

Tenets of Eden Book 2: Placeholder

[Chapter 70: Hunting Dogs](#)
[Chapter 71: Morning in Eden](#)
[Chapter 72: Ruined Morning](#)
[Chapter 73: Brief Violence](#)
[Chapter 74: Calm before the Storm](#)
[Chapter 75: Blood in the Streets](#)
[Chapter 76: Marching for Food](#)
[Chapter 77: Precipice of Death](#)
[Chapter 78: Wellsprings](#)
[Chapter 79: Campsite](#)
[Chapter 80: Calm](#)
[Chapter 81: Effort](#)
[Chapter 82: Alive](#)
[Chapter 83: Qi Control](#)
[Chapter 84: Preparations](#)
[Chapter 85: Worming through the Sky](#)
[Chapter 86: Status Update](#)
[Chapter 87: Respite](#)
[Chapter 88: Tavern Time](#)
[Chapter 89: Decisions, Decisions.](#)
[Chapter 90: Archmage Saif Zolycc](#)
[Chapter 91: History Lesson](#)
[Chapter 92: Blackmail...?](#)
[Chapter 93: Welcome to the Party](#)
[Chapter 94: Fighting](#)
[Chapter 95: Wraith](#)
[Chapter 96: The Frontier](#)
[Chapter 97: A Place to Stay](#)
[Chapter 98: Ann the Goddess](#)
[Chapter 99: Strengthening the Gateway](#)
[Chapter 100: Altars](#)
[Chapter 101: What is a Rift?](#)
[Chapter 102: Defenders of Eden.](#)
[Chapter 103: Hopeless](#)
[Chapter 104: A Person named Marie](#)
[Chapter 105: Tough Bitches](#)
[Chapter 106: True Beginnings](#)
[Chapter 107: Fragile World](#)
[Chapter 108: Rousing Dragons](#)
[Chapter 109: New Beginnings](#)

[Chapter 110: Stargazer, Startaker](#)

[Chapter 111: Rhythm](#)

[Chapter 112: Joy of Freedom](#)

[Chapter 113: At the Threshold](#)

[Chapter 114: Dark Fire](#)

[Chapter 115: Ruination](#)

[Chapter 116: Heaviness](#)

[Chapter 117: Real](#)

[Chapter 118: Resolution](#)

[Chapter 119: Muscle - Memory](#)

[Chapter 120: Memento](#)

[Chapter 121: Hope for Tomorrow](#)

[Chapter 122: It's finally over](#)

[Chapter 123: Rainbow Fire](#)

[Chapter 124: "Eclipse" - Epilogue](#)

[Interlude: Chris](#)

Chapter 70: Hunting Dogs

Somewhere, far away, there was a room that didn't exist.

Someone, though perhaps calling them a "person" would be an exaggeration, sat on a chair in that room. It was a featureless chair, made as though drawn with one continuous line, solid white with black lines denoting its edges.

Without those lines, no one could have told where the edges laid, since the "room" - if it's worth calling it that, even - was also entirely blank. The kind of blank where colour doesn't really do it justice, at all, so while the room wasn't really white, it was so empty it may as well have been.

In that white room sat something. A thing was more accurate than to call it a person, so it was a thing. A creature which had shoved its entire existence in a facsimile of a human shape, but was very clearly not human. It had a head, two arms and two legs, as well as a torso and neck, but that is about all that was human about it.

The thing's skin was entirely colourless. See-through, more like smudged glass, as if a child had put its hands all over and then those stains had been dragged around with a dirty cloth. Inside the glass framing of the creature, there was a layer of dozens upon dozens of eyes. They laid over and under each other, to the sides and across. Each one seemed pressed up against the glass, straining to escape.

Each eye was a different colour, too. Some brown, some blue, some green or yellow or pink. They had round pupils, slit pupils, horizontal pupils, pupils like those of a goat with two round circles interconnected with a line between them. Pupils that were entirely different, shaped like vortices or towers or buildings.

It was a thing of evershifting complexity and undulating colour as the eyes blinked, and vanished, and were replaced by other eyes pressing up against the glass from inside.

Across that thing, for calling it a person would be too kind, sat another creature confined into a too tight human body. This one had managed a somewhat better mimicry, for it put in more effort. While the other creature was full of eyes that wanted to escape and see more, this creature had wrapped itself into infinite density.

Layer upon layer of something covered it. Like a matryoshka doll in the shape of a human. Its outermost layer was thin wrapping paper, the kind you'd get to cheaply wrap christmas packages, but without the colour. It was thin, translucent, and a dirty brown. Underneath that was a layer of glass.

Glass, of course, was intrinsic to these creatures, but while one proudly displayed it, the other was more private - though saying they understood the concept of privacy would have been giving them too much credit. Underneath the glass there was a layer of the creature made from mattress foam. Then one of fabric. One of thin wood. One of plastic. Aluminium foil.

A thousand thousand layers followed, each one smaller and more delicate yet just as intricate as the last, and all of them hidden behind that shitty paper wrapping. The layers, of course, had friction, and would rip and tear when the creature moved, revealing deeper and deeper gashes into its body until those layers sealed back up and it was a simple human shape wrapped in wrapping paper.

One creature looked at the other.

"It is time. She must perish, now," Eyes said.

"She will not walk through until her soul is strong enough. You know this," Matryoshka replied.

"Then we must make her," Eyes spoke again. The vibrations appeared in the room, though there was no air, and Eyes had no mouth to speak.

"We must." Matryoshka agreed, its hum shredding the wrapping paper and revealing a dozen layers deep into its body.

"How?"

"Violence."

Eyes nodded, a bastardization of the human motion. It wasn't smooth or gentle like a normal nod, instead looking frazzled and jerky, like a video watched from a scratched CD, jumping ahead and back, or a glitch in a game.

"Always Violence," Eyes agreed, nodding some more.

"Who?"

"Always our enforcers."

"Which of them?" Matryoshka asked, again. Their voice was even, but the paper tore, in the shape of a vein on their forehead. Angrily, it revealed dirty glass.

"The violent ones," Eyes hummed, blinking a thousand times as though it was obvious.

"Always the violent ones," Matryoshka agreed, leaning back.

"How violent?"

"Very."

"Very," Eyes agreed.

Then, each one of the eyes underneath their surface moved. A thousand directionless, curious gazes, taking in the nothingness around, suddenly flickered, turning towards one direction.

"Choose," it said, and it revealed pictures of... people. Not all human. None of them looking kind.

"All?"

"**No.**" Eyes voice reverberated strongly, popping one of the eyes, sending a splatter of blood against the inside of the glass. It vanished, a moment later, replaced by more eyes. "Never all."

"Never all?" Matryoshka hummed, curiously. Tauntingly.

“Never.”

Slowly, Matryoshka nodded. Its mimicry was better than that of Eyes, because it tried. Still, the paper was not bendable, and so it tore. The glass fractured, and for a moment, a thousand colours spilled into the room.

A failure of mimicry. An embarrassment. Matryoshka closed the hole, watching a million mocking gazes from Eyes. It was enraged, but despite that, nodded again.

“Not all, then.”

“Choose,” Eyes commanded.

At that, Matryoshka froze. The wrapping paper shredded away, all at once, as its body vibrated, layer after layer underneath the glass disintegrating and being replaced. “You dare?”

Silence.

“Choose,” Eyes requested.

Slowly, Matryoshka's anger faded. The creature grew wrapped in beige, thin paper again. Silently, it picked out some of the people, indicating them with a pointed finger. “These.”

A human man. Middle aged, in his forties. Scraggly beard, unkempt hair, violent eyes. Many scars.

A woman of green scaled skin, with a tail for a lower body. One of the folk, some kind of snake. Her scalp full of sharp scales, done up with decorations. Piercings in the shape of golden rings, through ridges of scales that stood taller. She had a cruel smile on her face.

Finally, one person with three bodies. One of the tris-adu. The shellcrafters. This one had made its bodies different from one another.

A wooden thing, tall, lanky, like a tree come to life, a deer skull with green embers for eyes. Decorated with bones.

A thing of stone, granite blocks attached to one another. Their bonds tight yet malleable, easily able to change shape. A hunting dog, for now.

Third, it was a human. A face to wear. Young, beautiful. Wild raven hair, cheerful smile, kind face and mysterious eyes. A scar, across one eye. A facade to mimic a kind but reckless beastmaster - a facade the tris-adu must have stolen.

“This one,” Eyes said, indicating the tris-adu. “Far away.”

Matryoshka waved its compatriot off. “Time.”

“Time.”

“Agreed?” Matryoshka asked.

“Acceptable,” Eyes indicating, a thousand affirmative blinks just beyond its tainted glass skin.

“Good. Hunt well.”

With an explosion of colour, the room broke. Eyes and Matryoshka relieved themselves of their limiting, human fakes and returned to being what they truly were, in their own realms. There were a thousand other things to manage, and they had neglected those for too long in the few seconds their conversation took.

Hurriedly, Eyes turned its gaze around, and solved problems where they arose. Renewing stasis. Maintaining gateways; maintaining *itself* as was needed.

But back in there, somewhere, within what one could have called its mind, there was a hunger for growth and expansion. A morsel had appeared, and it was sending out its proverbial hunting dogs.

Soon, it would become more than it was. It drooled at the thought.

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.

"Huuuurrrrggghhhhhh," 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.

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. His hair was long and in a messy ponytail, a patchwork of greying and black. 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 hair 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?

Chapter 73: Brief Violence

Before I knew it, I was in front of the Golden Dewdrop. I breathed. I'd sunken deep into [Single-Minded]. The talent helped me focus. This time, I focused on walking, apparently, because everything else had faded into the background.

Now I stood and looked at the building. It was two stories tall, made from wood and brick and clay. There was a hole in the wall, and blood on the half of the door that was still left. I heard snoring from upstairs.

I pushed open the door and it fell off its hinges, hitting the floor with a heavy thud. I hardly heard it. The smell of blood hit my nose. The bodies had been taken away. I didn't know who died, but people had died.

The blood had *not* been scrubbed. The floor was covered in dried, flaking, once-puddles of red. Residue clung to the wooden boards, clots of red held together by sawdust. Some tables and chairs had been broken.

It was so strange to see. From a certain angle... it looked like an entirely normal establishment. All the tables and chairs in that corner over there were intact. In their normal arrangement. The bar was mostly fine, only the bottles behind it having been raided.

Then I turned, and red filled my vision.

I breathed again, the smell of iron in my nose, and I almost choked on my disgust.

Heavy steps carried me to the back, to a door that had already been entirely torn off its hinges. This was the horror of superhumans, I supposed. I dimly took note that some of the blood in the staircase up wasn't red.

Some kind of shifter. Was the barkeep a shifter? I thought I remembered, but my mind seemed a bit foggy.

A blink later, I stood at the top of the staircase. Right. I had to do something.

Gently, I sunk into [Single-Minded] again. Focused on delivering a rightful beatdown.

I opened followed the noise of snoring into a room of four Reflectors. They were humans, all. I barely registered what they looked like.

One of them was awake, staring at me. "Morning," she mumbled. It was a girl, younger than me. I think. She carried a small staff and wore robes. Clearly a mage, using a beginner staff.

"Your boots are bloody," I said.

She looked down at herself, confused. Then she saw the blood staining her pants until her knees. "Ah. They appear to be."

"Don't they now."

"Why are you here?" She asked. The large man who was snoring slowly rumbled awake now.

He was a hulking goliath in plate armor. The kind you bought if you started with more money than you should. Sponsored? "Who're you?" he rumbled at me.

His voice was deep and gruff and annoying enough to wake the other two. None of them clerics. A swordswoman with wild hair, stained in just as much blood as the goliath's armor. Then another mage, an older man, around forty, the only one clean of blood.

The swordswoman grinned as she saw me. "Aren't you a lovely sight to wake up tah?" she said. I grimaced. The blood in her hair made it red, but it was a mockery of the colour that I loved so much about Ann.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" the young mage asked me. Her mouth was shaped into a perpetual "o", staring curiously out into the world, as though everything was new to her.

The older mage looked at me. He seemed clean, and the most lucid, right now. His eyebrows scrunched up. "Why are you inside our room, young lady? You smell of trouble."

"I love tah toussle with some trouble!" the swordswoman commented. The older mage, though, shot her a glare, and she shut her mouth.

"Identify yourself or we will engage hostile action," he said.

"So businesslike," I commented dryly. "You killed some people yesterday."

The goliath scoffed, then spat onto the floor. "Calls 'em people, she does."

I got a frown from the swordswoman. "Eyecandy is what they are, not real at all."

The younger mage simply tilted her head at me. "What? We did nothing like that at all. I barely even remember yesterday." She had the audacity to follow it with an unsure giggle.

Then, the old mage spoke, the party leader, it seemed. He sighed. "I told you all to not get blood on yourselves. You use icicles to kill. The murder weapon melts itself away."

“Bah. Ice’s no fun,” the goliath said, picking up a mace.

I felt a vein pulsing on my neck. “Do you regret?”

They looked at me like I was being ridiculous.

“No?” the goliath asked, confused. The swordswoman chuckled and shook her head. The old mage simply frowned, deeply, and the young mage tilted her head further, confused.

I reached into the air beside me, withdrawing my spear. I wore no armor. My spear looked simple, because I controlled that shape. I spun it, gingerly, with an amount of mastery I would wager none of them could appreciate. “No regrets?” I asked again, just making sure.

“Bah. Piss off, you piece of shit. They’re npcs, stop fucking around-” the goliath rumbled, lifting his massive frame. I waited. “Leave, now.”

I waited.

He stepped closed, trying to intimidate me.

“Leave,” he growled, this time. He was right in front of me, two heads taller than me and twice as wide, too. Then he frowned. “Blank-faced bitch. Get lost or get hurt.”

This time the edge to his voice was real. They were sponsored, for sure. Lightly dangerous.

I waited.

Only half a second passed before he moved, a blur to the normal human eye. The mace on his shoulder descended so fast-

Not nearly fast enough. Casually, I reached out with my off hand, catching the handle of the mace, and stopping the swing.

The goliath looked at me, a confused expression on his face. He pressed down on the weapon with both of his massive arms, and the weight was like lifting two tree trunks.

Not much trouble at all.

With a flick of force, I stepped aside, and assisted his motion, pulling the mace down, throwing him off balance. He recovered remarkably quickly and tried to stop the swing, but I was faster.

Before he could blink, I had pulled the weapon down far enough to bring his face to the same height as mine.

I dropped my spear, staring into his dark eyes for a moment, before grabbing his cheeks. I squished his face, and for a second I saw fear begin to build. Then I didn't see him anymore, because I threw him through the wall.

The room was quiet.

Three people looked at me, the sound of wood splinters raining to the floor the only one accompanying it all. I was [Single-Minded] on dealing with these people. Any little twitch I took note of.

I saw a grin flicker onto the swordwoman's face. She licked her lips, then brandished her blade, and it shifted-

A thin rapier lashed out at me with whip like speed.

My spear was in my hand where I'd dropped it, and the rapier blade shattered against the wood. The swordswoman was confused. Before that expression shifted even slightly, I lashed out, and suddenly she laid on her ass on the floor with a broken leg.

There was a weary sigh from the old mage. The curious, young one, seemed entirely unbothered by this.

"Why are you doing this?" oldie asked. I breathed deep.

"You hurt others. You get hurt."

"Yeah fucking right," the goliath grumbled, tumbling through the door. Blood dripped down his forehead, where the splinters had dug into his skin. The swordswoman reached out into the air, drawing forth another sword. I saw the old mage brandish his staff.

The young mage simply watched. I looked to her.

"Kid. You there?"

She blinked at me, then nodded.

"You killed people."

"I guess I must have," she said, breathing out.

"Any remorse?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Hard to tell. I'm trying to figure it out still."

"Allow me to give you a helping hand. This is what happens when you hurt people."

When I finished speaking, I moved. Their martialists, who had been catching their breath, tried to stop me, but... that didn't work out. I was faster.

Within a fraction of a second, I had shattered the young mage's staff, and given her a dozen bruises, as well as a handful of cracked bones. I was very soft on her, but there was only so much a human could do to hold back in battle.

A moment later, the goliath and the swordswoman were onto me again, and before I finished breathing out, they were both on the floor once more. Their blood now mixed with that of their victims.

I used the tip of the spear to cut a few long lines into skin, never going quite deep. It reeked of blood. Bile rose in my throat, and I sunk deeper into my focus.

The older mage looked at me with scrunched up eyebrows, yet didn't seem afraid.

"I'll break you next. Do you have a preferred arm, or do I break them both?" I asked. My voice sounded husky to even myself.

He scoffed at me. "Fuck off," he said, raising his much more expensive staff. Lightning lashed out at me, crashing into my skin, searing my nerves and-

It impacted a barrier of Qi on my skin. Metal Qi. That was the truth of my golden core. The metal easily directed the electricity into my spear instead, holding the charge in itself. Then I tapped it against the old man.

