

Chapter 97: A Place to Stay

Before we headed into the city, we took some time to look over everything we had. Without a doubt, we would need to do some looting here. Food was beginning to become a priority, and I would really like to restock my set of spare shirts.

Armor was less of a priority, since between [Golden Body] and Ann's barriers, my skin was rather tough these days. Marie wanted decent materials to make arrows from, maybe enchanted ones if there were weapons stored in the keep. She could summon ones from Qi and Mana, but it would tire her out faster.

Chris' shells had taken some damage, too. They were able to repair their leschi-self just fine with the materials of the forest, but they wanted to find some prime stone, preferably enchanted, in order to restore the hound. Reya was hoping for some divinely blessed items, since she, and us as well, could return those and receive contribution in turn.

That was the central point, though - we wanted contribution. Cleansing this city, or halting any further monster hordes that would pass through here, was certainly going to give us more contribution. If there was a single altar, anywhere in this city, be that to Jam or any of the divines... we could use it.

And it was almost certain that there would be an altar - those were supremely hard to break. Especially since most of the usurpers seemed rather like wild animals than a coordinated unit, they were still killing each other in the city, occasionally, it was unlikely they had targeted them.

Even if they did break those in the gateway hall, there might be secret ones hidden away in churches or the keep. We would just have to find them.

So, essentially, our goals were: grabbing gateway fragments for me, any useful materials for the party, including items and clothing, and finally, some kind of altar to turn in our contribution.

It seemed doable.

"Before we all go in, please give me a moment," Liam whisper-spoke to us. "I'd like to see how the usurpers behave."

"Okay," Marie nodded. "Go ahead."

A moment later, Liam sunk into the shadows, then darted off into the direction of the city.

Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes. We were tense. After all, there was a chance Liam returned with a monster or two in tow, or that we would be attacked from behind. Cass was keeping a lookout, too, but still.

After maybe ten minutes, our scout returned. He looked a little worse for wear, his breathing ragged. "So? How are things?" Matt asked, as Liam caught his breath.

"Bad," the rogue whispered. "Streets full of them, strong ones, too. The weak ones already starved or moved on. They're killing each other now. Trying to establish territories, where they absorb the Qi, and twist it to their element."

Ann clicked her tongue. "Leeches."

Liam gave her a glance. "Just a few of them, most have parts of other animals, and a couple are so... different they hurt to look at."

She rolled her eyes at the first part, then listened intently to the second. "Ah," she said. "Those would be the ones right from the rift. They don't always fit into our world properly."

Emilia blinked at her. "Where'd you learn that?"

"Mage school," Ann shrugged, getting an amused huff in return. "Getting info on monsters was my job in our guild, wasn't it?" the mage added cheekily.

Chris seemed a little interested. "The strange ones. Would they make good shells?"

Ann shook her head. "Hardly, I think. Might be too alien to adapt to, even for you."

They paused for a moment, then shrugged. "I can find out eventually. If it is safe to try. I will not endanger myself over this. My current shells suit me well."

Emilia clapped him on the shoulder. "That they do," she said. "Quite handsome, too."

Chris tilted their head, in their usual manner. "This is not a characteristic the triz-adu usually derive from shells."

"Huh?" the warrior asked.

"Someone's shell is an expression of their self, of their artistic taste. It is not their true self. For that, you must look at the spirit," Chris lectured, as if it was the most sensible thing in the world.

“... And how would I see your spirit?”

Chris smiled, somewhat teasingly. “For that you must get to know me. A few days will not suffice,” they said.

Matt gave a huff at that. “Sounds like you’re demi to me.”

“Demi?” Chris asked.

“A concept humans developed to explain certain types of developing attraction,” Matt said. “It means that you only develop romantic or sexual attraction to someone you already enjoy platonically.”

Chris gave him a long look. “I see,” they said. “It does sound similar. Attraction after knowing someone... I find myself liking it.” Chris gave a small smile, which Matt returned. Then, after a few moments, they turned towards the city. “Ah, but we should start exploring. Before it gets... well, it’s already dark. Before it gets darker.”

Marie nodded. “Right. We should go find somewhere to stay. Liam, did you find a spot?”

“A few candidates,” he whispered. “There are a couple empty houses that are mostly in decent condition. We’ll need to kill something to free up the area, though.”

“Of course we will,” I rolled my eyes. “So, what’s the best spot out of the candidates you have?”

“An old forge. Large, unoccupied basement with plenty of space. The building is well made and still mostly intact. Houses a nasty creature, but nothing too terrible to handle. It seems to mainly ambush anything that visits,” Liam explained.

Marie nodded, patting some dust off her clothes. “Alright,” she said. “Let’s get to it.”

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Ambushing the ambush predator went about as well as it could have. Liam made shadowy ropes, and Marie got a couple in place at once by attaching them to arrows. Then Emilia, Chris and I held the thing down, Reya applied some buffs, and not long after, Ann and Matt had done the killing.

Was it unfair to kill the thing while it slept? Maybe, but we didn’t care too much.

The monster had been a kind of chameleon-scaled bull, though it certainly had more horns than any bull ever reasonably should, spread all over its body. Marie was already collecting

those, and probably planning to make arrowheads out of the horns and shafts from the bones.

