

Chapter 151: To solve a Problem

I sighed, took the others once they were finished, and walked to the training hall. It was an uneventful stroll through the quiet city. People recognized us, but no one approached. Anyone who did, got shadowstepped aside by Liam.

We didn't talk much either. I was a little angry at those two morons for interrupting what was supposed to be a joyous moment. We returned to Eden to defend this world, we used all of the resources we earned by saving people and grew stronger. My level and my stats were higher than ever. And yet.

Cass floated above my shoulder. She had her own source of Qi, now, and could permanently manifest herself, with that same glassy-grey faceless appearance. Like a half-coloured, translucent sketch in the air. "What do you think they are up to, Fio?" she asked me.

Again, I sighed. Really, it's not so much 'think' as much as it is 'know' what they're up to. Matt and Rae were both morons, after all. Thick-headed idiots who couldn't look past their own pride. Both of them liked me, and you'd think that'd be enough for them to get along, but both thought the other liked me the wrong way.

Maybe some part of that had changed these days, but I couldn't imagine their conversation going well. "They're fighting," I told Cass. "I'm sure they are. So we're heading to the only place around that can handle that kind of fight."

And, as expected, when we made it to the training hall, the door had been moved. I knew it had, because otherwise, it would have been more dusty. The house still stood, somehow. Which was good.

I wrapped my hand around the door, pulling it open, and the remaining Qi washed over me like a tidal wave. It felt like a firework going off in my face - way too weak to injure me this day, but enough to hurt an unenhanced human quite a bit.

Sighing, again, I walked inside.

Matt and Rae were sprawled out on the floor. Blood coated the flat stones, new furrows carved into them. Each of the two idiots was covered in cuts and bruises and panting heavily. Matt's hand still clutched his sword, and he struggled.

He was trying his best to get up again and stab Rae one more time.

Meanwhile, my old teacher laid on the ground, slowly tilting his head towards the other warrior. Frowning deeply, I tapped Emilia. She nodded once, then stomped on the ground. Instantly, two chairs rose from it, forcing the two up from the floor and making them face us.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded.

Rae flinched back. First in shame, then in pain as the injuries set in. He glanced at Matt from the side, but my friend remained entirely stoic. The younger fighter looked at me. “Teaching a piece of trash a lesson,” he said.

I shook my head, holding my face in my hand. “Why are you like this?”

At that, he flashed me a radiant smile. “You know you like-”

“No, Matt, I’m very sincerely annoyed right now,” I said. He shut his mouth and furrowed his brows, almost confused.

“What?”

Looking at Rae, I asked him. “Why?”

He didn’t even meet my gaze. “Matt was angry with me. I thought this would… help him deal with the anger.”

“You are two adults and the best conflict resolution you could come up with was ‘hit each other’? Are you kidding me?” I asked, crossing my arms.

Matt turned to Rae, meeting the old man’s eyes for a second then looked at me. “Fio,” he said. “What do you want me to do? I’m not gonna forget anything that happened.”

“Me neither,” Rae said, defeatedly. He looked at me, paused, then slowly took a breath. “I’m sorry he said. I’m sorry for-”

I cut him off. “Apology accepted,” I said. “And forgiven.”

“Huh?” he asked, stunned.

Matt looked at me, then frowned. “You should hear the whole thing.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t care. It’s gonna be some generic stuff.” Slowly, I turn to Rae, and take a deep breath. “I forgive you, for everything. For the way you projected your trauma onto me, for the fact that you were terrified of growing attached, for the way you tried to raise me to be cold and callous,” I said.

He just blinked. "Huh?" he repeated.

Very gently, I knocked him on the hand with my knuckles. "Stop 'huh'ing me, old man. I know what you did."

Rae had lost his own party. He was afraid I'd lose mine and get hurt, so he wanted me to be self-sufficient. He was scared of losing me, so he tried to be cold and distant. He tried to keep me distant by sparring with me, by, effectively, beating me up. And it hurt.

Every single time, it hurt. The fact that he was so childishy unloading his pain, his own experiences with loss. It wasn't a fun experience, not at all.

But it was better than my nagging mom or alcoholic dad.

No, learning to fight wasn't pleasant, it wasn't easy, and I wasn't some dumb kid. I understood what was happening, I understood what he was doing, and here we were. "Yes, it hurt. Yes, you fucked up. What, did you think I expected you to be perfect?" I asked, shaking my head. "No. You're a mess. You got better once you got to process things, got some distance on Neamhan, but you're a mess. Terrified, stupid, traumatized. Retiring was the best thing you ever did. Forgetting me," I choke on the word, "was the best thing to ever happen to you."

He looked at me, shaking.

"Because, for the first time in your life, you were able to be honest. See how hard it is, now? You took a whole fight just to say you're sorry. People aren't that hard, old man. I forgive you," I repeated.

Matt looked at me for a long moment. "Well," he said, scratching the back of his head. "Crap."

I glared at him.

Apologetically, he held up his hands, then winced. Reya shook her head in exasperation and went to heal him. He gave her a grateful nod, then turned to me with an awkward, crooked smile. "Sorry," he said.

"You have to tell me what you're sorry for," I said, poking his forehead.

Matt grimaced, somewhat playfully, then caved in. "Fine, fine! I'm sorry for being overprotective. For going behind your back. For hurting someone you cared about."

I looked at Rae.

He looked back at me. "I-" the words died in his throat, and he swallowed heavily. "I am also sorry for hurting someone you cared about," he said.

