

Chapter 100: Altars

In a room that was not quite a room sat two people who could not be quite called people.

The creatures wore poor mimicry of human shapes, their skins of stained glass containing layers of horror. One was filled with eyes, the other with layers of material, like a nesting doll.

“Failure,” one of them stated. Matryoshka looked almost the same as before. The brown wrapping paper underneath the glass skin was thicker, as if stronger, but it still ripped, and it still frayed. It looked more wrinkled, too, distraught.

Matryoshka was thriving and suffering all at once.

The same was true for Eyes. Their frame seemed crammed with optical organs, each one squished up against their exterior, pupils darting about. It seemed that the thing did not want to respond, glaring at Matryoshka silently from a thousand angles.

“*Failure*,” the other keeper repeated, leaning forward towards eyes.

“Betrayal,” eyes ground out, voice like scraping glass.

“*So what?!*” Matryoshka roared, raising up from the chair.

“Sit,” Eyes commanded icily. The other keeper looked at the creature, standing perfectly still for a moment. Then, in an imperfect motion, Matryoshka returned to the chair.

“You failed.”

Eyes stared at the thing opposite it. “We failed.”

“You.”

“We.”

“Your agents,” Matryoshka insisted.

Eyes leaned back. “The ones you picked?” they asked, mockingly.

“Blameshifter,” the other one huffed angrily.

“So it seems.”

“What now then?” Matryoshka asked. “Not easy prey.”

“Not easy,” Eyes agreed. “So we must be insidious.”

The string of words was long and seemed almost counterintuitive, but it had a complex meaning. Martyoshka took a few moments to ponder what it meant. Then, they froze. “We increase the pressure,” they said.

“Yes,” Eyes answered sinisterly. “We... redirect resources.”

“Agreed,” Matryoshka said.

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As every day before I stood on the streets of the abandoned city, facing down a horrific creature. It has multiple heads, each one outfitted with razor sharp teeth, its body covered in glistening scales.

“Come at me then, bastard,” I taunted, and the usurper snarled.

One of the heads snapped at me in a display of aggression, and almost by itself, my spear snaked forward. The spirit in it was guiding my hand slightly, helping my alignment, and the blade dug into the gums of the creature slightly.

It was a shallow strike from far away, but the monster still howled, and instantly began charging at me. Of course, I bravely faced it down... then turned around on my heel and started sprinting away.

A small, waist long cloak-thing fluttered behind me, one of the first bits of clothing I’d made for myself, just to stuff it full of more pockets. Pockets were the spice of life, after all.

Ah, given the rapidly approaching footsteps behind me, maybe I should run faster, instead. I threw my spear forwards, then stepped through the reflection of the metal, appearing next to it and taking it back into my hand a couple dozen steps ahead, right as the hound behind me crashed into a building.

With my lead regained, I leapt over a barricade of hastily thrown together bits of wood in a narrow alley, where two piles of rubble laid close to one another.

Moments later, there was a crash, as the usurper smashed through the barrier - though its momentum did not carry it too far. Emilia was already controlling those piles of rubble, after all.

The second the first bit of wood splintered, the rocks turned into a liquid tide, cascading down onto the creature, and enveloping it like a burial-hug. Moments later, the others descended like a band of hawks, hacking at the thing with all kinds of elements.

Not too long later, I was left still panting for air, but the usurper was dead. "Mirror shards?" I asked between breaths. It was a bit harder to tell which creature had them around here, with so many in one spot, but usually I felt them when close, so when the answer came, I expected it. "None." I just nodded.

It had been another two days in the city, and we had cleared a good chunk of the way. The thing we had just taken out was one of the last guardians of the temple to the divines, so we should be able to get access to that now.

Of course, it was important to be safe, rather than sorry. "Any more things in the way?" I asked our scouts.

Marie shook her head, and Liam followed suit. "None," our leader said, and I nodded again.

"Let's head in then," Matt said, leisurely holding his blade on his shoulder, as he nodded towards the temple and walked off. He had grown scarily accustomed to the surrounding monsters, seeming entirely unbothered, even if he was inches from any beast.

His complete calm was almost scarier than the usual smiles he broke out into, but he was still the same Matt I knew. We all followed him into the temple.

The structure was mostly ruined, the ceiling having caved in, the floor covered in rubble and wood dust, beams and rafters having been smashed under masses of stone. This was a smaller city, and the temple was a single building dedicated to all the divines.

It didn't house what was once the gateway hall either - that place was now overrun by the rift. We were hoping to get there occasionally. I stepped in hesitantly, half expecting to get smited down with how my last chat had gone. Luckily, nothing happened.

[Seems our message went through!] Cass cheered.

I smiled slightly. 'Seems so.' Or, maybe, the divines just didn't have enough power to send my way. That was a thought I did not want to consider.

Just in case, though, we would send Reya first. We had to go one by one, anyway, given what levelling up was like, so having the most devoted among us talk to the divines first was simply good practice.

So, with everyone else guarding, Reya walked up to the altar of Lurelia, a single teardrop shaped gemstone laid upon it. She lightly placed a hand on it. Then, for a few dozen seconds, which seemed endlessly long in the silent ruins, she took her hand off it and took a very, shaky step.

She stumbled a little, but caught herself on a pillar, then gave me a tired smile and a nod.

With that bit of confirmation, I stepped forward. I swiped my eyes over all the altars, then went to the most familiar one anyway. Lightly, I touched the tombstone upon Hir's altar.