His robes almost caught fire, patches of them burnt, and he curled on the floor in pain. I broke both his arms. Then, they were all on the floor.

Some were groaning in pain. I breathed in, leaning further into the focus. Then, I spoke as if on autopilot.

"Quiet your moans or I hurt you more," I said, calmly. My voice was so deadpan it was scary.

Well, having just wiped the floor with their whole team in my morning shirt and a loose pair of pants probably helped. I kicked the goliath anyway, just to make my point, when he huffed at me.

"Let me make myself clear. You hurt Edians, this is what happens," I said.

They were silent.

"You," I said, pointing my spear at the throat of the old mage. "You knew this. You hurt them, though. Why?"

He frowned. "Their lives are worthless, they should be happy to-"

I stabbed his leg.

He didn't scream.

"You're not cruel. You're just unscrupulous. You don't care. That is acceptable, but you need to *control yourself*. Let me explain it in a way that happens: You acted, these are the consequences. You see them now, yes?"

He nodded.

"Step out of line again, and it will be worse."

Then I turned to the goliath. "You, on the other hand, are just cruel. That is fine, too. Bad people can do good things. Do good things, and we have no trouble. Save your cruelty for the monsters - they deserve no mercy."

He glared, but I moved on.

The swordswoman. "You, though, take pride in what you did." She grinned at me and nodded. "That is a problem. I'll get back to you."

I pointed my spear at the young mage woman. "You. You're clueless. Testing the limits. *You found them*. Overstep one more time, and you die. Simple as, clear?"

"Yes, clear," she said. Her voice was calm, didn't even quiver. The fearless kind, the kind to get... sponsored. I knew that already.

Then I turned to the swordswoman again. "Name?"

"Olivia," she said, sticking out her tongue at me. Her bright blonde hair fell into her face as she did so, the blood flaking from her hair, and parts sticking to her cheek.

"Okay, Olivia. I understand I cannot get through to you with pain. The next time you do this, you will be barred from Eden. Permanently. You'll lose all memories from here, all powers, and your soul will be hurt, badly. You will be in a haze on the other side for months, barely aware of what's happening."

I saw her face fall as I spoke. "This is not a threat, it is a simple truth. The only reason you aren't back on Neamhan again yet is because I don't like killing. Let me repeat that. I don't *like* killing. Understood?"

She swallowed.

"Alright then. You batch of filthy murderers. As a sanction from the divines, I will be stripping you of any and all magical equipment you possess." Within a moment, my spear separated their weapons and armor from their body. Anything with magic in it was taken into my inventory, until they all sat there, in thin, common clothes.

"Your money will be confiscated." The coins were lightly magical, so I'd already taken them all. "Who sponsored you?"

"Zinnic," the goliath said, wearing a cruel grin.

I looked at him. His shit-eating grin. Then I gave a smile myself, as kind and warm as I could manage. I kicked his broken leg, hard, and there was another crunch. He doubled over into himself, groaning in pain.

Then I took a long breath. "I expected as much. This might get me in trouble with Zinnic. I suppose that much was inevitable." I smiled again, at the freedom. I hated that piece of shit corp anyway. Who gave a fuck if they hated me? Now I was just gonna act against them more openly.

"I know you'll go crying to the big dogs. Let me be clear. If someone comes for me, I'll kick their asses. Anyone Zinnic sends at me will be sent back in just as poor condition as you all. Bring me Reflectors and I'll return broken goods." I heavily struck the floor with the butt of my spear, making the whole building shake with a resonant wave of Qi. "Clear?"

The goliath didn't smile anymore. Olivia seemed conflicted between frowning and grinning with elation. The clueless mage blinked at me multiple times, but I knew she got the message. The old mage seemed resigned, like he'd known this would happen.

I breathed deep again. The smell of iron sent more bile into my throat, but I forced it down.

"Don't let it happen again."

I headed home.

Chapter 74: Calm before the Storm

I threw up in an alley before I made it to the guild. There was blood on me. On my shoes, on my shirt. It clung to my hair. It was disgusting.

The smell of iron was so much worse inside a city than the wilderness. There were no earthy tones to subdue it all, only the smell and noise of more people. All people who looked at me with disgust, disdain, and distrust.

Step by step I shambled through the city. I don't think my route was quite right, but I was kind of out of it. [Single-Minded] was off now, and I felt the disgust cling heavily to myself.

Eventually, there was a tap on my shoulder. I lashed out with a quick swipe of my open hand, not wanting to kill anyone, but I didn't strike.

When I turned there was a man there. Tall, lanky, springy hair, a black goatee, dark skin and hazel eyes. He grinned. Next to him were two women, one old and hunched and frowning, the other young... a child, really, halfway hiding behind the man. Scared.

He smiled at me, almost a grin. "Hey there again, Dawn of Ambition lady!"

He recognized me. Where did I know him from? Who was this?

"Seems like it's our fate to find you in trouble and have ya lash out, huh?" he asked, humor in his voice.

He had one of those faces it was hard to stay mad at. "That goatee is hideous."

The girl chuckled, and the older woman barked out a bout of laughter. The man himself flushed for a second, then laughed, too. It was mundane. It helped.

And it clicked. These were the people who'd taken me onto a stretcher back in the day, when I first came back from the wilderness.

"You know, you never told us your name, lady," the man said.

I smirked. "The feeling's mutual. Since you all got three names to give, why don't you start, huh?"

For a second, I saw that the man almost replied, but the old woman interrupted him. "I am Evelyn. The young one is Sophia. The idiot is named Trevor."

I almost laughed. Their names were so normal it was refreshing. "Fio," I said, reaching out a hand. Then I noticed it had blood on it. Crap.

"Is that short for anything?" Trevor asked me. "Fiona perhaps?"

"Call me that and maybe I'll leave more bloody than you met me," I said, though my tone was joking. I breathed in the air, and the smell of iron didn't suffocate me for a moment.

"Hah!" Trevor laughed. "Alright, Fio. I got that. You call me Trev, then, alright?"

"Sure."

Sophia was no longer hidden behind Trevor by now, coming a little closer to me. Back when I first saw her I'd guessed she was in her teens. She was, I now saw, and early-ish, too. She couldn't have been older than fifteen.

Lightly, she reached out with a hand. I looked at her in confusion.

Evelyn spoke for her. "She wants to cleanse you of the blood. She's a cleric, though she hasn't chosen a deity yet. Argus, Archiva and Hir favour her."

Slowly, I reached out, then took the girl's hand. I felt a small rush of divinity crawl across my skin, eliciting a shiver that sent the girl skittering, and goosebumps raising on my skin. I breathed to shake off the feeling of static underneath my flesh. Then I shook myself again.

I turned to Sophia with a smile. "Thank you for that," I said.

She gave me a timid smile. "You're welcome," she said, in a quiet, bright voice, almost as bright as her grass-green eyes.

Evelyn spoke again. "I am glad you feel better, Fio."

"What did'ya get into to get that much bloo-" Trev started, before she continued, but she interrupted him in turn.

"We will *not* ask you what happened," she said, glaring at the man, who gave a non-remorseful motion of backing off. "How about this, instead: Let us walk you to your guild?"

I eyed her for a bit. "Why are you being so kind?"

Trev blinked at me, then laughed. "Hah! Hahaha! C'mon, Fio. We're all Reflectors. This ain't an easy life. We lie and fight and hardly have any true friends. So isn't it right to help another when you see one in trouble?"

"Humans gotta stick together," Evelyn said with a shrug.

I cringed at that. "People gotta stick together," I said.

The old woman gave me a long look. "Right. That works."

With a small nod, she walked ahead, her walking stick, which I was now sure was a magic staff, tapped against the road with a rhythmical tap. "Come along then. Let's get to your guild."

And then we did just that. I was glad for the company.

Trev, too, seemed glad. Because he did not shut up for a single moment of the walk. I now understood why he was in this party exactly. Anyone else would just get sick of his constant waterfall of quips, but right now, it felt nice.

I let his talking wash over me, not needing to put in much effort besides walking. He told me of their quests, how they met, what their plans in Eden were... and then we were at the doorstep of the guild.

There, they waved me goodbye, and I took another deep breath, before pushing open the door to Dawn of Ambition.

Ann stood in front of me.

I looked into her eyes and she looked into me. A scowl was firmly placed on her lips, and her arms were crossed.

"Where've you been?" she asked.

I looked at her. The small joys of the short walk evaporated quickly. My smile disintegrated. For a moment, I reflexively opened my mouth, about to lie like I was used to from my parents and Neamhan as a whole.

Then I decided I would do better. "The divines sent me an angel with a missive. To remind a few newbies why you don't kill Edians."

She flinched. The frown disappeared. She looked sad, instead. "Oh. Those poor people..."

I put my hand on her shoulder, squeezing lightly. "It's done now. I took care of it."

Ann looked at me for a long moment. Seconds ticked by, then she nodded. "Okay. Sorry. I thought- I want to support you. I thought this was something I should have supported you in. And maybe I should have."

“But I wanted to do it on my own,” I said. Felt like I had to, really.

She nodded again. “Yeah. I respect that. Sorry for putting you on the spot.”

“Apology accepted and forgiven,” I said, wrapping her into a quick hug and a small peck.

“Come on, then, sleepyhead. We got a whole day ahead of us.”

We did not, in fact, have a whole day ahead of us.

- - -

The usurpers were not an organized force. There was an inherent difference between them and the keepers and the divines, and that difference was communication.

If you talked to one of the divines, you were practically talking to all of them. Keepers... well, I didn't exactly know how much they interacted with each other back then, but suffice it to say, they can talk when needed to.

Usurpers don't do that.

Most of them, anyway. They were a loose force, mostly powerful monsters birthing more monsters. They consumed things to create more of themselves, and anything that wasn't "them" was an enemy.

Frankly, the only reason Eden hadn't ended yet, was because a lot of the time, the bigger monsters kept each other in check. Well, not just that, of course. People like Orvan were a major reason, too. But usurpers, by their nature, wanted to consume and spread out. To live.

Gateways, like the one inside me, made that possible. They could take that power, twist it to their own purposes, and drag more monsters through the void between worlds over onto Eden. Each monster meant this world was a little closer to falling, and it meant a little more territory belonged to the usurpers, so gateways were *valuable* to them.

That was why I'd kept the mirror Qi signature hidden.

Cities were warded in Eden. They *had* to be warded in Eden. The monsters would come and need to be fought off every minute of the day, otherwise. This way, the bases of civilization were hidden behind shrouds.

But those shrouds weren't perfect.

If my mirror Qi leaked out, it would attract monsters. So I kept a tight grip on it. I let none of it spill, unless I was already locked in combat, when I occasionally used a [Reflection] to turn attacks back where they came from.

So I was sufficiently surprised when, during my walk to the temple to check what my contribution could buy me, I saw the sky flicker.

Chapter 75: Blood in the Streets

A month. That was, give or take, the amount of time I spent in Eden before things went poorly. If I were to give an exact number, it would have been forty-one days. More than a month, really, but time had flown by.

The first week, I finally fixed up the gateway inside my soul. Then there were three days of normal missions. A longer excursion, two and a half weeks, to get yet another gateway fragment, this one pried from a newly forming nest.

We were gearing up for another, longer excursion, expecting to be out for a month. That meant we needed to prepare. Get backup sets of armor ready, buy rations, stock up on it all. Could we have done it within a week and headed out before the sky flickers? Yes, probably, but it hadn't felt that urgent.

Now, though?

That sense of urgency was back.

I was outside, middle of the city, in civilian clothing, hand in hand with Ann. I had expected it to be a calm day, because usually I only needed to do one drastic thing each day.

Honestly, I'd known that tomorrow, at least, would be annoying. Zinnic acted fast and with vengeance. But I expected to have some time.

Instead, a new problem appeared. The sky flickered a second time, and then it fractured.

The protections around the city broke. The walls of Qi and Mana and Divinity all fell apart. There had been power invested in those defenses, *real* power by the truly high-level people.

So much power had been in there that when they broke, shards of the sky rained down like so much broken glass. None of the energies were usually solid when they weren't in control of a person, yet this time, they were.

I remember that moment, still.

I stood, frozen, in the middle of the road. Ann's hand tightened around mine, and I felt her nails digging into my skin. But it all didn't seem to matter.

When the barrier broke and the glass rained down, the whole world turned silent for a moment, except of course for the brief noise of shattering. Chatter stopped, people looked upwards, facing a fractured sky.

The power invested fell down. One of the pieces scratched my face. It was Qi, compacted and unbelievably dense, holding its shape even as it was slowly disintegrating into the ambient atmosphere. Blood trickled down my face.

Slowly, I turned to Ann. Her mouth was open. She knew what it meant. The moment of silence ended.

"Fuck," I said.

Things happened quickly.

The first thing I felt, was the atmosphere changing. The blocks around the cities kept the air kind, the Qi nonhostile. But now, with the formations gone, I could literally feel safety and comfort flow away from me, replaced by an irritating scratching against my skin.

It was the energy in the air, scratching and clawing at me, trying to take what I was into itself. Trying to assimilate, like it always did. Instinctually, I coated my skin in thicker golden Qi, and the feeling faded away. As did the pain from Ann's fingernails, as my skin grew tougher.

Then, secondly, there was a noise of Divinity. Golden flames tore across the heavens, trying to rebuild the barriers, but it was too late. How had they gone down so fast? I didn't have the answers to that, not at all.

But the sky itself roared as flames blanketed it, briefly. Then, suddenly, they winked out. There was nothing to latch onto, nothing to rebuild, so it fizzled away into nothing but sparks, like fireworks heralding a poor end.

A moment later, the usurpers roared back.

My head turned, mechanically. Beyond the city walls, I saw a large shape. Antlers, poking over the edge of the wall. Long limbs, with multiple joints, and arms long enough to drag on the ground.

From this close, I saw the thing's eyes. Pits of black fire. Its face was animalistically humanoid, great tusks carving upwards over its lips, and its skin tainted bluish. Dozens upon

dozens of antlers tangled off its head, branching off to the sides. They had dozens of prongs, seemingly piercing the sky itself.

It looked at me.

That black fire stirred, briefly, in recognition. It was the same thing we had fled from in the mountains. Its face twisted into what looked like a cruel grin. The giant moved, slowly. Shambling. Its hip tilted to the side, and it almost took a step forward, but then, instead, its arm moved.

With the same noise a whip made when it was cracked, the thing broke the sound barrier. Its arm snapped forward at unbelievably speeds, slamming into and breaking apart the city walls, and the creature raised a screech to the sky. It was somewhere between a howl and a roar, sending shivers down my spine.

Ann squeezed my hand. "We have to move."

With an exertion of will, I tore my eyes from the pits of black fire, and nodded. My stomach spun, but regardless, I reached into the air and grabbed my spear from my inventory. With another small push, I felt [Iron Will] click into place, and the world suddenly came into focus.

My fear vanished and I heard the screaming around me. People were panicking. Edians sprinted past me, all over the place, but mainly further east. Of course, the monsters were coming from the west, after all.

Reflectors were running, too, some brave ones towards the horde. The more sensible ones ran north, trying to get to the gateways, to escape back onto Neamhan, where they would be safe.

I blinked and found myself running, dragging Ann along as my steps were faster than hers. Then, a moment later, she'd muttered a spell, and floated right beside me, suddenly weightless.

Realization hit me hard for a millisecond, then mellowed. *I couldn't take the gateways out.* They were close, and an easy escape that promised relocation to another city. But I couldn't take that path.

If I stepped through the gateways, I would *die*. No doubt about it. The keepers would tear the repaired gateway from my soul, and I would be discarded. Simple as that.

I breathed, deep. The air tried to burn away my lungs, but the Qi in it got subsumed by my golden core instead, trickling into my barely drained reserves. My heartbeat steadied. It was do or die, now, and the panic left me.

Dawn of Ambition, our guildhouse, was further to the south. Ann and I sprinted towards it. Our team was in there. So were Ann's robes. Briefly, I spared a thought for whether Orvan was alright, then discarded it when the giant slammed into the wall again with a loud crack, then a rumble. Stones fell to the floor as the protective construct vanished.

There had been guards up there, but by now they'd been reduced to little more than bloody smears. How had they not seen this coming? Something must have gone deeply wrong...

Ann and I turned a corner, racing through the streets. Edians were sprinting past us, away from the horde, and the streams only grew denser as more fled. Reluctantly, I stepped into the air, making us more visible to the monsters.

Dozens were streaming through the cracks in the walls already, dozens more breaking the stone further. The Drytz, burrowing creatures they were, had already entered the city. One almost swallowed a young woman down on the floor just below us, with a throw of my spear, the monster was dead, and a moment later I held my weapon again.

Bound weapons were incredible.

My Qi already cycled through the spear, reinforcing its edges, keeping the metal ever sharp. The tiny chips in the blade that came from impacting stone at high velocities had already vanished, the wood laying smooth and cool in my hand. I breathed.

