

Chapter 171: Gateway

I stood in my astral realm, staring at the gateway. Cass was outside, fighting alongside Ion, my other self.

Some part of me felt gleeful at that. Watching ‘myself’ be in multiple positions, fighting on multiple fronts. No, that’s a lie. Some part of me was gleeful that it *wasn’t me* fighting. That someone else carried the load for once.

I breathed, looking at my mirror image.

That’s what the gateways were, after all. Mirrors. Mine was surrounded by handprints, made by fragments, melding together. Ever-growing, ever-strengthening. It was laced with Qi, fed by my maelstrom, and it was laced with Echo. A song that thrummed throughout it.

The gateway was hungry. It took every kind of power... for what?

It was the first time I wondered that. It had given me so much, and taken so much, too. I was a target because of it. Wanted by keepers and usurpers. But at the same time, it gave me talent. It let me share that with my friends. It let me learn and grow and thrive.

It took my freedom away. It gave me freedom.

I breathed, and pressed my hand against the glass. There was another ‘me’ on the other side of that mirror. My mirror image. Not Ion, not me from another world. Just me.

Slowly, I tilted my head, watching as my mirror image did the same thing. Thinking that, perhaps, she was just as real as me, waiting on the other side of that mirror. With a different dominant hand, parting her hair to the other side, and yet still just the same as me.

Gently, her lips pulled into a smile, and so did mine. “Be kind to yourself,” I whispered, and so did she. Be kind to myself.

Ion was fighting for me. Living as my shield. Was that truly who I was? To let my alternate selves fight while I hid away in another world, just... what? Waiting? Hoping for the best?

No, that wasn’t me. I fought for my freedom. Every step of the way. And so, like I always did when I went to another world...

I stepped through the mirror.

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Glass enveloped me. It was all around me, filling my nose, brushing against my eyes. It was cloying, suffocating, freeing. I opened my eyes, and saw myself. Not... alternate version, but just me. My mirror images. Every mirror I'd ever looked at.

And, of course, myself.

My sleeping body.

When changing worlds, after all, bodies were put into stasis. I had a body to be used on Neamhan. But it was just out of reach, kept by the keepers, in some other gateway.

That was okay, though. I still, after all, had my mirror images.

And that was what happened. I stepped into myself, through myself, into my own gateway. When Ion turned to liquid glass, the first person to step out to save Neamhan wasn't Emilia or Eric, not Trichtera or Chris, and not even Stella.

It was me.

I was still in Eden. My vision split, as my [Transference] network connected me to *myself*.

And then, I was inside two bodies.

"Hey there, shithead," I greeted happily, spinning Astraeus in my hand. "Miss me?" Conquest's eyes widened as I stabbed at them, driving them back.

A moment later, the others followed. Emilia, Eric, Chris, Trichtera... and even Stella. I didn't put her into the body from Neamhan, though. Instead, we maintained her Edian body, sending her through in perfect health.

All at once, they spilled forward, piling onto Conquest. The usurper's eyes widened. "No! What?! Keepers! She should have been kept in Eden! Get her, damn it!!"

To be fair to them... they did. In Eden, I found myself surrounded by four keepers. Well, their avatars at least. There was Matryoshka of Secrets, Eyes of Perception, Swamp of Decay, and Manipulation of Possession.

Crumpled paper, layered eyeballs, fetid bog and a coiling mass of puppeteering strings.

And not a single one of them was a warrior.

How could they be? The keeper traded in favors, not in war. They were good at manipulation, at cutting deals. They fought with avatars that made my eyes bleed, tried to

get me to agree to deals that suited them, to forget what they were, to manipulate people who were too weak to resist.

But now? They'd been roped into a fight that wasn't suitable for them. They were strong, yes, but they were also not used to fighting. And when the pointy end of a spear flies at your face, being used to fighting matters a whole hell of a lot.

