

Chapter 80: Calm

The fish were a bit dark by the time we took them off the fire. Liam devoured one of them, all on his own, while everyone else shared the second. I refused any bite of it, though I did eat quite a few of Marie's roots.

My body could sustain itself for longer than the others, and from a more dire diet by now. My endurance was probably the highest of the party, so I could reasonably eat tree bark by now, too. As long as it wasn't *too* poisonous.

Additionally, my body was partially fed by Qi from my wells. Which helped stave off hunger for a truly superhuman time. It also worked for sleep, luckily enough. Though my mental exhaustion still told me I needed rest right now.

So I politely remained laying down, closed my eyes, and was out like a light a moment after I'd eaten.

- - -

When I woke up, the sky was still dark, and full of stars.

There were, however, sounds of fighting around me. Those had not awoken me. What had woken me up, was Cass loudly screaming into my head, telling me to dodge.

Adrenaline flooding my veins from the sudden stop to my rest, I rolled to the side. Where I'd just been, a drytz poked out of the floor, its claws tearing apart my rudimentary bedding. I was slow, and it scraped my shoulder, but glanced off one of Ann's barriers.

With a herculean effort, I lifted myself off the floor, then closed my eyes again, not bothering to keep them open. My aura sense encompassed a small area around me, but... I learnt fast on the verge of death.

Plus, it extended underground.

With a swift grab into thin air, my spear materialized then I stabbed it into the ground with pinpoint precision, spearing a drytz straight through its head. The creatures were tough, and ferocious, but they were most of all stealthy. How they'd found us I didn't know, since Marie should have put up barriers...

... Then again, the monsters also found the city.

Combat was swift and brutal, and by the end, the range of my Aura sense had improved by about half a meter, fed by the Qi I'd been able to recover during my brief rest.

When we were all catching our breaths, I turned to Ann, every muscle once again alight with fire. "How long... was I out?" I asked between gasps.

My girlfriend was luckily less winded, since she had been levitating and blasting them with spells. "Two hours, maybe. A little less."

"We have to move," Marie commanded. I turned to her, seeing the gritted teeth and pained expression, but she was right. Resting when monster hordes were about and protections didn't work... was a poor choice. No, we needed to move.

"I'll take point," Emilia said. Matt joined her in the front of the party. Our scout was down, and Marie needed to get us something to eat while we moved, so we wouldn't have time to find monsters ahead of time.

Soon, our formation roughly established itself. Matt and Emilia ahead, followed by Trevor and Evelyn, then our healers, as well as Liam and I. Ann was at the back. I was almost bothered at being so far in the back, but those thoughts soon faded away when simply marching forward took all my focus.

By now, my clothes were filthy. My boots rubbed against my already hurt skin, blistering rapidly. I couldn't reinforce my skin with Qi either; despite my wellsprings producing much more, it was still not enough for luxuries.

It was barely enough to puppeteer my broken body while allowing my cores to fill ever so slowly. I didn't have enough for luxuries.

A half dozen hours passed in a silent march. Occasionally, there would be a small skirmish, but our vanguard usually blasted solitary monsters apart before I even noticed. Halfway through, Liam stirred.

He'd remained firmly asleep throughout everything until now, but when his eyes opened, some light had returned to them. In fact, as soon as he moved, I saw the shadows around us shift a little, as if his control over them manifested itself. He had regained enough Qi for that, then.

I saw the rogue take a couple ragged breaths, then he turned to me. I saw him linger, as if in thought. He still levitated, laying down in mid air, so it was a little strange seeing him turn.

His face was pale as a corpse, and his eyes had bags under them. Other parts of his skin were still blackened and burnt, some flaking off and revealing red flesh underneath.

A few moments, the silence lasted. Eventually, though, I heard his voice - and I was sure I was the only one who heard it.

"You're tough Fio. You advanced, too. Be proud of yourself."

That was all he said, his voice an even quieter whisper than usual, and raspy to boot. Still, his eyes lingered on me, dark and dreary. I gave him my bravest smile. "I... am, yes. But. We each have our strengths, we cover for each other."

My words prompted a small smile from him as well, his skin slightly cracking as he smiled, though shadows soon rose and laid onto his body. "... Yeah," he whispered. "Lend me your shadow for a bit?"

I gave a short nod, not spending my bare energy on an answer, and a moment later, my own shadow liquified, then materialized into a glob of black, and floated off me before attaching to Liam himself.

