

Chapter 92: Blackmail...?

A week passed like that. We fought on the walls, and in front of them, holding back the tides of monsters with the other Reflectors, before hiding back within the city. Reya was spending every drop of Divinity she could spare on patching people back together.

The hole in my chest healed, thanks to the potion, and I improved my Qi cycling some more, focusing on regeneration. Maybe, in a couple more weeks or months, I'd be able to heal a wound like that without any assistance. That would be awesome.

I also, after our first shift on the wall, finally got a chance to experiment with [Gifted Fragment]. Apparently, the "gifted" in the technique's title was a reference both to giving something away, and to the Gift itself.

It allowed me to create a network of half as many people as I had gateway fragments, and then allowed those to partially share talents. As in, ones from the talent tab in the menu.

Suffice to say, I included our entire party in the network. With Me, Matt, Ann, Marie, Emilia, Liam, and Reya, that meant seven of my eight slots were filled. I had sixteen fragments, after all, allowing me to connect eight people with one another.

Keeping the technique up was easy. Every member of the network donated a small part of their energies to keep it running. It was a bit of a hidden blessing that we didn't have it function off only Qi, since Divinity and Mana might have been prerequisites for certain talents.

The feeling of it was strange, though. None of the effects fully carried over, after all, but the others experienced some of the effects of my [Precipice] for example.

From Matt, we inherited a fragment of [Prodigy], allowing me to advance my cultivation faster. Liam had [Observant], meaning learning from others was easier, which worked well with [Mirror Mind]. Ann's [Genius], which she used mainly for mana, helped me grasp Qi manipulation significantly faster.

Marie provided [Fundamentals], a talent that allowed new knowledge to be assimilated and usable much faster, while Emilia added her [Stalwart Patience], which made it so that skills became easier to learn the longer you practiced them. Finally, Reya had a talent called [Practical], which meant abilities were learnt more quickly when used in actual applications rather than training.

For now, we could all only share one talent each, but that was sure to increase as the ability grew. I was also simply maintaining it as that switch the Gift gave me, rather than understanding how it functioned. If I had to say how much of the talents I was granted, then maybe it was a tenth of their original power.

Which was still outstanding, of course. Especially with the learning bonuses stacked on top of each other... I couldn't say that advancing became a breeze, but it felt like I was learning more with each bit of practice I did.

Still, that peaceful while of practice only lasted for a single week before it got interrupted.

Because, after that week was over, I heard a knock on my door. Ann was currently out, doing things, so I opened it up.

In front of me stood a young man. He had a handsome face and messy, dark hair. His eyes were a bit intense, as he focused on me, like he was looking for some kind of weakness. Looking at him made me tense up.

"Good day," he said. "Is this Fiona Bellum I'm speaking to?" his voice was polite, but he spoke with a strange undertone, like he was waiting for something.

"Yeah, that'd be me. You need anything?" I asked.

His smile widened. "Yes. I was sent here to kill you. I have your brother, one Ivan Bellum."

I tensed up. Instantly, my spear appeared in my hands. I felt the nascent spirit within boiling with fury just as I was. But at the same time, I was terribly afraid. Why was Ivan in Eden?

"Who are you?" I demanded. "What do you want from me?"

If he had Ivan, then that meant he had done his research. He knew who I was. Somehow, he found out my brother was in Eden despite me not knowing. Had Sarah brought him here? Did he join Zinnic?!

The man simply smiled. "My name is Chikrotekete. You can just call me... Chris, if that is alright with you?" he said, his voice even and polite.

"Chris," I said, barely keeping the hate from my voice. "What do you want?"

"Ah," he said, looking at me, his expression slightly shifting. He saw the way my fist clenched around my spear, the knuckles turning white. He observed the muscles in my arm and shoulder growing taut. "I appear to have misstepped."

He said it so nonchalantly, as if there was nothing to him just admitting to kidnapping my brother.

"Tell me already," I ground out.

"Of course, my mistake. I would like to build an amicable relationship with you, Ms. Bellum. May I call you Fio? I have heard you prefer that, from your brother," he told me.

Why... why would Ivan tell him that?

"No, you may not," I said.

He frowned, almost imperceptibly. "I see. I appear to have offended you. I would like to build an amicable relationship with you."

"Then *why* do you have my brother?"

"... I believed it would make it easier to speak with you?" He tilted his head, as if curious.

"You're here to kill me."

"Oh, no, no. I was *sent here* to kill you," he said, smiling brightly. "I plan to disobey my orders."

"And why is that?" I asked.

"Because I believe that your existence is more valuable to this world and me personally than the price my employers are paying." Something about their voice shifted, then, not quite belonging to the young man in front of me anymore. "Your brother is safe," they said, eyes glowing. "In fact, he currently appears to be drinking water. An activity I believe is commonly partaken in when trying to maintain good health?"

"Why the fuck do you talk like that?" I asked, angrily.

"Oh. I see. My disguise, yes, right. I am triz-adu. I believed my name gave it away."

It did. I... was a little too angry to focus on that. Even now, I was worried. "And why would you tell me you have my brother?"

