Chapter 3

Let’s do the time warp again

Ignoring the others for the moment, I held out a hand, the stones in the bowl before me back to where they’d been *originally,* and, with the timer ticking down from ten minutes once more, there was something I needed to check.

With a gesture, and exerting *just* as much force as I had that first time, muscles straining…

*Thunk!*

The rock didn’t just lift, it was *hurled* upwards, bouncing off the ceiling, my arm, feeling perfectly fine and *not* ripped to shreds, like it had been moments ago, still taking more effort than I would’ve used if I’d just reached out and picked up the rock, yes, but the results were…

*Telling.*

“Okay, it’s not an Re:Zero situation,” sighed, making a pulling gesture to bring the stone back to me as it fell, catching it as I stood, stretching, the attention for the others, except for Kobeni, who was still unconscious, pulled towards me like a loadstone. “So. *That happened!”* I smiled. “Fuckin *Class E.* Hit the ground fucking *tumbling* assholes. But, honestly, still better than Class B. So, we’re all healed, and physically reset, but our *Chi* has carried over, and *maybe* muscle memory. That means that-”

“We,” Kaylee whispered tremulously, “we *died!”*

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Did you guys miss the part where we have *gods* on our payroll?”

“You mean, like… *God* God?” the mechanic questioned, with terrible dread.

I wiggled a hand, “We have some YHWHs, but only the flawed ones. The CoWHs, er, The Coalition of White Heavens calls dibs on the ones that are *actually* pure, but, for better and worse, their standards are *really* strict, and you need to be a *literal saint* before they’ll bother even looking your way. Which, well, *none of us are.* So, yeah, dying sucks, and that one was *particularly* bad, but it’s *not* going to be permanent.”

“You’ve died *before?*” Mel questioned, focus *laser* sharp.

“Five times, or eight, depending on how you count it, but just once before in a non-sanctioned fashion,” I replied. “It’s never *fun,* but knowing it isn’t the end helps. So, assuming it’s a full reversal instead of a pseudo-backup load, and we’re in the same place, we need-”

“We *died!”* Kaylee cried out, hugging herself.

“Yes?” I replied, before I realized what was happening. “*Right*. Sorry. A little rattled myself. Like I said, that *was* bad. And if you’re not used to it. You… you guys wanna take five?”

Mutely, Kaylee nodded.

“I would like a moment to collect myself, yes,” Mel agreed.

L didn’t move. Just staring.

“O-kay,” I sighed, taking a moment to spin the rock between my hands, settling into a pattern, rotating, throwing, and catching it, for a few moments, even as I knew this was just… *not even one percent* of what this style was.

*I get rock, and I start thinking planets,* I chuckled to myself a little, shaking my head before, moving over to Kobeni, going down on one knee, and, *gently*, shaking her awake.

“Nooo,” she moaned blearily, coming to, before, she spasmed and sat up rapidly, making me sway out of the way before she headbutt me. *“Gyah! I, I,”* she muttered, looking around fearfully, breaths coming in short, ragged gasps, *“I, we, I, not dead?”*

“*Were* dead, got brought back,” I summarized. “Probably are gonna die again, but it won’t stick either.”

“W-W-What?” the girl stuttered, eyes wide.

I paused, trying to figure out how to summarize our situation. “Ever see Groundhog Day?” I questioned.

Kobeni shook her head.

“Know what a time-loop is?” I tried instead.

She nodded.

“Yeah. *That.”*

Her eyes, if anything, *widened.* “Then, then we’re just going to *keep dying*, ***forever!?***”

“No.”

“Ehhh?” she Asian woman, who was starting to work herself back up again, sputtered, confused.

Holding my hand up, I spun the rock. “Our *powers* can grow. So. Are we gonna die again? *Yep.* No way we’re strong enough as is. Hell, it’s probably gonna take a few, as we’re fighting *swarms,* but we’ve all got AoEs, and that’s how you handle them. Better question: are we going to keep dying *forever?* ***Only if we give up.****”* Standing, I offered her my hand, and the girl stared at it like it was a hissing snake, but, closing her eyes, she reached out to grab it.

