

Chapter 93: Welcome to the Party

I took a long, deep breath to compose myself when Ivan was gone.

The fact he'd made it to Eden... was certainly something. It did not make me like Sarah very much. But it could also be a good thing. I was glad he didn't get roped into anything bad, though. Not that I should have worried. Ivan was brilliant, after all.

His relationship with Sarah was his business. I wouldn't meddle.

Shaking my head for a few seconds to get back to the situation at hand, I turned to Chris.

"So," I said, letting out another deep breath. "I thank you for keeping my brother safe."

They smiled. "It was rather simple. He did not make it difficult. Finding you was harder, though my employers assisted me in this venture."

"Assisted you?" I asked.

"Quite," they nodded. "I received a small beacon pointing to the nearest gateway, as well as knowing your general location. Then I kept moving until the gateway it was pointing to was mobile."

"Ah, that makes sense." The fact that the keepers could just grant a boon like that did suck, though. Hopefully they didn't hand them out easily.

"Yes. Now, to the network. I would like access to it, please," they said, bowing slightly.

At that, I froze up slightly, raising my metaphorical guard a bit. "And why would I do this for you?"

They raised themselves up again, looking at me with a neutral expression. "I believe it would be to our mutual benefit. You gain an ally. We gain the ability to progress. I would contribute my part, as well."

"I don't think I am comfortable just handing this out," I said, chewing on my lips. "Is there any guarantee you won't backstab me?"

Chris tilted their head. "Why would I do this? The network depends on you. It would be in my best interest to keep you alive."

That was a fair point. "Then how about your motivation, why do you want to grow stronger?"

At that, they became sad. It was a quiet, small sadness, in the slumping of their shoulders, and the way their arms sagged a little. “Ah, this is not a nice thing to speak of. But if I must. One of my old shells, one of the first I crafted, is still out there. Puppeteered around somewhere along the northern frontier. I wish to put it down, finally.”

They said it with conviction, as if it was truly important. It made me wonder, briefly, what those shells were like for them. How much time and effort went into one? Clearly, right now, they wore human skin as one of their bodies.

Was this respectful? Was this a culture of burying things to them? How did one go about discarding a body? If someone else was wearing it and they weren’t, how disrespectful was it? Like a slap in the face, or like digging up a relative’s corpse?

I didn’t ask them.

All I could do was answer. “I... see.” Then mull the decision over some more, but really, it was set in stone already.

Chris had been nice. They had also appeared honest, albeit a bit bad at communicating that honesty. How paranoid was too paranoid, though? Should I demand an oath or something?

Despite all my hesitation the triz-adu just stood in front of me, waiting with a neutral expression. The sadness had faded. They didn’t threaten me, didn’t say I would be hurt if I denied them. Before gaining anything, they’d brought me to my brother.

I sighed. Fuck it, time to take a chance. “Alright. I’ll include you,” I said. It was my last slot for now, but I was sure there’d be more in the future.

With a quick tap to their shoulder, it was done. Chris smiled. “Thank you,” they said, then gave a short pause, before asking bluntly. “Is it possible for me to join your guild?”

For a second, I stared at them. Then, I gave a small shrug. “We, uh, haven’t exactly been receiving applications. I suppose you’d wanna talk to Marie about it.”

“Are they your leader?”

“She is, yeah,” I nodded.

“Then I would like to speak with her if possible,” they said, giving yet another short bow.

“Uh, sure, I’ll take you.”

“Would it be acceptable for me to bring my other bodies?” Chris asked.

“You... have some in reserve?”

They shook their head. “No, the other ones I’m using right now.”

I blinked a few times. “Right. Sure, I suppose? Are they nearby?”

“One is stationed in another house, having kept watch over your brother. The other is out in the frontier, fighting against the usurpers. I shall call them both here. Please give us a few minutes.”

The request was a bit surreal, alien, even, but it made sense. If they were gonna join our guild, we’d wanna know all their abilities. Only a couple dozen seconds later, the first new creature came in, a hound-like thing made from rocks. Their body was rough, with many of the larger ones not quite fitting the shape a canine would usually have, but it was... kind of cute, in a bizarre way.

Its “eyes” were little pieces of ruby inlaid in their reddish body. I would’ve guessed it was made from granite or something, but I was by no means an expert.