"Because he is in a safe location."

"You said so right after saying you were sent here to kill me!"

"I am clearly displaying nonhostility and not even holding a weapon."

The way Chris spoke with utter nonchalance was absolutely infuriating. It made me want to break a chair over their head. "Take me to Ivan," I demanded.

At that, they grimaced. "My apologies, but I cannot do that yet. There is a request I would like to make of you."

"Fucking *what?*" I asked again, hoping to finally get an answer.

"That technique. It allows you to share talents. I would like to be allowed into your network."

How the fuck did they know? The triz-adu were known for being spies. They crafted their own bodies, or stole those of others. They could hide in birds, and similar. Some could even make immobile bodies for themselves, like tables or benches.

But even then, *how?* We had only talked about it in private, we-

"You appear surprised. I have gained this information from my employers. They are maintaining surveillance upon your mirror-aspected abilities."

It clicked. "The keepers sent you." I didn't ask.

They nodded. "Yes."

"You're another assassin."

Another nod, this time they had the audacity to smile. "Yes!"

"Fucking fight me, then!"

That seemed to confuse them. Chris blinked at me, tilting their head. "Why? I simply wish to grow stronger. We have no need to fight. You would lose."

They said it as if it was obvious, self explanatory even. I didn't feel any energy from them, though. Which was usually a good sign, meaning that I could crush them. But here? I doubted it meant that.

No assassin lived long without a lot of power. Catching people off guard could only do so much. Plus, Chris had two other bodies. If I crushed this one, they would simply make another one. Worst case, *Ivan* would end up as the next skin for that thing to wear. The thought disgusted me.

"Your... shell, you call them?"

"Yes! Shellcrafters, that is what we are."

“The one you wear now. How did you find them?”

Chris looked at me in confusion. “They tried to kill me, I killed them back.” As if to prove it, they pulled down the collar, revealing a nasty scar on the side of the neck, where a dagger had been run through it.

“You can’t prove that.”

“Ivan said to tell you ‘stop being a hothead’ if you kept being hostile. Is this an appropriate time?”

I stared at them for a long moment, feeling my anger. There was a lot of distrust there, too. Eric leaving had hurt, and made it even harder to think of Chris as having good intentions to me at all.

But yelling wouldn’t bring Ivan back.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to let part of that anger go, and put the rest aside, to slowly disperse as Chris proved themselves. “Fine,” I grumbled. “Take me to my brother.”

“Gladly,” the triz-adu told me, then spun around on their heels and walked off. I followed them down the stairs, onto the streets, past a couple blocks, and into an old warehouse.

“There we are!” they said, pointing at a table full of glass tools. Vials, beakers, funnels, and so on. Alchemy equipment. Of course Ivan would be into alchemy.

And there, at that table, sat my brother. Raven hair, and a mostly well maintained beard, combined with his dark eyes. Now, he even wore grey robes, making him look like a viking scientist. I held back a snort.

“Ivan?” I called.

He turned around at the sound of my voice in a way he hadn’t when Chris called. Instantly, he shot up from the table. “Fio!” he yelled right back, running into a hug with me. “Holy shit. I- I almost didn’t believe it all. This- a whole world!! It’s incredible!” he gushed.

I laughed. It was the only thing that seemed reasonable in the moment. “You find a new world, and the first thing you do is get yourself abducted so some assassin can find me?”

Ivann snorted. “No, that’s not at all the first thing I did. The first thing I did was select a class, choosing to be an alchemist.”

“You’re so pedantic,” I rolled my eyes.

"Precision is important," he chided.

"What's important is *why the fuck* you're in Eden!"

At that, his face hardened a little. He distanced himself from me slightly, still holding onto my shoulders. "No, Fio. What's important is that you hid this from me. From your whole family."

"No," I said instantly. "If you're here, you know exactly why I didn't tell you, or mom or dad. Because of this. Because it's dangerous."

"And you think I want you risking your life?" Ivan shot back.

"I know you don't, Ivan," I said. "And, as callous as it sounds, I don't care. It's not your decision. Mom and dad would think it's theirs, but it isn't."

His face fell, and he chewed the inside of his lips. He knew I was right, and he hated it. "Fio. You could've shared this--"

"Could I, Ivan? Could I really?" I asked. "Neamhan is a shithole, broski. You're busy making air breathable again. Do you wanna worry about a whole second world, too? How much saving are you gonna do? No, this world doesn't need geniuses like you. It has simple problems, ones that I can solve by hitting them hard enough."

"... You thought this through, huh?"

"A thousand times over," I said, laughing even as I felt tears coming from my eyes. "Of course I thought about it, Ivan. You're my brother. You're keeping this family together far more than I ever could. Hell, if it weren't for you, I think I wouldn't be on speaking terms with mom and dad anymore. And some days, I hate you for that. But you're trying, so hard, to be the best brother, and to make time for me, and to talk about all my troubles."

He took a shaky breath. "Fio, you're crushing my shoulder a bit."