We rounded another corner, finally stepping higher than the nearby ceilings, letting me pick a much more direct path. A moment later, there was another whip-crack hissing through the air, this one ever louder, sending my ears ringing. Despite that, I swung my spear with my free hand.

Qi coated the blade, making it larger, and I carved apart the rock that had flown at us, thrown by the giant. It was focused on me, I knew that much. Why was it focused on me? My mirror Qi *wasn't leaking!*

Still, Ann squeezed my hand. "Keep high," she said, confidently. I saw her eyes dart around, already taking it all in, and trusted her judgement.

With quick steps, I carried us through the air, as more and more monsters flooded into the city. Whenever something approached us, because there *were* flying creatures - Torin, bat

things with one giant eyes and an entire torso that could unfurl into nothing but teeth - my spear lashed out, carving through monsters.

Ann sometimes blasted the ground with spells, shaping the stone from buildings to fall over and bury monsters in the rubble. We saved Edians, as Reflectors ran for the gateways.

Another dozen steps later, most of the way to the guild, I saw someone appear next to me in the air. I almost lashed out, in reflex, then I held back. It was Trev. Little Sophia was riding piggyback on him as he leapt through the sky, with Evelyn gracefully hovering beside them.

The man flashed me a bright, if somewhat pained, smile. "Didn't expect to see you again so soon!"

"Me neither!" I yelled, over the roaring of the wind, when yet another whip-crack split the sky. I swung my spear before I could even think twice about things, carving a boulder in two. Behind it, I saw the giant creature stare at me, black fire burning where its eye sockets should be.

It was looking at us. Me? Most likely me. Was the creature a usurper, then? What had made them find the city? How were there so many of them?

My spear hissed through the air again, bisecting another of the bat creatures as I took swift steps. I could see the guildhouse now, standing high above the city as I was.

"Got anyone we can pick up for reinforcements?" Trev asked over the howling winds.

"Yeah!" I nodded. "Whole guild!" There were flashes down the road where people smashed and burnt and hacked apart the dryzt. But people were also getting hurt at the same time. Reflectors were fleeing.

I bit my lips, then focused on the present.

"Alright, let's go!" Trevor said, charging ahead. He was fast.

I saw Sophia's hand on him alight with a faint glow. Right, then. Some kind of buff spell.

A moment later, he spun in the air, leg lashing out, and smashing one of the torin right to pieces. The teeth from its stomach-maw scattered the floor with all the other dust and debris floating around. Another whip-crack impacted the wall, sending it crumbling into bits more and more, and monsters streamed in.

Larger ones, too. Zurulen, giants with crystalline growths, streamed through the gates, wielding maces of stone, some having freshly shaped their weapons from the remains of the

wall. Scorions scuttled over the debris, their stinger lashing out with venom, while Qi suffused their weapons.

I was forced to turn away when a small swarm of Torins descended to try and take a bite out of me. Ann set two of them on fire, Evelyn shot down another three, and I dispatched the remainder with a few swift swipes of my spear.

Then, suddenly, Ann yelled. "DOWN!"

She didn't have to tell me twice. Within a moment, the platforms of Qi underneath my feet dissolved and I plummeted from the sky. A boulder shot just over my head, this one clearly coated in black flame.

It singed the edges of my hair just as it soared by, then impacted the ground with a great crash, sending a whole handful of buildings tumbling to the ground. I felt the hairs on my skin raise up.

"We run through the streets!" I called to Trevor. "Hope it can't track us!"

The man gave me a quick salute, also descending. Evelyn still hovered high for another moment, waves of magic streaming from her. For a moment, the rocky debris around us turned liquid, a wave spreading through it all, then, within seconds, walls reconstructed themselves into a labyrinthine barrier.

She even seemed to coat it with a sheen of illusion, making it hard to see through. I gave her a quick nod as I hastily sprinted through more narrow corners, with Ann course correcting whenever her levitation threatened to smack her into a corner.

A minute passed quietly, then a second minute, until a storm of pink tore through a scorion in front of me. Matt flashed me a grin, though the effect was lightened by the blood trickling down his face. Not his own, I hoped.

"Fio! Good to have you! Follow me!" he said, and I followed.

Matt moved blazingly fast, and I sped up even more to compensate, giving some more focus to my movement. Only three swift turns later, we found Emilia and the twins, bunkered up. I saw a nearby shadow swirl suspiciously, then an arrow soared past my head, spearing through another Torin.

"We're all here!" Marie called from a nearby roof. Her eyes glowed with a telltale magic she liked to use, something to enhance her eyesight and aim. "Fighting retreat! Revil's falling!"

A moment later, I stood by Emilia's right. Her shield was glowing with the grey of stone. Matt was on her left, his eyes alight with a hunger for battle. I realized I probably looked pretty frenzied myself.

With a quick movement, I brushed some of the dust off my hair, the blood on it boiling away with a drop of Qi. I breathed, and it smelled of iron, but the nausea didn't come. Too focused.

Trevor stepped up a moment later, little Sophia still clinging to him. She must have been under some kind of weightlessness spell, given the fact that she easily held on even when he was darting around doing flips and whatever else it was he did.

"Who're- oh, the people who found you? Why're they here?" Emilia asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Picked them up on the way. Allies seemed like a decent thing to have," I said in the brief calm.

Emilia moved to nod, but then her head snapped forward. A roar pierced through the air, as a Zurulen stomped towards us. Emilia stepped up.

Its club was larger than the woman moving to stop it, but when the giant swung, I saw her Qi flex, and the weapon broke like putty against her shield. Her mace swung, cracking the monster's crystal skin.

Half a moment later, Matt descended upon it like a whirlwind of blades. Every movement he made conjured up a swarm of petals, digging into the wound, stripping the giant's crystalline protection.

But the monster was hardy. It swiped at Matt, giving a roar, only to have the attack stopped on a metal boot. Trevor stood, little Sophia on his back, and grabbed the giant's arm, pulling on it as if trying to throw it.

The creature didn't budge, of course, but Liam slipped out of the shadows, and used the moment to cut the tendons in the thing's armpits, while it was locked down. Suddenly, the arm Trevor held onto was limp and useless.

Icicles and arrows dug further furrows into the crystal, and when Matt withdrew for a moment, my spear moved. Enveloped in golden radiance, I carved into the monster's waist, and promptly disemboweled the thing.

The roars around us were only increasing in intensity though, drowning out the screams of the people. “Back!” Marie yelled, and we moved back. The alleys were too tight, and I jumped back onto a roof.

From there, I saw the monsters properly.

What had been a trickle turned into a tide. There were not only scorions and zurulen storming through the broken walls anymore. I saw two *leyburn*. The things that had broken my entire body. They held their heads high with majesty, not even bothering to crush or devour the fleeing Edians. Only those who stood and fought caught their interest at all.

We ran.

Dozens upon dozens of bodies broke upon my spear. I cut apart torins and drytz and zurulen. Crystal, flesh, bone, all carved to pieces.

And it wasn’t enough.

Everywhere we went, I saw bodies. Beastfolk laid on the floor, covered in blood. Some had chunks missing from their bodies. I grimaced but kept running.

Whenever we encountered someone still alive, we’d stop, kill whatever was killing them, then run some more. The black-fire giant thing would watch us, though. It would throw boulders into the sky, raining them down on us. Playing with its food.

Then it decided that it had played enough.

I saw it step into the city, turn rubble into dust with its massive steps. Whenever it moved its arms, there would be another whip-crack, sending spikes of pain through my ears and rattling my bones. All around, things broke apart.

Renvil was a frontier city. It had warriors, a whole guard. It had mages and archers. None of them stood a chance.

There were Edians who could fight. Keep up with us Reflectors, certainly. Ones who had been granted the “divine gift”, as Iryel called it. They could level and grow powerful.

But unlike castle Arhan, which had archmage Orvan, this town had no one like that. The most powerful Edian in the city was well known: Rufus. He was usually holed up in the hill district, but I knew he would fight.

He was many things, but he was not a coward. But he was not enough to turn the tides against this. Maybe he could fight a leyburn in single combat, but this? No.

So we ran.

Boulder after boulder slammed down on the floor nearby. The monster was speeding up its pace now, grabbing pieces of houses it had broken, sometimes even the bodies of other monsters, and tossing them at us.

Then, for a moment, the barrage let up. I looked back. The thing stood, black fire in its eyes, with a gash on its shoulder. It bled black.

A man floated in the sky, red lightning burning in the air around him. Maybe I had underestimated Rufus. For a moment, all eyes were on him, as the monster roars grew still. Even the leyburn watched him, in front of the giant.

He wielded a large curved sword, made for slashing. Lightning danced along the rim of the blade, though it was hard to make out from where I stood. He swung, and an arc of power struck the monster, leaving patches of black on its skin.

Then it laughed.

The sound set the sky rumbling, the earth shaking, and the hairs on my skin rose again. Its laugh was loud and cruel and guttural. It was distorted and so close to human, yet so clearly inhuman and horrific.

It moved.

I didn't even see the motion, only a blur in the sky. Its bluish skin was a smear across the lilac sky. The red of Rufus' aura winked out in the same moment. He was turned into little more than a smear of blood on the thing's hands.

For a moment, everyone was quiet. Then, the monster laughed once more, slowly turning its head. It looked towards us, our little group, and there was a moment of fear before I ruthlessly crushed that emotion with [Iron Will].

"Move," I said. "MOVE!"

The thing was looking at us again. Staring. *Smiling*. It stretched out its long, gangly arms, and what appeared wasn't a boulder.

A bow, made of black flames appeared in its arms. Then an arrow materialized in the other. It was at least three meters long, and looked unbelievably heavy, yet the creature nocked it with little trouble.

It drew the bowstring back.

Then, for a moment, I felt time freeze. There was a voice in my ears. Not my ears, my core. My voice.

[Gateway has reached (Intermediate)!]

“Take a sharp left.”

In the moment before the creature fired, I followed the advice. “LEFT!!” I screamed, voice enhanced by Qi. No one hesitated to follow the order. A moment later, my entire world flashed.

First, there was a noise. The bowstring moved, the arrow flew forward, and it impacted *something*. I couldn’t exactly place what it sounded like, because the moment the noise got to my ears, it was replaced with a ringing and blinding pain.

Despite that, I didn’t die.

I opened my eyes and all I saw was a blinding mess of colours. I couldn’t place if it was white or black, because really, there was no point. I blinked, once, twice, fifteen more times, feeling how dried out my eyeballs were. The pain hardly even registered. My nerves might have been singed.

Then, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and my vision returned. Not my hearing, though. Not quite.

Having my nerves regrown sent shivers of pain down my entire body as my spine realigned with itself. For a moment, everything was agony, and another moment later, everything was pain.

But I focused.

[Iron Will] activated at full force, and I shoved it all aside, looking around to get my bearings.

We were in a small protected space in the middle of a crater. The air in front of me shimmered with grey divinity. All around me, my companions laid on the floor. Iryel stood, his hand on my shoulder. I saw him turn to me, eyes tired and heavy.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but then coughed up enough blood to dye his grey robes red. He looked down at himself, then mouthed something like “Ah.”

With a monumental effort, he wiped the blood from his lips. I didn’t see him move his mouth anymore. Instead, his voice resounded in my head. “*Miss Bellum*,” he spoke, “*I recommend*

you take your girlfriend, excuse me, Ms. Belleflamme, as well as the rest of your team and withdraw from this location. Archmage Orvan has been informed and will be arri-"

He paused, vomiting up more blood. *"Ah. Divinity taking its toll. You get the picture. I shall be busy."*

I saw him slowly turn, to look at the sneering monster. Then he pressed his palms against one another, and Divinity flared bright around him. A moment later, my friends opened their eyes.

They gasped, or spasmed, or simply remained lying down. I saw Matt reach for his sword, then refuse to drop it even though his hand bled. We were all bleeding. My skin was burnt, charred at some points. I knew a couple of my muscles were torn, and my bones ached as though someone had bowled me through five sets of stone houses.

Despite it all, I got up. I took out some of the potions I kept in my inventory. I'd spent the money on them after having recently found out I needed them quite often. I gave two to the twins, first. Hoping they could heal the others. I splashed a little into my ears.

It was just enough to barely hear the world in ringing, distorted whispers.

Iryel spoke. "Ahhh, this is going to suck. [Divinity Descends]."

Then there was a flashing tower of grey. The barrier flickered for a moment, then collapsed in on itself, shards of glass hovering towards Iryel himself, and forming the shapes of wings, like those of a dragonfly.

He vomited more blood, more than anyone should reasonably vomit, then grumbled as he took to the skies. I lost sight of him, then. The whip-cracks of the monster were the only things I could really still hear through my half-healed eardrums.

I took half a moment to look around as I helped the twins off the floor. They could barely stand, but I saw them apply light healing to one another. Good. We'd need more of that.

All around us was a crater. We'd barely managed to make it into Iryel's barrier. Even inside it, the heat was sweltering. I could see that some of Emilia's armor had melted before the shield came down. Some of the rock around us seemed like it had briefly turned liquid around the edges.

Outside the barrier? All that remained was a smooth surface. If we'd been in a desert, the sand would've turned to glass.

I breathed. There was another horrible noise, but I could hardly hear it. Reya flinched, though, and I couldn't blame her. While the twins set about healing, I started pulling off Emilia's molten armor. Bit of tissue stuck to it, and I saw her grit her teeth, but she endured.

With another use of my inventory, I poured half of my last health potion onto her wounds. It would have to do.

The other half went to Ann.

Liam had been hit the worst, the attack tearing him from the shadows and sending him flying out onto the streets. Reya laid a hand on him for a long, long moment, yellow radiance covering his body.

Eventually, he drew in a gasp of air.

Marie was up on her feet early. She and I started heading out clearing some of the rubble ahead to make our escape easier. Eventually, throughout the next five minutes, all members of our party became able to walk. Ann floated herself and Liam. I helped Matt with an arm wrapped around my shoulder. Emilia assisted Reya, despite her own wounds, Marie helped Eric.

Tervor still held onto Sophia, and Evelyn made herself float. Sneakily, I think she also cast some weight reduction spells on all of us, but I could tell her mana was low after that labyrinth spell.

Slowly but surely, we began hobbling out of the city.

Eventually, we reached the other side of the wall. It was broken by a couple boulders, rough and uneven, and we made our way out, ignoring the flashes of light in the sky.

A couple dozen meters after we'd left, the lavender sky turned blue with a wave of magic. Orvan had arrived. I wish I could say more on the battle, because it must have been epic. An angel and an archmage against a giant of black fire. But I honestly couldn't hear it, nor did I bother to turn around.

All I could focus my significant willpower on was walking forward.

Chapter 76: Marching for Food

The damage was done.

Despite the fact that there was a huge attack on the city, there were still monsters in the trees. Bornins hassled us, and I could barely supply the effort to lift my spear and kill them. Matt still held onto his sword. He would raise it, then send out a blast of pink petals.

He barely controlled his power. Sometimes, the petals would leave gashes, other times, he straight evaporated the upper bodies of the monsters. Each time, I saw that bloody glint in his eyes flare up. Each time, he almost passed out and I dragged him further ahead.

Trevor recovered quicker with Sophia's buffs. He and Marie scouted.

Marie was, quite frankly, the only thing keeping us alive. Did we have rations? Sure. Not nearly enough. We had wounds, we needed to wash them, and she found a stream. While all of us were bathing, she braved the wilderness again, and found us more food. Even some herbs that had a light medicinal effect.

Trevor had hit his healing limit, and so had Emilia. I had as well. Any more Divinity would only leave lasting damage. But the herbs? The smaller healing effect would help regeneration, rather than exhaust our bodies.

We were also ravenous after all the damage and healing. Reya dug into the handful of roots, berries and herbs Marie gave her like a starving hound.

I tried to speak to the older woman, barely hearing my own voice, but she gently put a finger on my lips. I could see the burns on her skin. Despite it all, with only a small charge of healing she headed out again.

Despite every bone in my body being weary and worn, I decided I wanted to contribute. I dragged myself up. My wounds were all clean now, and they burnt like fire as I moved, but using my spear as a walking stick, I could do it.

There were, certainly, some animals in this forest. Not monsters, actual animals. I knew they existed. I'd find one, too.

For a moment, I felt Ann's hand on my shoulder. Half of her face was scabbed over, and some of the scabs cracked as her lips moved, dripping tiny hints of blood. I couldn't hear her. I just smiled. "I got this," I mouthed. Then I set off.

[Hero complex?] Cass asked.

I heard her voice and flinched in fear for a moment, expecting another attack. It was pointless, only leading me to stumble, fall, and scrape my knees. I grit my teeth, then pushed myself back up.

'I'm fine,' I thought at her. 'Actually. We have time now. What was that voice?'

[A figment, if I'm reading things correctly.]

Figment? Ah. That thing from my gateway menu, right?

[Yes.]

'Details?'

[I can give you my best guess.] I nodded at the suggestion. [Seems to me like fully restoring the gateway has given it the ability to access parallel dimensions. Other versions of, well, you. They can help you, shortly after their... death, it seems.]

