

## Chapter 173: Later at the Bar

We went to Bat's bar. It was just as tucked away as I remembered it being, which was good, because frankly, I did not want to deal with all the celebrity stuff just then. Ion went in first, giving the barkeep a friendly wave.

"Hey Bat," she greeted with a smile.

"Hm?" The young man turned around to face us, then his hazel eyes widened. "Oh. Oh hell. Are you-"

Emilia shook her head with a laugh. "Nah, nah. 'Course not. We're just regular people." She gave him a bright smile, and Bat got the message rather quickly.

He nodded, putting a customer service smile on his face as he caught himself. "Right, of course," he said. "What can I get you all? You can take the table in the corner, it should have enough space for you."

I breathed a sigh of relief when he dropped the issue immediately. We still got a few stares, but at the same time, no one approached. Today had been... a strange day to say the least. The ceiling of the bar was a little bit cracked, and some dust covered the floor, as if it had been shaken by a mild earthquake.

Which, granted, it probably had. From under the table, I felt more than saw Emilia stomp her foot, and the bricks and mortar flowed back together, turning the building nice and sturdy, fixing any cracks in the foundation. She gave us a cheeky wink, then ordered a cocktail for herself.

One by one, we placed our orders. Trichtera let Emilia pick for her since she didn't exactly know the local culture. Marie, Ann and Eric got something light, while Reya ordered something with frankly far too much alcohol. Amusingly, while I got myself a simple margarita, Ion ordered a long island ice tea, then shot me a smile when I looked over at her.

Not that alcohol did much anymore, what with cultivation. We could choose *not* to purge the poison, of course, which... well. Maybe a bit of a buzz would be pleasant.

There were benefits to magic, though. For example, Marie pulled out a paper talisman, and placed it in the middle of our table, and suddenly, the surroundings quieted. They didn't go silent, but the background noise of the bar faded a little.

I leaned back, taking a deep breath. The others started talking, but it was drowned out by the noise in my head. My ears had stopped ringing by now, but the buzzing of my thoughts hadn't stopped.

It was a bizarre sensation. To have killed the usurper. Knowing it was done, knowing that the keepers were finished... and existing in two places.

Across the world, over in Eden, I was still lying on a snow covered mountaintop. Clouds covered the lilac sky, gentle flakes of white slowly drifting down and landing on my face. I breathed in cool, mountain air, and at the same time, I breathed in the stale, chemical air of the bar I was in, cleaned by filters.

A cloud covered sky and one made of aged synthwood boards. What a bizarre feeling. Existing in two places at once.

Of course, far more bizarre than that was the feeling of freedom.

Orvan was avenged. I'd killed the conqueror, the one in charge of taking over Eden. Sure, the usurpers had more in store... but they'd lost, already. It was over. My gateway wasn't just glowing within me anymore, it was *burning*. A radiant source of power. I could call forth a dozen copies of me if I needed. I could exist in more worlds than just these.

It was bizarre. The feeling of power that washed through me. The song thrumming in my veins. That, too, was fed by my victory. Even now, I could feel that humming melody in my heartbeat eat at the Echoing remnants of what remained of Legacy. Some part of them would live on through me, as a stepping stone. Perhaps that, too, was a way of leaving a legacy behind.

Didn't matter to me. The keepers had their territory devoured. The usurpers were done for.

Sure, they might have gods... but we could beat those. Sure, they might have people above even that, but they had to play by the rules. By world-stability and deals with the keepers to travel. And I didn't.

That was the fundamental difference between the usurpers and me, now. They needed to steadily corrupt worlds, to invade them piece by piece, to cut deals before sucking things dry. And for us? That wasn't the case.

With the gateway, I felt it. I could go other worlds now, places aside from Eden, places-

Bat gently placed a glass in front of me. I stared at it for a moment, almost confused, then gave a drowsy smile. I felt so tired. The adrenaline was finally washing from my veins, and I felt almost lethargic.

Not the brutal, crushing kind of lethargy. Just the calm, quiet that came from the end of a workday. I felt like I'd finally clocked out. Like the deed was done. Not fully, of course, but the toughest part was over.

Gingerly, I reached out and took a sip of my drink. It washed away the lingering taste of battery acid on my tongue, and replaced it with that faint burn of alcohol. I looked to Ann, and she gave me a quiet, knowing smile. She didn't say anything, just reached out and ruffled my hair, placed a small kiss on my lips, then turned back to listen to the group.

