

Chapter 172: Burial

Chris looked at me with steel and kindness in their eyes. The request was both for my sake... and theirs. I looked across the battlefield and saw the reason.

The rock-hound that was one of their shells... it was gone. Pulverized. The granite had turned to dust. Dead, and never to be revived again. Chris had lost yet another piece of themselves, and yet, they smiled gently at me.

"Do not mourn me," they said. "I still live, by human standards. I will remember that part of myself. But I must bury it. Please. Grant me that kindness. I may lose another shell in doing so, but..." they looked at the kneeling usurper. "I have lost many in the endless war. Corrupted and turned. If I can finally end this, then finally, I must bury no more."

I looked at them for a long moment. Ann slowly floated down, landing next to me. She took my hand in hers, squeezed it, then spoke. "Let them do it, Fio."

Sighing gently, I shook my head as if to clear it. "Right," I said. "You deserve it. Thanks for fighting for my world Chris. Bury them. I think I... I got family to visit," I said.

They nodded, understanding. "There is much for us to clear up, still," they said. "But for now, I will do this for myself. Take care, friend. I will see you when it is done."

With a nod, I looked at Legacy for one last time. My ruinous wings chimed behind me. I spent a long, lasting moment looking, before I smiled gently. "The mirrors can't eat you," I said. "But I think your past mistakes might."

And then I walked off. Hand in hand with Ann. Matt sheathed his sword with a sigh, wiping the blood from his forehead, and the battle-lust from his eyes. Reya cast a last healing spell, Marie placed a last ward, Liam withdrew from the shadows, manifesting back into a human shape, and Emilia took off her helmet. Trichtera folded her wings, Stella made her bow disappear, and Cass settled to gently floating behind me.

The fight was done. This fight, at least, was over forever. We'd outpaced them.

Usurpers grew quickly. Abhorrently quickly, even. With each win, they grew stronger... and yet, we outgrew them. Because we shared talents. Because we cared for each other. Because we fought for one another's worlds.

Chris had died for mine. I'd died for theirs. So, fair was fair. I got to crush the keepers. They got to bury Legacy.

And so we walked off.

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Chris looked at Legacy, at the broken usurper before them. They sighed, and then took a long look at their broken shell. With gentle motions, Chris gathered the dust up in their palms. Handful by handful, they poured it onto the ground next to Legacy.

The usurper watched. Their one remaining eye followed the motions. "So," they said, eventually. "Is this... some kind of ritual."

"Yes," Chris said. "I am mourning."

"Sorry about that."

"You need not lie," Chris said, shaking their head, placing another handful of dust onto the small pile that remained of their rock-hound shell. The leshen stood next to them.

"How did you figure out I was going to kill her?" Legacy asked.

Chris looked at the usurper, a sad expression on their face. A single tear ran down their cheek in memory of the part of them that had once been, and they breathed the warmth that remained within their being eternally from having worn that shell. "Because you are competent," the triz-adu answered. "Because you would not fail."

Legacy sneered at that. "Yeah," they said. "I wouldn't, but now I will. Fucker. All because of you. Because you're so clever, huh? Bitch. If you'd not fucking interfered, I would-"

"This is my fourth shell that died in this war," Chris spoke. "You cost me the first body I ever wore, did you know that? It was a beautiful thing, shaped by those who spawned me. A wonderful creation of ice and air. Of frozen light. And it died."

They looked down at the usurper, and remained silent for a dozen passing seconds. "The second shell I lost was my first prized hunt. A dragon. It was not even killed, but wrenched from me. Infested by one of your kind, a fungus that puppeteered its body, wrenching it from me. It was stolen."

Rage and grief settled into their features. The kind that came from losing family. "The third," they said, their voice quivering. "Was that of the first human I took on. The one I first spoke to Fio with. The first one I made friends with. A human I killed with my own two hands. You

killed it, and I was forced to take a new one. To see someone I killed die again... it was a strange thing to mourn," they said.

"And, finally, you take another. The first one I crafted for myself. Rocks piled on rocks," Chris spoke. Their hand clenched into a fist. "I have lost so much. So many precious things, now only in my memories. I have lost myself and rebuilt myself all over. More than three shells. Three shells are an entire life for us. And you cost me *four* of them."

The triz-adu breathed, grief overtaking fury. Loss outweighing hatred. They took a long moment, looking at the usurper. "You know what it is like to lose?"

