

Chapter 71: Morning in Eden

It was a new day in Eden.

I woke up in our guild, Dawn of Ambition. The beds in Eden were a little less comfortable than back on the other side... Neamhan. My bed back on Neamhan was nicer. But. This side did have Ann sleeping next to me, so quite frankly, it was all worth it.

Ann, of course, was my gorgeous girlfriend. How she managed to be gorgeous even while sleeping I did not know. She was still asleep, and I decided to let her be.

With quiet motions, I took off the blanket, stepped out of bed, and stretched. There was a window in the room, and I pulled back the curtain enough to feel the sun on my face. It was still morning, though far from sunrise by now.

I felt a tug at my soul. 'Right, thanks Cass!' I thought at my keeper, then, with a small expression of my will, I reigned in my Mirror Qi, keeping it tightly contained within myself. Not a drop of it leaked outside. Better safe than sorry, it just wasn't worth the risk of drawing monsters in if there was a gap in the repelling formations.

Then I looked at the sun.

The sky in Eden was lilac, during the days, and looked gorgeous in the sunlight. I smiled, then pulled the curtains closed, letting Ann sleep a while longer.

With a quick grab into where there would have been empty air, I pulled clothes from my inventory, quickly changing into those instead of my pajamas. I quietly headed out the door and downstairs, to the common room.

Matt and Liam already sat at the table. Emilia, well, for a certain definition, she might have "sat", but it was honestly more like she was draped over the couch like a wet sock. Hungover, badly so.

"Morning," I said, keeping my tone even but cheery.

"Morning," Matt said, with a nod and a smile.

"Morning," Liam's voice sounded right in my ears.

"Huuuurrngggghhhhhh," Emilia said. To give her credit where it was due, she did raise her hand to wave at me. For a certain definition of wave, anyway.

"You really shouldn't drink so much," I told her, as I opened up the fridge, grabbing some jam to put on bread.

She went through the bare minimum effort to stick her tongue out at me. It would have had more impact if she looked less like a wet sock and more like a fierce warrior. Eh, I'd have to give her a few hours for that.

As I prepared my bread, Cass appeared next to me.

It took a tiny amount of Qi for her to appear, and there was an invisible tether of it connecting her ethereal appearance to mine. She looked kind of like a floating ghost, slightly translucent, slightly glowing. She had the shape of an artist sketch of a human, the stuff you'd draw before adding any defining features.

A round, featureless head, with a line horizontally and vertically across the face, to more easily determine where the eyes, nose and mouth would go. Her body was entirely the same colour, with no shadows or definition, more like a facsimile, and spheres kinda sketched in where joints would have been. She was about the size of an average eight-year old, hovering in the air beside me.

"What'cha making?" She asked. She kind of vibrated as she spoke, since she didn't have a mouth, but she did *speak*. Matt and Liam could also hear her. Emilia reasonably could hear her, but I don't think she was listening, particularly.

"Breakfast," I told Cass.

"Is it any good?" She asked, flitting over to my other side.

I shrugged a little. "Eh. It's alright." We were out of my favourite jam, so it was alright, for a certain definition of alright.

Cass nodded, sagely, then floated over and sat down on the couch. She didn't really sit, she couldn't really interact with the couch after all, but she could simulate it. Though she did decide to sit on the backrest, with her feet dangling in the air, since she was short enough to not have them reach the seating.

Matt smirked at her. "Having fun, Boo?" He found it incredibly amusing to call Cass "Boo", since she looked like a ghost, according to him. And apparently, if she didn't say "boo" to scare people, he had to do the job for her.

"Very," she said smiling.

I smiled, too. The last... what, had it already been a month? It must have, I suppose. Well, the last *month* had been hectic. Rushing from gateway to gateway, absorbing shards. I'd made it to the seventh step on both voyage and imprint. I was on the very precipice of the wellspring realm, and I had been there for that entire month, essentially.

