

Chapter 152: The Future

After my establishment of an accord, I awoke groggily, in a soft bed in the temple. Liam sat by my side, slightly hunched in a chair, but his piercing eyes trained on mine.

I blinked away the bleary remnants of sleep. Every part of me was sore. No, that was wrong. It wasn't *every* part of me that was sore - it was one specific part that I couldn't quite identify. A pulling kind of soreness, like overeating and overexercising all at once. It felt stuffy and cramped.

Liam looked at me, and I met his gaze. "You gonna say anything, Fio?" he asked, whisper-quiet, and sharp as a knife.

Ah. Oops.

No words came to me in the single moment he spared for me to think of a reply. So, instead, I just twisted my lips into an awkward smile. The kind I always put on when asking forgiveness rather than permission.

Our rogue gave a terribly soft sight, then reached to the bedside table. There was a glass of water. "Drink," he said. "You've only been out for a few hours. We didn't know how long it'd be. I got first shift."

My hand shook a bit as I took the glass from him. That kinda surprised me. I did not expect any negative consequences, but then again, it was a little like surgery. Liam watched me as I gulped down the liquid, first hesitantly, scared of messing up my parched throat, then greedily. He handed me a second glass after the first.

"Y'know," he said, while I was drinking, "I'm almost jealous of you, Fio."

It was so quiet, but it made me listen more closely. "Huh?" I asked, my voice rough and hoarse. It'd recover to elegance soon enough, but my first words sounded a little like they were sang by a barber quartet of frogs.

Liam eyed me for another long moment. "You get surgery to become a cool half-goddess, enhancing your interdimensional self with the ability to grant others power for their improvement of the world," he said. "That's so gender. Meanwhile I just got my boobs removed."

I snort, breaking out into laughter, and Liam cracked a smile.

"Now don't get me wrong," he added, "the boobs bothered me a lot. But dang it, when do I get shapeshifting, huh? It's downright unfair. Give me your gateway."

Laughing some more, I felt my lungs hitch. I broke into a cough for a moment, doubling over hacking and spluttering for a few moments. Then I laughed some more. Liam didn't quite join me, but the half-joke was intended to cheer me up. I did entirely believe him on the whole "wanting to shapeshift" part.

"Thanks," I said, my voice finally back to its usual smoothness. "I needed that."

He smiled, faintly, leaning back in his chair. "I imagined you would," he said, stretching like an old cat. Then, he looked at me again. "You're lucky you woke up to me. Matt looked ready to stab you."

I grimaced. "He would."

"Stab you?" Liam raised an eyebrow.

"No," I shook my head. "He would *want to* stab me." I smiled. "How about you? Not angry?"

He shrugged. "Nah. It's cool." That's all he said.

I looked at him for another long moment, smiling just a bit. "Thanks for understanding," I said. "You gonna head back to Neamhan, then?"

Smirking at me, the rascal checked his wrist, acting as if there was a watch there. "Oh, not quite yet. But I do have a shift scheduled, see, there's this cute girl I haven't kissed in a few hours. You'd know things about girlkissing, right?"

Again, I snickered. "You're silly, Liam."

"Girlkisser," he chided me.

I summoned a facsimile newspaper roll out of Qi to bonk him on the head with, but he effortlessly shifted out of the way, dissolving into a mass of liquid shadow, before reintegrating into a human shape. "Too slow," he teased, then winked at me, pulled his mask higher on his face, and dipped out of the room.

As a formless shadow, slithering underneath the door.

Sighting softly, I got out, tossing aside the blankets. A quick application of Qi saw me wreathed in a protective sheath of it, keeping my clothes safe and sound beneath a faint, glassy golden armor. Then I stepped forward, and teleported.

The whole world was a [Hall of Mirrors], and every reflection was a heartbeat away.

The moment my step ended - no, that wasn't right. Before my step even completed, the very second my foot had left the ground, I was already in a different place. The shunt was so instantaneous, bereft of any real movement, that I almost stumbled.

Very graciously, Emilia quickled caught me, keeping me on my feet as the brief moment of dizziness passed over me. She grinned brightly. "Why, princess, should I be the one to stop you from falling for me?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sadly, I am into elegant mages. Shining armor is too glaring for my delicate eyes."

She laughed, loudly, then patted me on the shoulder. "Glad to have you back on your feet. Heard you made a whole pact. Special snowflake."

"Ugh, you're gonna make me groan," I grumbled. "I just made sure we had the kinda baseline we already should have had. Now, Ann and Marie can keep up. It's only fair."

"Did she put you up to this?" Emilia asked, raising an eyebrow.

An awkward smile spread on my face. "She may have suggested it."

"Sure, she only threatened to burn you to ash if you didn't get her access to more mana, right?" Emilia grinned. "Mages, right? We martial types are all completely normal."

At that, my eyes flickered to Matt. He'd changed his clothes, but there were still a bunch of shallow cuts underneath. "What?" he asked. I stared. Then, he shook his head. "No, surely you're not accusing me of weirdness. There has never been any shenaniganery afoot in my surroundings."

Then, he couldn't keep up the facade, and gave me a light smile. "Seriously Fio. Don't scare me like that."

"Rats have small hearts, they can explode from stress," Emilia helpfully provided, eliciting a groan from Eric.

Eric.