Another me had died to the monster, then. In fact, my entire group must've died over there. Iryel was too late. That thing had, somewhere out there, killed Ann.

Unforgivable.

[Fio.]

Cass's voice was like ice cold water on the fire of my rage. I stopped my hobbled walk, and took a deep breath. My vision was blurry with angry tears, now that I had digested enough water to produce them again.

I blinked them away. *'Sorry. I'm here.'*

[Good. You saved yourself. This is good.]

'Good?' I asked. I felt so angry, I had trouble comprehending that. *'I, essentially, died, Cass.'*

[Fio, breathe.] She commanded.

For a moment I considered lashing out, but I followed the advice. I drew in a deep breath, feeling my skin and muscles and bones ache at the thing. The pain grounded me for a moment. I breathed out. Calmly.

[It's good. We can network. Link up with other you's. Learn from them. We wanna be free, yeah?]

'Yes.'

[So we'll make use of this. Every failure, every mistake by another figment. We learn from them. And if we fall, we pass the torch. Tell another Fio how to get free. Until one of us goes and fucking does it, Fio.]

I paused at that.

Yeah. Okay. A grin appeared on my face. *'Let's help ourselves, Cass.'*

I swear I could hear her grin. *[Let's. If one of us can't do it, we'll try a hundred times. And if that's not enough, we'll try a million times.]*

Now that was something I could get along with. But there were still the technicalities to work out. *'How long until the figment recharges?'* I couldn't imagine that with just one figment, I'd get a warning every single time I was in danger.

[Once every week, I believe.]

Ah. That was quite the cooldown. I only had one for now, after all. But that would grow with time. *'Have you figured out what the other numbers mean?'*

[Not quite,] Cass said. [Strength still links to the territory, but also to the length of the message the figment can give us. Fragments are a bit more nebulous, but they seem to generally provide you with a tiny fraction of the potential other versions of "you" have. I can tell that neither of those are all that those numbers do, though. Even figments aren't just about knowing when there's danger. I can tell there's more to them, but [Gateway] is still not a high enough level.]

I'd need to level it more, then. In the future, though. Right now, most of my Qi was focused on keeping my body running. At least that was something I could make my mirror Qi do without worry of attracting monsters.

If I used it purely internally, then it was fine, though the control needed for that was quite intricate. With how much of my mind was occupied on forcing the pain aside, then the rest making my body move, I had little left for extraneous thoughts, so I stopped having them.

Instead, now that my talk with Cass was mostly done, I decided to focus on hunting. There had been flashes of movement in the trees around me, but it seemed like it was mostly bornins. Nothing edible.

Monster meat decayed in the wild, back into ambient energies. Qi, Mana, sometimes even Divinity. But without alchemical preparations, it was absolutely inedible. None of us had that kinda experience in alchemy. So, I'd need to find something that wasn't a monster.

With the little hearing I had, it was honestly already hard to just keep my balance. I stumbled through the undergrowth with my spear as a crutch. Maybe the bornins were grouping up to attack me. Ah. There was a decent chance of that, wasn't there?

Whatever.

I kept the glass underneath my skin shifting as I moved on, disregarding the potential of monster attacks. I was weakened. Had almost died, even. But I still wasn't going to die to some fucking beginner mobs.

Indeed, they *had* been grouping up to attack me. I realized when they gathered in the trees, watching me. So, I indulged. I faked a stumble, and a fall, letting my spear slip from my hand.

Of course they pounced, instantly.

At the same time, I turned my stumble into a roll, feeling the skin on my back scream in pain, and resummoned my bound spear into my hand, then infused it with whatever dregs of golden Qi I still had. My muscles burned and hardly listened to me, so I moved my body by willing the shifting glass to move. That did it.

My spear spun above my head once as the little monkey-kobolds jumped at me, and then five bisected corpses dropped to the floor. I pushed myself up slowly, staring into the forest with feral eyes. For a few more minutes, the bornins watched me. I stared them down.

They fled.

I let out a deep breath, then sucked in more air, panting. Slowly, I took another shaky step. The second one came easier. Breathing slowly, I continued on my walk.

Eventually, I smelled something. My sense of smell seemed like it was still mostly working, especially compared to my blurry eyesight and ringing hearing, so I relied on it. It was like... wet moss. Maybe a river?

Following the sensation, I made my way through a much more uncomfortable part of the forest, and some thorny bushes that I had to push aside and sometimes even cut apart with my spear. Eventually, though, after a few minutes of trekking through the undergrowth, I did find a larger stream than the one we were camping at.

Not quite big enough to call a river, but it definitely had a source somewhere. Maybe a pond? Some fish could be good. Hells, I'd eaten rats before. I'd eat just about anything, really. Frogs, maybe even snails. Could Ann cook snails?

I shook my head as if to clear the thoughts away, then started single-mindedly walking again, upstream. Occasionally, I stopped to drink some water, or pour some on my more egregious

wounds to clean them of dirt. Infection was, luckily, not that big a deal, since I could use Qi to kill microorganisms in my body.

Despite that, I decided to be careful, because I was still running on dregs, using Qi to make my walking possible at all. So, I just put one foot in front of the other.

Step, after step, after step.

An hour, maybe two passed as I marched. It was uphill slightly, and the undergrowth was thinner around the stream; probably cleared away by monsters and animals who used it for drinking. It made the march less troublesome, at least.

Eventually, though, after a while, I did find a pond that the stream originated from. Maybe it was even large enough to call a lake? Something in between. Surely large enough to grab some fish.

I slowly approached the surface of the water, careful about any aquatic monsters, but when none leaped out at me, I looked a little closer. My face was haggard, my eyes wild, my hair in a mess. Parts of my skin were sticky, and the hand gripping my spear was slick with blood. I took in a long breath.

This was me. I was alive.

With a shift of the focus of my vision, I started to look underneath the water for any fish, but of course, I couldn't find any this close to the shore. The water was relatively clear, though, with most of the lakebed made from stone. So, I took a deep breath, held it in, and stepped into the water.

The Qi made my muscles more dense, so I didn't float. I could have, of course, but instead, I just held my breath and walked along the bottom of the lakebed. I didn't have to walk very long.

Only a couple dozen steps in, the water got quite a bit deeper, with a rather steep drop in front of me. In there, I saw a school of fish. Bass, or something. Large, and very edible. They probably survived here by being out of sight of the monsters. Lucky for me, I supposed.

I wound back, infusing my spear with another bit of Qi, then tossed it. The Qi helped it glide through the water, spearing two fish at once. The school instantly dispersed, of course, but I had my haul. With some small, and still painful, motions I swam to get my spear with the fish on it, then quickly made my way back to the surface.

Being underwater wasn't uncomfortable per-se, but my lungs burned a bit from holding my breath, so I panted for more air, as the water dripped onto the rocky shore beside me. I grinned as I looked at the fish on my weapon.

Despite the fact that I was in lots and lots of pain from all my wounds and the water touching them, I grinned. This was a good amount of food. Especially for superhumans like us, this could sustain you for a while, surely.

I raised my head, just about to start making my way back, tossing the fish into my inventory. Then, I saw the tip of a sword pointed at me.

"Ah," I said to the swordswoman, Olivia, in front of me. "So this is how it's gonna be, isn't it?"

Chapter 77: Precipice of Death

Olivia grinned, pushing her sword just a little closer to my face. "Seems like it, spear-bitch." Her teeth seemed almost sharp.

Briefly, I wondered how she was standing in front of me. I broke her leg. And her sword. Yet, there she was. Zinnic. Sponsorship must've included healing and weapon replacements.

"Where's the rest of your little party?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

"None of your business, is it?" she asked right back.

Then I opened my mouth to speak and she grinned. "No more stalling, lady. I see what you're doing. Tell me your name, so I can cut you down where you stand."

Staring down the tip of a sword, which she poked yet closer to my eye as she spoke, I strained my manipulation, drawing as much Qi into my cores as I could. I was low on mirror Qi after using it to march, but my golden Qi was even lower than that. Dregs. Tiny bits of it. It would have to do.

I stared the swordswoman down, the tip of her blade maybe an inch from my eye. With a lot of effort, I lifted the muscles of my lips. "You wanna know my name? My name means war, and I'll show you just how fucking serious I am about that!"

Then, I twirled the spear in my hand, knocking the rapier aside. It was a distinctly more expensive weapon than what she had before, and wouldn't just shatter against my bound one. I frowned, and a wild grin plastered itself on Olivia's face.

She took half a step back then grinned at me. She laughed. “Hahahahaha!! Oh fuck yes, fight me!” she yelled, words echoing back from the forest. We stood maybe two metres apart. I used every moment to grab more Qi, knowing it wouldn’t be enough.

Olivia didn’t give me much time.

Maybe half a second after her bout of laughter she lunged at me, stabbing forward with her rapier. My arm screamed as I moved it, batting the weapon aside, and sweeping my blade upwards from below.

Nimbly, the woman sidestepped the slice, bringing her sword up higher, aiming for my shoulders to extend her reach. I commanded my muscles to move, and they refused, so instead, I shifted the glass under my skin, bringing my spear up half a moment late, as the rapier drew a thin line of blood.

The pain from the wound was superficial. Slowly, I felt myself slip into [Single-Minded] focus. All around me, the world blurred. Only the battle mattered.

Olivia thrust forward and I stepped backwards and to the side, water leaking into my torn boots as I stepped into the lake. Instantly, the swordswoman followed up with yet another slice, which I deflected, making my body move via Qi again.

My follow up was raw physical power though, pain screeching through my legs, up my back, and into my arms as I moved. I grit my teeth and *endured*, half my mind focussed on clawing Qi from the air into my cores.

With hardly any effort, Olivia reflected the slow swing to her right, and went underneath my spear, aiming for my waist. She was skilled, quick and decisive, but she wasn’t Matt. I pushed down on the spear with both hands, forcing her arm to pass by my right side, then brought the back of my spear up to slam into her stomach.

It didn’t reach. Instead, her fist collided with my jaw. I could hardly hear, blood ringing in my ears, but I still heard the rattle of my bones.

My world started spinning, and I lost my balance for a moment. On pure instinct I stepped back, receiving only a small slash across my cheek rather than one which would have ripped out my eye.

Slowly, with a vicious grin, Olivia circled around me. She had hardly used any Qi. I didn’t even know what type she used, or what stage she was in... It didn’t matter. I breathed,

ignoring the cruel words she spoke, but she stopped in the middle of the sentence to stab at me.

I hadn't expected it, sending more Qi throughout my body to avoid a deep wound to my upper body. Forcing my body to move was horribly inefficient, and quickly, my mirror Qi was running out, too.

With the tiny bit of golden energy I'd collected, I reinforced my spear. Then I decided against it. Reinforcement was not needed. Instead, I thrust forward, forcing Olivia back. She had an annoying habit of dancing just out of my reach, light as a feather. But she didn't expect that reach to extend a bit, for just a moment.

A golden blade shot forth from the thrust she avoided.

With brilliantly quick reflexes, she twisted, but the stab still drew blood. It tore through her fancy leather armor, leaving a small gash just above her elbow, on her non-dominant arm. If only she'd twisted the other way. I spat blood on the floor.

My golden core was truly empty. Floating sparks were all that coursed through it as I desperately clawed for more Qi to enter into it. But I got no breaks.

Olivia capitalized on my weakness, moving in while my spear was extended. I brought up the back of it to block her swing, but I needed two hands to stop one of hers, and a brutal kick against my thigh sent me kneeling on the floor.

Blood poured from my lips, now. I spat more of it onto the ground.

Then I got the fuck back up again.

"You fucking done?" I asked, my jaw clicking from the punch I'd gotten.

Viciously swift, the woman sliced at me again, and every muscle in my body screamed in protest, yet it moved as my mirror Qi demanded, blocking her first blow, then another. My reserves were dangerously low, but nothing remained except to use more of it.

Despite it all, I felt death closing in.

By now, my movements were too slow, permitting me no counterattacks, and only my significantly greater technique stopped me from being killed. Every moment was a dance on the precipice of death. Every dodge a step closer to that cliff.

Almost automatically, I slipped into [Mirror Mind]. Subconsciously, I was reaching out for every shred of power I could find.

My master's movements replayed in front of my inner eye, and I flowed like water. A slash came, and was gently guided aside. Olivia stumbled forward, taking three steps into the water.

She slashed at me, and once again was intercepted, a slow slash blocked, a thrust batted aside. I had a moment to bring my blade down on her head, but she moved aside. A dozen more exchanges passed, and I felt my mastery of my spear increase with every moment.

[Momentum Shift has reached (Basic)!]

My core burned inside my chest with exertion. I was desperately gasping for air, each breath bringing life saving Qi, but it was endlessly slow compared to my expenditure.

Olivia panted, too, but it was a light exhaustion compared to my ragged wheezing. "Looks like you're on your last legs, hah," she gloated and I breathed in a hiss of air through my teeth.

She lunged again, suddenly dropping close to the floor. With a degree of mastery I never should have managed, I slid my leg out of the way, her blade biting into empty air. My footing was unstable, and I threatened to fall forwards, so I committed, lifting my other foot away, and kicking at her.

My leg connected with her skull, sending her careening back, blood trickling down her forehead. My shin cracked in the collision, pain racing up my body. The glass under my skin felt so lethargic, and I collapsed to the ground with the movement, only barely getting back up in time for Olivia to wipe the blood off her face.

Then she moved towards me again.

I commanded my hand to move up to block the blow- And it refused.

For a few moments, all I could see was death coming. My mirror core was empty. I bled from my eyes and nose, the strain of the Qi manipulation too high. My golden core had tiny sparks of Qi in it, and I dragged every single one out of it and into my arm, beckoning it to move, letting go of my spear.

It wasn't enough - it just wasn't enough!

The world slowed down to a crawl, then.

There was the tip of a sword approaching my left eye. I was raising my left arm, and with a brutal effort of my mind, I had, somehow, triggered [Golden Body] on it. But it was too little. I

focused further. The zone of my ability condensed, down to two tiny points, one in my elbow, to move the arm, one in my palm, to block the sword.

[Golden Body has reached (High)!]

And it was too slow.

I saw it - saw the sword about to enter my eye, with my hand only at the level of my cheek. The glass under my skin grinded against each other as I moved, no longer liquid and supportive, but instead rigid.

The golden power flowing through me wouldn't do.

When the blade was an inch from my eye, my life started flashing in front of me.

I saw scenes. Of my childhood, school, university, the easier nights and the tougher ones. Of the divorce, Jacobs funeral and the way my parents cried. Beth's birth. Desperately, I analyzed them for a hint of how to live.

My bits of enlightenment flew by. When I learned how to properly hold a spear, that it was an art. When the movements were drilled into me - and how imperfect I still was!

[Spear Technique - Fundamentals has reached (High)!]

Then more and more flashed by, until, for a moment, my mind desperately clung to my experiences with cultivation. My journey through the golden shores. My walk along the road of infinite self-similarity. The barriers I broke. The freedom I yearned for.

My small attempt to feel my connection to my cores on Neamhan.

Now, I felt them more than ever. They felt like two burning suns in my chest, searing my flesh, making it hard to breathe.

I had been desperately drawing Qi into them, through my connection to them, from the air. But that connection - it was there! I'd reached out to it, almost manifested a core back on Neamhan, but there hadn't been any Qi there to support it! The agony was my core collapsing; of course it was! It would have consumed *me* instead of the Qi!

The blade approached ever closer, but time slowed down even more as my mind *raced*.

I could feel my body try to spasm with enlightenment, but my mind tuned it all out. Only the memories mattered.

That connection to my cores, that consumption of myself for Qi... there was something there, on the tip of my tongue...

The tip of the sword came ever closer and suddenly, roiling anger bubbled forth from me.

I would not die here.

I closed my eyes. The blink was instant, even in slowed time. Perhaps my eyelids didn't even shut, but the outside world disappeared, and I was in two places at once.

On a road to the sky, and the shores of the ocean.

My intuition told me I needed a vehicle to travel. The road in the sky ended; imprint wouldn't carry me any further. The shores, the beaches, held no more for me, only the ocean had the answers.

But I didn't *have* those vessels. I could have made a ship from the palm trees for voyage. Made my own road for imprint. But I didn't have the time.

I. Would. NOT. DIE.

Two destinies, and both of them were *mine*. Not for me to make vessels, but for me to move forward. Take my freedom. Make myself known.

With a wild dash forward, I dove into the ocean. The golden waters swallowed my silhouette, and I opened my eyes to the depths. The ocean would go down infinitely, the waves crashing over my head, and my lungs burnt, but I swam down into those depths, because they were *mine to see*.

Uncaring for the road in the sky ending, I didn't build more of a road. I simply ignored the wall in front of me. I stepped into the sky, my feet holding on pure willpower. I looked up, seeing an infinity of Fios, on different stages on the path, then I rose one step above the others.