And *missed.*

But I got where she was going, and took her hand, ignoring her strangled yelp, pulling the short girl to her feet, setting her down gently, and letting her go. She stood there, eyes screwed shut, for a long moment, before, she, *hesitantly*, opened them, and looked to me with a gaze brimming with fear.

“You ready to start?” I questioned, and, at her nod, directed her towards the bowl where the flame burned merrily. “Alright, your element is *Fire.* But the elements are far more than what they seem on the surface. Mine is **Stone**, but that’s more than just a mountain, or a brick, or even a moon, it’s all that and *more*. So, you got a glimpse of what *Fire* was, when we started. Do you remember that?”

“N-Not really? *Sorry!*” the girl apologized, looking at me as if I’d haul off and *hit* her or something stupid.

“But you remember a *little,* right?” I prompted, getting a nervous nod. “Okay, Fire’s the most innately destructive of them, but not *all* of it is, and we’re starting *there,*” I informed her, as, with her nerves, she’d likely blow herself up with something more volatile. And, while that now *wouldn’t be the end,* there was no need to make her dive into the deep end. *Further* into the deep end. “Now, have you ever seen a hearth-fire, or been camping?”

“N-No?” the *Devil Hunter* replied, and I wondered what kind of world she came from, but, no, *that wasn’t the point.*

“Have you ever warmed your hands by a fire, even if it was just a gas stove in a cold apartment?” I tried instead, hitting paydirt.

A little bit of her nervousness faded, as she perked up. “I, uh, yeah! But, but I wasn’t supposed to-”

“Who gives a shit,” I told her, recognize the wilting of her demeanor as an associated traumatic memory. God knows I’d felt *that* often enough. “You’re here now, not wherever that happened, but I want you to remember that *feeling*, where Fire wasn’t dangerous, but *nice,* and *comforting,* okay? Not before, not after, *that moment.*”

It took her almost thirty seconds, before she nodded again, and, as I continued, the timer clicked down to five minutes, and L moved to speak, but I held up a finger to make her wait, as this *needed* to be started off correctly.

“Alright, now, look at the Flame, and remember that feeling,” I instructed. “And *pick it up.”*

“I, *what?”* Kobeni questioned, losing focus. “But, but it’ll *burn me!!*”

Lifting an eyebrow, I asked, “Did it *then*? No, some part of you *is* Fire now, just as some part of me is **Stone**, so think of it like a delicate flower, but also a cat. If you grab it too hard, or wrong, you’ll crush it, and it might claw you, but if you’re gentle, and attentive, you’ll be *fine,* and it will *warm* you, just like it did then.”

Looking at me as if I was *nuts,* I stayed silent, waiting, with an encouraging smile, and, hesitantly, with shaking hands, the girl stepped forwards, face screwed up in a grimace as she edged her fingertips closer and closer towards the fire.

Stopping just before, she glanced back my way once more, and I stayed still, waiting, the girl, visibly sweating with nerves, inching her digits into the substance, until tongues of flame licked at them, to seeming no effect, and, almost *confused,* Kobeni slid her hand into the bowl fully, cupping her hand to cradle the golf-ball sized blaze, bringing her other hand up, and starting at it with a mix of worry and wonder that was, actually, kind of adorable.

Turning to the others, whose expressions were odd, I stated, “Alright, so, I’m sure you have questions?”

L spoke first, stating, accusatorily, “You said you didn’t know what we could do. That looked a lot like you knowing.”

Taking a moment to parse that, I nodded. “I know the base exercises for about forty different elemental styles. It was a Seminar I took by accident thinking that it was either about Agriculture or Training in general. Lovely instructor. Very nice Cock.”

The woman all stared at me, and I wondered what I said *this* time. “So, uh, you’re gay? *Not that there’s anything wrong with that!”* Kaylee quickly reassured me.