Chris made no effort to introduce their other self, though the wolf-thing did give me a small bow. I nodded my head back at it, then, I mean, and they seemed to take that as affirmation enough. The other body would take a bit to get here, so I decided to check what Chris contributed to the network, for now.

Very quickly, I found the talent they had decided to share. It was something called [Malleable Mind], making it easier to adapt to new sensations, perspectives, and general mental frameworks. A quick test showed me that it also made my reflection-vision easier to digest, which was rather lovely.

I did a few more tests, seeing how helpful it was for cycling Qi, and it felt like a minor boon to learning most manipulation-related abilities. Quite lovely. By the time I was done testing, Chris’ final body had arrived.

This one was made from wood, mainly, and a few bones and leathers they seemed to have attached to it. It was a tall thing, almost three metres including the antlers, with a deer skull for its head. Dim, green glows lingered in the empty eye sockets.

It reminded me faintly of the gangly giant of black flame that had so effortlessly destroyed Renvil, yet it looked at me with clearly different interests.

I saw it - them, dang it - tilt their head, and gaze at me with curiosity. They extended one long, wooden hand, their fingers carved into crude claws, and then gazed at me with anticipation.

Slowly, I reached out and shook their hand. They returned the handshake with enthusiasm, jostling me up and down slightly, as the glow in the eye sockets brightened. After a few moments, they took a step back and gave me a small bow. It was not easy to notice, given the giant's hunched position in the warehouse, but I returned the gesture, and they seemed pleased.

Chris' human body gave me a faint smile. "I hope this experience is not too alien for you," they said, though I felt there was some amusement in that statement.

I did my best to return the smile. "Getting used to it."

They nodded, a small gesture, then continued. "Shall we meet your leader, then?"

"Sure, yeah."

And with that, I started walking to the inn the others were staying at. They should be up by now, surely. Walking through town with all of Chris was, of course, an experience. The rock dog and forest giant certainly drew more than a couple wary looks.

But, surprisingly, no one attacked us. Maybe people were too preoccupied with their own safety. Maybe they were intimidated. I didn't think I looked particularly intimidating, having unsummoned my spear and wearing civilian clothing.

Of course, that was probably made up for by the nonchalance Chris walked with the monsters - or, well, their other shells.

They seemed faintly happy with the proceedings of the day, wearing a small smile all the way until we were back at the inn. Then, they eyed the building.

"It is a bit small," they remarked.

"What?"

"I won't fit," the triz-adu in the shape of a young man told me. I blinked. After a moment, they pointed at the forest-thing. "*I*," they emphasized, "will not fit."

Right. The thing - I really needed to figure out a better way to refer to it - would certainly have a tough time with the tavern. "Uh, do you want me to call the others out?"

"That would be rather more polite," they nodded.

Fine, I could do that. With small words of affirmation, I headed inside the tavern. Luckily, Marie was downstairs, at a table, with Ann. She must be back from running errands. The two were currently working on some arrows, adding enchantments to them.

I waited for them to be done with the one they were currently working on, then gave a knock on the table to get their attention. Both of them turned like squirrels shaken from a tree. I suppressed a laugh at Ann's surprised look.

"Fio!" she said, quickly smiling. "Where've you been? I was a bit surprised when you weren't home when I checked in!"

Ah, I didn't exactly have a good answer prepared. Telling her I went with an assassin certainly would get the wrong image across.

"Okay, I need you to hear me out-" I started.

This was the point at which Matt was making his way down the stairs, giving me a bit of a laugh. "Haha, this is gonna be good. What're we hearing you out on?"

I rolled my eyes at the swordsman. "Someone showed up at my door, telling me my brother was in Eden."

"Oh, fuck," Matt said, no longer amused.

"This person appears to be well willed and has asked to join our guild. *But*. They were hired by the keepers to kill me."

Ann stared at me. "You went along with an assassin?!"

For a second I considered whether her anger was justified, then remembered she had been doing chest compressions on me last time. It... was probably justified. "Let me elaborate. They did tell me by then that they had no plans to hurt me."

"... And you believed that?" Matt asked.

"They had Ivan."

"They could've been lying!"

"But they *weren't*, Ann." I stared her down. "I saw my brother. I was able to have a peaceful talk with him. I was able to send him back home to Neamhan, before this whole place goes up in flames. And I am entirely unhurt. They told the truth, with every bit of it."

"Why did you believe them?" Marie asked, calmly.

