvoted. Hir had shown their determination, proven that the Echo in the network was different, and now gave me a nod. "There. No more threats to you. Eden has suffered for too long to see more death. So, I needed to prove that there was a path forward without cages."

Their eyes drifted to Saph, the crystalloid still sitting still, arms folded in their lap. "No cage for you, either. I want you to be able to walk this world."

Slowly, Saph moved their head to meet the divine, tilting it. "Why?"

"I heard it," Hir said simply. "You never wanted to infect, never wanted to ruin this world, right? So, stay here. Make this your home. Not a conquered one, but a chosen one."

Saph stared, then their motions lightened, their movements giving a crinkling that was somewhere between crumpling aluminum foil and laughter. “A home,” they said happily. “Yes. I’d quite like that. My old home threw me into war when I was born. This world suits me more.”

“Good. See, we just had a spot for a new divine opening up. Three spots, actually...” Hir said with a wink, and I held back a laugh.

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That was how Eden healed. In the passing months, it would rebuild. The world learned about Echo, and about the song, and developed its own ways to deal with resonance. Hir, Iryel and Saph led the charge in the research on how to use the new energy productively; how to move forward rather than backward.

Usurpers were still an invasive species, but Vivi found herself rather happy to assist with that - not with murder, but with containment and sending them back. None of the divines of Eden wanted another deal with the keepers, who demanded a tithe of Divinity and power in exchange, so instead, Cass and Vivi dealt with it.

They sent usurpers back to their home worlds, and, in doing so, *found* those worlds. The leyburn that had once nearly killed me helped with that, too, turning into a stalwart friend for Saph, and one of the divinities of Eden.

Now that the world had defenders strong enough to deal with any trouble, there was no more need for dimensional reinforcements, but the gates between Neamhan and Eden stayed open. In fact, the two worlds entered a much closer partnership, trading resources, items, and even energy back and forth.

This was spearheaded by Ivan, who cooperated with Foundational Exchange and later on took over the company.

For Zinnic the future was darker. Almost all their board members saw some amount of jail time for selling out our world. The exact crime was “attempted repossession and sale of public property” - though those who had been puppeteered into it were given a much lighter sentence.

Richard Terril, the CEO of the company, stepped down voluntarily. He met with me, just once, and apologized. For all his rudeness, and all the problems he’d caused. Apparently, seeing things from the down low, as someone forced to cooperate, had shifted his perspective a bit. He also understood that I might never forgive him... but he just wanted out.

Away from it all. So, Reya cured him of any lingering Echo, and we sent him on his way into an early, cushy retirement. Though he, eventually, ended up taking a job working at a bar.

Ivan eventually changed the company quite a bit. People were paid fairly for resources retrieved from Eden, and it became half-courier-service, half-cultural-exchange-program. Seeds of Edian plants were crossbred with ones native to Neamhan, kept in seedbanks, and we created magical variants of mundane plants that could survive even in the shitty atmosphere.

New laws about emissions were implemented. Companies grumbled, but the government had more resources now. The world was changing, and for once, it was for the better. It moved forward.

Chris asked for my help with making a new shell, and I did so happily. We built something from golden glass, my Qi element. A radiant golem, which Ann etched magical circuitry into. It took a month of working on it consistently, but by the end, Chris was more than happy with it, giving me a long hug.

And the two worlds continued onwards. The worst had passed. The tide had turned.

In the weeks and months after the death of Legacy, what really happened was that hope blossomed. For once, it was obvious to see the trajectory: things were improving. The air, slowly, got clearer. People who were interested in making the world a better place got enough resources to do so.

The sun set, and the sun rose on a new dawn. One where, perhaps, ambition would carry the world forward. So that as I was free, everyone could be.

Because everyone deserves freedom. Spread your wings, and fly.