Splitting my mind across two bodies was strange. It made me clumsy across both of them, yes, the initial disorientation making my head ache. But, at the same time, Chris had lent us their talent. [Adaptable]. My mind was already shifting, becoming used to the strain, even as I fought and got hurt.

And I got *hurt* alright. I bled. Against Conquest, against the keepers.

The war scythe dug into my bones, splattering my blood. Manipulation shot puppet strings through me, pulling at my insides like worms. Matryoshka made the entire world twist with mistruth. It hid and orchestrated, even as Swamp burned my insides.

Fetid poison made me spit more blood, vomiting my guts out. Eyes stared at me, and where they looked, my own skin unravelled. Almost voluntarily, my body peeled itself. It hurt, but despite that, my smile didn't break.

It didn't break when I stepped forward to protect Stella and had my arm cut off. It didn't break when I lost control of an arm, and the strings puppeteered me into stabbing myself through the stomach. My smile didn't even break when Matryoshka turned me blind entirely.

[Unyielding Metal has reached (Inevitability)!]

And the Gift understood why. My heart kept pumping. I couldn't help but grin. It was the turning point. It was, finally, at the end of it all, the turning point. We'd win. I knew we'd win.

There were too many allies on our side, and too few for the keepers and usurpers. Because we'd grown too fast. Because they'd pushed too much. Overreached and underdelivered, over and over again. Wasn't that funny?

In the end, it was their avatars, their nests that had fed me. They'd broken the gateway that I stole. They'd carried the fragments that put it back together. Their avatars fed my manifestations, fed my ability to step through myself. And their own people were rebelling against them.

It was hilarious, because while Saph couldn't step through to Neamhan, not quite yet, they could fight on Eden. And they fought with *us*.

Here we were. A human and a usurper, fighting for Eden. An angel, an ex-goddess and a triz-adu fighting on Neamhan. I almost laughed. That's a lie. I *did* laugh.

Even when I died. When Matryoshka drove a hidden knife through my skull. When I bled my brain out of my eyes, I laughed. Because, in the end, they had nothing. Another version of myself still lived. And so, my dying body turned to glass, and then a new version of me rose from it.

Unblemished, unhurt, and holding Astraeus all the same. I swung, I thrashed, I raged, I soared.

My wings spread. They crested the sky, tasted the air, and found freedom. And the tide, slowly but surely, turned.

Blood spilled on the ground. It covered it. My own, that of my friends, that of the usurpers, and even the strange glass that the keepers bled. It always did. People bled for what they loved, for what they needed to change. Neamhan could not stay the same. Eden could not go back to how it was before.

They needed to be better. To be freer. And *that* was something worth fighting for.

So I bled with a smile on my face. I crawled out of my own dying body a half-dozen times. I felt the pain, I felt the hurt, and I took it in. I didn't yield, and pressed on. And then, finally, all at once, the tide flowed the other way.

Saph made it first. Before me, they grabbed onto one of the keepers. Swamp. The poisonous one, the one whose venom did nothing to the crystalloid's hard shell. They grabbed it with four arms, and pulled.

Glass cracked, then shattered, and its head came off.

A pool of brown, brackish water spilled out of their shattered form. It was a broken avatar, of course, not their true self, but it mattered little for the power invested. It was so much, and the keepers descended like vultures.

But the body was made from glass, and before anyone, I stepped through that reflection.

I drank it in. The gateway fragments, the liquid power. Within me, the gateway hungered, and I fed it.

[Golden Glass Maelstrom advanced to **6th Step**.]

Power flooded me. I called forth another manifestation. Vivi, Ion, me, and now, another version of myself. She, too, rose from me, and joined the fight in a flurry of violence.

A single death had swung the numbers game in our favour. On Neamhan, Conquest was being battered by an entire army. Yes, they were as strong as a god. Yes, they could split mountains and break the skies. They wielded darkness and frost, they wielded a song so violent it could shatter and chain.

But they were not enough.