There was a silence that spoke volumes after that. It seemed as if the divines didn't wanna speak first. It was like being on a phone call with the other person being quiet; I knew someone was there and choosing not to speak.

'So,' I started. 'Here we are.'

More silence.

'Are you expecting anything in particular from me?' I asked. 'Because if you're unsure where to start, there are a couple paths for you to pick, Hir.'

'I know, Fio. Is it so surprising that an old creature like us would think for a while, though?' the chorus asked me, their voices almost... regretful.

'Not really, I suppose,' I said, shifting my weight to my other leg. 'How long do you expect me to wait then?'

Hir let out a sigh. 'Not at all. I apologize for my last outburst. Despite you provoking it, I should not have reacted that way,' they said.

'Ehh, 's all good,' I waved them off. 'I was worried you'd be holding a grudge.'

A gentle chuckle followed. 'No, I do not believe so. Are you not at all curious about Annabelle though, now that you know the truth?'

'No,' I thought without hesitation. 'She will tell me everything I need to know, whenever she is comfortable. I will not betray that trust.'

'We see. Well, then, Fiona. Is there anything else you wish from us?'

'Is Iryel alright?' I asked.

Hir seemed amused at the question. 'Yes, quite alright. He is a powerful angel. He will not be brought down so quickly.'

I gave a faint smile at that. 'Good. Is any archmage on the way here, to repair this mess?'

'The city?' they asked. 'Not right now. The archmages move by themselves. One of them, Tiri, specializes in teleportation, and may appear here anytime, though I would not bet on any of the others coming here anytime soon.'

'I see. Thank you, Hir,' I thought.

'No trouble, Fio. I am glad you decided to stay. You have done a lot to keep the people of this world safe. Would you like to access the shop?' they asked.

'Yes, please,' I replied. 'Cass? Look for something to help with general resource shortage.'

[A crafting technique?] she asked.

'Not quite. Something a bit different. I want it to help get magic items, but ones that are useful for everyday things.'

[Got it. I'll browse.]

In the meantime, I allocated some of my contribution to regular level-ups. I had enough to take Spearwoman to ten and Gateway to nine and still have contribution to spare. I was pretty sure of those levels, but didn't lock them in yet, browsing through skills.

Cass was quite a bit faster than me, and could also often intuit more about the techniques given the vibes they gave off.

[I don't think you should keep your hopes up, Fio.] she said. *[Stuff like that is rare, and you aren't exactly a crafting build.]*

'Hmm, you're right. But I don't think I need to pick up a plain combat thing right now,' I said.

'Actually,' Hir interrupted, 'I may be able to assist with this. The Gift comes from the divines, after all, and your network technique is rather close to a substantial change of it. We may be able to alter it into a new branch of your Gift, entirely.'

'... Oh?' They had my attention now. 'How would that function?'

'You would lose the technique from your status, but maintain its function. Additionally, by temporarily linking anyone you kill - including usurpers - to this branch network, you would be able to influence them. Then, we could draw upon the gateway in you, to essentially offer an exchange to other worlds. You, and other members of your network, would give up a

small part of your contributions, as well as parts of the bodies of killed monsters, and in exchange occasionally receive items.'

I blinked.

'So when we kill something, there is a chance for them to drop a magic item?' I asked carefully.

Hir gave a small sigh. 'At the very basics, yes. By using your kills as currency, and outsourcing the crafting work to parallel worlds and different times.'

'Right. I want it.'

'You don't have enough contribution to pay for it,' Hir noted drily. 'However, since this system graft would expand on the network of your ingrained gateway, and also apply to your party members, I suggest you mention it to them.'

'Right. Will do.'

With that, I took my hands off the altar. And, of course, the levels I had temporarily marked came crashing into me.

My legs turned wobbly, searing itches and discomfort coursing through my body. It was being rebuilt, becoming yet more and more, but all I could do was stumble and barely catch my face from slamming into the floor. I grit my teeth, barely raising myself onto shaking legs.

I stood for a long moment, waiting for the feeling to abate, and eventually it did. "Ugh, hate that," I grumbled.

"You good?" Ann asked, hugging me lightly.

"Yes, I hadn't locked the levels in. Was gonna discuss something with you all, then they went through. Surprised me, is all. Not the focus right now. I have a small proposal."

"Let's hear it," Marie said, sitting on the rubble of a pillar nearby. "What's the idea?"

"Well, you see..."

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A short explanation later, Matt was drooling. "Let's do it."

"Are you sure?" I raised an eyebrow. "It could be costly."

"I think we should, too," Ann said. "The divines are by no means perfect, but they want us as strong as possible to protect Eden. Hir is suggesting this to help us."

Marie nodded her agreement. "I am with you all. Getting item drops could be amazing. Plus, the way this sounds, feels like it would build in chance as we kill weaker enemies, and pay out more frequently against stronger ones."

Liam tilted his head. "How'd you get that idea?"

"Well, it said it wouldn't drop always. So we would probably build up a balance, then have it spent on better items. Though, it would still be mostly random, though," Marie said.

I shrugged. "One way to find out. Everyone ready to pay up for it, then?"

A round of confirmation later, we all placed our hands on the altar, and confirmed the prompts.

[Gifted Fragment has changed.]

[Technique: Gifted Fragment (Low) removed.]

[Additional Gift options opened: Section "Transference" added.]

"Yooooooo, it says trans!" Liam noted.

And, indeed, it did.