"Sorry," I yelped, letting go. "Sorry."

The silence hung in the air briefly, before Ivan talked.

"I'm sorry you didn't have anyone to share this with," he lamented. "It must've been so hard--"

"It wasn't," I said, shaking my head. "Not at all. I have friends here, you know? Built a whole life. We met up on Neamhan recently, and just... talked. Hung out, drank, had fun. I felt alive, accepted, loved."

He swallowed dryly.

"I mean, for the love of the divines, I've been dating my girlfriend here for... almost two years now, Ivan. This place has been amazing. It's made me not want to go back to Neamhan at all. Sometimes it feels like I'm only going back there out of an obligation. Because I 'owe' it to mom and dad."

"That... sucks."

"Yeah, it does. Seeing our parents has become *tolerable* on the good days. You know how often they promise to change, only to have the exact same talk with me again the next time around? Must've been dozens of times by now."

"Fio, I really don't wanna interrupt but... could we focus on the fact that there are *multiple worlds*?" he asked.

"Right, sorry," I said, wiping away a couple tears. "I guess, what I mean to say is, I'm rather happy here. You don't need to worry about me. How are you handling all this? Where's Sarah? Did you join Zinnic?"

At that, he burst out laughing. "Bahahahahaha! Join Zinnic? Surely you're joking? As if I'd ever, pfffft. No, no. Absolutely not. Right now, I got a sponsorship specifically from the city. I'm making potions for them, so they're providing ingredients and tools and such."

"And you're still working in a shabby warehouse?"

"Look, if I, a beginner alchemist, don't look like a shady drug dealer, then I'm not doing it right," he said with a smirk. "As for Sarah, well. She has a team, and does active combat missions. That's not for me."

I nodded, honestly glad to hear it. "And now? You'll stay here and just... do this?"

He laughed again. "Hah, absolutely not, no. You said it yourself, Fio. Neamhan's a wreck. I got a world to save over there. I wanted to see you, that's all. Sarah told me you were a Reflector. A special one, too, from what I hear." His eyes glinted proudly.

"Look, this whole shtick you're doing is dangerous, sis. It's messy, and risky, and generally a bit irresponsible. But. I've not seen you smile this brightly in years. I mean, you met your love here. Friends. I would never get between that and you. No. Before this gets too dangerous, I'll dip. Back to Neamhan, permanently. You don't need to worry about me, okay?"

I cried a little again. Fucking Ivan. I always knew he was smarter than me, but he'd understood it all immediately. Why this mattered, why it was something I had to do regardless. He knew I met my friends here, and that it was what let me get some self-worth.

"Thanks, broski," I muttered, drawing him into another hug.

"Of course, sis. Though I have to say, this "Gift" thing is pretty cool. The disposition bit is a bit eerie, the fact that it can sum up my character, but knowing just how amazing my talent is? Worth it."

"Your talent?"

"Oh, I've got a few," Ivan said with a smile. "Namely, though, there is [Grasp], which lets me learn much faster when I take apart the objects I'm trying to understand with my own hands, as well as [Deconstruct], which lets me grasp the fundamental principles when I learn about complex things. Both incredibly helpful for alchemy, as you can imagine."

"You're impossible," I said, shaking my head at him. "Divines. What did I do to be constantly surrounded by geniuses all the time!"

Ivan tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

I smirked at him. "I started with *one* talent, Ivan. I bet you have more than that. Wanna know what it was? [Slight Edge]. You are slightly above average. That's *it*."

He gaped at me, eyes wide open. "Oh," he said. "Oh. But... you got more?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "I, uh, don't think you'd like them. One of them requires me to be near death to learn faster."

Once more, Ivan just stood there and blinked. "Well, I-" he stopped, thinking. "I guess the rapid emittance of adrenaline and other performance boosting neurotransmitters might lead to enhanced cognition in the moment of death. This talent could play into that? That's amazing, sis."

"... I needa almost die if I wanna keep up with geniuses like you. Regularly."

"Oh shit!" he scratched his head. "Yeah, that uh. That sucks. Big time."

I smiled. "Not that bad. Got a nice eyebrow notch out of it," I pointed at the scar.

"Riiight," Ivan said, drawing out the word. "Well. At any rate. You gotta introduce me to these friends of yours! Not here though. Not now. I've been hearing that something bad is coming, and I'm guessing you don't want me here for that."

"Dead on," I nodded. "Now, you ready to go back to Neamhan?"

"This isn't a dream, right? I'll remember all this?"

I shot him a grin. "Every last bit, given your memory at least."

Ivan gave me a crooked smile. Briefly, I considered incorporating him into the network. It would take the last slot, though, and I was... unsure how willing to wait Chris was. Plus, his talents sounded more suited to science than fighting.

"Okay, sis. You're amazing. I'm so proud of you. Show this world just why you're so fucking special, okay?" he said, giving me a big, toothy grin.

"Alright, broski," I replied with a smile, laying a hand on his shoulder. "See you on the other side."

"See you on the other side."

Then, I triggered [Gateway], and a moment later, Ivan was gone.