

Chapter 134: Weekend Babysitting

Living back on Neamhan was strange.

I really, really wasn't used to having my family so immediately near me for extended periods of time. By now, I was used to seeing them once every two months at most, usually having longer breaks between meetings.

Now? It was the third week in a row that mom asked me to watch Beth on the weekend.

Not that I minded, really. I had the time, after all. There were new gates opening, sure, but they were under control. Neamhan had its own force of hunters. Yes, there were casualties. Yes, people died sometimes. Yes, the industry was cutthroat.

But we were humans. It'd always been that way. It was no easier than life had been before, but humans were hardly.

I knew a few people who cherished their trips into the gates, even. Trevor, for example. He worked for the government, but each time he got to actually dive, he *smiled*.

He was risking his life, going into abyssal places, filled with creatures trying to kill him, trying to turn our planet into their habitat. And he smiled. I asked him about it once, and he looked me in the eye. "Fresh air," he said. "I get to breathe, Fio. That's priceless."

And I agreed.

So, people dove willingly into the gates. To protect Neamhan, to bring back resources that might help us restore our planet. Scientists were modifying plants and mushrooms with qi and mana. Mutated bacteria to be able to more easily digest plastics. It was a booming industry, because frankly, humans wanted the planet clean.

Like a light at the end of the tunnel, this crisis had-

Beth tugged at my sleeve. "Fiooooo," she whined. "You've gotten distracted again. My ice cream is melting!"

"Hahaha. Sorry, little Butterfly. Let me finish that up for you," I said, quickly scooping out some more vanilla before covering it in a reasonable helping of caramel sauce and some whipped cream. "Here you go. Don't eat it too quickly, or you'll get a headache."

Rolling her eyes at me, Beth stuck out her tongue. “Of course, lady Radiance,” she said, then proceeded to shove a big spoonful into her mouth.

I laughed at her antics, shaking my head a little. What a feisty child. “Anything you wanna watch, today?”

“The Platypus!” she cheered.

With a small smile, I put on an episode on the TV. It was a show for kids about a crime-fighting platypus, but honestly, I liked it too. Mom, of course, found it too childish, and would rather have Beth read Shakesapple or something. Luckily, she was currently not at home.

In fact, she was out on a trip with Jared. They’d be gone from Friday afternoon till Sunday evening, and I’d watch Beth for a chunk of that time. Then Ivan would help, and Marie also agreed to swing by for a little while.

Beth was rather happy with my new friends. She liked all her uncles and aunts. Reya was even teaching her a little bit of sign language - which she was better at than me, taking courses about it in school, too.

“Owww,” Beth said, holding her head.

“Brain freeze?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said mournfully.

I grinned. “If only someone had warned you of this. Truly. What a tragedy that you don’t-”

She interrupted me by throwing a pillow at me, giving me a pout. “Get me my water,” she demanded.

“What’s the magic word?”

“Get me my water, *please*.” She rolled her eyes.

I got up with a smile. “Of course, Butterfly. Be right back, then.”

Mom’s house was a little cramped, still, so I had to squeeze to maneuver past some of the paintings and supplies. My mom was always orderly, but still messy. It was funny how that aspect of her clashed with her well-maintained facade.

By now, since I had more money than I really knew what to do with, we had bought an expansion to the house. A painting studio. Which was... well, I shall not mention those

unspeakable horrors here. Suffice to say, the rest of the house got cleaner, and the mess had to go somewhere.

It was nice. My mom was grateful for it. Really grateful. She'd never been *poor*, but her and Jared's planned cruise definitely wasn't exactly financed by her. They had gone on that, too, by now.

Well, it was possible once I'd gotten the Band of Tethering, since I could leave a mark with them. For the two weeks they were on the boat, I manipulated an alternate version of myself that had gone along with them, only ever a single superposition away from them.

