

Chapter 89: Decisions, Decisions.

“There’s an eclipse coming.”

It was starting to feel like that sentence was one of the heaviest strings of words I’d had to say in my life. On par with “I can’t come to school, I’m attending my brother’s funeral.” and “You can’t come over, my dad is drunk off his rocker right now.”

But this time, the reaction was none of the awkward stumbling I usually got as a reply. Instead, there was a heavy silence hanging over our group.

The inn around us was busy. I had used my voice transmission to tell the others directly, so none of the patrons would be scared away. Really, the background noise just made the silence feel more awkward.

I saw Liam’s Qi fluctuate for a moment before it stabilized, the rogue schooling his expression back to one of neutrality. Marie wore a deep frown, but her eyes wandered over the others.

Ann gave my hand a squeeze, and I squeezed back. Right, we would get through this together.

Matt was looking at me, too. There was a question there. I shook my head slowly, telling him that no, I could not just go back to Neamhan. Then he nodded.

“I am staying,” the swordsman agreed.

“Me too,” Emilia said without any more hesitation.

Marie smiled, a tiny, fragile, worried expression, but still nodded grimly. “Then I’ll stick around, too.”

Liam seemed almost bemused as he nodded. “Same here, then,” the whisper rang out next to my ear. I saw him turn to Reya. She smiled.

“We’re leaving, right?” Eric asked his sister.

I turned to him. Ann did, too. I think I looked surprised, though I certainly know she didn’t. Ann looked... furious.

Like she was about to set his ass on fire.

“What?” he asked, glancing around the table. “It’s an eclipse! We’re going home, right, Reya?”

The woman looked at her brother for a long moment. Then to Liam, then to me, then back to Eric. Very slowly, she shook her head. She signed something, but I didn’t speak sign language yet.

Eric seemed stunned. Like he couldn’t believe what was happening. “Sis, Reya, please. Don’t- this isn’t a joke or something, right?”

She shook her head again.

“Are... are all of you serious?” He looked around the table for help.

Emilia reached out. She laid a hand on his shoulder, her expression frozen somewhere between angry, disappointment, and compassion. But then it faded, and she simply looked sincere. “Dead serious,” she assured him.

“You too, Emilia?” Eric asked, his voice trembling.

She nodded.

The cleric turned to his sister. “Reya. You’re... staying?” She nodded, too. I saw as Eric dropped his face into his hands for a moment, his fingers interlacing with his hair, turning it more messy. “Fuck,” he gasped from between his hands. “Divines... fuck.”

Marie seemed sympathetic to his pleas, really. Like she was just about to reach out and grab his hands, but Ann looked at her, and shook her head. She wasn’t just angry, she was *beyond* pissed. Why? Just for me?

A minute ticked by, then a second one. Eric shook once, probably sobbing. I... zoned out a bit. It felt so distant now. The fact that I had received so much more support than expected made this bit of pushback hit unreasonably harder.

“Eric,” Ann’s icy voice cut through the air, and he raised his head. “You can leave now.” It wasn’t really giving him permission so much as it was demanding he do it.

He looked at her, then at Reya again as if seeking help. She shook her head, though it seemed like it was breaking her heart. Then, Eric’s expression hardened in real time.

In just a couple seconds he went from close to sobbing back to composed and frigid. “Fine,” he said, raising with a scrape of the chair against the wooden flooring. “Reya. I’ll make sure. When you die, I’ll make sure you have someplace to return to.”

She signed again. "She won't die," Liam said. He didn't whisper it, either. He told Eric, upfront, standing as well by now. I'd barely seen him get up.

Reya looked at Liam, then gently pushed down on his shoulder. The rogue gave her a look, then sat back down. Reya turned to her brother, and gave the saddest smile I ever saw. Her lips moved soundlessly, but I could read them. "I love you," she said.

Eric clenched his fist, trembling. Then he turned, walked to the door. "I'll wait on the other side, sis," he said, then left.

