

Chapter 72: Ruined Morning

After the morning, we discussed what to do next. My Gateway was fully grown now, but it was not fully strengthened. It took some playing around with [Gateway] and some of Cass' help, but eventually, I was able to summon up a new menu.

[Gateway:

- Strength: 8
- Fragments: 12
- Figments: 1]

That was all it said. I had no idea what a figment was, and neither did Cass, apparently. The fragments, though, were clear. When I absorbed broken gateways, they were worth some amount of fragments. Some more than others.

The first one I grabbed had been decently strong, worth five fragments. The one from the nest was a single fragment, and so on.

What the strength meant was still a bit nebulous. It seemed linked to the "territory" Cass could manage in the astral, and for how well it was tied to my soul, but the technique didn't exactly give much more of an explanation.

Disregarding that for now, I stepped out onto the sun-soaked streets of Renvil. I took a long moment to let the sun shine on my face, stretching wide. When I opened my eyes again, I found myself frowning.

In front of me, there was a man, probably slightly older than me, with a stubble for a beard. He wore long, grey robes. There was a necklace around his neck, with a small Tombstone on it. There was writing on the stone, and I didn't bother trying to read it. Hir obscured that kinda stuff themselves.

"Good day miss Fio," the cleric greeted, giving me a small bow.

"Good morning? May I ask who I have the pleasure of talking to?" I asked, though I think the frown on my face may have given away just how much of a "pleasure" I found it.

He gave me a sad, understanding smile. "Of course. My name is Iryel. I am a cleric of-"

"Hir. I figured," I said, indicating his necklace, maybe a bit more flippantly than I needed to.

"What does the divine need of me?"

Once again, the priest gave me a pained smile. "I see you did not wish to see someone like myself today?"

I shook my head. "I did not." This was my first day off in a while. Well, it seemed like it might just be a morning off, then. "Regardless. State your case."

My words were a bit too arrogant, and I almost flinched after I'd spoken them, but if the priest took offense, he showed no indication. "Right then. I shall keep it short. The divines overall wish to talk."

"I imagined," I deadpanned.

"Please, allow me to finish," he said, giving yet another small bow. "Your reluctance is seen. If you would prefer it, the divines have allocated me as our go-between. They used prettier words, but that is what they mean."

For a few seconds, I looked the man up and down. His air was grey already, even though he was probably only in his early thirties. His face was smooth, without scars, but the rings under his eyes told me he slept rarely. Probably from nightmares, I guessed. They were too deep, and his eyes too aware to be from sleep deprivation.

Slowly, I nodded. "Right, then. Iryel. That name sounds... holy."

At that, his eyes glinted, and for the first time I saw their colour shift. The usual dim grey shifted to bright white for a moment. Shit. My guess was right on.

The *angel* regarded me again. "Well then, miss Fio. Let us keep this conversation clear. Anytime the divines make requests of you," I scoffed when he said "requests"; they were more like demands, "it will be through me. Exclusively. The clerics in your party will be unbothered by this role."

So an angel was sent because I was suddenly too high-profile. Right, that was fair. "I'm guessing you aren't here to tell me just that."

He nodded. Then paused. Drew a long deep breath. "Edians were killed by Reflectors."

I froze. *Fuck.*

Once more, Iryel nodded. "Three dead. Middle of the night, here in Renvil. New people, fresh from the tutorial. Cocky after their first mission, drunk in a bar. One of 'em got a little touchy, was rebuffed, took it poorly."

"Shit."

“The divines wish for a... *rebuttal*,” he said, almost hissing the last word.

Right. The dimensional sanctions... they weren’t enough in cases like this. Slaps on the wrist only did so much. The divines couldn’t take away levels at all. Edians weren’t supposed to hurt Reflectors.

So when shit like this happened? Reflectors were recruited. Now, in most cases it was just a quick bout of fighting. In the worst case... It was an execution.

I swallowed heavily.

“How severe is this rebuttal meant to be?” I asked. My voice shook. Damn it.