Nothing had happened. They came back, safe and sound. Some things had been impossible, of course, because of the gates, but overall, she got to enjoy it.

I handed Beth a glass of warm water. "There you are, Butterfly."

"Thanks, Fio," she said, drinking some. "For everything."

Smiling, I ruffled her hair a little. "That's what big sisters are for, silly. Now, let's finish the episode. Cass is incredibly invested."

"Oh! Can we play some video games afterwards?" she asked.

That was another point my mom had heavily contended, but she couldn't exactly stop me from bringing some consoles along, right? So, it was a hobby that Beth and Cass shared. My little keeper could assume a semi corporeal form by now, enough to hold a controller at least, and the two had become rather good friends.

"Of course," I said, already pulling on my wellspring to weave a physical avatar for Cass to occupy. "She says she's excited to see you again too."

The next few minutes, the house was filled with two girls giggling and hugging, one made from flesh and blood, the other of translucent, half-real glass. I smiled. Life was really rather strange, but I was glad I got to experience those moments.

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Friday passed, and Saturday came easily. I woke up before Beth, not needing to sleep as much because of my cultivation. Really, I had hours before my little sis woke up. I'd had to carry her into her bed when she fell asleep while watching TV.

So, since I had some time to burn, I did what I usually spent my time with. Reaching into the empty air, I pulled out Astraeus from my inventory. The spirit within my spear hummed and chirped happily, molding himself to my grip.

The weapon felt right in my hand. I did, however, need a little more space than what I had inside the house in order to be able to practice properly, so I stepped outside into the small garden.

Plants were hard to come by, but my mom maintained some, assisted by Ivan. It was kind of her hobby but also his research project, so it was rather well maintained by both of them. They'd kill me if I messed it up.

Luckily, I just needed space, not exactly the ground to walk on.

Stepping on a Qi platform in thin air, I stood a few inches above the ground, making sure not to harm any of their precious glass. I spun Astraeus in my hands, going through the motions. Another version of myself stood on the other side, half-real and ready to swap places with me.

And then, we fought.

Not really, of course. There was no resistance. It was halfway between shadow boxing and practicing forms as I went through the motions with my spear. Cuts, thrusts, slams. Maintaining my footwork.

All fighters had their own styles. Matt's swordsmanship, for example, was beautiful. Emilia's macework was brutal. Liam's was malleable and ruthless. Marie's was cautious.

My style was a lot of different things, since it was an amalgam. Like every fighter, I learnt from a lot of different sources - I had my master, I had fought monstrous beasts the size of houses, and I'd fought other humans. In the tight quarters of caves, in forests, in open fields, in midair, while gravity was being changed on me.

One form flowed into another as I thought about my style of combat. What was at the centre of it? I was fluid, one motion easy passing into another, but also unyielding. Relentless efficiency had been drilled into me by Rae, and I was skilled at fighting in groups, avoiding my allies.

But what was my greatest strength? The answer was already in my talents, wasn't it?

[Superimposed Experience] was a core part of my learning, letting me mimic others, letting me see the world from their perspective. I could even use it on enemies to understand and predict their styles, learning and adjusting on the fly, but it wasn't my signature talent.

The one that defined me, the one I had forged myself, was [Precipitous Wings]. At the thought, those fragments of golden glass sprouted from behind my back again, casting a small spectacle of light, like stars in the night sky.

At its heart, my fighting was relentless.

I never backed down, never gave up, never let my opponent catch their breath. If they wanted to hurt me, I'd hurt them back. They would pay for each drop of blood, for each mistake they made. My [Budding Nova] would eclipse their stars, and that was that.

Something clicked at the realisation, and I smiled. Breathing, I put my spear away and looked at the sky.

Hours had passed.

It was already almost sunrise.

With a few quick steps, I hopped back onto the cobblestone path to the house, heading through the door and into the kitchen. Beth would probably wake up in a little while, so I got to work on making pancakes. My sister deserved nothing less.