

Chapter 155: To find Closure

This new version of myself looked around the world with curiosity. Her mouth was open with wonder, and her eyebrows raised in surprise. It made her look a little silly. Did I look like that, too? Is that why Ann teased me sometimes?

Her gaze snapped to me, and she rolled her eyes. "Hey, don't give me that. Wait. Don't give *us* that? Eh, who cares! It's the look Ann gives me, and I will not stand for it!" she said, then had the audacity to pout at me.

I blinked at her. "You're, uh..."

"Bubbly? Charming? Loveable?" she asked, coming closer with every question, wide smile plastered across her face. "Yeah, I guess I'm all of those," she said, sighing dramatically.

"Those work, but I was gonna say 'awfully chipper for being dead', y'know," I replied.

For the first time, her face fell. "Ah, that," she said, sounding like me for a moment. "Well, it sucks. I don't like being dead." Then, slowly, a smile spread. "Which is why I'm so thankful to you! I get to be a walking corpse now, instead!"

Again, I blinked, shaking my head. "You shouldn't say that with a smile."

"Oh c'mon, me! How couldn't I?! Would you prefer I stay all miserable and mopey about what happened? That's not like us at *all*! Now, there's a chance for us to spread like a virus. All infinite dead versions of ourselves come here, until we reach a singularity and spread back out!" She smiled, and it was so wide it terrified me a little.

"Right, like a virus..." I said slowly.

And then, all that sinisterness vanished from her face, and instead it lit up with joy again.

"Oh, I know you! You're thinking of what to name me! Were you thinking something like Nana, because of our name?"

I shook my head. "Vivi, actually," I said with a thin smile. "Because of the virus thing."

Her eyes positively sparkled. "Whoaaa! Oh my divines! I love it! Yes, alright, I'll be Vivi from now on then."

"Sure," I confirmed. "Uhm, do you need... anything?"

"How long will I remain manifested?" she asked, happily.

That made me double check. I had... fourteen figments, now. Before, it had been minutes equal to my figments, but that seemed to have changed since my advancement to maelstrom, as well as the fact that ten figments felt like something of a breakpoint.

It was now... hours. Fourteen hours of summoning per day. I told my clone as much.

Vivi put a finger on her lips and tilted her head. "Hmmm, fourteen hours huh. A little shorter than I expected, but oh well." She smiled. "Still plenty of time to cause some trouble! Point me at the nearest usurper nest and I'll take it down!" she said, miming a few punches in mid-air.

A soft sigh escaped my lips. I didn't even bother to protest, instead I just pointed northwest. That's where the front was, after all, and the wilderness there would be swarming with usurpers, and Echo would be suffusing the air.

The grin on Vivi's face turned feral, and Qi spilled out of her. Enough Qi to make the hair on my skin stand up. Enough Qi to shimmer in the air with a faint golden hue, a maelstrom that washed away a bit of colour from the world, replacing it with glimmering glass. Vivi breathed, smiled violently, and nodded.

"I'll be off then," she announced cheerily, before stepping through the reflections and into what was almost certain to be a massacre.

"Scary," I muttered. Then I shook my head. "Is that what I look like to others?" I mean, I guess I was a little casual about risking my life, I guess...

"A little?" Cass asked from atop my shoulder. "You sure it's just a little?"

"Oh, shush," I said, snickering and shaking my head. "Surely I'm not that bad."

My very own keeper huffed at the question. "Sure," she said, "you might be less energetic or exhausting. But, relatively speaking, you are probably more troublesome." After he chiding, she gave me a meaningful look, and I knew better than to retaliate.

Instead, I just took a long moment to myself. A deep breath, a small sigh, and I moved on. The nest was cleared, the gateways had been absorbed. There were more targets, and I should, reasonably, lead my party through the wilderness.

And wasn't that a strange thought? Lead them. Emilia and Chris were more than capable of acting on their own - the former at the very cusp of maelstrom and the latter... well their current human shell hadn't crossed the threshold, but with my enhanced senses, I could tell that Chris was not quite going all out yet.

I'd not met many triz-adu, but at maelstrom, I could feel something about them. Some kind of power that I could only describe as the development of their true self - that part that carried over talents and memories in between shells, allowing them to keep growing and growing, even if they needed to embark on a cultivation journey all over, or learn a new path.