More of me followed, taking their first brave steps into the sky. But I was ahead, up just a little further - carving out my identity.

My vision fluttered back, and it was all consumed by the tip of the sword. My world was tinged red, as my eyes bled.

I roared, as pain gripped my chest, as I dug *through* my cores for more Qi, shattering their bottoms, and more Qi spilled forth.

[Congratulations! You brave the depths on your **Voyage**. You have found that your Qi is yours alone, and made your Wellspring.]

[Golden Core advanced to Wellspring Realm!]

[Congratulations! You make your **Imprint** in the skies. You have chosen to rise above and prove your power to yourself.]

[Mirror Core advanced to Wellspring Realm!]

Chapter 78: Wellsprings

For a single moment, time remained frozen. The heat in my chest bloomed, my two cores suddenly growing searing hot, sending waves of agony through my broken body, until, with a pop in my ears, they suddenly changed.

The searing heat collapsed into two singularities, then suddenly froze, as an icy chill spread from those two locations. A moment later, the freezing cold turned into an invigorating, cool breeze, blowing away the absolute agony from the heat.

And that same instant, Qi bubbled forth from *within* my wellsprings - for that is what they were now, no longer cores.

Within a moment, the golden Qi rushed to my hand, reinforcing my arm, letting it move the faint few centimeters sideways it still needed.

Olivia's rapier bit into my flesh, then broke through the bone of my palm, stabbing right through my hand. With all the golden Qi I could muster, I drove my hand upwards.

The power of the attack drove my hand up against my head, the blade digging deep into the flesh on my forehead. It cut through my eyebrow, barely missing my eye itself, then scraped upwards against my skull, all the way until it exited at my scalp.

I roared out a pained scream, blood oozing from the wound, blinding me in my left eye- the one I'd almost missed. With my other hand, the mirror Qi moved, shifting the glass underneath my skin.

With newfound mastery, I stabbed forward, my weapon whistling through the air.

[Swift Spear has reached (Intermediate)!]

The metal bit deep into Olivia's outer thigh. The woman - not used to pain like I was - instinctively let go of her weapon to grab at the wound. The sword was still stuck in my hand, now pulled down by gravity, and sent new waves of blazing hot pain through my body as the wound worsened.

Despite that, I was left not a moment of respite.

There was a whisper in the air, something that I barely detected because I was drawing all the Qi in the area to me. I activated [Reflection] for the attack, shifting its energy with another twist of my already strained mind.

My wellspring had just bloomed, and the technique was hungry for Qi, though, so it didn't work entirely.

Instead of reflecting the attack, it was more like a deflection, and an icicle dug into my right side from my back, stabbing through muscles and injuring organs, but not puncturing my lungs as it would have.

Another scream tore itself from my hoarse lips as I fell to my knees. My muscles, barely refreshed from my ascendance to another realm of cultivation - twice at that! - convulsed with the pain of the enlightenment I had felt.

My spear was so comfortable to me now, the weapon resonating with my very soul, and yet I could do little more except let go of it and drop to the floor. I twisted my head a little and, yes, there he was. The damned old mage from Olivia's party had shot an icicle into me.

The woman who had just almost stabbed my brains out was still screaming, but I filtered her voice out. Deep within me, Qi bubbled from my wellsprings, desperately trying to fill my... well. My wells? Maybe I should still call them cores.

A moment later the extraneous thoughts faded away. [Mirror Mind] still ran, and I remembered patterns. How people shifted Qi in their bodies. My master... his technique was incredible. Evershifting, staving off the effects of age, increasing blood clotting on wounds, making him faster, stronger, and even increasing his regeneration...

It was unbelievably sophisticated, and a more pure expression of his mastery than almost anything I could come up with. It was also far too complicated for me to mimic, even with the help of my talent.

Instead, my mind turned to Matt. A prodigy, seemingly always a step ahead of me, with unbelievable skill and incredible talent to boot. His cycling technique was good, very good even, and I mimicked it for a moment.

Flakes of gold suddenly hovered around my body, tearing apart the icicle.

I almost passed out from the pain, and dizziness as I started losing blood, but then I blended the methods. [Golden Body] - which I now knew was simply a method to circulate Qi - mixed with Matt's petal manipulation.

The flakes of gold settled down on my wounds, stopping the flow of blood, and the glass underneath my skin roiled, somehow helping me turn more water into blood. My skin virtually sucked my sweat back in, even absorbing some of the bloody lake water I laid in, and more blood was made.

Smaller parts of my skin cracked from the lack of moisture, but despite the wounds, despite the fact that there was quite literally a hole about three inches deep and one wide in my back, I moved.

My hand dug into the muddy ground of the lakeshore, each muscle in it burning with agony. Then I pushed my upper body up.

The entire area around me was still under my will, the Qi obeying me, and so, when another icicle came flying, I leaned to the side until it missed.

When I was sat up, I moved some more. My right hand went over to my left, then pulled Olivia's sword out of my palm. I tossed the rapier onto the ground with a grunt. By now, the woman had long since stopped screaming.

In fact, despite the fear in her eyes, she came at me, trying to kick my face.

Instantly, I drained my mirror well empty again. The Qi flooded into my circuit, demanding the glass underneath me move, and I dodged back by simply a hair, her boot brushing by me and missing my chin. She lost her balance because of the injured leg, slipping and falling onto the shallow lakebed.

My well started filling up again, Qi bubbling forth, but my eyes bled more. My mind pounded, my head aching as if my brain was trying to escape my skull, from the exertion of the manipulation. Still, I breathed, scraping Qi from the world and into my wells. Because it was *mine*.

Slowly, guiding the glass under my skin, I got up. Shakily, I stood, then caught another icicle with my bleeding hand.

My eyes had bled so much they were both blind, so I shut them, and simply relied on my sense for Qi.

[Aura Sense [New!] (Low) (Perceive your surroundings by being in touch with the energies suffusing them)]

I breathed. I dropped the icicle, stained red in blood. I tried to speak, but only gargled noises left my mouth; my throat was filled with blood. Ah, damn it.

With another twist of Qi, because, really, I was already bleeding everywhere, and my aching mind seemed to lack care for whether it would ache more, I burned away the blood in my throat and lungs. Some of my pain faded, but new pain blossomed to replace it, like a carefully cultivated flower of misery.

I spoke, though, my throat hoarse and wounded. “Stay the fuck out of my way.”

A moment later, I cut off Olivia’s right hand. My ears had bled so much, and my eardrums might have ruptured... again... so I didn’t hear her screams.

The mage was too far away. I simply looked at where I thought he was, over the lake. I had my eyes closed, and [Aura Sense] only let me see a few meters around me, so I just guessed where he was.

No more icicles came.

Then... I walked away.

All of this for a meagre two fish... well, and a human hand, but I wasn’t about to eat that, so I just left it.

Chapter 79: Campsite

Each and every step through the damned forest along the damned stream was agony.

I desperately clung to my spear with both hands, barely keeping upright, only by expending almost as much Qi as my wellspring made. The wound the icicle had torn into my side reopened, not just once, but *five* separate times.

With each damned reopening, new flashes of pain wracked my shivering body. My muscles were worn down by the enlightenment I had grasped on the cusp of death, too, so they protested even more now, and I felt more like a skeleton puppeteered by strings of Qi.

Still, when my wound opened up, I diligently stopped, circulated my Qi to form tiny flakes of leaf gold, then had that cover the wound up again through a clever twist of [Golden Body]. I would probably evolve that into my own Qi circulation method soon enough - maybe something like [Golden Mirror]?

The agony of the next step shook me from my thoughts.

It took every ounce of discipline I had to remain standing. And, according to [Disciplined], I was quite good at managing my body.

Only [Iron-Will] and [Single-Minded] let me continue my dreadful march back to my companions.

I just had to take it step... by *agonizing fucking step*.

- - -

It took me two hours to make it back to the base camp.

Two full hours of shambling through the forest while barely alive, leaking a trail of blood. I drank from the stream while I followed it, then from filled waterskins, keeping my blood replenished whenever I started feeling light-headed.

By the end of the march, I was relatively sure that each and every muscle in my body, both physical and mental, was at the verge of breaking. Liam found me before I arrived at camp; well, he felt my shadow, rather.

He didn't pick me up, cause he was literally unable to move himself. Didn't even have the Qi to tell the others I was coming, just a simple sign telling them the rustling was a friend rather than a foe.

Secondly, I noticed Matt. He had a big grin on his face. "Fio! Guess what!" he yelled before I even came through the bushes, his voice a dull thrumming in my barely working ears. Maybe I was detecting the vibration through the Qi? Genuinely couldn't tell.

Anyway, with this annoyingly chipper tone, he yelled at me. "Guess who hit wellspring realm just two and a half hours ago!"

THIS MOTHERFUC-

[Calm down Fio, or you'll fall unconscious from blood pressure!]

'Cass. He got to wellspring before I did, when I literally almost died!! How do you want me to be ca-'

Then my blood pressure spiked, and I did, in fact, fall unconscious.

The third thing that I noticed was that my face never impacted the forest floor, because a warm, comforting, familiar presence entered the Qi near me. The smell of fire - not smoke, but fire itself, really, mixed with a faint hint of orange and an even fainter touch of cinnamon.

Ann.

Like lifting a mountain, I opened up my eyelids, dried blood leaving my eyes as I caught a glimpse of her beautiful, beautiful and incredibly worried face.

My lips twisted into a weak smile.

"Hey there, gorgeous," I croaked, then fell unconscious properly.

- - -

When I woke up, it wasn't to the lovely sight of Ann, though. Instead, it was the noise of footsteps and swinging weapons. Pained howls from monsters, and grunts of exertion from my guild.

Opening my eyelids was like lifting mountains, yet I did it anyway. I saw the lilac sky hang above the clearing for a moment. It was so peaceful...

Three celestial silhouettes hung in the sky. The sun, and the two moons, not too far from each other, really. I smiled, and reached my hand up high into the sky. For a moment, I let the feeling of peace run through me.

Then, blood splashed onto my extended arm.

My smile turned into a frown, and my fist in the sky clenched, my spear weaving itself together from my Qi. It was a bit different now, I noticed, since my mastery increased. It felt closer, more like a part of myself. I smiled. Maybe soon, I'd learn more of my master's techniques-

Once again, my thoughts were ended by something entering my field of view. A bloody bornin flew by me, splattering blood onto my face. It joined the dried stuff that was already there.

My entire body still ached, my muscles burning with pain and soreness. They couldn't have used healing magic yet, so my body was wrapped in bandages, and I quite distinctly felt the hole in my side.

Despite it all, I got to my feet.

A bornin saw me and lunged, but with my newfound Qi, it was easy to send it into my spear. I made the weapon much longer, and a tiny movement of my arm annihilated the creature.

The dull ache in my head grew stronger, the strain from manipulating Qi getting to me, but that one was just pain at the end of the day. I pushed it aside, into the corner of my head, and moved on.

Two wells rested inside my body. Neither of them were even remotely full. After my recent fight, their capacity must have increased. I was leaning so heavily on my Qi I would be enormously surprised if those stats *didn't* increase.

So, I decided to go with my new advantages.

[Golden Body] activated as I began cycling my Qi throughout myself. I mixed in some tricks from Matt's style, and some of the things my master had shown me to get more efficiency out of it. Frankly, the ability was the only thing that allowed my battered body to move.

A faint smile wound its way on my face nonetheless.

It felt good to be alive, you know? Sure, I felt dizzy. I wanted to throw up. I was disgusted with *cutting someone's hand off*. But I was alive!

Faintly, in the back of my head, [Mirror Mind] still buzzed, mimicking the Qi circulation, and, strangely, it also let me mirror the bornins. For a moment, I saw one lunge at me.

I was so familiar with the critters, though, that the ability showed me its next movements. I could see exactly how the fight would go. Then, it also let me borrow something from those creatures.

Curiously, I let myself learn from the monsters - the usurpers? Perhaps.

With the mirror in my mind, my body followed, moving with cruel ferocity. Rather than lash out with my spear, I followed the instincts, and stabbed forward with my hand. It was longer than the monster, and I latched onto its head.

For a moment, the mirror told me to rip into it with my teeth, but that was quickly shut down. I was *not* a monster. I could learn from them, though.

Instead of becoming animalistic, I used my spear as a claw, driving it through the creature's heart.

Another one lunged at me, and I sidestepped. Every move it could make played out in front of my inner eye, but I ended the fight by jumping right at the monster, and smashing its head against the ground.

Blood pooled, turning the soles of my boots sticky, and more bornins fell. One after another, we tore them apart. They were ferocious and numerous, some throwing rocks or crappy javelins carved from sticks, but they were no match for us.

Trevor and Emilia bashed, Ann and Evelyn cast, Marie fired arrows, Matt sliced them apart.

Qi bubbled up in my wells and was almost instantly consumed by my hungry abilities, as my spear turned into a shifting weapon of destruction. When enemies came too close, I could even create a secondary blade purely from Qi, or shift the entire shaft into being a blade. Once, I even made the main blade into a scythe, and drew it back, cutting one of the bornins in half.

Fifteen minutes later and the assault was over. I allowed my mind to rest a little, and the dull ache returned. A moment later, with my Qi seeping out of my muscles, I collapsed to the ground, my spear disappearing.

Ann instantly appeared next to me, kneeling down and holding me up. "Fio?" she asked worriedly. "You there? Come on, lay down, you shouldn't be moving, let alone fighting right now..."

I held up a hand to stop her, gently laying a bloodied finger on her lips. I cracked a smile, attempting to be reassuring, but there was blood in my mouth, so some of my teeth might've been red. "Don't worry, love. I'm okay-"

My calming speech was interrupted by a coughing fit filled with chunks of blood. It felt like I was coughing half my lung out, really. Ann attempted to guide me to a makeshift bed of leaves, but I stopped her again.

"Fio, please. Lay down, it's-"

"It's just pain," I said. I looked into her eyes for a long moment. "It's just pain, Ann."

Her face fell, not into anger or disappointment. She just looked... sad. Defeated. "Fio..."

Marie spoke instead. "Fio. You need to rest to recover."

I looked at her for a moment, then swiped my gaze across the camp once. Trev, Evelyn and Sophia wisely kept out of the discussion. My eyes focused on our leader again. I saw that her expression was stern, set in stone. “No, Marie,” I shook my head. “I won’t be a burden this time. I reached wellspring realm, on both my cores. I *will* heal.”

Our leader frowned even more now. “Resting does not make you a burden-”

“YES IT DOES!!” I snapped. Then I coughed again, more blood seeping into the grass. “Yes it does,” I whispered.

“Fio,” Matt tried, but I shot him a glare, and he wisely closed his mouth.

I looked at Marie. For a long, long moment, I held her gaze. She was our leader. The most adept at keeping a cool head and at keeping all of us alive. But I’d fucked up before. Each time I fucked up the others payed the price, in time and effort and pain and money, even.

Not this time.

Slowly, stubbornly, I rose to my feet, then moved to a fallen over log, sitting down heavily. Then, I looked at Marie again. Her face had softened. She understood. “Sorry for snapping. Marie, everyone, please, just trust me. I know I look bad, but we *all* do. We’re in the wilderness. The next city is dozens of miles from here. Monsters *will* find us. You can’t afford to protect me, and I don’t *need* protection.”

I let out a long sigh. “As long as I can move, I’ll move.”

Emilia shot me a smile. “Alright princess,” she said. “You’re being mighty strong right now. I’ll rely on you, then, and you rely on us as well. We’ll have your back, and you’ll have ours.”

It brought a faint smile to my face, too.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Reya and Eric nod. Marie spoke up again. “Emilia is right. We’re a team. Trust is important. If Fio says she can keep going, she can. We trust you.”

At that, there were more nods around the camp. I smiled. “I did bring home a bit of food, I said,” taking the two large fish out of my inventory. “Mountain lake without aquatic monsters. It’s where I got ambushed by some of the Zinnic murderers I taught a lesson to.”

Liam flinched, which was... impressive, given that he was laying down. *Shit!* He was resting! I knew he was worrying about being a burden, he- “Will they come after you again?” his voice resounded in my ears.

It was terribly sad, even less than a whisper, barely more audible than a croak. He sounded hoarse and defeated. "... No," I said solemnly. "I cut off the swordswoman's hand. There was a mage, but... he's afraid, now, I think."

"Zinnic won't continue supporting them if they're that hurt," Emilia said.

"You'd think so. I broke the swordswoman's legs just this morning though, and here she was."

At that, I saw faces turn into grimaces. Ann gently ran her fingers through my hair. "Zinnic wouldn't tolerate failure twice."

"That's true," Matt nodded. "And if they do come again, we'll be here to help you."

He and Emilia were in the best shape out of all of us. Matt, because he advanced, and Emilia because she was unbelievably resilient. I nodded. "Probably, yes. Might make her desperate though. But she won't come swinging a sword well, at least."

Once again, people nodded, and things turned quiet. The clearing smelled of iron, dark bornin blood staining the grassy ground. Our campfire crackled quietly, the fish cooking quietly above it. Reya had placed them there.