“What? No, I’m *very…”* Going over what I said, I winced, “Oh, sorry. In-joke. He was a Moon Aligned Rooster Spirit Beast named Bi Di. Which, yes, *was* a dick joke by his… let’s say *father.* Because of that, I know the intro exercises for, among others, Fire, Water, Air, **Stone**, Wood, Metal, Lightning, Sun, Moon, Ice, Stars, Bone, Blood, Flesh, Life, Death, Ghost, Shadow, Light, Chaos, Order, Creation, Destruction, and Void styles, and went through simulations for all of them. It was an interesting few weeks, Subjective, hour and a half, Objective. So I can get you started, but while I know her Cultivation can eventually throw out *Novas,* at the upper ends, I have no clue *where to even start* to get there. Next question…” the Piltovan lifted two fingers to signal me, “Mel?”

“You said this was a time loop,” the woman stated, working her way through the concept as she talked. “If that is what it sounds like, does that mean we shall be back in Oakville?”

“*Probably*,” I agreed. “The Company is actually really big on the repayment of debts, and, well, *we didn’t save the town,* so we’re probably giving it another shot, though there’s a decent possibility we’re being punted somewhere *else* and another team is being brought in to do it instead. I received *zero* intel on this mission, my Contract covering *training* and I focused on short-circuiting the ways we might’ve gotten screwed, so any ‘fate worse than death’ kind of thing won’t stick either, as it covers *all* of us. Which it originally *didn’t.*”

“But we *are* likely to die again?” the politician questioned, staring at me with aristocratic intensity.

“What’s bad about dying?” I asked in turn, instead of answering.

And, as I planned, my inquiry took her aback, “I’m, I’m sorry, what kind of question is that?”

“The kind I’m asking,” I stated. “So? What’s bad about dying?”

“You’re *gone!”* Kaylee declared, still upset.

Waving a hand around the space, the timer almost down to zero, I inquired, “Are we?”

“Well, it *hurts!”* she argued instead.

“Oh, yeah, *that* part sucked,” I agreed easily. “But when there’s no permanent consequences, most of the issues evaporate. Mind you, then it’s pretty easy to go *mad,* but merely not being alone will stop half the issues *there,* stopping the isolation of eternal recurrence from eroding one’s sanity, and the fact that we *can* progress handles another third.”

“And the last sixth?” L questioned.

I grimaced, “Certain personalities that function based on exteriorly-enforced morality tend to… *fall apart* when there are no longer any exteriorly enforced *consequences* for their actions, but I doubt any of us are like that. Have *you* seen Groundhog Day?”

“You’re no Bill Murray,” the blonde observed cooly.

“*Agreed*. And, yeah, well, there’s a *reason* the movie skipped from the first few days, when he was first realizing his situation, right to near the end, at least forty *years* later,” I stated. “They had the ‘Ultra-Deluxe-Mega-Extended-Cut’ version available at Basic, and skipping around it, well, the loops where Phil just decided to murder everyone in an insane, desperate, animalistic frenzy on the off-chance *that* would break the loops would’ve likely undercut the film’s general message, not that I blame the man.”

Looking at the timer, I cut off the Agent’s no doubt witty rejoinder, “Okay, it’s go time. Let me do the talking, get us started, and we can work on training up your basics, assuming I’m correct. And, if I am, this Loop’s effectively a bust for getting to the next step in the chain, but three hours is enough to get the *basest* of basics.”

Hitting zero, the ceiling split open, unfolding, into, yep, the same place we were in before, the same town, and the same people, who, by their expressions…

*Yeah, that’s what I thought.*

Striding forward, I approached elder, who smiled, declaring loudly, “Thank you, heroes of Slutlife, for coming to us in our time of need! Without you, all would be lost!”

“Mr. Durand?” I questioned.

“I, Y-Yes!” he replied, surprised. “How did you know?”

“And this is Oakville, correct?” I pressed, getting another nod from the man. “Have we met?”

As my inquiry confused him, that just confirmed it for me, the old man’s reply of, “No, I think I would have remembered meeting one such as you!”

Ego-stroking aside, I had what I needed. “The threat from your forest is taking the form of possessed animals, which is why your hunters were overwhelmed. They’ll strike soon. Prepare a location you can fall back to, and which will need to have a firm floor, as the enemy will be fielding diggers, and birds.”

*“Rocs?”* the man questioned fearfully.