"Because it made sense. Ivan hadn't been on Neamhan for a while. I knew his new girlfriend was a Reflector. Plus, they wanted me alive for the networking ability, because they have a personal vendetta."

The older woman nodded, leaning back in her chair. "Okay. I... see your point, Fio. I would've liked it if you asked us for help, though."

I bit my lip. "Yeah, that's... understandable."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," Ann said, staring at the table. "I-

"They probably came in *because* you were out, Ann," Matt said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Not your fault. It's what assassins do."

"Right," I nodded. "Plus, we might walk out of this with another ally. In fact, since they asked to join the guild... they are waiting outside."

Marie raised an eyebrow. "Outside? Why?"

"Triz-adu. One of their shells doesn't fit in," I explained.

Ann nodded. "Yeah, they can be particular about that. When making decisions that affect all their shells they want them all present, preferably."

"Nerd," Matt teased, once more trying to diffuse the atmosphere. It worked, a little.

"Let's go meet them, then," Marie said, getting up from her chair. She stretched slightly, having probably been hunched over the arrows for a little while too long.

Not long after, we stood in front of them on the outside.

Ann's hostility dissipated a little when she saw Chris. "These are well crafted," she muttered, looking at the other bodies. I saw her eyes glow a little, she must've been looking at the mana in them. "The weave... extraordinary."

Chris smiled wide. "Thank you! We take pride in our work."

Given Ann's expression, the pride was warranted. Before our lovely mage had any chances to disrupt the discussion any more, Marie spoke up.

"So," she asked, drawing out the word until all three of Chris' bodies turned to look at her.

"You wanna join our guild, is that right?"

They nodded. "Yes, that's correct," the human mouth replied.

"Right, great. You got the Gift?"

"The Gift? Ah, yes. The divines have bestowed it to me a little while ago. I exchanged enough contributions to be inaugurated," they explained.

Marie nodded again, slowly. "What's your goal in this?"

Chris tilted their head slightly. "Well, growing stronger I suppose. Making sure Fio remains alive so I may benefit from my increased talent. One of my once-shells is still out there, being used by another being. I wish to put it down."

"That's... all?" Marie asked.

"All? I thought this was a more than sufficient reason," Chris said.

"Usually, uh, people ask about like... payment, and stuff. Contract length, employment hours, that kinda deal," Marie elaborated.

Tilting their head even more, Chris sounded a little unsure. "... I would like to eat food occasionally?"

Almost absentmindedly, Ann explained. "Triz-adu rarely need to worry about sleep or rest due to their multiple bodies. They'll usually only require bare minimum maintenance and throw themselves at any problem with everything they have. They don't need comfortable beds, good hours, or even pay, they simply expect their maintenance to be taken care of." She said it without lifting her gaze from the forest-thing shell even once.

"Yes!" Chris excitedly confirmed. "Maintenance. I will occasionally need rocks and sticks and mosses. If they are magical, that is better. If we remain in human lands, then I may need... crowns to acquire them?"

"The currency is called novas," Ann helpfully provided.

"Thank you, novas then," Chris said, smiling. "I can buy rocks with them, yes?"

Marie nodded. "I suppose so."

"Then, if we find no maintenance materials on the road, I shall require some novas to purchase them," Chris beamed. "I will also require a somewhat soft surface to rest my talking shell upon. And human food to sustain it."

“Entirely reasonable,” Marie said, still a little perplexed. “How, uh, long are you planning to work with us?”

“I would expect to be working with you until I am powerful enough to lay to rest my wayward shell. My expectations are for this to take half a year of ordinary exploration type activities. I understand you may not all remain in Eden for that long?” they asked.

“No,” I said. “We’ll most likely head back in a month, maybe two, depending on how long the eclipse lasts.”

“Ah. If there is an eclipse, I expect it to not take much longer than until that ends for me to become strong enough. Either that or I will die. These are acceptable conditions, for now. I may lengthen this “contract” if you have need for me for longer, afterward, and are amicable to my presence,” Chris said.

“Well, I mean, does anyone have anything against them joining the party?” Marie asked.

Liam, Matt, and Reya shook their heads. Emilia kinda shrugged, while Ann was still transfixed by their magic, but gave at least a half hearted wave of her hand. I finally also agreed.

Marie turned to Chris. “Welcome to the party, I suppose?”