Crossing my arms, I nodded at both of them. Emilia grinned, brightly. "Now kiss," she said.

At that, Liam whacked her on the back of the head, and we laughed. Chris quickly swept forth a wave of water, cleaning the blood off the ground. Both of my moronic loved ones were healed by Reya, and hopefully, the lesson would stick.

I sighed, again. Rae had taught me a lot, but I did somewhat hold a grudge. Hearing him apologize meant he'd grown. I was thankful for that. Now if only my parents managed the same thing. He apologized after changing. They apologized, then never changed.

Shaking my head, I cut that thought short. After all, I was the bigger person. I would calmly give them yet another chance, in hopes that they might do better, but expecting nothing. I'd been burned too many times before. But that was fine. I was strong, after all, and I had my own support network in place.

Looking at my friends standing behind me, I gave them a bright smile. "Alright," I said. "I'm starving. Let's get some food?"

Emilia cheered loudly. It was good to be back in Eden.

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While everyone was eating, I finished early and stepped back into the temple, with the divines. There was one final request I had off them.

'Fio, you return so quickly,' Hir said, somewhat confused. 'You do not have much contribution to spend.'

Nodding, I smiled. 'I know. You know that Ann and Marie are on Neamhan, yes?' I asked.

Confused, the divine confirmed my question. 'Yes? They cannot return, for their bodies here were broken. Marie's may yet mend, in a few years, but Ann's would need to be rebuilt entirely. That is expensive.'

I nod. 'Of course. Yet, they both own substantial contribution to spend, yes?'

Hesitantly, Hir agreed again. 'Yes.'

'Give me an altar to use on Neamhan,' I asked, getting to the point.

At that, the divine almost flinched. 'Impossible,' they said. 'A world without divines receiving an altar is... preposterous!'

I raised an eyebrow. 'Without divines?' I asked. 'Neamhan has no divines?'

'No magic, no divines,' Hir confirmed. 'Before the keepers connected to your planet, there was nothing. It was, in effect, a barren world. The only desirable resources it has is space and people.'

'You were rather interested in that whole *people* aspect, huh?' I push.

The chorus of voices that is Hir, divine of death, almost grinds their teeth. 'As despicable as it may be, yes. You could live a second life here, die in battle, and return safely. Not the same for Edians.'

Slowly, I nod. 'So, you have been drawing from Neamhan for a while. Give back. Give us an altar.'

'We have paid you back,' they grouse. 'Each and every person.'

'What about those who died? Do they not still have contribution to turn in?' I asked.

'They did, but it was voided.'

I smirk. 'And Ann?'

'It may be reinstated when they revive, here,' Hir said slowly.

That wasn't good enough. 'We need an altar on Neamhan. People are fighting the usurpers there, Hir. Let us grow stronger. Let us *fight*.'

'Granting the Gift to onworlders is expensive, Fio! It cannot be done so hastily!' they replied.

My frown deepened. It wasn't good enough. 'Then how do the keepers interface with the altar?'

'They can also pay out contribution-'

I grin, interrupting them. 'How curious. Isn't there a keeper with me right now? Cass, how come you cannot hand out people's rightfully earned rewards?'

[Bizarre, isn't it?] she chitters. *[To have my right so easily brushed aside]*

Hir paused. For a long moment, the connection went silent. There was a distant buzzing, as if they were talking with the other divines. Eventually, the chorus of corpses descended on my mind again. 'Your world has no divines to draw power from,' they commented.

'So alter the gift. Let them siphon power from defeated enemies, power that matches their contribution, power that they can spend.'

More chittering. 'The gift is too fragile to be altered. It is in a precarious balance.'

'Hir,' I think at them, for once entirely neutrally. There are more cards for me to pull, more paths to take. But I cannot logic away their fears. 'My world is dying. I have a network set up that can grant people power. Ann, someone you once knew as a goddess, is being denied what is hers. We have done much to help save your world. Please help me save ours.'

Every argument had already made sense. Every reason I'd given was clear. If altering the Gift was too precarious, then perhaps they could graft it onto my network instead. Hir paused for a long, terrifying moment.

'We have paid you back for all your contributions,' they reply. It's delivered with stone-cold cadence.

'Yes, I don't have points to spend. But I have earned goodwill. I have earned your trust. In fact, I have far more reason to distrust you than you do me. It is not without risk,' I say, seriously. 'I understand. And yet, I request this of you. As a favour. Because I want to be able to consider you a true ally. A friend. Not just an alliance borne from convenience or necessity.'

Another long, heavy pause. 'Ru and Argus decline your request. Lurelia does, too. Archiva... she says that her library is open to you. Any abilities devised by her will be available to your world.'

I wait, letting them speak more. Hir, made from a thousand voices, sighs heavily. 'And so will mine.'

Success.

'Allow me to access your [Transference] network, Fio. I will graft an altar onto it. It shall grant the gift to all who are added. It shall allow for contribution to be exchanged, so long as the person is in contact with you, Cass or a receptacle of your power. And... hopefully, it means you may call me a friend, once more.' Their voice is almost desperate the way it rings out in my head.

Slowly, I breathe. I'm excited, I'm afraid. Trusting the divines has burnt us before, just this visit. And yet, despite that, I open up to Hir. I breathe, shake my head to clear the worries away, and open up my network to them.

'Of course, my friend,' I say.

For just a moment, before my visions blackens from the procedure, I think they smile at my declaration.