“No, sparrows,” I answered with grave seriousness.

One of the guards scoffed, “You’re scared of a few birds?”

With a flick, I sent the stone in my hand into his armored gut, the force still making him bend over, like I’d socked him in the gut, though, from the strained feeling in my arm, or, really, the Chi pathways *in* my arm, I couldn’t do that more than twice before needing to take a break.

“You can kill a rat, can’t you…” I paused, trying to remember his name.

“*Edward,*” Mel provided, watching me carefully.

“Thank you,” I nodded, not looking away from my ‘example’. “You can kill a *rat,* right Edward?”

“You…” the man spat, glaring at me, but my supernatural display kept him from drawing his sword, like he wanted to. “Yeah?”

“Have you heard of the rat-swarms that live in the sewers of cities?” I continued, hoping that was a constant.

And, from his hesitation, that *was* a known thing, as he instead declared, “That ain’t a thing here.”

“That *wasn’t* a thing here,” I corrected. “Now it is. Not sure why. But the swarms coming make the rat-tides look *quaint.*” Turning back to the now-worried elder, I continued, “So, defensible locations will be required. If you have nets that are small enough, use them. The Alchemist left, but did he leave behind any fire?”

“He… did not,” Mr. Durand slowly replied.

Glancing to Kaylee, who’d come up on my right, I made a note to ask her if she knew ye olde timey equivalent names for various compounds, though L might know them as well, as the cartoon version of her edged into omnidisciplinary, while the Movie version was… well, *she* hadn’t been able to hack it.

“In that case, prepare incendiaries to use in front of the forest-facing walls,” I instructed. “I’ll be doing some last-minute review with my team, if you could deliver us some bread, cheese, meat, and weak ale, we would appreciate it. Do you have any questions?”

“Do, do you know what’s attacking us? What it wants?” the elder asked, tentatively, and with deference.

“Ultimately? No. To both. Though, after we rebuff its initial attack, we *will* be entering the forest ourselves to find out,” I informed him. “We have mere hours to prepare, so do so, ***now****.*”

The old man quickly bowed, and turned, looking at the others, calling out, “Well! You heard him!”

Letting out a long breath, taking a moment to figure out how to do this again, *but faster,* next time, I turned around to my team. “Alright, now in the meantime let’s… where’s L?”

Mel and Kaylee looked around, while Kobeni curled up around herself, holding her Flame protectively.

Looking at the small Devil Hunter, I informed her, “I don’t blame you. But she ran, didn’t she?”

The Asian nodded.

“Fair enough,” I sighed running a hand through my hair. “Well, it gives me more time to focus on you two. Two and a half,” I added. Seeing the Fire-user look down, tears welling, I informed her, *“Because you’ve already got the basics, Kobeni.”*

“R-Really?” the girl questioned.

Waving towards her hands, I stated, “You’re literally *holding fire.* That’s the *basic exercise.* If you start feeling tired, and it’ll feel like body is but *not* your muscles, drop it back off in the bowl, and the runework on it will keep it going while you recover. Next go-round we can work on techniques, but you all need to work on your metaphysical musculature, as everyone, *except for you*, will be starting off at zero, and you might be too, depending on how things worked in your world. So, Ms. Frye, Ms. Medarda, who would like to go first?”

The two women, who could *not* be more different, looked to each other, something passing between them, and the Piltovan took a step forward.

“I will!” Mel declared, chin up, back straight, and proud.

“Well okay then,” I smiled. “Go have a seat, and we’ll get started!”

<**LDW**>

Coming to with a slight groan, as a beeping alarm brought me back to consciousness, I sat up in my chair, my body slightly sore, my Chi network feeling warm, like muscles after a good workout, and I could feel as the spiritual effected the physical, and vice versa, my body firming up, *just* a little, as untouched vitality was slightly drained to rejuvenate my metaphysical essence.

“Sooooo,” I drawled, looking over to L, “how’d your little scouting trip go?”

The other three had *instantly* reached for their elements, doing as I’d asked, and pushing past the feeling of our deaths by focusing on their cultivation, which helped blunt the traumatic experience of what they’d gone through in the stability of their respective element.