For a moment, the crackling was the only noise.

I used the moment to call up the divine gift, checking my Status. I hid the parts whose updates I'd seen in combat already.

[Name: Fiona Bellum

Class: Spearwoman (8) / Gateway (5)

- + Techniques
- Stats
 - General
 - Strength: Medium (**Intermediate**)
 - Agility: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Endurance: **High** (**Inferior**)
 - Resilience: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Manipulation: Medium (**Greater**)
 - Capacity: Medium (**Greater**)
 - Absorption: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Qi

- Gold
 - Purity (Intermediate)
 - Realm (Golden **Wellspring**)
 - Stage (1st Step)
 - Path (Voyage through the Golden **Depths**)
- Mirror
 - Purity (Perfect)
 - Realm (Mirror **Wellspring**)
 - Stage (1st Step)
 - Path (Imprint upon infinite Self-Similarity)
- Disposition
 - Covenant
 - Familiarity (Kind to the known, distrustful to the new.)
 - Temperament
 - Impatient (Time ticks and you wish to be ahead of it.)
 - Disciplined (Your command over yourself is admirable.)
 - Iron Will (Your tenacity is incredible, even among the outstanding.)
 - Talent
 - Slight Edge (Average is below your standards. Go above, even by a little.)
 - Single-Minded (Your focus is your strength. Once your mind is set, nothing will shake you out of it.)
 - Mirror Mind (You reflect what is around you. Mimicking what you see becomes second nature.)
 - **Precipice [New!] (Growth lies on the edge between life and death. Throw yourself onto the precipice... and thrive.)**

Current Status: **Moribund]**

I checked my current status first and winced at the divine gift's choice of words. Moribund was... well, essentially describing me as a shambling near-corpse. Then again, human bodies were not meant to have this many holes in it. And I was kind of only walking by making my Qi move my own body...

On a brighter note, that had done *wonders* for my manipulation. The stat that has always been one of my weaknesses suddenly turned into a strength. Of course, I was under no illusions about this - it had come from a long time of accumulation. Watching people who were better at it than me.

Heck, I may have been mirroring Matt and Rey, my old master, but I had certainly learned a lot of those principles from the way Ann handled mana. In fact, there were still things to learn from her.

However, seeing my endurance jump a major realm was even sweeter than that. It has probably happened sometime during the... body puppeteering march. My muscles still hurt from that exertion, yet I lived, and my body would grow. Because of the divine gift.

That was too long. Why did Iryel have to tell me, really? I'd just call it the Gift from now.

Gazing at my status again, though, I looked at what was by far the biggest gain. [Precipice]. It was the first new talent I had acquired myself, after three years in Eden.

I had heard of something similar before, though the wording on this one was slightly vague. Sinister, almost, telling me to get myself nearly killed. Just thinking of that moment made the deep gash on my forehead ache again. ...I'd have an eyebrow slit for a little bit, I supposed.

But reading the vague wording told me it did exactly what it promised: help me learn when I was hurt. Especially, if I was in a life-or-death kinda scenario. A thin smile found itself on my lips, that probably shouldn't have been there.

The thought of plunging myself into life-or-death battles was... dangerous. Reckless. I should treat this ability as a *safety net*, not as a talent to actively try my best to use.

Still... the Gift called me moribund right now. Almost dead. What if I sparred-

"Don't even think it," Ann hissed. "We'll be moving out tomorrow morning. You'll need to walk. Wipe that grin off your face and *lay down*, please. You are not sparring."

Matt perked up at the word, then quickly lowered his head again. He let out a wistful sigh. Then he smiled at me. "So, Fio, when'd you reach wellspring?"

I felt an artery on my forehead pulse, one that hadn't been severed in my last battle. "Half an hour after you," I said through gritted teeth, clenching them so hard it ached.

The rat-looking fucker had the audacity to give me a bright, truly kind smile. "Ah. That is the smallest gap to me you managed yet! I'm proud of you Fio."

For a moment I faked more anger, struggling against Ann's grip as if I was about to kill him, but then my wound ached, and I dropped back down. Playing with Matt wasn't quite worth aggravating my pain for tomorrow. I sighed. "Proud of you too, you prodigious Rat."

He grinned. "I am quite talented, aren't I?"

Quietly, I grumbled. Maybe I was gonna use [Precipice] a liiiiittle more than strictly necessary.

Chapter 80: Calm

The fish were a bit dark by the time we took them off the fire. Liam devoured one of them, all on his own, while everyone else shared the second. I refused any bite of it, though I did eat quite a few of Marie's roots.

My body could sustain itself for longer than the others, and from a more dire diet by now. My endurance was probably the highest of the party, so I could reasonably eat tree bark by now, too. As long as it wasn't *too* poisonous.

Additionally, my body was partially fed by Qi from my wells. Which helped stave off hunger for a truly superhuman time. It also worked for sleep, luckily enough. Though my mental exhaustion still told me I needed rest right now.

So I politely remained laying down, closed my eyes, and was out like a light a moment after I'd eaten.

- - -

When I woke up, the sky was still dark, and full of stars.

There were, however, sounds of fighting around me. Those had not awoken me. What had woken me up, was Cass loudly screaming into my head, telling me to dodge.

Adrenaline flooding my veins from the sudden stop to my rest, I rolled to the side. Where I'd just been, a drytz poked out of the floor, its claws tearing apart my rudimentary bedding. I was slow, and it scraped my shoulder, but glanced off one of Ann's barriers.

With a herculean effort, I lifted myself off the floor, then closed my eyes again, not bothering to keep them open. My aura sense encompassed a small area around me, but... I learnt fast on the verge of death.

Plus, it extended underground.

With a swift grab into thin air, my spear materialized then I stabbed it into the ground with pinpoint precision, spearing a drytz straight through its head. The creatures were tough, and

ferocious, but they were most of all stealthy. How they'd found us I didn't know, since Marie should have put up barriers...

... Then again, the monsters also found the city.

Combat was swift and brutal, and by the end, the range of my Aura sense had improved by about half a meter, fed by the Qi I'd been able to recover during my brief rest.

When we were all catching our breaths, I turned to Ann, every muscle once again alight with fire. "How long... was I out?" I asked between gasps.

My girlfriend was luckily less winded, since she had been levitating and blasting them with spells. "Two hours, maybe. A little less."

"We have to move," Marie commanded. I turned to her, seeing the gritted teeth and pained expression, but she was right. Resting when monster hordes were about and protections didn't work... was a poor choice. No, we needed to move.

"I'll take point," Emilia said. Matt joined her in the front of the party. Our scout was down, and Marie needed to get us something to eat while we moved, so we wouldn't have time to find monsters ahead of time.

Soon, our formation roughly established itself. Matt and Emilia ahead, followed by Trevor and Evelyn, then our healers, as well as Liam and I. Ann was at the back. I was almost bothered at being so far in the back, but those thoughts soon faded away when simply marching forward took all my focus.

By now, my clothes were filthy. My boots rubbed against my already hurt skin, blistering rapidly. I couldn't reinforce my skin with Qi either; despite my wellsprings producing much more, it was still not enough for luxuries.

It was barely enough to puppeteer my broken body while allowing my cores to fill ever so slowly. I didn't have enough for luxuries.

A half dozen hours passed in a silent march. Occasionally, there would be a small skirmish, but our vanguard usually blasted solitary monsters apart before I even noticed. Halfway through, Liam stirred.

He'd remained firmly asleep throughout everything until now, but when his eyes opened, some light had returned to them. In fact, as soon as he moved, I saw the shadows around us shift a little, as if his control over them manifested itself. He had regained enough Qi for that, then.

I saw the rogue take a couple ragged breaths, then he turned to me. I saw him linger, as if in thought. He still levitated, laying down in mid air, so it was a little strange seeing him turn.

His face was pale as a corpse, and his eyes had bags under them. Other parts of his skin were still blackened and burnt, some flaking off and revealing red flesh underneath.

A few moments, the silence lasted. Eventually, though, I heard his voice - and I was sure I was the only one who heard it.

"You're tough Fio. You advanced, too. Be proud of yourself."

That was all he said, his voice an even quieter whisper than usual, and raspy to boot. Still, his eyes lingered on me, dark and dreary. I gave him my bravest smile. "I... am, yes. But. We each have our strengths, we cover for each other."

My words prompted a small smile from him as well, his skin slightly cracking as he smiled, though shadows soon rose and laid onto his body. "... Yeah," he whispered. "Lend me your shadow for a bit?"

I gave a short nod, not spending my bare energy on an answer, and a moment later, my own shadow liquified, then materialized into a glob of black, and floated off me before attaching to Liam himself.

This wasn't a new ability. It let him borrow some of the attributes of the shadow-bearer for a bit, so he was probably using it to enhance his endurance. Indeed, I saw his wounds begin knitting themselves together. He had a lot of experience in manipulating his body simply because he used Qi to help him transition, so that probably came in quite handy in helping him fix himself up.

In the process, his gaunt form turned even slimmer, using a mix of Qi, fat, and muscle to cannibalize enough nutrients for reshaping flesh. It wasn't a miracle, no form of healing was. But with it, he would be in walking shape again sooner rather than later.

A few seconds after he laid the shadows onto himself, he turned his head. Reya had stepped closer. Suddenly, his form wasn't shrinking anymore, instead, the nutrients were supplied from Divinity. Liam couldn't receive divine healing anymore, but his own Qi was a bit different.

The healing went slowly, but bit by bit, his wounds closed.

After another couple hours, he was almost ready to walk again, though he still remained floating.

We marched silently.

Another hour passed by.

“You know, Fio,” he said, looking up into the night sky. “You don’t have to worry. I... feel a bit bad about myself. But I’ll catch up.”

As he said the words, I saw a small ripple in the shadows on his skin, as if responding to his promise. “I feel like this has been... a learning experience. This kind of silence is rare, you know. I’m getting close to something.”

His thin lips turned into another smile. “Soon. Then I’ll join you in wellspring. Just you wait.”

Somehow, despite the difficulty of advancement, I didn’t doubt his words for a moment. Liam was talented. He also chose an element that allowed him to inherit some power by shadowing others around him. With both Matt and I having wells... it was only a matter of days until he was there, too.

The thought made me look towards Ann at the back of our party. She was keeping a lot of spells active, and had been for a while... My eyes went wide, then she noticed my stare and gave me a sheepish smile.

She’d reached fourth circle. Before Matt reached wellspring, too!

I smiled back, and blew her a kiss, to which she stifled a giggle.

Then I almost fell flat on my face, as a tiny rock impeded my movement. An application of Qi and a painful twist of my muscles later I managed the step but learned my lesson. Instead of flirting, I focussed back on the road at hand.

- - -

[We’re being watched.]

I gave Cass a small nod.

Another hour or two had passed, and the forest was quiet. Sure, we stumbled upon occasional small monsters, and even big ones we had to flee from, but we hadn’t been overrun by the horde, or felt the quakes from a distant battle.

What surprised me most, though, was that we found no other survivors. See, there had been thousands of Edians back in Renvil, and hundreds of Reflectors. Surely, we should have met at least some, rather than just me seeing the hostile swordswoman.

Additionally, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Which, honestly, would be just my luck.

Circulating my Qi had been healing my wounds a little, but this was not damage that could be mended in less than a day, especially when I hit my healing limit already.

The sky was dark above, though not quite as dark as during the night. The sun was, ever so slowly, cresting the horizon above a chain of mountains. Each tree cast enormously long shadows onto the dark ground, and clouds were gathering.

It would rain soon. It felt like something was waiting for their moment to pounce. With a small tap, Liam focused on me, and I formed a couple shapes with my hand, disguising them as best as I could.

His face remained neutral, heavily schooled, but a moment later, every member of our party got the message. All except Trevor, Evelyn, and Sophia. They wouldn't expect the communication, and we couldn't afford to give our knowledge away with a flinch or something.

I saw the muscles on Marie's back tense slightly. She was currently with the party, luckily. We remained silent, all focussed, though our magical senses were now stretched to their limit.

With slight glances, I observed the trees all around us. If I weren't hiding my expression I would have grimaced. There were too damn many places to hide!

Eventually, though, the first raindrop fell.

Dark clouds had gathered in the twilight sky, and the rising sunlight was once again almost extinguished. Thin, tiny wisps of sun, cast enormous shadow, turning the whole forest dark and sinister.

The rain grew quickly, and minutes later, it came down in a pour. Thousands of thick drops slammed into the ground, turning it into slick mud and insecure footing.

I tensed further, the prickling in the back of my neck growing intense. I even felt that Cass was uncomfortably on edge.

Then, eventually, it happened.

A raindrop fell just right; into a ray of sunshine that came through the leaves, hitting my eye at just the right angle. I closed it, the blinding light forcing my pupils to adjust and creating a small distraction for a moment.

The very second my eyelid closed, my aura sense shifted. The raindrop turned into a human figure wielding a sharp knife, thrusting it at my eyes, while from the shadow a tree cast on me, a serpentine hand reached up to slash my tendons.

Not a second later, everything exploded into motion.

Chapter 81: Effort

An attack from a raindrop and the shadows. The first used water to fight, probably. Maybe even rain. The other was shadow or mud, it was almost impossible to tell the difference in that split second, and both would allow them to step through the muddy, dark ground beneath me.

Bending my Qi, I forced my torso backward, barely evading the knife coming at my face and watching it sail through where my head had just been. I saw the silhouette of the man who swung it, a gruff human covered in scars, with a scraggly beard, unruly, wet hair and bloodlust in his eyes.

Unfortunately, the move messed with my footing. The hand sliced against Ann's barriers, and would've broken through in a moment, but settled for the much faster move of Grabbing my ankle, and dragging forward.

Before a second had passed, I felt my back slam into the ground, spikes of hardened shadow threatening to dig into my skin before Liam forced them back down. Instead, mud and stone were the only things that awaited me.

The muck seeped into my open wounds, eliciting a hoarse scream, since the impact blew all the air out of my lungs. The pain made my vision flash white for a moment, and the very instant it came back, a knife was already being stabbed toward my eye again.

'What's with everyone going for my eyes?!'

The thought lasted a brief moment, before I jerked my head to the side. The knife plunged into the ground, but a moment later, shadows wrapped themselves around my neck and *squeezed*.

My attempts to take another breath were quickly interrupted, and I ended up choking on empty air, being pulled a bit deeper into the muck. Every bit of my body ached, and the compression on my throat was strong enough to make my neck creak.

Then, a second later, the shadows lifted, Liam wrangling control of them into his arms again. I quickly activated [Reflecion] on the next stab coming for my face, and the returned slash was quick enough to leave a wound on my attacker's wrist.

Enough time passed for Matt and Ann to explode into the fight - very literally.

In an instant, petals and fire consumed my immediate area, while Marie dashed in to pick me up and drag me out. The bright light briefly drove the shadows away, forcing them to take shape.

A serpent-folk stood in the darkness, red tongue flickering across bronze scales. Her long, scaled tail slithered, already propelling her forward rapidly through the mud, the golden jewellery attached to her scales tinkling as she slithered forward.

The man clashed with Matt, whose sword slid off his dagger. A storm of petals deflected the second stab, headed for his gut.

For but an instant, we held the stalemate, then Trevor and Emilia pounced, smashing at the man. The rogue, however, simply vanished. Reappearing from another raindrop to slash at me.

I quickly raised my spear to stop the swing.

He was using just a dagger, but the force of the attack was nothing short of calamitous. The blow rang down heavily enough to send my bones shaking, and slammed me out of Marie's grasp, instead landing on the floor again.

Only our leader's quick intervention with her own shortsword stopped me from losing my head.

Then, the snake was upon me again - the shadows around me turned into twisted claws, grasping hands with fingers sharp as knives. The serpent directed them, in a bizarre act that could be borne from Qi or Mana. I even heard her hum, in a bastardized incantation.

In a moment, the claws came down.

All but one dissolved away, pained screams tearing forth from Liam's throat and mine. The rogue was wrestling the snake for control of the shadows - and she was trouncing him. The

serpent was certainly at wellspring rank, probably at a higher step than me, too, and still used mana to enhance her attacks.

Liam was already crying tears of blood from exertion, yet my wound was much more mundane.

Sharp, knife-like fingers tore into my thigh, where Liam had failed to dissolve them, and tore apart my flesh to the bone. I lashed out with my spear, dispelling the illusion, but the muck beneath me was already calamitously turned red.

My whole world flashed red. I could not have even reflected that attack, I just didn't have enough Qi. Despite being at wellspring rank, the march was taking a lot out of me, and I was already only barely hanging on.

Despite the horrendous pain, I forced myself to sense the area, at least. Something stirred next to me, sinister and hateful, and I rolled aside, instinctively stabbing back, and hitting only empty air. Whatever I was aiming at, the man I guessed, was horrendously flexible, bending away from my spear with an almost inhuman movement.

A low, hoarse chuckle resounded around me. "I thought this hunt would be harder."

