

Chapter 143: Ride Home

We killed the boss of the gate and then left it.

Rae exited at the same time as us, relying on the flash of light from the opening of the gate to dart away. I'm pretty sure Lyra, the government's maelstrom cultivator saw him, but that was fine. She kept quiet about it.

Instead, a dozen cameras flashed in my face. Reporters, cameras, the whole nine yards were there, and a thousand pictures were shot all at once as the gate snapped shut behind us, reality mending with a soft pop. The edges of the rift pulled back together, and as I looked behind me, I thought I could see an amphibian, frog-like eye staring at me hatefully for a brief moment.

Yea, that was surely not gonna be a problem.

With a deep breath I faced the reporters and the flood of questions. Ann squeezed my hand, while Chris stared at the flashing lights and Matt put on a blindingly bright smile. It was almost enough to make the reporters forget about the very human blood he was splattered with. Almost.

When they realized the state of Zinnic's ex-cultivators - all of them looking ragged and downcast - the flood redoubled, and Lyra handed us a microphone with a thin smile. Her lips moved and with my enhanced self, I could read them. "Good job, Fio." That was all, apparently.

She handed Matt the mic. There were more, but he was the best of us at the initial greetings. "Good..." he looked to the sky, "evening, everyone!" His mic peaked faintly, and some guy at a pult turned him down a bit, while still trying to keep his voice above the clamor of reporters. "I understand you have a lot of questions, but please, let us give a short summary first, yes?"

Another few moments passed and Matt patiently waited for the endless barrage to slow down. When there human noise had mostly faded, and we just heard a bunch of camera clicks, he put on that bright smile again. "So, let me cut right to the chase! In this gate, Zinnic tried to kill us."

Instantly, the crowd roared again, but at a few gestures from Matt, they quieted down. "We killed their upper echelons instead," he said, then quickly continued speaking before more noise came up. "White Tiger is dead. Black Swan is dead. Eagleeye is dead," he said. "Olivia

is the only member of Zinnic who surrendered. Every other one of them fought us. So, we broke their cultivation. They're no longer superhuman."

Chris nodded sagely. "This is true," they said. "Zinnic also tried to kill me."

"Now," Matt said. "I'm sure there will be at least some papers that will say we were the aggressors in this case, right? We could have backstabbed Zinnic, because anything that happens in gates stays in gates. There is no way to prove our innocence, beyond testimonies. But maybe we blackmailed Zinnic. So, let's just look at raw numbers instead. Even with a backstab, we never should have won. But we did. Because when driven to the edge, we thrive."

Slowly, his smile grew a little menacing. "So, please. I humbly request you keep us in your good graces, and that we can continue earning your trust. Thank you," he said, with a small bow. Ann and I followed suit, and shortly after, so did Chris. More moments passed. "Now, any questions?" Matt asked.

A dozen hands shot into the air. I held back a soft sigh. It was going to be a long day.

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We went home much later that night. I couldn't see the stars because of the smog, but I was rather sure they were up there, glimmering and twinkling when we went home. The reporters had riddled us with questions, and then we'd also had to give a report to Lyra, Trevor, and the rest of the government agents.

And, of course, I had to give Ivan a ride home. "Y'know, broski, if you got those cross-gate bodycams done soon, it might buy us a lot of goodwill," I said.

He laughed. "Yeah, right, Bell. As if it's that simple." He shook his head, amused and exasperated. "No, I'm not gonna get them done soon. You're lucky your phone still works. I know signal's been getting spotty since the world has changed. I'm mostly working on satellite tech right now to keep communication up, yeah?"

"Hopefully the density increase will start slowing a bit," I said, sighing softly while leaning against the window of the taxi.

Ivan shakes his head. "I doubt it," he said.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Well, we haven't really tackled the cause yet. Except for those two avatars..."

Thanking the divines for soundproof glass and luxury taxis, I put my head in my hands.

"Yeah," I grumbled. "I know. We needa kill the keepers and the leaders of the usurpers. There's more work to be done, always more work."

"Just the leaders?" Ivan raised an eyebrow. "Don't you wanna kill them all?"

"No," I shook my head. "Most of the usurpers are mindless. Even strong ones. Some of the wellspring, even maelstrom level monsters are just... animals. Following their instincts. Living. They're more like..." I waved my hands in the air helplessly, not finding the words.

"Invasive species?" Ivan supplied.

"Yes!" I said. "They get carted around by the keepers and the leaders of the usurpers, and wreak havoc in new biomes that were not made for them. Then, they change the world to suit them. But so many don't know what they're doing. Even the nests... are just that. Nests. Habitats in places where they aren't supposed to be."

