

Chapter 74: Calm before the Storm

I threw up in an alley before I made it to the guild. There was blood on me. On my shoes, on my shirt. It clung to my hair. It was disgusting.

The smell of iron was so much worse inside a city than the wilderness. There were no earthy tones to subdue it all, only the smell and noise of more people. All people who looked at me with disgust, disdain, and distrust.

Step by step I shambled through the city. I don't think my route was quite right, but I was kind of out of it. [Single-Minded] was off now, and I felt the disgust cling heavily to myself.

Eventually, there was a tap on my shoulder. I lashed out with a quick swipe of my open hand, not wanting to kill anyone, but I didn't strike.

When I turned there was a man there. Tall, lanky, springy hair, a black goatee, dark skin and hazel eyes. He grinned. Next to him were two women, one old and hunched and frowning, the other young... a child, really, halfway hiding behind the man. Scared.

He smiled at me, almost a grin. "Hey there again, Dawn of Ambition lady!"

He recognized me. Where did I know him from? Who was this?

"Seems like it's our fate to find you in trouble and have ya lash out, huh?" he asked, humor in his voice.

He had one of those faces it was hard to stay mad at. "That goatee is hideous."

The girl chuckled, and the older woman barked out a bout of laughter. The man himself flushed for a second, then laughed, too. It was mundane. It helped.

And it clicked. These were the people who'd taken me onto a stretcher back in the day, when I first came back from the wilderness.

"You know, you never told us your name, lady," the man said.

I smirked. "The feeling's mutual. Since you all got three names to give, why don't you start, huh?"

For a second, I saw that the man almost replied, but the old woman interrupted him. "I am Evelyn. The young one is Sophia. The idiot is named Trevor."

I almost laughed. Their names were so normal it was refreshing. "Fio," I said, reaching out a hand. Then I noticed it had blood on it. Crap.

"Is that short for anything?" Trevor asked me. "Fiona perhaps?"

"Call me that and maybe I'll leave more bloody than you met me," I said, though my tone was joking. I breathed in the air, and the smell of iron didn't suffocate me for a moment.

"Hah!" Trevor laughed. "Alright, Fio. I got that. You call me Trev, then, alright?"

"Sure."

Sophia was no longer hidden behind Trevor by now, coming a little closer to me. Back when I first saw her I'd guessed she was in her teens. She was, I now saw, and early-ish, too. She couldn't have been older than fifteen.

Lightly, she reached out with a hand. I looked at her in confusion.

Evelyn spoke for her. "She wants to cleanse you of the blood. She's a cleric, though she hasn't chosen a deity yet. Argus, Archiva and Hir favour her."

Slowly, I reached out, then took the girl's hand. I felt a small rush of divinity crawl across my skin, eliciting a shiver that sent the girl skittering, and goosebumps raising on my skin. I breathed to shake off the feeling of static underneath my flesh. Then I shook myself again.

I turned to Sophia with a smile. "Thank you for that," I said.

She gave me a timid smile. "You're welcome," she said, in a quiet, bright voice, almost as bright as her grass-green eyes.

Evelyn spoke again. "I am glad you feel better, Fio."

"What did'ya get into to get that much bloo-" Trev started, before she continued, but she interrupted him in turn.

"We will *not* ask you what happened," she said, glaring at the man, who gave a non-remorseful motion of backing off. "How about this, instead: Let us walk you to your guild?"

I eyed her for a bit. "Why are you being so kind?"

Trev blinked at me, then laughed. "Hah! Hahaha! C'mon, Fio. We're all Reflectors. This ain't an easy life. We lie and fight and hardly have any true friends. So isn't it right to help another when you see one in trouble?"

"Humans gotta stick together," Evelyn said with a shrug.

I cringed at that. "People gotta stick together," I said.

The old woman gave me a long look. "Right. That works."

With a small nod, she walked ahead, her walking stick, which I was now sure was a magic staff, tapped against the road with a rhythmical tap. "Come along then. Let's get to your guild."

And then we did just that. I was glad for the company.

Trev, too, seemed glad. Because he did not shut up for a single moment of the walk. I now understood why he was in this party exactly. Anyone else would just get sick of his constant waterfall of quips, but right now, it felt nice.

I let his talking wash over me, not needing to put in much effort besides walking. He told me of their quests, how they met, what their plans in Eden were... and then we were at the doorstep of the guild.

There, they waved me goodbye, and I took another deep breath, before pushing open the door to Dawn of Ambition.

Ann stood in front of me.

I looked into her eyes and she looked into me. A scowl was firmly placed on her lips, and her arms were crossed.

"Where've you been?" she asked.

I looked at her. The small joys of the short walk evaporated quickly. My smile disintegrated. For a moment, I reflexively opened my mouth, about to lie like I was used to from my parents and Neamhan as a whole.

Then I decided I would do better. "The divines sent me an angel with a missive. To remind a few newbies why you don't kill Edians."

She flinched. The frown disappeared. She looked sad, instead. "Oh. Those poor people..."

I put my hand on her shoulder, squeezing lightly. "It's done now. I took care of it."

Ann looked at me for a long moment. Seconds ticked by, then she nodded. "Okay. Sorry. I thought- I want to support you. I thought this was something I should have supported you in. And maybe I should have."

“But I wanted to do it on my own,” I said. Felt like I had to, really.

She nodded again. “Yeah. I respect that. Sorry for putting you on the spot.”

“Apology accepted and forgiven,” I said, wrapping her into a quick hug and a small peck.

“Come on, then, sleepyhead. We got a whole day ahead of us.”

We did not, in fact, have a whole day ahead of us.

- - -

The usurpers were not an organized force. There was an inherent difference between them and the keepers and the divines, and that difference was communication.

If you talked to one of the divines, you were practically talking to all of them. Keepers... well, I didn't exactly know how much they interacted with each other back then, but suffice it to say, they can talk when needed to.

Usurpers don't do that.

Most of them, anyway. They were a loose force, mostly powerful monsters birthing more monsters. They consumed things to create more of themselves, and anything that wasn't "them" was an enemy.

Frankly, the only reason Eden hadn't ended yet, was because a lot of the time, the bigger monsters kept each other in check. Well, not just that, of course. People like Orvan were a major reason, too. But usurpers, by their nature, wanted to consume and spread out. To live.

Gateways, like the one inside me, made that possible. They could take that power, twist it to their own purposes, and drag more monsters through the void between worlds over onto Eden. Each monster meant this world was a little closer to falling, and it meant a little more territory belonged to the usurpers, so gateways were *valuable* to them.

That was why I'd kept the mirror Qi signature hidden.

Cities were warded in Eden. They *had* to be warded in Eden. The monsters would come and need to be fought off every minute of the day, otherwise. This way, the bases of civilization were hidden behind shrouds.

But those shrouds weren't perfect.

If my mirror Qi leaked out, it would attract monsters. So I kept a tight grip on it. I let none of it spill, unless I was already locked in combat, when I occasionally used a [Reflection] to turn attacks back where they came from.

So I was sufficiently surprised when, during my walk to the temple to check what my contribution could buy me, I saw the sky flicker.