

Chapter 161: Loathing

The hospital was sterile and white, and I felt horribly mundane as I walked in. My memories are blurred, but I know I talked to a receptionist at some point, who pointed me at a nurse, who pointed me at my dad's room. Third floor, room seventeen.

I remember that because I spent what must have been an eternity staring at the door. I didn't want to open it, didn't want to see what laid behind it. In the end, it wasn't even me that opened it. Another nurse - a guy this time - saw me standing there and came by.

"Sorry, is the door locked?" he asked, then instantly opened it to check. Of course, it wasn't locked. Which sent him into a stammering of apologies. I hardly heard them, because on the hospital bed laid my dad.

He looked like shit.

There was no other way to say it. He looked terrible. His cheeks were sunken in, his skin was a pallid grey, and even his hair had lightened at the roots. I could see bits of skin flaking off him, and that was *after* Reya had taken off the worst of the effects.

Normally, she could cure Echo addiction. Normally, it shouldn't cause any trouble.

Yet, within my dad, I could feel it differently. There was structure there. He didn't imbibe Echo impermanently, no. The experiments had been engineered to start him on whatever the equivalent of Echo-based cultivation was.

Within his chest there were the remnants of something like an Echo-core. It was shattered, now, breaking apart and flaking in the same way that his skin was. Somehow, it was almost similar to being Path-broken, yet different. Cultivation cores were near impossible to be actively cleansed, unless-

Unless someone had access to Divinity? Had Reya somehow figured out how to restore someone's Path?

So many thoughts darted through my head. Theories about cultivation, and how the different powers interplayed, how Echo and Qi and Mana and Divinity all connected, because by now I knew they *had to*. There was so much evidence for it. So many things to think over.

And I ignored all of them.

Instead, I looked at my dad and walked forward. My steps were shaky, but despite everything, I didn't stumble. I was hard as iron, after all, and so, my feet carried me to the side of the bed.

The trainwreck of a human that was Lars Desum looked at me. His lips formed into a smile, and the skin around them cracked as lines wore themselves into it. I could see healthy skin underneath, but it was raw, red, young. It would take time to heal, but he was stable. Despite everything, he was stable.

"Hey Fio," he said, calling me by a name that should have been mine and yet wasn't. By a name I'd lost when I died. "Sorry you have to see me like this."

I wondered if he grieved me in my world. I wondered if he mourned me, or if he was too drunk to notice. If he found solace at the deep end of a bottle back then, in that place that I was no longer in.

A heavy, dry swallow went through my throat. "Yeah," I said, almost choking on the attempt to speak. "No, I mean. You're okay. Not your fault."

At that, he gave a wry, weak chuckle. His eyes turned to the ceiling. "Not my fault, huh?" he parroted with a sigh. "No, it is. I bit off more than I could chew," he said, and the resentment in his words was clear. The self-loathing more than obvious. "I did it again, and again, and again. And now here I am. This is where my choices have brought me."

My mind raced to find a reply, but each attempt died before the words came to my lips. Ann stood next to me, a rock, an anchor, a point of stability, and still, I couldn't find the strength to speak.

The man who was not my father shook his head. "And again," he said quietly, "you save me. Your friends drag me out of there. Your friends heal me. Bring me to a hospital. They call you, they clean up." By the end of his words, there were tears in the corners of his eyes. The words were deathly quiet. "I just wanted to be useful again."

I clenched my fist so hard it would have shattered stone. My throat felt tight, and yet, I willed myself to speak. "No," I said. "You did fine."

"Fine?" he asked, mocking himself with spite in his voice. He turned to face me again, the only thing he could really do, fists balled and grabbing his sheets. "No. I didn't do fine. I got this close to killing myself over vain pride, over thinking I had something to prove."

"No," I repeat, croaking it more than speaking. "You did- It's..."

"What?" he asked. "What pathetic excuse are you gonna give me?" The word felt like a punch to my face, and I felt speechless. My throat tightened up even more. Despite everything, all my power, it was so hard to speak to Lars. I hated him. I loved him.

