

Chapter 123: Rainbow Fire

I stepped into the mirror.

Glass filled my face. Liquid glass pushed against the air in my nostrils, pressed against my lips. But I kept my eyes open.

One moment I was in a temple made from cold stone, the next I was on an ethereal road in the midst of infinitely reflecting space. I took a step, towards the other world, towards where Ann would be waiting for me.

And then the pain set in.

I looked up. Four figures. Humanoid, yet carved from glass.

One was made of Perception. Eyes spawned and popped inside it, as it stared to my deepest bits, trying to rip them out because everything it saw should belong to it. Eyes.

One was made of Secrets. Layers upon layers, crickling and cracking, wrapping paper in a glass frame. Matryoshka.

The third was made from Decay. Festering, putrid flesh. Insects and degradation. Its insides were decomposing, turning into black sludge then dust then ever finer and finer. Swamp.

Finally, the last one was made of Manipulation. Fingers reaching out from within one another, grasping contract and items and souls that spawned within the palms of hands. Already, those hands reached for me. Possession.

Weight, horrible and soul rending descended on me. The greed and desire of four keepers, fully fledged and greedy, each one grasping at the gateway within me. Eyes saw it, it was theirs. Matryoshka wanted to peel away my layers. Swamp threatened to decompose my body to get at it, and Possession would simply tear my chest open and rip it out.

But rather than scream or fight, my lips twisted into a snarl. There was power within me. Power they wanted. Power that they couldn't have. Power that was *mine*.

Strength flooded my gateway, and the area I was in was designated as belonging to me. It slammed into the keepers like a truck, knocking them back a step. It was not absolute, but the closer to me they got the harder it would be.

A fractal barrier manifested. Pushing them aside. I felt anger, the way the insides of those glass dolls twisted and sped up. They coalesced, fusing their power, agreeing to split the spoils, but it was too late.

With a last middle finger, I reached the other side of that tunnel, and stepped through.

Glass filled my world and my vision again. For a moment, there was a lurching pull as if the mirror would never let me go, but then I was out.

Instantly, I noticed three things.

First, the world had changed. Not just my flat, but *Neamhan*. There was Qi in the air. There had never been any in the air before. The impact of that was terrifying, because I instantly felt more of my power available to me. My wellspring bubbled in my chest, sending puffs of power through my normal body.

Secondly, I had changed. Much more than the world. I was a gateway. Fully fused to it. And that was a curse, because of the people who wanted me dead, and a privilege, because it meant I was synced across worlds. I felt it, now. My other body, the one for Eden?

It was a finger's width away. Just a tiny push. A little like looking at myself through a window on the other side. The world had changed, letting me access maybe 5% of my strength on Eden... but I had changed more.

The third thing was that my flat was *trashed*.

I came out of my bathroom mirror, spluttering a little, feeling my stomach twist - though less than it usually did. Holding myself together, I tried to grip at the sink - and there was none. It had been turned into smashed shards of ceramic on the floor.

Stumbling, I stopped myself with a hand against a wall. What the *fuck*?!

"Ah, you're Ms. Fiona Bellum, then, I assume?" someone asked me.

I turned, and sitting on one of my kitchen chairs, in the middle of my bathroom, was some tall asshat in a black suit. He had gelled back hair, and there was a cigarette in his mouth. A dozen extinguished buds laid on my dirty floor, and he took a puff from the one still in his mouth.

"We've been waiting since just before yesterday. I was about to get my shift changed."

His smug voice pissed me off. "Who are you supposed to be? And what the fuck are you doing in my flat?"

A thin smile spread across his lips, and he leaned his head on his free hand. "Watch your tone. We have your little girlfriend."

My world broke.

All over, all at once, it fractured. Someone in my flat? Fine. Everything I worked for, fucked? *Fine.*

But now, very suddenly, I felt fury bubble up in me. Everything turned a little red. Cass said something, but I couldn't hear her over the blood rushing in my ears.

"Your mother, too," the agent added with a smirk and a small laugh. More bastards in suits gathered at the bathroom exit. Slowly, lazily, he pulled a knife from his coat, then pointed the sharp end at me. "So we'll have to ask you to come with us."

I looked at him, a long second passing. "Where are they being held?"

"Employer doesn't want you to know," a taller, burlier man said, standing in the door. Brass knuckles on his hand. *Bloodstained.* "We ain't tellin' you shit."

Slowly, faintly, my eyes shifted to him. "Zinnic, yeah?" I asked. The rage had turned to ice in my veins. My voice was steady, calm.

He grinned, viciously. "Yep. Half a private army out there. You pull anything, and any of us call the boss."

"You need to call them? On your phones?" I asked.

A woman looked at me, long ponytail neatly tied behind her back. "Ma'am, do not make this more difficult than it needs to be."

I shattered that thin veil of glass that separated me from my full power.

My fist swung out, crashing through my bathroom cabinets, smashing the smaller mirrors. The shards pinged harmlessly off my skin.

A wellspring of Golden Glass manifested in my chest. A spark of truest power, bringing every advancement I had made on that other world with me. I could last for seven minutes like this, I thought. Just as many as I had figments.