Slowly, breath by breath, I opened my ears, too. I joined the moment. I let the future drift away, falling to the side like flakes of snow. Soon, I'd tackle it all, but for now, I didn't need to. I'd earned my rest - and I would take it. Even if it was just a single evening with my friends.

So I leaned forward. I listened. I watched. When Marie talked about her time alone on Neamhan, and showed photos of little wooden statues she'd carved. When Liam asked Bat for a few knives and juggled them to Reya's stifled snorts. When Emilia promised to drink Eric under the table - and promptly followed up on it.

I snickered when Matt turned down the third girl trying to flirt with him that evening, and gave him a pat on the back when he turned down a guy, too. We talked, we laughed, we played some cards, we vented about how shit everything had been. How much it fucking sucked to fight all the time, to have to deal with terrible crap upon coming home.

About parents and their expectations and their absences. About lost friends, petty high school drama, about old relationships, and who we were crushing on. That's also how Eric and Emilia ended up together. When the cleric was a little tipsy, he finally admitted he liked her, and our shieldbearer promptly smooched him, to everyone's delight and Matt's rolling eyes.

Bit by bit, the evening passed us by. Bit by bit, the minutes ticked over.

And, eventually, the bar door swung open, and another friend of ours walked in.

Chris.

They awkwardly shuffled in with their human shell, giving a look around until their eyes landed on us and glinted. They'd changed clothes, wearing a hoodie with a cat on it and

long, flowing pants in blue-black. When they spotted us, their lips curled into a smile, and they headed over.

“Ah, good evening everyone. I have come to find that clothing in this world is remarkably comfortable. Your fabrics are quite lovely. Though I must say that your shopkeepers could use more practice in haggling. When I offered a handful of gold coins they told me to simply take what I wanted,” they greeted.

Instantly, I laughed. “Good to see you too, Chris,” I said, smiling at their antics as they sat down. “You’re alive.”

“Remarkably so,” they said. “I expected to have at least this shell annihilated, and perhaps my entire existence erased. Yet, nothing happened. Perhaps Legacy had a change of heart at the end.”

Ann took a long sip from her cocktail, then flashed Chris a smile. “People do change most when they’re about to die. It took me death to realize I didn’t like being a goddess.”

The triz-adu nodded solemnly. “Indeed. The deaths of our shells mark great steps in our lives, too. It is a moment of grief as much as it is one of growth.”

Matt tapped them on the shoulder. “Enough of that! Impressive pillar of fire! Have you been holding out on us?”

“I would never,” Chris shook their head. “I simply burnt what must be burnt.”

“You never showed us fire-abilities until now,” Emilia noted.

Chris smiled and nodded. “That is true, I did not. Because, until now, I had nothing to properly burn.”

At that, Marie tilted her head. She took a sip from her drink, and gave a soft smile. “I think I got it,” she said.

“Hm?” Chris hummed and tilted their head. “What do you understand?”

“It’s a cultural thing, isn’t it? Some sort of self-imposed rule. Something not meant to be shared with the living, something very important to you personally,” she noted. “I’d imagine that must mean it’s a pretty big secret. Probably something related to your entire species. I think-”

With a sigh, then a chuckle, Chris interrupted her. “Please. No more. Asking me to speak of this is like asking me to remove my clothing in front of the table,” they said, blushing and

holding out a hand. “It is intimate and secretive. Do not make me debase myself, please. Especially when you know already.”

I smiled lightly, then nodded. With Marie’s words, it wasn’t hard to figure out the rest. The secret about their shells, and everything else. I didn’t need it spelled out to get it. Instead, I just agreed. “Fine by me. If you wanna talk about it, you can. But I won’t pry.”

“Thank you,” the triz-adu said gratefully, giving me a smile and a nod. Then, they focused on the menu. “Now, are any of you willing to help me select something from this list of beverages? I am curious if your drinks are as pleasant as your clothing. Also I do not know why anyone would drink something named after the undead. Or blood.”

With a snicker, we leaned forward, helping them.

The secret fell by the wayside. Unimportant. For just that evening, all of us allowed ourselves to feel mundane. To be just normal people. Not celebrities, not warriors, just friends, sitting, talking, and laughing together.

It was a little bit of a lie, and it was a little bit of a truth. But most importantly, it was freeing. And that was the greatest gift I could have asked for.