

Chapter 146: Nostalgia

Standing in front of the mirror, I took a long, deep breath. It wasn't the same anymore. Not the one in my bathroom, the one that Zinnic had shattered. This was the one in our gateway hall, custom made, and blessed by the Gift.

Gently, I moved my fingers across its surface.

They didn't smear or dirty the mirror. Instead, They just sent a gentle ripple across the glassy surface. It was strange just how strongly this piece of glass resonated with my affinity. Tiny streaks of gold were left behind when I touched it, slowly fading away again.

What did a water cultivator feel when it rained? Was this how Liam felt when he was around shadows, how Emilia felt when she was enveloped by the earth?

I breathed. My heart beat in my chest with anxious excitement. I didn't need to be scared anymore.

The others were all through already. There was a chance for problems to come up when I was in-between, so I was set to go last. Even Rae had already stepped through, giving me one more glance. And so, I closed my eyes.

For a long, endless moment, I waited. I listened to the beating of my heart, the rushing of Qi in my maelstrom. I breathed out, letting all the air in my body go, forcing out any fear, any doubts. My will turned into solid steel.

I opened my eyes.

And then I stepped through the mirror.

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Liquid glass wrapped around my face. It rippled and stretched, but it didn't seem as overwhelming anymore as it used to. I held my breath, until that sheet of glass passed, and once I was fully in between worlds, it felt almost like an embrace.

I was a gateway, and so, to some degree, this was where I belonged. My place.

Around me, there were a million other mes, each one transitioning between worlds. Some of these would come to me as Ion, or maybe, I would go to them. Regardless, we would help

each other. Some were alternate versions of me who had gone earlier, some had hesitated a moment longer. All of that was fine.

The sky shook.

High above, I could see the keepers stirring.

Hungry gazes twisted until they reached us. Eyes, Matryoshka, Swamp, and Possession. The first and last of those had rents in their glass shells, in the strange almost-bodies that contained their concepts. Rents that I had cut into them.

A smile blossomed on my face, even as their power crushed down on me. It echoed in my ears, making me feel the blood rushing through me. They couldn't tear the gateway from me, but they could try. Try to send me someone else, somewhere I might die, spawn me in the middle of a nest or something.

But they failed.

My maelstrom churned, whirled, and an infinite amount of copies of myself repeated the same action throughout the astral realm. Cass appeared floating behind me, and Astraeus easily came into being, my fingers already wrapped around the weapon.

Smiling, I slammed the butt of the spear on the not-path that I was walking on twice. "Come at me!" I roared my challenge to the heavens.

Because that was what cultivators did.

Instantly, the keepers flared with fury and hunger and greed. They were the sky above the sky, and this should have been their domain. White, glass lightning arced down, and yet, I turned it aside.

Astraeus caught the bolts before they touched me, and discharged them harmlessly into the ground. Golden glass started bubbling and boiling around me, turning the astral realm into my playground. Cass contested their powers, manifesting mirror-shields and weaving thousands of gossamer-thin glass threads to cut up the sky.

I roared the challenge, I stepped up into the air, my Qi flared and burned, and infinite waves crashed into infinite keepers, each version of me fighting her own fight. They were powerful, here. They were stronger than me. And none of it mattered, because they were *cowards*.

When my attacks approached them, Eyes ran first. It warped in on itself, and, with a motion as if its full body blinked, winked out from existence. Then Possession. Swamp and Matryoshka sent down arcs of disease and forbidden knowledge, and I battled them for just half a moment, until the pull from the other side increased.

[Fio,] Cass reminded me.

Softly, I sighed, and dropped my shoulders. “Yeah,” I said. “Of course.”

I let myself be pulled, and disappeared from the astral realm again. Eden called, and quite frankly, I didn’t have the time to play with these clowns instead.

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Stepping out from the gateway hall in Eden was nostalgic. My guild and master were there, waiting for me. Eric was awkwardly fidgeting, Liam was stretching, already working on his body with the shadows, and Emilia was pulling out bits of her armor from her inventory. Matt stood a small distance away, glaring at Rae. Reya leaned against a wall, looking a little woozy.

Everyone but Marie and Ann had made it here.

I breathed, gently placing the loss aside. A second passed, then Eric nodded at me. He hadn’t come through our hall, instead choosing his own access point, which was fine. Now, though, he had to go through with it.