Voyage ticked over pretty soon after I got back to Eden. I'd expected that. With all the stuff I did to feel comfortable back on Neamhan? It made me feel free, instead of bottling things up. That was good for voyage, so it hit the seventh step quickly.

The sea inside my soul changed again, then. It now had a pier. I knew what I had to do to advance. It wasn't called "walk across the golden beach", after all. It was a voyage. I needed to build myself a ship, now, and that ship would serve as my wellspring.

But that was exactly the hard part.

For imprint, the story was similar. I walked across that ethereal road, and hit a wall. Not a bottleneck that could have been broken through like all the ones before, but an actual, proper wall. I needed a shift of perspective, a change of attitude, and I just couldn't figure it out.

With every gateway fragment I consumed, that truth felt a little closer. By now, the gateway was, after all, fully repaired. That had unlocked the possibility of buying the [Keeper Manifestation] ability that Cass was using to talk to Matt right now.

It was, well and truly, repaired. And so, the keepers could now take it away. So, what I still needed to do was get the gateway attached solidly enough for it to be inseparable from my soul. I was still a ways away from that, too.

But despite all the shortcomings, I could feel satisfied when looking at my status. It had been a month of hard work, and I had run myself ragged. But it was all worth it. I smiled, staring at the words in the air.

Of course, Matt noticed. "Hey, Fio," he called from over on the couch.

"Don't you dare, Matt," I said, glaring at him over my shoulder.

He grinned, wider. "You remember, Fio...?"

"Don't you daaaare!"

Matt leaned back, crossing his arms behind his head. "Remember that beautiful day, when we came back to Eden, and I'd already hit the seventh stage?"

“You Rat!” I yelled, not truly angry at all.

Our swordsman only laughed at my antics; it seemed the only one who truly suffered the consequences of my actions was Emilia, who barely managed half a turn on the couch to give me another groan. I was pretty sure she muttered something. Probably something about being quieter.

“Just wait until the twins wake up, they’ll cure your headache, I’m sure,” Liam said, laying his hand on the taller woman’s shoulder empathetically.

Was that a good use of divine power?

The thought hung around for all of half a second until I shrugged. Meh. Don’t care. Not my problem.

What was my problem, was the fact that Matt was still smugly grinning about getting to stage seven first. It was only a tiny difference, too, but he had gotten there before me. I frowned as I picked up my plate of now finished sliced bread with jam, and moved to sit down on the couch. Cass floated up for a second to make some space for me, then promptly sat down on my shoulder.

Luckily for me, our little ghost was entirely weightless. Not that lifting a kid’s weight would have given me much trouble, but it would have made it much more uncomfortable for her to sit whilst I ate.

Her form was one of the new abilities I’d picked up, that one from the contribution shop specifically. I’d also levelled Gateway to five, and Spearwoman to eight. With a small smile, I pulled up my full status for the first time in a while.

[Name: Fiona Bellum

Class: Spearwoman (8) / Gateway (5)

- Techniques
 - Spear Techniques
 - Spear Technique - Fundamentals (Intermediate)
 - Swift Spear (Basic)
 - Momentum Shift (Low)
 - Qi Techniques
 - General