"I-"

"Don't bother," he said, turning aside. "I know what I am. Pathetic. I-"

Ann stepped forward. Furious, like a wild fire, she stepped up and grabbed the sides of his hospital bed. Her eyes burned. "You're going to let her speak," she said, each voice cold and furious. "You're going to listen, Lars."

He blinked at that, flinching back. The loathing burnt when faced with Ann. He looked at me, and saw the wet sheen in my face, and all that hatred crumbled away. It turned to ash, because Lars had always been weak, and when push came to shove, he would crumble. When faced with pushback, he gave up. Even if it was pushback on hating himself.

All that he was left with was a faint sense of defeat.

Then, Ann stepped back, and squeezed my hand. We weren't dating; she was dating *Fio*, not *Ion*. But she still supported me.

I took a deep breath. Felt the way Astraeus and Cass hummed in my chest to support me. Another deep breath.

Instead of a hospital, I imagined myself in a warzone. I imagined myself facing the dark-fire giant again, staring down death, because in so many ways, it was easier than facing the man who wasn't quite my dad. And finally, *finally*, the words came.

"You discovered the Echo operation," I said, surprised by how gentle I sounded. "You saved people."

That was all. All I could say, and all I needed to say, because when faced with adversity, Lars crumbled. He teared up more, then let out a choking sob, pressing his face into the crook of his elbow. He had always hated crying, especially in front of me, but he still did it.

"I could have done more," he said. "I could have asked for help. I should have!"

Ann nodded. "You should," she said calmly, laying a hand on his shoulder. "But to expect perfection of yourself is cruel."

Dad gave a choked chuckle at that, followed by another sob. He wiped his face in the blanket, sniffled, and sighed. Long and hard in a way that was full of pain and sorrow and

growth and happiness and so many things. "I'll try," he said. "To be kind to myself. So I can..." he trailed off, then looked at me again, and took a deep breath. Somehow, even with his face reddened, he managed another smile. "So I can keep moving forward. Keep doing better."

Some part of me smiled at that. I let that thought pass through my connection with Fio, the real Fio, and she froze like a deer in headlights. Unlike her, though, I simply nodded. "Good. Burn those regrets," I said. "Leave them behind and move on."

They'd forged that Path together, after all. And I saw the way my words influenced him. The way that they stoked the fire in his core, the way his Qi grew and ate at the Echo that still coursed through him. A minor breakthrough from... what, second step of Qi Gathering to third?

It didn't matter, not exactly. The exact stage was unimportant. All that mattered was taking another step, moving forward. And, looking at his face, Lars knew that. Because if he gave up again, I could tell Fio might give up on him.

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I took a deep breath. Despite everything, the campfire didn't feel warm enough anymore. It was snowing, of course, it was always snowing here, but that was not what I meant.

The cold ate into my bones, because I'd just seen my dad in a hospital bed. All at once, I'd learned that he'd dismantled an Echo experimentation scheme and nearly gotten himself *killed*. Because he was a fucking moron with a death wish who couldn't accept help and would throw himself-

Emilia placed a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, princess," she said. "You okay?"

I stared at her. Felt the rage, the anger, the pain that I felt at the thought of my idiot, piece of shit, worthless dad almost killing himself just to prove a point. Just so he could indulge himself, and play the hero one more time. Because to him I was still a child, still someone he needed to prove himself to, someone he needed to be a mountain for.

"... Break something," I mumbled, clenching my fingers tight around Astraeus. "I need to... need to break something."

How Ion handled it so calmly, I didn't know. I was pissed. Beyond pissed. I wanted to smack him, to scream, to yell, just anything but this.

Emilia just nodded. She pulled me up with a quick motion, took a look around, and then faced Stella. “Yo, Archer,” she said. “Got anything?”

The woman smiled faintly. “Way ahead of you,” she said, then pointed. “There. About... three-ish kilometers. They’re the most durable things around, so knock yourself out.” The words came easier now, after she’d travelled with us for a little while. But I didn’t pay attention to that.

I just stepped into the air, then through the reflections, and disappeared. Things needed to break. I needed to break things, to do something with this *loathing*.

And so, the usurpers broke.