Instantly, Qi tore itself out of me, into the atmosphere. It manifested as golden, glowing hands.

Three heads brutally slammed into my floor. The cigarette fell out of the smug looking man's mouth, and I stomped on it. He gasped for air.

"Hey," I said, kicking his stomach. He tensed in pain, but five hands held each of his limbs down. He turned to face me, fear and fury on his face. "Answer. You need to phone your boss, yeah?"

He motioned to spit at me, but before he could, I kicked his teeth in. It took me no effort. My hand reached to the side, and the space of the world cracked open. From my inventory, I drew Astraeus, the spear crackling with barely contained power.

I pointed the blade at his forehead.

He tried to move back, but the hand liquified into a golden cocoon, shackling his entire body. I drew a bloody line across his skull.

That loosened him up, finally. "Fuck! Yes, yes! We need to phone them!!"

A moment later, golden glass spilled forth, grabbing every bit of electronics from them. Watches, phones. There were tiny chips in their suits, monitoring vitals. How inconvenient.

"Distress beacon?"

He gave me a defiant look. I pressed the spear forward until it scraped bone. A horrendous sound.

The suit shivered in pain. "Yeah," he spat. "Yes. Fuck. Yes! If any of them break, there will be a beacon to kill your girlfriend. If any of our vitals drop to zero, another distress beacon."

I nodded, slowly. "Where are they being held?"

This time, he was smart enough to answer quickly. "Two locations, one for your mom, one for your girlfriend. You can't save them both," he said.

A vicious grin slowly found its way onto my face. "Oh, can't I? You'd fucking love that, wouldn't you?" I kicked him again. "Watch, you piece of shit."

Without hesitation, I reached into myself, pulling on a new string that had been forged in my last moments on Eden. A *manifestation*.

Golden glass poured out of me. Into the air. It formed a body, then changed its colour. First, it grew reflective, then opaque, and finally, it settled on looking like skin. Then clothing. And then, finally, I opened my eyes.

A second Fio stood in this room. She looked at her hands. "What...? I... just died."

"Manifestation. Gateway ability when we reach fifty strength. You're with me now. Zinnia is holding Ann and mom," I said.

She looked at me. "Oh. *Oh*." I saw the rage pass through her. She stuck her hand out, withdrawing her own Astraeus from a portal, looking faintly different from mine. "I'll get mom," she said. "You get Ann?"

I nodded. "I'll get Ann." Both of us turned to the guy. "*Where?*"

Now, his ears were fully lit up with fear. "Fuck, shit! The addresses are in our texts! What the fuck *are you?!*"

Gently, I pressed the fingerprint sensor of the phone against his thumb, and it quickly sprung open. A quick look through his texts revealed the locations. Nicely dotted with coordinates.

It took me only a minute to forward it to myself.

Manifestation-Fio didn't have a phone - but with all the talents from the archmages, our memory had increased by quite a bit, so she was able to memorize it instantly.

"Don't kill anyone until we're at the places," I told her.

"Vital sign checkers?"

"Yep."

"Got it," she nodded. Then, with a few swift motions, each of the agents was fully wrapped into golden cocoons. They would dissipate, eventually, but for now, they could breathe, but had no way of contacting superiors.

We didn't need to communicate anymore, and moved.

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There were more Zinnic agents. In the stairwell, there was a half dozen, each one instantly wrapped up and incapacitated. It took us less than five seconds to make it out of the house.

In front of it, there was an army. Dozens of them. Each one equipped with sunglasses.

Each one... wearing something reflective.

Phones, glasses, shiny metal surfaces... each one became a weapon in our hands. It took not even ten seconds until thirty more agents were on the floor. Each one, pathetically writhing in the cars they'd come here with another ten seconds later.

I had the keys to my car, but I didn't take it. Instead, with three leaps into the air, we soared high up, into the grey clouds. Then, we moved.

Sticking barely below the sound barrier, me and my manifestation split up. I rushed south. Ann was waiting for me. I would not lose her. Would not disappoint her. No way.

My journey to the holding spot took two minutes. It was rather far. My manifestation had already reached the other. Through our connection, she confirmed, and so did I.

In a storm of violence, we descended onto where Zinnic was holding the people who really mattered.

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A warehouse. It was huge, abandoned, and swarming with suits. Dozens of cars were parked in front of it. Hundreds of henchpeople inside. How disgusting.

Each millimetre of it was within my vision. There were windows. Metal sheets and walls. The agents wearing tech and metal. I stepped forward, and I appeared within the room where Ann was held, appearing from the wall.

There were yells, and guns leveraged at me. Guns leveraged at Ann.

My Ann. My beloved, amazing girlfriend. The woman I had spent years with, who I was ready to die for, and who had already died once for me.

She sat on a chair. Her hands tied behind it, wrists rough from movement. Blood stained her. Bruises and small cuts. Her hair was dirty and slick with crimson, staining the bright red darker.

Despite it all, she was okay.