Usually, unsuitable paths of the shells should have barred them from cultivating within those borrowed bodies at all, and yet, Chris made it look effortless. "Oh, this body used a path called *Deep Sea Resonance*," they said as if it was simple. "I am simply bringing myself into alignment with what that means temporarily, the part of myself that inhabits this shell is walking that path. And once that part rejoins my ancestral whole or transitions to a new shell, then those memories shall last, and yet, it shall be a different me."

And that was all. With a sigh, and a shake of my head, I stepped through the air, following the bend of the light through atmospheric dispersion, and emerging right in front of Emilia. The warrior promptly swung her mace at me, which I managed to deflect off to the side.

At least she realized who I was before sending up a spear of earth to stab me in half. I breathed in, giving her a moment to gather herself. A smile appeared on her face, sweaty hair clinging to it. "Well, well, well. If it isn't our princess! And didn't you put on a spectacle for us, huh?" she teased.

I smiled faintly, looking over the group. Emilia was covered in ichor, but otherwise fine. Chris' human shells had taken a few nicks, which Eric was already tending to. The cleric was the furthest behind for this group, so Emilia protected him a lot, but that was fine. If she wanted to do so, then she was welcome to.

Trichtera, the angel of Ru, for her part, looked just a little ragged. Then again, she always did. Her hair was tied back in a strict bun, though strands of brunette fought against it, with one especially curling down the side of her face, framing it. She had red eyes, the red of blood, with dark streaks in them, and wore an armor made of mostly red-looking glass.

It broke and fractured easily, but it also repaired itself when blood was spilled on the strange material, so with each wound that Trichtera took, and with each beast the hard-worn woman struck down, the armor regrew. She had wrinkles, but her hair still maintained her colours, and I would have placed her in her late 30s, if she were a human.

Of course, she was not. She was half-fire spirit, her skin a gradient between warm yellows and deep reds, and flames occasionally drifting off of her like leaves in the wind. She eyed me with surprise and some admiration, yet also with trepidation. There was some wariness in her eyes.

And while she was a competent warrior, she was also less competent than Emilia. After all, she had only been named an angel recently - which showed in the fact that she had one pair of wings, made from flaming feathers, and even that pair was rather faint - and while strong, she was only at the beginnings of wellspring.

The gap between the strengths of everyone in the group was a little larger than I was perfectly comfortable with, but that was fine. If the divines needed me to babysit their little spy, then I would do so.

Trichtera frowned as if reading my mind. "Are you thinking badly of me?"

I blinked. The delay in my answer told her everything it needed to, and her frown wore itself deeper into her face. "For someone so mighty, you can be childish. I am not your burden. If you run and I cannot keep up, you are free to let me die," she grumbled, then flinched slightly as Eric applied healing to her wounds.

"It's alright," he said quietly. "I am the one slowing us down."

Emilia clapped him on the shoulder. "Stop that," she said, unusually serious. "You're doing your job. We'll keep doing ours. You keep us standing, and we'll keep fighting. That's how it's supposed to be."

Eric nodded, but despite the gesture I could still see the lingering doubt in his eyes. I shook my head at the antics. Taking care of his emotions was part of my job, but Emilia was doing a far better job at being empathetic with him than I ever would. Instead, I turned to the angel.

She was watching the entire exchange with the eyes of a hawk, and lightly clicked her tongue when she noticed my lingering look on her. Instead of replying to me, she closed her eyes.

The wings on her back cleared up slightly, and she hummed a faint tune. A bit of divinity left her, pulsed into the sky. After some delay, a thin, red streak of light pulsed back down, almost invisible against the flames covering her body. Despite that, I noticed it, and her eyes snapped open, glowing faintly.

"I've got our next target," she said. "A champion, this time. A giant, wielding a sword of black flame."

My eye twitched. I clenched my fists.

"A champion," I ground out, remembering what the last blackflame giant had done to our party. I was scared. But more than that, I wanted *vengeance*. "Point us at it."

- - -

Ion felt the change rippled through her. For a moment, she felt fear. A lingering worry that the moment would end too early.

She was on Neamhan again, had gone there before Fio went to subjugate the nest, in order to keep the others updated through their thin tether. With their core at gateway, she'd been able to stay longer than the few minutes that should have been possible - instead, she was able to remain active for just about an hour.