The door fell closed louder than I think it had any right too. I saw Ann reach for her drink in the silence that hung over the party. Reya still stood, looking at the door. Then there was the sound of wood splintering, as Ann crushed the tankard into a thousand pieces in her hand.

"Ah," she said, her voice dry. "I appear to be mildly angry."

I put a hand on hers, and she looked at me. She would have scared me if I didn't love her. Her eyes, usually fire red, seemed more like pools of blood, deep as the ocean. Her fury wasn't the usual flaming kind, but more like unfathomable depths trying to swallow me.

So, instead, I pulled her into a hug.

She was tense, and I could feel every muscle in her smaller frame tightened. From her back, down her arms, to even her jaw. Really, she seemed just short of shattering her teeth. It was a testament to her practice that she was still able to enunciate her speech so clearly.

"I'm fine, Fio," she said in that same frigid tone.

"Yeah, of course," I lied. "I'd just, uhm, like to hug you if that's okay. For purely and entirely selfish reasons."

She didn't deign me with a reply, but I felt her lean onto my shoulder slightly, and that was all the confirmation I needed. I held her for a long, silent moment.

When I finally turned to the group again, I looked everyone over. Maria and Emilia seemed pensive. They understood. They knew why he left, and were saddened by the decision, but compassionate.

Reya was more sad than them, though. Liam had given her a hug, but now just had his hand on her shoulder. She stared at a wall absently, alone with her thoughts. The rogue seemed more preoccupied with her than with Eric leaving. The two hadn't really interacted much, after all.

Ann was still furious, but now she just seemed... defeated. All that rage driving her was slowly dissipating, and all that was left was a gaping hole of disappointment. She had expected more from Eric.

And then, there was Matt. He seemed... shockingly neutral. Like this was the expected outcome and he had dealt with it already. He looked over at me, then gave a crooked smile. My eyes widened. He *had* expected it.

"When?" I asked, quietly, barely above a whisper.

"The moment you told us," he answered. Then he shrugged. "Nothing wrong with being a coward," he added. "Being brave is about fighting even when you're scared. I... honestly wish I were more like that. Bit of fear would do me well." His crooked smile turned sad.

Emilia nodded. "Nothing wrong with being a coward."

Ann stared at the two of them, her eyes reddened, both from fury and some tears I imagined. Maybe angry tears. "How can you say that? People will die because he left."

Marie gave Ann a long look. "He's not killing them, hon."

"They'll die because of his choice!!"

"*He's not killing them*," Marie affirmed again, more solidly. "He's made his choice. We've made ours."

"Marie, I can't fucking forgive that. He's despic-"

Reya spun over at Ann to slap her. I lightly caught her hand, looked at the cleric, then shook my head, slowly. "Ann," I said, maintaining eye contact with Reya, "Eric is back on the other side. He made a choice, one that he is free to make. You can be as angry as you'd like, but please do not insult him in front of the people he wants to keep safe."

From the corner of my eyes I saw Ann bite her lips, hard. "Yeah," she mumbled. "Yeah, yeah. Fucking fine or something."

I kissed the top of her head. "Hey. If he's gone, we'll just work extra hard to save all the people he would've."

At that, I saw Reya give a small nod. She signed again, though I didn't understand. "She says 'fuck yes we will'," Liam provided, still using his own voice rather than the whispering he usually did.

Ann froze at that, then cracked a tiny smile. She shook her head, and I saw the world in a myriad of tiny reflections as scattered droplets of water almost too small to see flew through the air. “I- yeah. We will. Thank you, Fio. Liam, Reya,” she said, shooting them a smile that seemed only slightly forced.

I kissed the top of her head again. There was another moment of silence, until Matt talked. “So uh, I guess I’ll go pay for that,” he said, gesturing at Ann’s broken tankard, “and order you another drink? You look like you could use it. For like, hydration I mean.”

The mage took a long, shaky breath, then nodded. “Yeah, I’ll, uh, take a glass of water. Definitely.”

Emilia shot her a small smile. “Hydrate don’t diedrate, eh?”

“Hydrate don’t diedrate,” Ann confirmed, shaking her head at it.