The second voice was beautiful, almost enchanting. "Quite. But our timing was quite fortunate."

"Indeed, who would have thought that Renvil would be overrun so soon... I thought the tide would take some time to trigger?"

"Ah, we must simply be quite excellent at luring the monsters."

The fight had lulled for a moment as the voices spoke, all of us taking the time to regain our bearings, and some power. I ran threads of mirror Qi through my body, forcing my leg to move, and raising from the floor like a twisted marionette.

But the moment they spoke... all the fear in my heart was instantly replaced with boiling, bottomless fury.

I stabbed out at the shape most nearby to me, the man in dark blue clothes, and he twisted out of the way again. It was strange watching him, the way the raindrops coalesced, and moved once they hit his skin. Rather than flow to the floor, he seemed to be collecting them.

Not that I cared.

With a huge blast of Qi, my spear expanded, becoming one enormously long blade. I swiped it to the side in a motion that would bisect him, but the man just grinned and vanished.

He appeared behind me, quite a distance away, and stabbed forward with his dagger. Suddenly, all the water that had hit him reappeared from behind his back, flowing along his blade and forming a long needle of ice.

Instantly, burning pain erupted in the same leg the shadow snake had already hurt, the needle piercing into my thigh. With another quick movement of Qi, he broke off the bit that was not inside my leg, and recalled the rest of the ice into water before I even had a chance to retaliate.

A sinister grin was on his face as he danced even further back.

Grimacing, I stepped forward, chasing after him. The shadows around me roiled, snaking across the ground and began reaching out, but were then beaten down. I trusted my party, and narrowed my focus.

Everything vanished except for the man.

His steps slowed down in my vision, the raindrops freezing in midair. For a moment, I thought it was my focus, but then the drops turned into tiny spikes of ice and flew at me.

I gritted my teeth, and quickly made my spear as wide as I could, hiding behind it like a shield, and watching the needles tinkle to the ground as they hit it. But by the time I moved forward again, the man was gone.

Instead, he was replaced with flashing pain in my side, his knife digging into the hole left behind by another icicle.

Another scream tore from my mouth, but the fury replaced the pain, and I lashed out with my spear. He dodged the blade, but was close enough for my fist to smack him in his mouth.

He tumbled back a step, then laughed hoarsely and spat out some blood. I was panting, desperately shoving the pain aside, while this fucker wasn't even out of breath.

"Serpent!" he suddenly shouted. "Target change! She's no longer a real danger!"

Then he vanished.

Ann.

It was all I could think of to turn, and right there, in the back of the party she stood.

Her hands were extended, wisps of steam flowing off them because of the intense heat concentrated in summoning a fireball. There, only a few steps from her, the man stood.

I saw the water behind him move again, snaking its way onto his dagger to create the same kind of needle he'd made to stab my leg.

Ann would die.

She was a mage. It would just... pierce her heart, and that would be that. Death. Right then and there.

I had to save her.

My mind raced, looking for a way to get to her. Liam could step through the shadows, and the man could step through the rain, but there was no metal for me to step through with my golden Qi.

So how? How to get there?!

Then, I remembered. Right at the start of the fight. I'd thought the man moved through reflections...

What were raindrops, if not tiny mirrors?

The moment the thought appeared in my head, I saw it. Every single droplet in the sky mirrored the world around it. I saw myself in a hundred kaleidoscopic refractions, my face smeared with blood, my body torn and twisted. I saw Matt and Liam and all the others hold the snake down. Eric was close to me.

I gazed at him through the reflection, and he nodded.

An instant later, he crumpled to the floor, spent.

Every drop of divinity in his body flooded through me, fueling my broken muscles with power.

With an iron will, I drew on my mirror Qi, emptying my entire core within a moment.

The world shifted, and I was no longer where I had been before. I stood, in between the assassin and Ann.

[Reflection has reached (Intermediate)!]

Then, everything turned to blinding pain for an instant, my vision going blank. It faded a moment later, my brain overwhelmed with the signals. I looked down, and...

Oh. There was an icy dagger, right through my chest. How unpleasant.

Despite it, I gritted my teeth.

The assassin wasn't far from me. I'd stepped closer to him than to Ann.

With a push of will, I grabbed his shoulder. He couldn't step through the rain if I held onto him.

The expression on his face shifted. From cruel confidence into surprise, glee, then suddenly more surprise and a hint of worry.

I slammed my forehead into his nose, breaking it in a moment.

"ARGH!" he screamed in pain, grasping at his face, but I wasn't done.

With a broken body, I shifted my mirror Qi, forcing my hand to move.

"You want this back, fucker?!" I asked, my hand wrapping around the ice in my chest. I broke off part of it, and stabbed it through his eyes. **"Get away from her!!"**

The man staggered back a step, screaming with pain, but I didn't let go of his shoulder, my hand like a vice grip on him. The extra distance let me summon my spear again though, which I promptly drove into his stomach.

Water shifted, and a layer of ice went to protect him, but it was never gonna be enough.

Every drop of golden Qi rushed through my body, into the tip of my weapon. His shield of ice, made from thousands of raindrops shattered within a moment. My spear went into his gut and back out the other side.

The Qi drove through him, tearing his insides apart.

A moment later, the light in his eyes went out.

Chapter 82: Alive

My Qi was empty. The snake woman was still alive, though she was currently held down by all members of our party. Then, though, she suddenly sunk into the floor, vanishing into the shadows.

A moment later, as my vision turned red and my world tipped onto its side, I saw Liam, too, lose cohesion and turn into a black blob.

Then, for a bit, the world was filled with dancing shadows and bestial howls. I saw claws and fangs and horrid monstrosities in the darkness.

The fight lasted only an instant. At the end, Liam returned from the shadows, his body now covered in lacerations, and bites, bleeding from a myriad wounds. Still, he grinned. "Made it," he whispered. "Wellspring."

Only a few seconds later, the snake reappeared, mauled and broken, barely clinging to life. She... had not expected an attack in the shadows, and never held that kind of battle, so Liam's rather suicidal charge took her by surprise.

He'd been brutal, too.

Both her eyes were clawed out, turning her blind, and bite marks like those from a wild beast covered her side, having torn off huge chunks of shadowy flesh. Her body seemed to barely hold its cohesion together, but already, shadows twirled to repair it.

Liam had run out of Qi before finishing her, but that didn't matter.

Emilia's mace came down, breaking her face, and a moment later, icicles made by Evelyn and Ann sunk into her flesh, until she stopped moving.

The camp was silent for a moment, and I staggered.

Briefly, I remembered the gaping wound in my chest. The flame of divinity burnt for a moment longer, then left like a flickering echo.

All the strength that had fueled my body suddenly disappeared, leaving me feeling hollow and weak.

A small, terrible smile appeared on my face. I really was hollow now, wasn't I? Who could boast about having a hole in their ch-

Then, I fell unconscious, once again.

- - -

Awakening was a soup of pain, made worse by the fact that I saw everything and everyone from a hundred different perspectives. Maybe more than that.

The pain was a red hot iron diving into my brain. I tried to let out another scream but all that left my mouth was a wet gurgle.

Ah, nice. Punctured lung. Lovely.

[Fio. Cycle your Qi. Try to breathe. Your left lung is punctured.]

Okay. Luckily, the stab wasn't too thick. Only about... an inch in diameter?

[It's bad, but you can breathe.]

I could. Slowly, forcing myself to be as calm as possible, I drew in a small breath. My right lung moved, and oxygen slowly reached my blood. It hurt like hell, but... what was another bit of pain on top?

[Ah. Sorry. I can...]

Suddenly, some of the pain faded. I only saw darkness again. 'What... was that?' I asked. It was honestly hard to even form cohesive thoughts.

[Reflection. You can... see and walk through mirrors near you now? Something like that. It's still raining, so there are a lot of mirrors. I took that part of your perception. Easier for me to filter through than you. Let me see if I can't...]

My vision changed again as Cass tried out something. Images after images flashed by my mind, distorted, strange reflections of reality. The darkness before my inner eye suddenly became awash with twisting, blinding colours, and honestly I wanted to close my eyes.

Too bad they were already closed.

A few seconds passed where my world was awash with twisted brightness, until it finally settled.

Once again, my perception was different. The new... perspective, I supposed, joined my aura sense. I could already feel the world around me, my range having expanded again after the battle.

Now, though, in addition to the strange sense of my surroundings, there was also a clear visual image of the world around me. I could see all my companions, despite my closed eyes, and I could see myself.

Wow did I look bad.

The rain had washed away a lot of blood, but more still was oozing from my wounds, as Ann desperately tried to stem the bleeding. Oh. I was... still lying in the mud? Only a couple seconds must have passed...

[Two minutes. You were out for two minutes, Fio. Ann had been doing chest compressions on you.]

'Oh crap.'

Just to calm my girlfriend down, I put in the effort it took to lift my eyelids. Honestly, there was little point to the motion. I felt raindrops falling into them eliciting tiny bits of pain, but they faded again moments after.

Okay, maybe it was worth it, to see Ann's face.

She was... crying. Her red hair was a dark crimson, stained by the rain, and hung down in muddy curls. The rain mixed with her tears on her face, dripping down onto me. My ears popped and I could hear her sobbing.

"C'mon!" she cried, pressing down on my chest one more time, prompting me to cough painfully, bloody chunks of flesh evicting themselves from my body. I spat on the ground next to me, the dark mud tinged red.

"Fio!" Ann yelled again, suddenly turning to look at my face, her scarlet eyes lighting up with hope.

Despite all the pain in every tiny part of my body, I gave her my best smile. "Heya Ann. Sorry, I-" my clever line was rudely interrupted by another bloody cough. I was doing that a lot recently. I drew in a ragged breath and finished my sentence. "I must've... slept in. Did I... miss anything?"

Slowly but surely, Ann's lips curled as well, a tiny smile mixing onto her face, and she started laughing and crying at the same time, drawing in deep gasps of wet air. She even smacked the ground next to me, scattering some bloody mud through the air.

"You're so grounded!" she cried in the middle of a horribly sad laugh. "Don't do that, Fio! Don't ever do it again!"

I was more glad than ever to have reached wellspring. The two minutes of calmly laying down and bleeding out were enough to regain some Qi. I immediately used some golden Qi to keep my insides inside, and some mirror Qi to move myself.

Slowly, gently, my arm reached up, and I wiped a tear off Ann's face. "Come on, I must've... looked really cool, didn't I?" I grinned.

She laughed again, her body wracked and struggling to cope with it all. Eventually, she managed to get out a couple words. "Yeah," she said between quiet sobs. "Thank- Thank you."

Then I let my hand drop.

'Cass, monitor my vitals. Make sure I keep breathing. Sync if you have to, but please, stay away from my pain receptors, alright?'

My keeper gave me a small affirmation, then I felt a bit more secure. I coughed again, lighting up the flares of pain in my chest, but it didn't matter for now.

"I'm so proud of you, Ann," I say, taking laboured breaths, and still feeling short on air. "Liam, too. You're all amazing." Another breath. "I'll... take a nap now."

Her face fell.

"Don't be... dramatic," I chided, then coughed again. Wow, I really unlocked a whole new stage of agony. "I'll wake back up."

She laughed again, a horribly sad giggle that almost shattered my heart. "You better! Or I'll come after you and kick your butt."

I gave one last smile, then fell asleep.

- - -

Somehow, the next time I woke up, everything hurt even worse than before. At least I wasn't walking this time. Instead, I was gently floating in midair.

Rain still pattered down on my face, much more gentle now, and the wind was a cool breeze.

My hair was, however, still sticky with blood. In fact, all my clothes were caked in it. The rain did, however, let me see the outside world, overlapping with my Qi sense. My ears were... better. No longer ringing. I could actually hear the sound of droplets coming down on my face, and my friends marching.

Other than that, there was the rustling of leaves in the wind. The storm had let off a little. But... there were definitely more footsteps than there were supposed to be.

I focussed on my sense and the images Cass projected into my mind. This kind of sight had limited range, and was a little blurry at times, since it was a patchwork of distorted reflections, but it was omnidirectional.

A quick review of what was going on around me told me that yes, there *were* actually more people. We'd picked up some refugees. Lots of people I had never seen, and a couple I had. Someone from the market, someone who'd been at a blacksmith at the same time as me, an alchemist I'd brought supplies to once.

Every last one an Edian.

They looked... well, I couldn't exactly say *worse* than me, but definitely more demoralized. These were people who had lost their homes to monsters. People who might've only seen the wilderness a few times. Now they were being escorted through monster infected woods by a group of ragtag Reflectors riddled with wounds.

Should not have thought of wounds. The reminder of their existence made pain in my lungs flare up. I forcefully made my breathing more shallow, trying to take in only as much air as I needed.

At the same time, I tried to envision how Liam moved his Qi. His technique had been made for turning flesh malleable - both for being a good scout, but also to truly reshape his body. I could surely take some of his patterns and apply them to me...

My next couple minutes of consciousness were spent cycling Qi. I took it slow, combining multiple tricks from multiple people to create a method that worked for me. It was a patchwork at best, but with my recent... intense... practice, I made progress faster than I usually would have.

Ah. Right, that was something my master had once told me. Advancing, then consolidating your experience. Push your boundaries, then settle your strength. I suppose now, I was onto consolidating.

Everything about my use of Qi had progressed by leaps and bounds, though at a cost. I had cried blood and cut up my insides, but I had progressed. Now it was time to settle into that new power.

Briefly, I took up a moment to turn to the side, and cough up some blood. Yeah, okay, there was definitely more internal damage from overly straining my Qi pathways. But it would heal, I hoped.

It did mean that I needed to be careful now.

Strangely, my mind still felt fresh. Well... not exactly fresh. It had been more than through the wringer, but by now the headaches were so constant they were more of a background hum. So, I simply remained with my eyes closed, and focused on moving my Qi.

Eventually, I was interrupted by a small tap on my forehead. I didn't bother opening my eyes, but I did focus more attention on my outside senses again. "Ann?" I croaked. Wow, my throat was scratchy. "Water, please?"

She smirked. "Really? Not even gonna look at me?" Despite her protest, she brought a small cup-like thing to my lips and poured some water into my mouth.

"Your beauty is too radiant," I countered after taking a moment to swallow.

"Oh my gosh," she said, then giggled. "Seriously, though. Your skin is glowing. It's making people nervous."

"Ah," I said, then checked. "So it is." Golden body did indeed make my skin glow. A part of my current Qi circulation was taken from that Skill, and really, most of it was. What I was doing now was more a special application than a real overhaul.

"Your wounds also seem to be scabbing over in gold. That's you, I'm guessing?" She asked.

I gave a small nod, managing the tiny gesture since my neck muscles were some of the few I hadn't had to completely overwork. Still hurt, though.

"Okay. Nothing dangerous?"

I shook my head.

Ann nodded. "Okay." She paused for a moment, then placed a light kiss on my lips. "You focus on getting better soon, sleeping beauty."

At that, I could not hold back a smile. "Okay," I said simply. I would've loved to tell her more, but I was already feeling short on breath, spouts of dizziness setting in, and so was forced to focus on my meditation again.

Quite a bit of time must've passed like that.

Chapter 83: Qi Control

I was woken up by a tap on my nose from Ann. My meditation had most certainly ended up with me drifting into sleep. Which... wasn't the point, but at the end of the day, circulating Qi was mentally exhausting, so it was only really a matter of time.

"Oh, good. You're thinking again," Ann chimed in with a smile.

Hearing her voice, I took a moment to focus on the present again - and immediately regretted it.

Every single bit of my body hurt and complained. My bones ached like I was over three hundred, my skin felt paper thin, the windchill already cutting through it. My muscles had it worst, the pain of their overuse mixing with the pain of my countless cuts and bruises.

Of course, it still paled in comparison to the aches on my head and chest, where I got my skull scraped by a sword and my lung pierced. Divines, my lungs *hurt*. I could have been breathing nails and I swear it would've felt better.

Despite that, I forced myself to take a shallow breath. Only half my lung was moving anyway, so I supplemented Oxygen with Qi. It was not exactly sustainable for long, but it was better than nothing.

With the magical energy coursing through my circuit, I felt a lot better already. My eyes were still heavy, so I instead tried to give a smile to Ann. "How'd you know?" I asked.

"Your face. You look peaceful when you sleep, but that was your thinking face just now," she said, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"I have a thinking face?"

"Oh, yes," she agreed. "Very serious business."

Despite all the pain, I was still glad to see, no, feel the smile on her face. The rain had... not stopped, but slowed a lot. With fewer reflective surfaces around me, my view of the world shifted again, essentially only encompassing my Qi sense. It made the world less clear, certainly, but at least the pressure against my mind decreased a whole lot.

Less sensory overload - I think that might have actually knocked me unconscious without Cass to handle it. I sent her a quick thanks before focusing on Ann again.

"So much thinking," she teased, giving me a kiss on the nose.

“Sure, sure. Why’d you wake me up, then? Just to tease me a little?” I asked, innocently.