This wasn't a new ability. It let him borrow some of the attributes of the shadow-bearer for a bit, so he was probably using it to enhance his endurance. Indeed, I saw his wounds begin knitting themselves together. He had a lot of experience in manipulating his body simply because he used Qi to help him transition, so that probably came in quite handy in helping him fix himself up.

In the process, his gaunt form turned even slimmer, using a mix of Qi, fat, and muscle to cannibalize enough nutrients for reshaping flesh. It wasn't a miracle, no form of healing was. But with it, he would be in walking shape again sooner rather than later.

A few seconds after he laid the shadows onto himself, he turned his head. Reya had stepped closer. Suddenly, his form wasn't shrinking anymore, instead, the nutrients were supplied from Divinity. Liam couldn't receive divine healing anymore, but his own Qi was a bit different.

The healing went slowly, but bit by bit, his wounds closed.

After another couple hours, he was almost ready to walk again, though he still remained floating.

We marched silently.

Another hour passed by.

“You know, Fio,” he said, looking up into the night sky. “You don’t have to worry. I... feel a bit bad about myself. But I’ll catch up.”

As he said the words, I saw a small ripple in the shadows on his skin, as if responding to his promise. “I feel like this has been... a learning experience. This kind of silence is rare, you know. I’m getting close to something.”

His thin lips turned into another smile. “Soon. Then I’ll join you in wellspring. Just you wait.”

Somehow, despite the difficulty of advancement, I didn’t doubt his words for a moment. Liam was talented. He also chose an element that allowed him to inherit some power by shadowing others around him. With both Matt and I having wells... it was only a matter of days until he was there, too.

The thought made me look towards Ann at the back of our party. She was keeping a lot of spells active, and had been for a while... My eyes went wide, then she noticed my stare and gave me a sheepish smile.

She’d reached fourth circle. Before Matt reached wellspring, too!

I smiled back, and blew her a kiss, to which she stifled a giggle.

Then I almost fell flat on my face, as a tiny rock impeded my movement. An application of Qi and a painful twist of my muscles later I managed the step but learned my lesson. Instead of flirting, I focussed back on the road at hand.

- - -

[We’re being watched.]

I gave Cass a small nod.

Another hour or two had passed, and the forest was quiet. Sure, we stumbled upon occasional small monsters, and even big ones we had to flee from, but we hadn’t been overrun by the horde, or felt the quakes from a distant battle.

What surprised me most, though, was that we found no other survivors. See, there had been thousands of Edians back in Renvil, and hundreds of Reflectors. Surely, we should have met at least some, rather than just me seeing the hostile swordswoman.

Additionally, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Which, honestly, would be just my luck.

Circulating my Qi had been healing my wounds a little, but this was not damage that could be mended in less than a day, especially when I hit my healing limit already.

The sky was dark above, though not quite as dark as during the night. The sun was, ever so slowly, cresting the horizon above a chain of mountains. Each tree cast enormously long shadows onto the dark ground, and clouds were gathering.

It would rain soon. It felt like something was waiting for their moment to pounce. With a small tap, Liam focused on me, and I formed a couple shapes with my hand, disguising them as best as I could.

His face remained neutral, heavily schooled, but a moment later, every member of our party got the message. All except Trevor, Evelyn, and Sophia. They wouldn't expect the communication, and we couldn't afford to give our knowledge away with a flinch or something.

I saw the muscles on Marie's back tense slightly. She was currently with the party, luckily. We remained silent, all focussed, though our magical senses were now stretched to their limit.

With slight glances, I observed the trees all around us. If I weren't hiding my expression I would have grimaced. There were too damn many places to hide!

Eventually, though, the first raindrop fell.

Dark clouds had gathered in the twilight sky, and the rising sunlight was once again almost extinguished. Thin, tiny wisps of sun, cast enormous shadow, turning the whole forest dark and sinister.

The rain grew quickly, and minutes later, it came down in a pour. Thousands of thick drops slammed into the ground, turning it into slick mud and insecure footing.

I tensed further, the prickling in the back of my neck growing intense. I even felt that Cass was uncomfortably on edge.

Then, eventually, it happened.

A raindrop fell just right; into a ray of sunshine that came through the leaves, hitting my eye at just the right angle. I closed it, the blinding light forcing my pupils to adjust and creating a small distraction for a moment.

The very second my eyelid closed, my aura sense shifted. The raindrop turned into a human figure wielding a sharp knife, thrusting it at my eyes, while from the shadow a tree cast on me, a serpentine hand reached up to slash my tendons.

Not a second later, everything exploded into motion.