A day had passed since she landed here. Maybe two. She had been fed and provided water, though was gagged and passed out now. I smiled, lovingly. She fought. The wounds on the idiots in my flat made sense now.

My beloved Ann would have given them one hell of a fight.

Some trigger happy, afraid idiot squeezed the trigger at me.

I looked at the bullet. I could see it flying towards my centre of mass. I tensed my abs.

The bullet ripped through my shirt, tearing the fabric effortlessly. It slammed into my skin. I felt the metal deform and heat up from the deformation. Then it stopped, and harmlessly pinged onto the ground.

It hadn't broken skin.

Then, the sound of the gunshot hit everyone. Dozens of people looked at me, shocked, surprised, horrified. Ann stirred awake from the noise. They looked at me. At the way I still stood, casually, unbothered.

"Hands up!" one of them had the *gall* to yell.

I scoffed. "Anyone who still has their weapons out within three seconds... dies."

With the words, Qi flooded from me. Enough to drive half these weak willed, pathetic creatures to their knees. The ones who had pointed at Ann were the cowardly ones, falling from the pressure.

More stood their ground, training their guns at me. One second passed until the first one fired. The bullet broke my shirt again, then pinged to the floor.

Another second passed. I counted to two, breathing deeply.

Half a dozen bullets pinged harmlessly off my skin.

And at three a bloodbath began.

I called my last fight in Eden "easy", yes? Not truly needing physical effort. Like a scythe through wheat.

This wasn't that. I made *sure* to keep it personally. There were forty five Zinnic employees in the room. I counted. It took me fifteen seconds to take down half of them.

A step forward, and I stood atop a man's gun. An invisible spear of willpower manifested in my empty hand and slammed through his throat, nailing him to the ground. Then I disappeared.

Javelins of gold appeared in the air around me, launching forward without being thrown, spearing two more through their chests. A third one received a kick on the head that made his skull cave.

That was the one that made me want to no longer kill them. The noise and feeling was horrible. I saw the terror set in, now. Deciding to be a *little* more gentle, I dulled the edge of my spear.

Two swings shattered ribs, leaving the owners barely breathing and sprawled on the floor. And one got away with a broken thigh, and two took dull javelins to their heads, receiving concussions and dropping to the floor.

The rest went similarly. With my gateway abilities, and the cloak and sash that now manifested, I was a whirlwind of devastation.

When the fifteen seconds were over, there were six dead. I'd been too rough two more times. A dozen were severely injured, and another twenty-seven came away... okay! The worst any of them had was broken legs. Something that might heal mostly properly, especially since all of them had some amount of Qi or Mana.

Each one of them that dared make a noise received a golden hand covering their mouth. They could breathe through their noses.

Ann was awake.

She looked at me, wide eyes. The gag covered her mouth. I smiled, covered in blood. Gently, slowly, I approached her.

The fear in her eyes hurt.

I cannot express how much it hurt, but for just a moment, it did. Then it vanished, and tears gathered in her eyes. She strained against the ropes, inching towards me.

"Shhh, hey," I said, slowly stepping forward. "It's okay. I'm here."

Guards were gathering outside, but golden javelins slammed into them without me even looking, letting Cass handle most of that skill. Instead, my hand reached forward. I grasped the gag around Ann's mouth, and the fabric was cut by a tiny spear I manifested in my palm.

Ever so gently, I pulled it off, taking care not to hurt Ann anymore. She looked at me.

Bloodstained, and having just killed six humans, then injured another thirty-nine. And she smiled. "I feel like I should be more afraid," she said, then giggled. "But it feels normal."

I smiled.

Ann babbled on. "It's the first thing that feels normal. The power in the air. The crackle. The... gold. How?? How did you do that- that should be impossible! I saw you *vanish*! You-"

Slowly, so as to not upset her, I placed a finger on her lips. A teasing smile was on mine. I traced it down to her chin, then lifted it and cupped her hand in mine. The prompt appeared.

Ever so gently, I accepted. A tiny pinprick of mirror-power flowed out from me, and into Ann.

[Annabelle Belleflamme has been added to your [Transference] network.]

And her eyes lit up.

I saw it.

To this day, I think it's magical. I saw the memories come back. I saw the tears gather in her eyes, as the broken pieces of her self started to mend. As months and months of time we'd spent together entered her mind, as she *remembered*.

Tears gathered in mine too.

Ann didn't need my help to break the bonds. Her magic was restored. Her body on Eden may have been dead, but it didn't matter. My network remembered. Her divinity remembered.

A forge of golden radiance appeared in Ann's chest, a star blossoming. But far outshining that was her magic. A core and four circles around it. A fourth circle mage. Mana coursed through her.

With me in this world, she, too, could access her full power for seven minutes. Mana flooded her, and the bonds burnt to cinders in rainbow flames.

I grinned. "That's so gay."

She jumped up from the chair, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Yeah. Fio, I- I'm so-"

I placed my hand on her head, digging into her head, wrapping the other around her waist. She was so close. We both cried. "Yeah. I know. It's okay."

A moment passed, quietly. Then Ann laughed. "I love you. So much."

"I love you, too."

And then she kissed me.