

Chapter 124: “Eclipse” - Epilogue

My mother was safe, too.

Three days had passed since that event. Mom was slowly adjusting. She had been unconscious when I saved her, being a lot less hardy than Ann, so she simply woke up in my arms.

I had those memories now, too. The memories of that other “me”, of my manifestation. She - I? - had done exactly as expected. We crushed Zinnic.

Those were the only words I had for it. Within five total minutes, we took out over two hundred trained operatives. Fifteen of them were dead now. Many more severely injured.

Some part of me had empathy with them... but that all faded when I ran my hand through Ann’s hair and she flinched and I felt the scabs on her head. But she was getting better.

On the day after the attack, the others finally made it over. Reya healed Ann, of course. Being part of [Transference] meant that they, too, could access more of their true power than anyone else on Neamhan.

And, of course, Marie was with them.

She hugged me so tightly. I hugged her back. [Transference] did its thing and she clicked into place, aligning with her body from the other side and gaining a larger chunk of her powers back.

How strange was that? Since she’d almost died, and her body was in stasis within my gateway, she was closer to it than anyone else. So, her core blossomed faster, and the sanctions were lower on her.

We were back together.

That was what mattered.

Housing was a little complicated - well, not that complicated really. We bought a house. Put together, considering our contributions during the eclipse... well, we had more than enough money.

Of course, *that* was what actually broke mom’s suspension of disbelief. She had been shocked by the agents, at being abducted. She’d believed me that I’d somehow gotten her

out of there, even the vague details. But a work bonus that was large enough to afford me a house? That was the end of it.

I laughed. What a mundane thing to worry about, right? I'd been fighting monsters for so long... my mom getting confused about money was just too funny. In the end, it was kinda funny. I just told her that it was a secret.

Of course, it took some convincing that it wasn't illegal, but having Ivan and Ann and everyone else to vouch for me certainly helped. Of course, she pushed, but we all remained silent as the grave.

Ivan... my lovely brother. He also got a slot in [Transference]. His talents were rather amazing, after all. But other than a short meeting to introduce him to Ann, we hadn't done much.

Dad, on the other hand, was more complicated. Ivan had checked him into a clinic. He'd drank himself to unconsciousness. Again. Pulled some sort of dumb stunt at a party and broken his arm. So, he was on detox. With professional help.

Was it cheap? No. But my brother had apparently had a lot of success with a tech startup on air cleaning, and now here we were. Here we were.

Me and Dad on two sides of a glass pane.

"This feels like when I was in prison," he said. His tone was joking, but his expression? Miserable.

I stared at him, through the glass. "At least, you're getting help here."

"That's what they said there, too."

"Right," I muttered. Already, I was asking myself why I even bothered. Why I even bothered to visit. "Right."

Dad gave a long sigh at that. "Bear. I'm... sorry. I'm trying."

"You've been trying for a long while," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "I-... fuck, I need better friends when I'm out of here."

"Sure," I nodded. "That's a start."

He looked at me. "And I need to apologize. To you, to Agatha-

Gently, I shook my head. "Not yet," I said. "I get that it sucks, but you're gonna do this. And then you're gonna ask for forgiveness. And then you're gonna see if anyone forgives you. If they don't - and I might not, dad - but if they don't, then that's that. You don't always get do-overs," I told him.

It was cold. He looked like a kicked puppy. Silence hang between us, thick as an inch of glass. He sniffed, then wiped a tear off his pale cheek with his big hand. I wanted to hug him, wanted to feel compassion, but I was tired of the back and forth. So all I did was sit there, and look at him.

He sniffled again. "Yeah," he said, voice shaky but not cracking. "I. I'll do this. No more hurt. No more pain."

I nodded. Sometimes, I liked to imagine what Eden would do to him. It had a weird effect on addictions. Your body was kept in stasis, but still healing. So, maybe some of those physical aspects of the addiction would fade?

With the rising Qi levels on Neamhan, maybe I'd find out someday. What a little bit of cultivation or magic would do to him. That thought almost made me chuckle, but I stifled it.

"So? Why'd you do it?" I asked instead. "I'm asking because I'm curious. This isn't an accusation." That was a little bit of a lie, but enough to make it more palatable for him. And I was curious.