The mousey man stood off to the side, not quite fitting in with the group. I looked at him for a long moment, and he couldn't quite meet my eyes. "Good to have you back," he muttered quietly, before Emilia wrapped her arm around his head, making him tumble into a half-hug.

"C'mon, doofus. You can say that with a bit more spirit, can't ya?" she chided, smiling brightly. "Stop cowering already, jeez. You've been all mopey for the entire thing. Would it kill ya to smile for once?"

At that, there was a soft snort from Reya, who quickly covered her mouth with a hand, shaking slightly. Eric looked at her and his eyes turned a bit softer. He quickly managed to weasel out of Emilia's arm-lock, somehow, and dusted off his robes, attempting to appear graceful.

Then, he plastered a smile on his face that was only half-fake and turned to me. He gave me a bow. "Thank you-"

I whacked him on the head with my facsimile newspaper role. It crumpled in on itself even just from the gentle tap, but it made him stop in his tracks. "Just treat me normally, jeez," I said, shaking my head. "It's good to be awake. Yes, we'll get along. You don't owe me an apology or any grand thanks. Your sister kept herself plenty safe. Okay?"

He blinked. For a second, he just stared at me. I raised the crumpled newspaper roll again, and his lips curled into a genuine smile. "Alright. God it," he said with a quick nod.

Slowly, bit by bit, the excitement tapered off. They asked me what exactly my new power was, since apparently, the divines had been sparse. I explained exactly what I knew; that I would be able to work as an altar interface on Neamhan.

But, with that done, I'd slept away the night. It was morning again, so it would be time for them to return to Neamhan - though it was evening there. The time desync did sometimes end up causing what was effectively jetlag, but well. My friends weren't exactly normal humans. They'd be fine.

Rae left first, with a quick not, and a pat on the shoulder. "You're doing good," he said. "And you will continue to do so. See you on the other side."

Liam and Reya were off rather quickly, both giving me quick hugs before darting through the portal. The latter also had a slightly longer signed conversation with Eric. Then it was Matt.

He also hugged me, though he said a bit more. "I'll keep everyone safe on the other side, don't worry."

A small smile spreads on my lips. "You sure? Leave some of the protecting to Ann, or she'll light you on fire."

“Hah! She would, yeah. I’ll tell her hi from you, and all that. See you... not soon, but soon enough, yeah?”

I nodded, then patted him on the shoulder. “See you soon, bestie. Rat.”

He snickered. “See you soon, Fio.”

And then, they were all gone. Me, Eric, and Emilia. “You should’ve picked a name that starts with E, too, Fio,” Emilia noted, and I snorted for a second.

“There’s still one thing for me to do, actually,” I noted, and activated an ability.

“And what would that b- Oh my god what the *Fuck* is that?!!” Eric started, then screeched as my skin rippled like glass and an identical copy of me crawled out of that gateway.

Emilia laughed as he jumped behind her for protection. Ion looked at me, then at the scared cleric. She grinned. “What? Never seen a corpse transported across dimensions to be infinitely reanimated in order to fight my other selves’ battles?”

He blinked at her. “Huh?” he asked.

Ion leaned forward, grinning ferally. “I’m saying I’m a lot more hardcore than the Fio you know, Eric. There’s a world out there in which I stabbed you to death, y’know, and-”

I smacked her on the head with my facsimile newspaper roll, too, immediately destroying the gravitas of the moment. “Shush, you,” I said. “Stop scaring the poor guy.”

She, or, well, I, rolled her eyes, and let Astraeus vanish from her hands. “Fine, fine,” she said. Then she looked at me. “Am I being sent on a fetch quest?”

“Yeah, you get to meet Ann,” I said. “You should work as an altar to spend contribution at.”

At that, she blinked. “How, uh,” she started, then paused. “Do I like... smooch her? Are we-”

“Oh,” I said, helpfully, as the implications clicked. “Do you, uh, want to?”

“This is a very good question. I’m not equipped to answer at all,” she replied.

“We do share memories,” I noted.

She gave a quick nod. “Except for the deaths. We compartmentalize those, right?”

I blinked. “Right, absolutely,” I said. “So. Ann.”

“Yes. Ann,” she said.

There was a long pause in the conversation. Then, slowly, I had an idea, and smiled.

“Actually,” I said. “This might be our first chance ever to do another first date. You lucky girl.”

Ion looked at me for a long moment, then wiped at her eyes. “Uh,” she said, then nodded.

“Yeah, uh. You’re right. Thanks. That’s a good idea, I think. I might like that.”

With that whole debacle cleared up, I smiled brightly, then pushed her towards the gateway.

“Alright, then. Go get ‘er. If she’s cool with it, of course, y’know. Do you wanna use your name, or mine?”

“Mine,” she said. “I don’t wanna lie to her, y’know?”

“I know,” I replied, snickering. “I know-”

“Everything I know,” she said. “I know. Ugh. This is so much more complicated than stabbing things.”

At that, I laughed. “Luckily, it’s no longer my problem. It’s yours now. Good luck!” And with that, the me that was not me stepped through the gateway. Onto a first date, and onto the very first step to saving Neamhan. I smiled, feeling a tingle of butterflies at the prospects in the future. My hand unconsciously clenched around Astraeus, and I turned to Iryel.

“So, what do you need of us?” I asked.

He smiled. “To save a world, of course. Or,” he eyed the gateway, “two, I suppose.”