He looked at me, unable to hold my eyes for more than a few seconds. I sighed, and walked up to him, clapped him on the shoulder, and included him in the damn [Transference] network. He flinched for a second at the motion, but then, I just pushed him towards Emilia. “Make this dork less scared of us,” I said, smirking.

Grinning brightly, she saluted me. “Aye aye, captain!” she said, then went on to ruffle the cleric’s head, and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. I smiled at the display, and Reya gave me a small nod, seeing the way they played around.

Matt pushed off the wall, standing next to me. “Make it through okay?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, all good,” I said, and a small smile appeared on his face.

“Awesome,” he said. Then, he turned towards the entrance of the gateway hall. “Oh, sounds like the welcoming committee is here,” he noted.

And they were. Iryel and Chris. Hir's angel looked tired, still having the characteristic bags under his eyes, and a slight stubble on his face. But still, he was smiling, and gave us a small bow. "Welcome back," he greeted us. "It's good to see you again."

Chris, for their part, gave us a wave with their human shell. The smile stretched along their face with practiced ease, even if it was still a little unsettling. "It has only been a while since we met, but it is good to see you again."

The angel turned to Rae, too. "And, of course, we are happy to welcome you back to Eden, Spear God."

At that, Rae's face flushed slightly, and he gave an awkward frown, scratching the back of his head. "Don't get too used to it," he said. "I'm really rather tired of fighting." Then, he glanced at me. "But, well. At least it doesn't feel so hopeless anymore, now."

Iryel nodded gently. "Yes," he said. "We are glad to see more people reach the next realm. And..." he glanced at Reya, for a moment. "It is good to see people pursue the pinnacle of their arts, always."

The mute girl gave a soft smile, and a few hand signs at that. Iryel simply nodded, and turned around. "Enough of the greetings," he announced. "Let's go to the temple. Watching you get your levels will be my first break in half a year."

I laughed at that. "You're an idiot. Do you even sleep?"

He shrugged. "Once a week, maybe."

"Moron," Matt sighed.

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We went to the temple.

There were five altars there, one for each of the living divines. There was also the altar to the keepers in the gateway hall, which could fulfill the same functions without the... well, the trouble the divines often caused. But, despite that trouble, we were saving their world.

So, they were thankful to us. Hopefully thankful enough to make some concessions this time.

I was to go last in our group, since I was staying in Eden, so the others went first. One by one, they placed hands on their chosen altars, closed their eyes, and levelled. I could see it when they stiffened and walked away awkwardly, struggling to control their motions. Levelling was just as unpleasant as ever, then.

Not looking forward to it, I still knew it had to happen.

Rae took a longer while to sort through his options than the others, and when he stepped away, he eyed me with a somewhat strange glint in his eyes, but smiled nonetheless. There must have been something special in there, for him. "All okay?" I asked.

He turned to me, somewhat surprised at the question, but then gave a warm smile. "Ah, to have a disciple care for an old master. It warms the heart," he said. "Yes. I am alright. Thank you for asking, Fio."

Matt clicked his tongue a little before walking up to the altar, glancing at Rae with disapproval. He'd never liked him, and that bad blood didn't seem to have lessened even after our excursion into the category five gate. But that was fine. For now, they didn't need to love each other.

I did see my master giving Matt a sad look when the demiboy went to the altar. But he remained silent, simply waiting as our swordsman took his levels, then strode back. I saw Matt taking deep breaths as he stepped away from Ru's altar, his eyes glinting sharply, but he simply leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes, cycling his Qi.

Then, Reya's turn came about, and we would finally make the request we had come here to collectively make. Our mute saintess gave us a nod before striding forward confidently, Eric's eyes glued to her back with worry.

Gingerly, she reached out to touch the altar.

Instantly, the room flooded with radiant whiteness.

Reya's hand remained glued to the altar, but her mouth tore open in a gurgling screech. Her skin glowed from the internal brightness, and Liam flinched in horror, dashing at her. He grabbed her shoulders, and tried to pull her away, but her hand remained glued to Lurelia's altar, even as the light burnt her.

It arced off of her, slamming into him like a lightning bolt, and sending him sprawling against the wall. Eric looked around in a panic. "Help her!!" he yelled, rushing forward himself, only to be disposed of instantly.

But his words shook me from my stupor. I rushed forward, placing my hand on the altar too, and the world went white with resplendent, divine agony.