We’d fought on the battlements, thrown nets taking down groups of birds, who, as densely packed as the super-flock had been, hadn’t been able to right themselves despite having enough lift to have lifted it up, were grounded long enough to hit the oil-soaked ground, which Kobeni lit up.

There weren’t enough nets, the village only having some for hunting, holding produce, and other day-to-day tasks, and we’d still gotten swarmed, the guards *not* able to handle swarms, and, to their credit, the others had *tried*, but they hadn’t had enough power, or technique, to do very much.

Kobeni managed to wave her fire about, which had helped, and grimacing, Mel had tried to use some metal shards to do the same, but she’d lacked both the conviction and the sheer Chi needed to do much more than cut them a little, and the foul fowl had been driven on with supernatural rage, so that’d done *fuck all,* and Kaylee…

While Water *could* be strong, you either needed a *lot* of it, or to put it under *pressure*, and she didn’t have the spiritual might to do *either.*

So we’d died, either to the birds, or to the various fluffy forest animals that had eventually gone full zombie-horde and *made a path through the flames* and a *ramp up the wall* with their tiny bodies, which was… oddly horrifying.

Now, we’d killed an absolute *fuck-ton* of them, and, if any of us had been Demonic Cultivators that might’ve been the boost needed to get into a success spiral that’d turn us into berserkers, drunk on the deaths of our enemies, even if it was the equivalent of each of us drinking a barrel of those tiny little novelty bottles of booze sold at the front of liquor stores, turning into engines of dark destruction, but…

Well, those were the short-path to power for a *reason*, and those things were *almost always* noob-traps, with hidden costs that, when they came due, would *wreck* you if you weren’t careful, and which, at the end of the day, took *even more time and effort* to get a handle on then if you’d just done it *the normal way from the start.*

“… I *exploded,*” the woman declared stiffly.

“Like, *quickly,* or, say, after about *three hours*?” I questioned, darkly amused. “Also, spontaneously, or did something explode *you*? Like a Wizard or something,” I offered with a half-smile.

“I’m glad you find this *funny!”* she snapped.

“You mean the fact that, rather than talk to me, you bolted, *after you knew the loop had already been established?”* I mused. “Considering the *rest* of us just got mauled to death by small forest animals again, while you got a quick end? Yeah, it’s pretty funny,” I stated, without humor. “Especially since you could’ve just *asked,* but, then again, I doubt you’d believe me. Though, honestly, I was going to spend one ranging out to see what happened, so, is there a range limit?”

The doctor glared at me, Mel, after a moment, stating, “It would be good to know.”

Glancing towards the Piltovan, the New Yorker let out a long breath. “It was at least an hour out, though probably not three. I thought I was having a heart attack, given the sense of impending doom. Got worse as I went down the road until… Do you know what it’s like to explode?” L questioned.

“So, yes, but probably not the way you likely mean. From within?” I prompted, getting a nod. “Then no. I was exploded from the outside. Mostly. Fuckin’ *Fireballs*.” Kobeni froze. “Wizard variety, not yours,” I added, the girl relaxing a little.

L looked around the table, the timer ticking down. “So, while I was gone you got the others to all fall in line like good little soldiers?”

Before I could respond, with a tone of matriarchal disdain, Mel, moving hand to make her bits of metal spin, just like I could with stones, observed, “As opposed to running like a scared child? If, to escape, I must learn to wield this power forced upon me, then so be it.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a *pacifist?*” the blonde asked archly, tone cool.

“I believe in the power of negotiations, of dialogue, of using one’s *words* instead of base violence,” the dark-skinned woman replied equally contemptuously. “One cannot negotiate with *squirrels.*” Turning to look at me, she informed me, “Once I can use my ‘not-magic’ well enough, I will be entering the forest to attempt to open talks to seek an end to these attacks.”

“From their perspective, they wouldn’t have attacked yet,” I warned, “But, yeah, that works. I was planning on doing so after we’re strong enough to repel the first wave, which would also give us a position of strength to do so from, but if you want to give it a shot, go ahead. I’ll just ask for you to report back in the next loop.”