I left her to it, instead beginning to inspect the basement. As Liam had said, it was almost undamaged - the hatch to access it blended into the floor rather well, and would have been too small for the bull to fit through anyways. Instead, it'd just slept on top of it.

Now, we were reaping the rewards of that lack of destruction. The basement had *food* after all. Canned and pickled vegetables, some dried fruit and jams, and even a few loaves of somewhat stale bread.

Matt smacked my shoulder. "You're drooling."

"Speak for yourself," I retorted. "I am simply looking forward to a somewhat decent meal."

"Mhm," he smirked. "Sure, sure. I'll see if I can whip something up. You know, there's even spices here." He indicated a bag of salt.

Before I knew it I was already walking up to the bag, then quickly stopped myself under my friend's watchful gaze. "I-" I started, paused, then turned away. "I think I should explore the other parts."

Matt smirked. "Sure, knock yourself out."

Dismissing the swordsman with a nod, he slowly went through the foods, while I moved on to other places. There were still more rooms to go - as I said, the basement was large. Emilia was raiding a room full of tools; saws, files, hammers, scrap metal, the works.

Liam was in the shadows, keeping a lookout, while Marie was up above, seeing which parts of the main workshop might still be useful. She was also dressing the corpse, with Chris' help.

Which left Reya and Ann. I found them in the next room, which seemed a bit more... personal, I suppose? Maybe cozy was the right word.

There were a few bookshelves stacked in the corners, though the books had been knocked out of them and strewn across the floor. It was all covered in dust from the ceiling shaking, but it had survived.

There was a somewhat comfortable looking cushioned bench in a corner, with a small table in front of it. Another part of the room housed a sewing machine, the kind with a mechanical

foot pedal, as well as a few rolls of mostly beige cotton fabric, and some more generic needle-and-thread utensils.

Ann and Reya just kinda... stood there, looking at it. While I paused in the entrance, the mute cleric knelt down, and carefully picked up one of the books, brushing the dust off it. The title shimmered for a moment, before the letters rearranged themselves to something I understood as the translation kicked in.

“Everlasting Grief.” There were a stylized man and woman drawn on. It seemed like a romance story, maybe with some tragic elements.

Reya got up, and carefully placed it back on the bookshelf. Then she picked up a second book, placing it back. Then a third, fourth... the fifth one seemed a bit different.

It was a children’s book.

We paused as Reya picked it up. It was a story about a caterpillar learning to spread its wings, and that becoming a butterfly wasn’t all that scary. The cleric handed it to Ann, who placed it back on the shelf.

I started helping too, wordlessly.

You know, until then, it hadn’t really kicked in. We were all... too high-strung to think about it. But this had been a home, once. The upstairs was ruined, of course. There must have been a bedroom there, at some point, but it was broken.

Still, someone had lived here.

They’d had taste in books. They’d had hobbies and interests and jobs. And, apparently, they’d had a kid, too.

I bit my lip, carefully placing another book back on the shelf.

We were going through the stuff of dead people. They... wouldn’t mind, of course, they were dead, after all. Even if they weren’t, I doubted they’d want to come back here. But suddenly, it felt like we were intruding on a foreign space, and it was only right to be somewhat respectful.

None of us cared if it was silly. We dusted off the books, and placed them back on the shelves. After a few minutes of work, that part was restored. I then walked over to the sewing machine.

Slowly, I traced my fingers over the metal that made the machine. It was a little different from the ones back on Neamhan, but the purpose was unmistakable. I blew the dust away.

Reya stopped next to me, giving me a question look and forming some signs. I looked at the gestures, unable to tell much from them, but guessing from her expression.

“You’ve... sown before?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Are you asking if I’d like to learn?” I asked again.

The cleric smiled brightly, and nodded again.

I looked down at myself, the torn shirt and all, then back up to her, giving a crooked smile.

“You know, I think I’d like that quite a bit.”

Reya quickly nodded, then also gave a look at Ann. The mage didn’t notice, though, scanning the spines of the books for their names, until our cleric snapped her fingers. Then she looked over.

“Ah, sorry,” Ann quickly said. “Distracted. What do you need?”

She gestured at me, making Ann look over, and I awkwardly pointed at the sewing machine, unsure what to say. She wrinkled her forehead for a moment, then smiled. “Oh. Fio will sew?”

With a big smile, Reya nodded.

“And you’re asking... for me to give her my clothes to fix?” Ann raised an eyebrow.

Reya let out a gurgling kind of snort, shaking her head, then pointing at me and the machine again.

“She’ll teach me,” I supplied sheepishly.

“Oh!” Ann said. “Right, then. Nice. I’ll be going over some notes, I think. There’s a desk, and I think I saw some stoppered up ink.” She made her way over. “So I should be able to think on some research, maybe even do light testing.”

“Sounds good,” I said with a smile. Then, once Ann was seated, I pulled out a damaged shirt from my inventory. It was reasonably clean, at least.

Reya took it from me, then gestured for me to come closer as she took a seat at the machine. She pulled some fabric to her, and grabbed a large pair of scissors to cut from it. The job didn't need to be super aesthetic or anything, so she just cut out a few patches.

And, always gesturing for me to look where it mattered most, the cleric began stitching up my clothes.

I'd have the evening to learn. Luckily, I'd been rather talented recently.