Ivan nodded thoughtfully. "Makes sense," he said after a while. "Striking at who actually makes those decisions seems like a smart move."

I smiled. "Thanks," I said. Then, there's a bit of silence, until I move to fill it. "How's your magic coming along?"

"Second circle, now," he said with a small smile. "It's so much easier than cultivating, I dunno how you do it. Mana listens when I make it do stuff. Qi needs to be wrangled. It's like coding in a computer compared to wrangling a batch of particularly angry snakes."

A small laugh bubbled out of me, and Ivan smiled. "Yeah, it can be that way," I said. "Mine feels like a dragon, sometimes."

At that, he laughed instead. "Yeah, you would think of yours that way. Arrogant idiot sis," he said, throwing an arm around me. The jab had no heat at all.

"Oh yeah? Gotta keep up with my silly genius brother," I return, lightly smacking his side.

"Why thank you," he says, giving a mock bow. "Then I'll do my best to do as much as I can, gotta keep you moving. And provide you with internet. Whatever would you do if you lost access to all those novels?"

I smirked. "Teleport to the moon for fun, or something?"

Ivan paused. Then, hesitantly, he asked. "... Could you?"

"Hm," I tilted my head, thinking. "Dunno. Probably? I don't see what would stop me. I don't think the vacuum or cold would give me too much trouble. Worst case I use Qi to warm myself up. I'd have to hold my breath, though, which I can only do for... what, half an hour or somesuch?"

"Is that peak wellspring or early maelstrom?" he asked.

"Ah, wellspring," I said. "I... don't know, actually. With maelstrom, I'm unsure if I need to breathe," I replied earnestly. Qi could do a lot, after all, so fuelling my muscles and brain with it instead of air wasn't outrageous.

The upgrade to maelstrom had changed its intensity, malleability, and even the rate at which it was produced by a lot. The biggest change, of course, was being able to manipulate Qi externally. I could probably take away control of their own abilities from anyone in the core realm or below, which was a scary thought.

Ivan smiled softly. "Do you feel like your humanity is slipping away?" he asked, quietly. It was a question with no heat, half teasing, but also half genuine. I looked at him for a long moment, trying to read what he was expecting, but he gave me no tells.

I sighed, leaning against the cool glass of the window again. "Yeah," I said. "It does. Well, physically, at least. Cultivation has been surprisingly easy on my emotional state."

"Finding a path that suits you does that, I suppose," he said.

Gently, I tilted my head. "Hm?" I asked.

"Ah," he said. "Well, we've done some tests, and cultivators do develop rather extreme personalities, oftentimes. It usually happens when they follow a path that doesn't suit them. When the demands of their cultivation clash with who they are as a person. It doesn't just make it near impossible to advance at some point, it also changes the way you act. Your Qi controls you, not the other way around."

I shivered a little, suddenly a lot happier that I had helped dad find his own path back in the clinic. That seemed scary. Still, most probably wouldn't advance far enough to really see the effects of that, right? "Were the tests largely on reflectors?" I asked, to be sure.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Largely. It’s troublesome, but not nearly as troubling as, say, Echo. Mana does the same thing to a lesser degree, and Divinity... well, our only sample is Reya, so I cannot say much. I’d assume that if it comes from an external source, it made people more likely to exhibit traits possessed by their chosen patron divine.”

“Scary,” I said.

“Yeah,” Ivan nodded.

Then, I closed my eyes, enjoying the cold of the glass on my cheek, instead of worrying too much. More minutes passed in silence as I digested the words over. It made me wonder, what was the price of power?

It was so intoxicating, but it also came with requirements. I had Cass in my mind, and I loved her, of course, but I also couldn’t have chosen not to have her. Which was a little troublesome, I supposed.

In my case, I’d made the best of it, but not everyone was likely to be as lucky. What about Matt? Was his battle-fury the result of who he was, or the result of his cultivation technique?

I shook my head, smiling a bit. In his case, it was likely that his technique made him calmer. It was all soft movements, pleasant smells, and elegance. Compare that to his brutish lust for hacking things apart, and I was really more worried about it dragging him down.

But with how much of a prodigy he was, I didn’t think I’d need to worry about that. No, if anything, Matt could use the calm. A few dozen more minutes, and the taxi dropped us off at the guildhall. I gave an autogramm as well as a tip for the late driving, then dragged myself in through the door.

I put on my pajamas, brushed my teeth, then dropped into bed next to an already asleep Ann. I was tired. As I stared at the ceiling, my thoughts slowed by bit. Tomorrow’s Fio would deal with the media backlash. Tomorrow’s Fio would see about what to do with Olivia and Rae.

Tomorrow’s Fio would cut off Mr. Henney’s head.