“You do not believe I will succeed?” Mel challenged.

I smiled ruefully, “I mean, it’d be nice if you did, but, no, no more than *you* would if some random Ixtalan showed up and asked you to cancel a planned raid on some Undercity criminals.”

That caused her to frown, “But these people have committed no crime.”

“*Have they?*” I questioned. “All we know is that we’ve been hired to save them. And, even if they don’t *think* they have, assuming there even *is* something to talk to, it *might not care*. Or it might want something we can’t give, like if it’s a nature-aligned dragon who had something stolen from its hoard, but the thief is long, *long* gone, and it doesn’t care, because humans stole from it, so *humans* *must pay.*” Shrugging, I stated, “Hence why we need the strength to get it to listen. Probably. But I’m *supposed* to be training you, so I might be a bit biased here.”

“And if we don’t do what you demand?” L inquired sourly.

“Then you don’t do what I *suggest,*” I replied. “And it’ll take us that much longer to stop dying every time. With the way this thing works, I could get strong enough to handle everything *myself,* but it’d take months, and not just a couple. Perhaps even years. Dying. Over and *over* and ***over*** again. Every three hours. Three hours and ten minutes,” I corrected. “But, well, it’s that or break. And, while I’m sure my employers would be *disappointed* if I gave up, and the latter happened, the way they work, that’s an *acceptable option*. Because there’s a market for *tragedies* as well.”

“That’s, that’s,” Kaylee stuttered.

*“Monstrous,”* Mel finished for her.

I shrugged, “We’re *slaves,* myself included, after a fashion. You almost certainly did not agree to be employed by The Company, and *absolutely* did not agree to this posting, unlike me. Furthermore, while they are no longer *entirely* Devil-run, Slutlife are, by *no* stretch of the imagination, the *Good* Guys. They are, at their core, a *lesser* Evil, and losing sight of that is how you Bad End yourself. But if you manage that, there is *possibility* there.”

“B-Bad End?” Kobeni questioned fearfully.

“Yes. Your story Ends, *Badly.* It’s kind of in the name.” I pointed to Mel, “For you, it would be if you had to watch your mother conquer Piltover, pillaging it for its technology and resources, turning it into yet other Noxian tributary, ruled by the sword, only for her to be killed, and you to be given over to her murderer as a *plaything.*” The Councilor turned ashen at the thought.

To L, “If you failed, Earth was destroyed, or conquered, and you survived, again, a plaything, this time of some backwards alien species, likely involving some sort of horrific reproductive process, where keeping you alive is required, but sane is *not.*” The Agent stared back, unimpressed, but I wasn’t saying this entirely for her sake.

To Kaylee, I said a single word. “*Reavers.”*

Lastly, gesturing to Kobeni, I offered, “I... I have no idea how your world works, so I’d just say something Devil related involving eternal suffering. Really, it’s a loss of what you held dear, pain, and powerlessness that are the main ingredients to fashion such a thing”

“And you?” the blonde questioned. “What would *your* ‘Bad End’ be?”

“I thought I was already there,” I answered honestly. “Which is why, when what I *believed* to be a goddess appeared to me, as I slept in my parent’s nearly freezing basement, my room having been given to my mother’s friend in my absence, and allowed to come ‘home’ as long as I didn’t cause them any serious inconvenience, or stayed *too* long, having found out that *my* friends were nothing of the sort, *my*-” I paused, as, even years later, that memory was… *painful.* “Regardless, as I contemplated suicide, and a woman with skin like flawless bark, hair like immaculate vines, and eyes like a paired *liquid abyss* appeared, and offered me the chance to make something of myself, to find people that cared about me, to *be a* *Hero,* leaving my old life behind, if I but took her hand? Well, as you can likely guess, ***I accepted***.”

I gestured around us, “And, despite everything that’s happened to me, despite how much I suffered, despite how much of that offer was an *outright lie…*”

The timer ticked down to zero, the ceiling splitting open, unfolding, into a platform revealing the town, along with the hopeful, *doomed* populace, I stood, stating with confidence, “I will *still.* ***Be. A. Hero.****”*