That changed when Fio devoured more gateways. As the figments crossed ten, then ticked up further. She felt the change ripple through her, and after the moment of fear, Ion felt... more solid. The moment would last.

She took a deep breath. Ann sat across from her. Ion on the couch, and Ann on a chair, both in their private room. A faint smile spread across the parallel-universe-clone's face.

Ann tilted her head. "Something good happen?"

Ion nodded after a moment. "Yes. I think we have a little more time for this conversation now," she said.

"Oh, good," Ann nodded. "An hour can be a little short when it comes to stuff like this, can't it?" she asked, with an awkward smile.

"Yeah," Ion agreed. Then she paused and thought, dropping her hands and hanging her head a little. "Yeah."

"So," Ann said, slowly. She felt the urge to reach out and pet Ion's head or hold her, but restrained herself. "Would you like to... tell me about your world?"

Ion smiled a terribly sad smile at the reminder. "I think you deserve to know. The differences, the similarities."

The mage shuffled a bit on the couch, the thumping of her mana heart audible in the silence, before the magic clamped down on the noise again. She was still getting used to it - in a way that Ion had never seen her Ann do it. "I'm listening," Ann said.

Nodding faintly, Ion started. "The biggest difference," she said, "is that I died in Eden, not you. But that's something you already know." Her smile was crooked and awkward. "No, what I wanted to talk about is just... You are very similar to my Ann," she said.

"You are very similar to my Fio," Ann confirmed with a nod. "Just a little more..."

“Grumpy?” Ion suggested.

“Dark,” Ann supplied.

“Ah,” the clone said. “Right. That works.” She gave a self-deprecating smile. “Yeah. You’re also a bit more open than my Ann used to be. She was all silence and mystery, and it felt like I was always diving deeper, always dying to get to know her better.”

Ann nodded along. “I see.”

“So I suppose, I just- You aren’t her. You’re so very, very close, but you’re not her. I can see you as a reflection, the way someone appears in a mirror, some bits of them irreversably... not wrong, but different.”

“Yes, I am not your Ann,” the mage confirmed. “I am this world’s Ann,” she said. “My own Ann.” She smiled faintly at that. “Fio’s girlfriend.”

Ion nodded slowly. “Yes. It’s strange to meet someone who I am yet so familiar with.”

“I can say the same,” Ann admitted with a small chuckle. “You’re almost Fio, but not quite.”

“Would it help if I grew my hair out?” Ion suggested half-jokingly with a smile.

Ann did laugh, for a moment, before it died down into a chuckle, then into nothing. “You don’t owe me anything,” she said slowly. “I am not that person you miss. I will never be, Ion. So, if you had longer hair or want to grow it out, by all means. I will respect any decision you make. It is your comfort, after all.”

Smile turning plagued, Ion nodded. “Got it,” she said. “I’ll see about it.”

“Look,” Ann said. “I know this is harder for you than it is for me, so, please, say what you want to say.”

Ion flinched, then took a deep breath, shaking her head to clear it of worries. A few moments passed as she gathered her resolve, then she lifted her head, looked Ann in the eyes, and spoke. “Yes. I came to talk for a specific purpose. I want to be friends. Even if you’re not the same, I want to see you happy. To redeem myself.”

“I am not your redemption,” Ann said. The words came out a little cold. “And I don’t think it’s fair to use me as a stand-in for someone I am not.”

At that, the manifestation nodded. “Yes, you aren’t. But still, I want to help. To see you smile. To work together. I want to spend time with you, as friends. As a little light in my heart.”

Ann gave her a long look, then a longer, suffering sigh. "You really are just like her. Straightforward and a dummy," she said, shaking her head with a smile. "Alright, Ion. We'll be friends. Under one condition."

"What condition?" Ion asked immediately.

Ann's eyes glinted with fire. "Don't obsess over me. Live your own life, and strive to find happiness. Your Ann would want that, too, wouldn't she?"

Ion swallowed dryly. "Yeah," she said. "I think she would have said the same thing."

"Then we're on the same page," the mage said with a smile. "Welcome to the team, friend."

"I am also your bodyguard," Ion admitted sheepishly while shaking her hand.

The mage rolled her eyes at that. "Typical. You're incorrigible, all versions of you."

And that brought a faint smile to Ion's face.