Legacy gave them a long look, then turned to the ground. "I'd forgotten," they admitted. "But I remember, now."

"That is good," Chris nodded. Their face was placid, their leshen shell standing next to their human one, expressions inscrutable. "My name is Chikrotekete. My friends call me Chris. You are Legacy. You are the legacy of your actions, the forces you led, the leader of those who killed me once over, and made me remake myself. You killed me, and you birthed me all at once. I have grown, and for that I thank you. You have killed me, and for that I will burn you. You have changed me, and for that, I will remember you."

At those words, Legacy finally cracked a little. There was no emotion on their face, even the faint defeat washing away from them. The murder finally caught up with them. They burnt out on the cruelty, burnt out on the violence of war. Conquest broke in them, and they truly became Legacy. But it was, sadly, too late.

Chris took out a shovel. They buried the pile of dust that was leftover from their rock-hound shell. They'd made it as a child, their first construction, with so very much help. They'd carved its crude shapes. And now, they laid them back with the earth.

And then, when the dust was buried, Chris stood. Silently, mourning, grieving. Legacy, too, remained silent.

Only after a minute had passed did Chris gently place the shovel atop the grave of their past shell. Chris looked to Legacy. "I know you will take more from me when I kill you," they said. "That you will do whatever it is you planned to do to Fio. That it may extinguish me forever, across all my bodies. I know you can, I don't doubt that you will."

"And yet, you'll do this?" Legacy asked, facing Chris again.

The triz-adu nodded. "I will," they said, reaching into the air beside them. It split open, revealing their inventory, and they pulled out another body. Red streaks of hair, tall, woven from fire and darkness. It was a faceless thing of sharp edges and brutal efficiency. "This is the greatest secret of the triz-adu. We are not limited to three bodies, you see. I could live in... a hundred, perhaps, now." They smiled at that, for they had grown. "I could spread across the world, and you would be unable to extinguish me."

"But you won't," Legacy whispered.

Chris nodded once more. "I will not. Because it is not who I am, because I must lay this to rest. For myself. And if this costs me my life," they eyed the usurper for a long, horrible moment, then breathed out, shoulders slumping slightly. "If it costs my life, then I will give it. So, Legacy. Kill me if you will."

With a breath, the *gravetender* came to life. Hair drifted like magma. The air around it heated up already. Power bubbled and boiled inside that shell, enough power to incinerate so much more than the pitiful grave they'd dug. All three of Chris' shells stood before the grave. Despite the dead part of them, they were complete.

Legacy looked at the gravetender, at the flaming tendrils, at the way Chris looked at them. Their broken form was bleeding, still, but their blood evaporated in the face of the horrid heat. Temperatures climbed and the rocks began to melt faintly, turning glassy and red.

Finally, Chris stepped back as a human and as a leshi. And Chris stepped forward as a gravetender.

They raised their hand, slowly, reverently. Their dark, faceless shell stared at Legacy, then at the shovel above its grave. It held for a long moment. The triz-adu met the usurper's eyes for a long moment. "Farewell, forever." Then, fire reigned.

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Ann felt the heat first. She was always one to understand fire, so she turned a moment before the pillar of flame rose. "Holy fuck," she said.

It pierced the sky. I blinked, as it burnt itself into my retinas. The clouds, having just pulled in again, burnt at it. The smog in the air turned to ash at the heat. It burnt so hot, the air around it shimmered with a haze, and I could feel the heat brush against my skin.

Like staring into the sun. "Is that... Chris?" I asked.

Matt stood with his mouth open. "Holy shit," he said. "That's a lot of fire."

Emilia laughed a soft snort. "Dang. They were holding out on us," she said. Then she snickered again. "Whelp. Since it's a sunny day, now, let's get something to drink?"

I blinked. Then I shook my head. I opened my mouth to reply, but Ion did so before me. "Yeah," she said. "I know a place."

"Sounds good to me," Emilia said with a grin. "Let's go." She placed an arm around Ion, pulling her along, through the streets, past the people staring at us, staring at that roaring, final pillar of flame in the distance.

It marked the end of the war for two worlds. It burnt itself into my eyes. It was the final breath of a world-conquerer. The ash fell, slowly, tiny flakes of it drifting into my hair, and I finally tore my eyes away from the pillars. Ann squeezed my hand, and I smiled at her, just a hint. "Yeah," I said. "I think a drink sounds nice."