- Aura Suppression (**Intermediate**) (Keeping your Qi contained inside your body allows you to appear perfectly ordinary)
- Golden Core
 - Spear Qi (Intermediate) (Manifest your Qi outside your body and on your weapon)
 - Golden Body (**Intermediate**) (Flood your body with your Qi to temporarily improve all physical attributes)
 - Weapon Resonance (Basic) (You and your weapon are one. It resonates with your Qi, amplifying its effect)
- Mirror Core
 - ~~Gateway Manifestation (Low) (Your body functions as a Gateway to and from Eden)~~
 - **Gateway (Basic) (You are a Gateway, with all that entails)**
 - Reflection (**Basic**) (Manifest a mirror from your Qi and use it to reflect enemy attacks back)
 - Lost and Found (**Intermediate**) (You have a tether to other problematic gateways, allowing you to feel their location)
 - **Keeper Manifestation (Low) (Summon an Avatar for your Keeper to interact with the world)**
- Stats
 - General
 - Strength: Medium (**Lesser**)
 - Agility: Medium (**Greater**)
 - Endurance: Medium (Superior)
 - Resilience: Medium (Greater)
 - Manipulation: **Medium (Inferior)**
 - Capacity: Medium (Basic)
 - Absorption: Medium (**Intermediate**)
 - Qi
 - Gold
 - Purity (Intermediate)
 - Realm (Golden Core)
 - Stage (**7th Step**)
 - Path (Voyage through the Golden Shores)
 - Mirror
 - Purity (Perfect)
 - Realm (Mirror Core)

- Stage (**7th Step**)
 - Path (Imprint upon infinite Self-Similarity)
- + Disposition

Current Status: Healthy]

I didn't need to check my disposition; nothing about it had changed since my last check-in. But, since my last time in Eden, these were all my improvements. I was especially proud of getting my manipulation over the hurdle and into medium; I'd only managed that practicing a lot with my mirror Qi.

And it had taken a *lot* of practice. Enough for [Aura Suppression] to increase in rank twice. [Golden Body] was also mainly trained via manipulation. I did focus on speed a lot, so my agility increased by two minor realms. That was satisfying.

The strangest change, though, was probably the fact that [Gateway Manipulation] turned into just [Gateway]. That had happened right after picking up another fragment, the first one after I came back to Eden and it was... an experience.

I didn't wanna think back to it, so I shoved that thought aside, instead focussing on what the ability was *now*.

"Fio, you're staring into the air," Matt said. "And you haven't touched your breakfast. At all."

With a light frown, I moved to take a bite of my bread.

"Checking your status again?" Liam whispered.

"Mhm," I nodded. "Reviewing it all. Feels surreal."

He gave a hum of agreement, nodding as well. I didn't know all of Liam's stats, and it would feel kinda rude to ask, but I'd certainly noticed his improvement over the last month.

"Gonna get to wellspring before you~" Matt hummed, cheekily.

I was tempted to throw a slice of bread at him, but that would have been both a waste of food, and an entirely undue way of dealing with his teasing. Instead I just gave him a groan, and he chuckled back at me.

With a roll of my eyes, I thought about my status again. [Gateway] still hung there, with a description that told me entirely nothing about what it did, and an entirely unearned basic ranking. I'd hardly used the ability, because it didn't feel like some of the others.

For example: [Golden Body] had felt like a switch in the back of my head, until I used it enough that now it was more detached from the system. It was easier to activate just by myself, with my own skill at manipulation.

But [Gateway]... wasn't quite like that. It wasn't a "switch", it was a whole airline control's worth of different options and choices and none of them were labelled, and I had no idea what any of them did and it was unbelievably frustrating and I wish I-!

[That's why you need a Keeper,] Cass calmly interrupted, her legs drumming against my shoulder as she swung them. [I'll press the right buttons to make things work!]

I paused for a moment, long enough to take another bite of my breakfast, then take a sip of water. Matt and Liam eyes my ghostly little friend for a few moments, then shrugged. Matt drank a bit of what I think was tea, Liam went about sharpening some of his never ending supply of knives.

"Thanks, Cass. I'll try to keep it in mind," I said, genuinely meaning it.

[Don't sweat it too much. It's all... a lot. But at the end of the day, it's part of you, and not at all bad, either. There's a lot you can do with the ability, and I haven't quite figured out much of it yet, myself. I can certainly get the others teleported back to Neamhan, if the need ever arises, though!]

This time, I smiled. "Let's hope we never need to use that."

Emilia groaned loudly enough to inform us that she, right now, might want a transport back to Neamhan to deal with the headache.

We all laughed. Emilia groaned at the noise again. It was a good morning.