It is the fate of cultivators, of resonators, to rise until found insufficient, and on that day, Conquest was found insufficient. A tide of attacks poured down, until they tried to escape to cause collateral damage. To infect the world and break it that way - but Ann did not let them. Liam cut off escape routes, Ann caged the area in, Stella hunted it down with brutally accurate shots, and Marie set up wards. Anytime it fled, Matt was right there, steps carried by the wind, and Chris moved their bodies in tandem, mauling the usurper.

Conquest, too, shed blood. It burned and hissed, because it was not their home. It tried to infect this world, as it had so many others, but the blood burnt. It burnt, because of Reya. Divinity flooded the ground, turning it *consecrated*. Holy.

That was the other amusing part. The keepers had tried to corrupt the people of this world with Echo. Make them addicted, experiment on them until they broke, and yet, all it had taken was one healer. The faith she gained from the believers on Neamhan was a river that turned into a torrent, as people watched the explosions, and put their hope in us.

The belief of people from Neamhan was enough to clean that world. Reya, in that fight, advanced to the next realm of divinity. Her own forge, blazing hot with belief, ignited, and let her sprout wings, too. Even Trichtera, bruised and battered, set her blood on fire and warred.

Until it was done.

There was no grand moment at the end. No single blow to finish the battle. After Swamp, Possession broke next. Shattered by Nana, my third manifestation, alongside Vivi and Ion. Then I broke Eyes, and finally Matryoshka.

[Golden Glass Maelstrom advanced to **7th Step**.]

Each time, my power grew. Each time, my wings fluttered, as I climbed higher. Each one was a weight being lifted, a stone cast aside from my heart. Because they were broken, now.

These were avatars, but I reached through them, and shattered their gateways. I took their fragments into mine, and Cass waged war on their astral realms. Mine expanded, and theirs shrunk. And the four keepers who were too greedy... broke.

And then, it was only Conquest. The symbol of power that was the usurpers. The thing that could not enter Eden, for it was on par with the divines. The thing that could have broken any of us in single combat - that *did* break me, multiple times.

They, too, broke.

At first, it was a leg. Then an arm. Half of their face. A chunk of their torso.

Blow after blow, their body was carved away. Until they kneeled. Until Conquest became Requiem, and Requiem became *Failure*. They kneeled. Their song quieted, its notes exhausted after hours upon hours of screaming battle, after grinding at so many maelstroms of Qi and Mana and Divinity and more Echo that it could not keep up.

Because while its song was strong, our song was shared. And so they lost.

"Ah," Failure said, at the tip of a spear and a sword. "I see."

"What do you see?" Matt asked, eyes still alight with fire and fury.

The usurper smiled. "I should have asked for better pay for this job." It was a sad, broken smile. The kind of a person who could not even conceive that it was over.

"You're going to die, and you're worried about pay?" Ann asked.

"Yeah," they said. "That's my life's work. Resources. More worlds, more people, more song, more power." They looked to the sky, clouds split, smog dispersed from the raining fire. It was blue, and the sun hung high above. "Huh," they said slowly. "You know, you got a nice sky here."

I looked at them for a long while. At the monument that had spelled terror for so long. That had taken Orvan from us. That had made Ann forget my name, for a while. I took a long, deep breath. "Any last words?" I asked.

Failure looked at me with its remaining eye. They tilted their head almost curiously. As if thinking about what to say. "I'd like my name to be Legacy, for this," they said. I nodded, curtly. Legacy continued. "Let it be known that I fought. That I did my job well. My legacy... I wish for it to be competence."

“Granted,” I said, gritting my teeth. The fucker had been competent. Abhorrently so. Even now, all of us were bleeding, hurt. Then I drew my spear back - only for Chris to stop me. Their hand on my arm, holding me back from stabbing Legacy to death.

The triz-adu gave one long look at the usurper. “They’ll kill you if you strike them now, Fio,” they said calmly. “Please. Allow me the honor of burying them.”