Iryel eyed me, eyes glinting with tired divine light. “You aren’t killing anyone, miss Fio.”

Involuntarily, air heavily left my lungs. “Glad to hear that.”

“It is good you are glad. If we are to work together, I would dislike for you to be a killer.”

The words came genuinely and raised my mirth slightly. Angel of death doesn’t wanna work with killers, eh?

“How is this gonna go, then?” I asked.

“We offer a reward of contribution, as per the general standard. You will be incorporated into the lists of a dimensional agent. We may make requests for you to carry out missions on the other side, too.”

I nodded, that much was expected.

“You can turn down missions,” he said, and my shoulders fell a bit in relief. “We will *try* to give you only ones you are amicable towards. In exchange, the divines promise to keep your...” he nodded towards me, and I felt he was indicating the mirror core in my chest, “*secret*.”

“Heh,” I couldn’t help but huff. “Extortion?”

He looked at me, and his eyes turned grey and tired. “‘Tis a shit world we live in. The divines tell me to say they mean no extortion. They simply wish for an amicable work relationship... but you know what they mean. You are being underestimated, because they cannot cope with the scale of our small world. I can, that is why I am here.

“So, I deliver the message as I deem best. Yes. There will be some veiled threats. You have your own, too, do you not? Should you join the usurpers... Eden is another step towards

doom, because this Gateway now has a fragment of the divine gift. The potential for *growth*, and that is new.

“Therefore, I ask this of you: Work with us. Please. I want this world to prosper. That is all. The divines are afraid, so they make thre- Argh!” Iryel held his head for a few moments, then breathed. He gave me a pained smile. “Ru does not like being called afraid, I have been notified. Regardless. The threats... please, simply see them as part of protocol. None of us truly want to act on them.”

There was another implied threat there. He didn’t want to act on them, but he would if there was a need. I blinked at him, and saw that he understood that I caught his meaning. His smile turned even more pained, this time in empathy.

“The divine gift?” I asked.

“Ah. The... what do you call it? ‘System’? Your levels. Techniques. The Assortment of it. It is woven into this world, gifted to those deemed worthy. For Reflectors, it is gifted by the divines and keepers together. The usurpers want it, of course, but cannot tear it from corpses. Your gateway, though? It’s a vulnerability.”

“I see,” I said. Yet *another* reason people would want me dead. How many more targets would I need on my back. “Where do I find these... murderers of yours.” I said the word and felt disgusted already. Killing other sentient beings. What scum.

For once, Iryel’s smile wasn’t sad or pained, but held slight satisfaction. “May I give you a divine thread?”

“Please, stick to mundane directions.” I didn’t need a glowing line tethering me to them.

“Of course. The bar they forced their way into sleeping at, and are still currently at, is called the Golden Dewdrop,” he said. Then, he gave another bow, deeper this time. “Thank you for your assistance. Contribution will be attributed as you are used to. I hope we will continue working well together.”

Then he was off. I knew the Golden Dewdrop, of course, like I knew most bars in town. We’d been there a few times. They had a rather pretty barmaid, there... And now she might be dead. Dread crept up in my chest.

Dying in Eden was supposed to be temporary- This was just like Jacob- I-!

I took a deep breath. Goosebumps rolled across my skin. Dread churned in my stomach. I felt bile in my throat, but forced it down.

Behind me, I heard footsteps approaching the door. Matt's, I could tell. I hesitated for a fraction of a second, and before even hearing his voice, I spoke.

"Got an errand to run, Matt." My voice shook, like a leaf in the wind. My eyes were almost tearing up. It reminded me of the night my brother died- "I'll be back soon," I said interrupting the train of thought.

Matt hesitated. He knew something was wrong. He spoke through the door. "Okay Fio. Let me know if I, or any of us, can help."

He didn't open the door. I was grateful for that. I took another deep breath, and the fresh Eden air tasted of decay and death and horrible memories. I didn't reply anymore, and walked off.

Ah... the morning was truly ruined, wasn't it?