He gave me a long, regretful look. "High school class gathering. Everyone else was, and people offered, and I declined, and they pushed. Then I accepted. And then... well, then my memory turns patchy."

For a moment, I considered barking out a laugh. My dad, always so brave and protective. Except, he just couldn't grow a spine. He ran a hand through his messy hair, waiting for my reaction. "I see," I said instead. "Sounds troublesome."

Dad sighed. "We both know it's on me. I fucked up. And I hope it'll be the last time I fuck up this way."

At that, I smiled, just a little. "Work hard, then, dad," I said.

"Hah," he said. "Haha. Yeah, alright. I'll... work hard. I can do that."

It was a phrase he'd liked to say to me. And he was a hard worker. The smile even lasted more than the paltry few seconds it usually did. I wanted to place my hand on the glass, but

there was a “no touching” sticker on it. Cleaning staff got tired of dramatic farewells apparently.

Instead, I gave him a nod. We talked a little more about this and that until I got up. “It was good seeing you, dad,” I said. “You don’t got signal in here, do you?”

He shook his head. “Nah. But, you can swing by again? Maybe in a week?”

I chuckled. “Sure. I’ll see what I can do. No promises, yeah? Focus on yourself.”

“Okay,” he said. “Yeah. Will do. See you, Bear.”

“See you, dad.”

I walked outside. Ann waited by the car. I took her hand in mine briefly and she gave me a smile.

Life was slow. Zinnia wanted to kill me, of course. But they were also fucking terrified, so we really didn’t end up being bothered too much.

Mom went on her cruise with Jared. The others and I looked after Butterfly in the meantime. She took a liking to Matt and Liam, because of course she did, and treated Emilia and Marie like aunts. It was... fun, honestly.

Having a kid around for a few days was exhausting, of course, but she even picked up a little sign language from Reya. And with all of us - yes, even Eric - there to juggle her, it was doable.

Days on Neamhan turned into weeks. First one, then a second, then a month. Six weeks of peace and quiet. I visited dad. I fought with mom again. I went out to play with Beth. I kissed Ann.

Gosh, the memories with Ann. We watched so many movies together. Played video games. I ate popcorn for the first time with her. Showed her some of my favourite books. Matt smacked her with some practice swords. She threw a fireball at his face and ruined a shirt he hated anyway.

It was fun. Hilarious.

Marie told us a bit about the couple weeks she spent doing forest ranging. She’d spotted one wildfire and gone to extinguish it. Which was super cool, honestly. I admired that.

Most of us went back to visit our parents regularly, but honestly... what was meant to be a kind of temporary measure to get Ann adjusted turned into a much more permanent arrangement. My flat was trashed, anyway. I paid a rather generous amount to the landlady for that, then moved on with my life.

Much of my decoration went up in the new house. It was big, since we could afford it. And so, everyone stayed. Marie and Emilia were there permanently, basically, with Matt, Liam, Eric and Reya coming and going. It felt a little incomplete without Chris, though.

But that was fine. They were doing their own thing. We would meet again, I was sure.

And I had time, now. I picked up drawing again, practiced my spearwork... my old master, Rey, even got me to give calligraphy another shot. To his utter dismay, I was still terrible. Ingrid framed and hung up my drawing of a potted basil, though, which I found rather charming.

Of course, none of my pictures were ever good enough for my mom, but that was fine, too. She just didn't get to see very many of them. Ann loved each and every one, often modelling for me, too. It was nice.

For the first time, Neamhan felt like a home.

Spring came, and the world warmed up, bit by bit.

On a Spring day like any other, Ann and I were out for a walk. There was a warm wind in the concrete jungle. Not much greenery to see... but that was fine. We would live.

Some guy tried to rob us. I added another knife to my collection, and he scampered off. Things were good.

We sat in a greying park, the grass and trees having died. The view from the hill was still nice, though. Then there was a sound, a faint tremor of the Qi behind me. We looked, and there it was.

Miniscule. Tiny, weak, and easily shut with just the barest application of effort, but it had appeared.

A rift.

And so began the story of how I saved my second world.