“No, really it was uh... I was worried you’d bleed out. Also, your blood is attracting monsters a bit, and your mirror Qi was increasing, also drawing more of them to us, so... yeah. We’re not in dire straits yet, but it would definitely be better for you if you closed the wounds up again,” she explained.

“Ah,” I simply mouthed, and focused some more. Within a few moments, my Qi was circulating. My wells were half full, which meant I had probably slept for a couple hours at least.

Their capacity had increased a whole lot since they became wells, so half full was about as much as my cores used to hold. Sadly, that meant very little, since [Golden Body], the technique at the foundation of my Qi cycling, was a very hungry skill. Of course, I could reduce the amount of power it used by augmenting my own strength and speed less, but enhancing my regeneration still consumed a lot of resources.

Still, I did it. I contained my mirror Qi, using it instead to plug gaps in my wounded body, to seal smaller scraped and medium sized lacerations. The blood dripping out from my wounds decreased, then stopped as a whole, when my skin once again shone with radiance.

Ann smiled. “Okay, love. You’re doing great. Wanna hear some news on how things’ve been going?” she asked.

“Sure,” I replied with a smile.

She nodded. “Right. We picked up a couple more refugees. Some angel came by and told us to head to the nearest city. Same guy who shielded us. He looked bad. Not as bad as you, but a close second.”

“Iryel?”

“He did not stay long enough to introduce himself. But he’ll live, I’m sure. Had the type of tired expression that told me if he was going to fall over dead he already would have.” She said the words in such a deadpan tone I had to try hard to stifle a giggle

“You’re probably right.”

“I am quite brilliant,” she said, giving me a shrug and a dramatic sigh, before giggling at her own joke. “But yeah, unfortunately he had no healing left in the tank. Not that you are in a state to accept it. General wisdom tells me to drop you off at a gateway now.”

"If only," I said with a grimace.

Ann nodded somberly. "The soul stuff?"

"Yep. According to Cass it's still not looking good. Really, eventually, I should just be able to gate myself back, no other mirror needed."

She sighed. "Alright. Let's hope it's sooner rather than later. Iryel seemed troubled. More than he should be, I mean."

I used some strength to reach out and squeeze her hand. "We'll make it through," I said. "We will." And even if I didn't, I'd make sure Ann did.

Despite her best efforts, she couldn't suppress the small smile on her face. "Alright, love. We will." Once more, she gave me a small kiss. "Make sure you heal quickly."

"It's not as easy as it looks!" I said, trying to put a grimace onto my face.

Ann chuckled. "Well, then you'll just have to figure it out, little genius."

I gasped at her audacity. "*I'm* the genius now?"

All Ann gave me was a slight shrug. "Look, I dunno which one of us reached wellspring twice over..."

"That's cause you don't cultivate!!" My offended yell tapered off into more of a whimper and a cough as I used up the air in the lung I had left.

My lovely girlfriend gave me a sad smile. "Okay, that's enough teasing for now. Just... make sure you heal, okay?"

"I will, promise."

"Thanks," Ann said. She placed a kiss on my forehead, then stepped away again, though I felt her hand linger in mine before she eventually let go. I almost mourned the warmth for a second, but was able to swiftly focus on my own situation again. The powerful pain of taking a too-deep breath certainly helped.

[Don't worry about stitching yourself back together wrong, I have blueprints of your body stored!] Cass supplied cheerily.

A tiny smile found its way onto my face again. '*Thanks Cass.*'

- - -

Time... kind of started to fly by after that little exchange. Occasionally, my meditation would be interrupted. Sometimes it would be people trying to talk to me. Mostly, those conversations started with them waking me up, and me stopping any wounds that had reopened and were freshly bleeding.

Occasionally, it was for food. Most of the time, though, when I stopped meditating, it was because I had fallen asleep. I slept a lot. Twelve hours one day, sixteen the next. I developed a small fever, but I crushed the invading tiny lifeforms with the brute force of my Qi.

Then, the very next day, my body temperature dropped too low and I was constantly dehydrated from losing too much blood. It was truly strange. I was healing, definitely, but at the same time, I was falling apart inside.

Keeping my lung going was painful and difficult work, my own muscles and organs seemingly begging me for rest. But there was no more rest I could give them. I already wasn't marching - and I was truly glad for that.

I saw it in the eyes of everyone else. In the mornings, when ice formed on the grass, I could often see the whole group more clearly. See the bags under their eyes.

Liam was marching again before me. His flesh was supported by shadows where too many muscles had been lost. The duel he had with the snake was a brutal one, and while he had carved out bits of her flesh, she had taken some of his as well.

But he supported himself. And walked.

We didn't have many mages, so only the most injured could be levitated. Especially if we wanted to be ready for combat. Qi simply wasn't as good at utility as Mana, but it was just as well suited for combat.

So, the mages were busy levitating refugees that were truly incapable of walking.

And the march was gruelling.

Marie was a truly talented forager, and we had alchemists to prepare monster meat to be cooked now, but with that came trouble. Repelling formations were simply no longer working. Monsters would run right past them, smelling us.

It meant that we had to stay moving. Sleep in shifts. Never rest too long.

With the formations failing, cooking became troublesome. Fire and burnt meat attracted even more hungry monsters. We scattered so often, or needed to fight around a fireplace. And I just laid there, dead weight, slowly mending my wounds and knitting my flesh back together.

Of course, the meat also took a long while and resources to prepare - no expelling those wild energies without using your own. It took energy to purify monster meat, and it was not a short process either. So our meals became sparser rather than fuller as we found more refugees.

Despite that, though, they all hung on.

Some of the people were older, some families with kids, some kids without parents. But they took care of each other.

The hostilities between Edians and Reflectors didn't matter anymore when you had to rely on each other to get food on your plates. We could see the Edians doing their best now. Boiling tree bark, picking berries, making nourishing tea from leaves, and they saw us. The way that we cut down monsters, got hurt, then fought again.

All the little conflicts over the ages were washed away, because everyone had to make a sincere effort to survive and march on.

Because, despite all that effort, each day our group grew and shrank. People would fall down, and others would carry them on their backs. Emilia regularly carried three or four people, lugging them over her shoulders when they were too tired to continue walking.

And every time someone collapsed it cost us when we had to fight. Wounds piled up. People slunk too far back and were picked off. Creatures swooped in undetected from the ground or above, and someone lost their legs before being able to fight back.

Then, we'd find a new group of survivors and our numbers grew more than they shrank.

It was horrible, seeing it all, and yet being unable to help. But despite the horror of it all, my body could not move that much. The gift told me so, too.

[Current Status: Subsisting]

I was *subsisting*. Staying alive. Not yet properly recovering. And I knew it was right - while I was staying alive, my wounds were healing slowly. My resilience would most certainly increase by the time I was done, though, which was nice. Nothing to take you over the hurdle of a major realm like a hole in your chest!

But it still bothered me, being unable to fight with the others. Still, it was something I had to endure, despite my impatience. So, I used the time to improve my Qi cycling.

There was nothing else to do, after all, and with recently unlocking aura sense, and being able to look through reflections, I could still see the world quite well.

Maybe the strangest part of the ability was being able to see the world through other people's eyes. Like, sure, they were called mirrors to the soul, but they were also actually reflective. But my ability also showed me what was reflected, creating a slightly distorted, strange perspective on the world - but a perspective nonetheless.

With the amount of refugees slowly increasing, my points of view also increased. Cass, luckily, helped me filter through them, otherwise it might have become overwhelming. My range was also limited, but the distance I could see was quite a bit further than the distance I could blink through them.

Mostly, though, I used this perspective combined with my aura sense to trace how people were moving their Qi. I learnt from them all.

Liam had a technique that was shapeless and quick, changing his body and allowing momentary adaptations. Matt was graceful but with a hidden fury, like a moving torrent of water, able to release a storm with the smallest movement of the floodgates.

Emilia's method was calm and solid. Reinforcing her. Letting her become an unmoving bulwark, and Marie kept hers light, keeping her quick on her feet but also strengthening the chain of her body, letting her shoot arrows faster.

Each of them was different, each something I could learn from. I even watched Trevor a little, and some of the other small handful of Reflectors who'd joined our group.

Strangely, though, each and every one of them paled compared to one memory I had in mind. I had seen it precisely once, before I could properly sense Qi, but the memory stuck out like a sore thumb in my mind, and even now, afterwards, I could barely comprehend the magnitude of mastery on display.

My teacher, Rae. It was a single display, the only time I had ever seen him seriously fight, and the memory was seared into the back of my head.

It was, after all, the first brush with death I'd had in Eden.

There were a lot of things that went wrong, as well as a bit of bad luck. With my first proper party, we'd elected to stay in Eden despite the eclipse happening. We'd known very little about it then, and thought that the other Reflectors were simply cowards.

They were not.

We headed out on a normal mission, the sky dark, the sun obscured by the moon. The world felt so angry, I still remembered the very air outside the protective magic feeling like it boiled against my skin.

Despite the warning signs we ventured out into the forest. I was not stationed at Renvil back then. The frontier was a bad place to be as a newbie, and I'd luckily spawned into the heartland. But that didn't matter when there was an eclipse.

We'd just fought off a group of starved, weakened bornins, when the rift opened.

I saw it, then.

The world, itself, torn open.

A gaping wound in the fabric of reality. An opening that let in an unbelievable hunger. Simply gazing at it was enough for me to believe I was starving.

Then, something crawled out.

It was a claw. It tore free from the rift, grabbed its edges and pulled it open further. There was a maw, ringed with eyes, each the size of a house. It was a truly enormous monster, clawing apart the world, and taking huge bites from it as the gash opened.

With a single snap of those dreadful teeth, half my party was gone. After a second snap, I was the only one left, since I'd had the sensibility and self control to crawl backwards. Chunks of the floor vanished into the maw, until he appeared.

A spear struck down from the sky. It was gleaming, a bright, blazing white, radiant and horrifying in its intensity.

The weapon struck like a lightning bolt, carving a ravine into the land. An enormous blow that uprooted trees, breaking them into splinters. The spear was gorgeous, too. Handle made entirely from steel, full of thousands of tiny engravings. A magical artefact made by the most skilled artisans all of Eden had to offer.

Its blade was pristine, with grooves cut into it, and slightly curved edges, giving it a brutal edge. It tore apart the monster.

A blink later, the fight was over. It had barely been a few blurs. A man, white hair and white robes, incandescent with radiance, picked up the weapon. He slashed out with casual ease, yet each moment gave a sense of supreme master, and a fathomless ocean of Qi moved with him.

Incandescence spilled forth. It was like seeing the tides, all condensed into a moment. A hurricane of unbelievable heat. An amount of Qi that seemed entirely inhuman. Impossible. Blazing with power and mercilessness. A consuming energy that left nothing standing.

Within moments, the world burnt. The rift burnt. The forest burnt.

My eyes dried from the heat and I shut them for a moment, then opened them again and it was all gone. The forest had turned into flatlands, and we were surrounded by glassy, barren soil.

“Oh,” Rae had said. “This isn’t good for my back. Ah, are you...? Oh, no. What is a newbie like you doing out here. Come, come. Get up, come on. That must’ve been bright, I do apologize.”

He’d extended a hand, and, dazedly, I’d grabbed it. A moment later I was on my feet.

“What’s your name, kiddo?” he’d asked.

I wasn’t really a kid anymore at all but... he was old enough I let it slide. The fact that he had levelled the forest within a kilometer also helped. “Fio,” I said. “Fio Bellum.”

His lips curled up. “A warrior?” Then his eyes flitted to the ashes that remained of my spear. I’d dropped it and it had not escaped the incinerating ocean. “Ah. Sorry. I’ll uh... pay for a new one?” He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly.

Slowly, I shook my head. He was like... a regular grandpa to talk to. “Teach... teach me, please.”

“... Huh?!?!”

Instantly, Rae’d taken a step backwards. But he couldn’t decline. And that’s how I’d ended up learning from him.

Now, that memory flooded to the forefront. The flood of Qi that was unending yet measured. Somehow, that entire ocean had been at his beckoning. Not a drop of the magical substance was wasted. Each bit terribly efficient and terrifyingly destructive.

Still, more interestingly was how he cycled Qi through himself to remain entirely unscathed. And keep me unscathed, despite hardly knowing I was there. How...?

The thought gave me a headache, and I abandoned the attempt for now.

One day.

Chapter 84: Preparations

That day certainly wasn't coming anytime soon, though. For now, I was busy trying to keep myself from dying. I used my Qi to copy some healing patterns from the twins as well, when they used it on the other refugees, though the Divinity did a large chunk of the work, and thus my imitations didn't work nearly as well.

Knitting flesh back together was unbelievably complex, after all. That was why healing was usually within the realm of Divinity. Different types of tissue demanded different ways of manipulating the energy - essentially frequencies. And they needed to be regenerated within the right framework, with the ability to replicate themselves, and no damage...

It was difficult. Instead of trying to mimic that aspect, I copied and enhanced other bits. Namely, the stimulation of regular recovery. That was something Divinity excelled in as well, and the aspect I copied. The patterns were still complex, but I could reasonably substitute Qi.

The newly made flesh wasn't always perfect. Sometimes, there were small defects or it broke apart. But the enhanced regeneration could largely keep up. Essentially, it looked as if my wounds scabbed over more than once, with skin building and shedding.

Was it a little gross? Yes, for sure. But I was finally recovering, rather than just subsisting.

Of course, the journey still continued on, and so I cultivated, too. My mirror well advanced another step first, the jump coming to me rapidly. Apparently, killing the assassins left a pretty big imprint on the future.

Voyage took a little longer to raise, almost a week. But as I lazily drifted through the air, held aloft by Ann's floating spells, the sensation was quite similar to being underwater. It meshed well with the... slightly strange turn my voyage had taken.

The thought brought a smirk to my lips. Yes, voyage hadn't progressed the way I'd planned for it to. But then again, if a journey went entirely according to plan... that was a pretty boring journey, wasn't it?

So, I leaned into it. Leveraging my new sensation to explore deeper and deeper into the golden depths. What I found was... calm. Quiet. Beauty. Ferociousness.

It felt like those depths were a reflection of myself. And what I truly ended up finding and advancing was my impatience. That was when I began to slightly crack through the barrier. Then, bit by bit, I crept closer. And, eventually, with a week and a half's worth of persistence, as I floated along, carried by Ann, I broke through to the second step of voyage.

With the breakthrough, I also noticed the depths becoming a bit lighter. My purity had increased. It would do so slowly now, since I could refine my Qi, and my well would produce more pure one than what was in there.

So, bit by bit, as I used it, then refilled my core, then used it again, the purity would increase. For now, it jumped from Intermediate purity to Greater purity. Which would do wonders for any abilities powered by it.

These were, however, my only breakthroughs. My Qi cycling improved by leaps and bounds, and with it my manipulation, but I had not called up the seven basic stats. I wanted to wait until I'd healed before. Watching them in the middle of training was bad, or so Rae had taught me. Even if that training was knitting my body back together.

Another week passed before we finally arrived at the next city. And, luckily, this one was still standing.

... Barely.

My vision was quite good now, with me being able to see through the eyes of the others. This meshed especially well with Marie, since her eyesight was incredible. Synced up with her, I saw the monsters.

The city walls still stood but were veritably covered by critters. Torins were tearing down from the sky, being shot down in droves by balls of fire, and cut down by warriors standing in the sky.

Shields of Mana and Divinity lit up all across the city stopping blow after blow. Seems like this city's arrays had failed as well. How wonderful.

Seeing the danger, Marie returned and reported. It was disheartening, really. By now our group was quite large, with hundreds of Edians, and two dozen total reflectors. Somehow, Marie remained in charge of it all. But with the news of the monsters, hope almost drained out of the peasant's faces.

I smiled, faintly. Fine, then. Maybe it was time to do my job then.

With a groan, I lifted myself upright. The wound on my chest was scabbed over, my clothes bloody and filthy. I sported new smaller scars all over, and a large one on my forehead that was still not fully healed.

These people all had seen me lay on my back for over two weeks now. Time to show them.

With a swift use of mirror Qi, I appeared next to Marie, jumping through a bit of reflective dew. I smacked my spear onto the ground, Letting a golden wave travel through the group. The murmurs of despair quieted.

Matt appeared on the other side of our leader, flashing me a radiant smile. Ann laid a hand on my shoulder, concerned, but I gave her a light kiss, then shook my head. With some effort, I turned back to the crowd.

"Stop cowering," I said. I projected my voice using Qi, just to make it louder. It wasn't like Liam's technique which only the person he spoke to would hear, my words simply sounded out across the whole camp.

"This world is overrun with monsters, isn't it? You all have faced this threat every day of your life. So now they're here, in front of you, and you can't hide behind those walls anymore, right? But the city is standing. There are people out there fighting. / will be fighting - hole in my chest and all."

That got a few nervous chuckles.

"Your city fell because you were unlucky. Caught on the back foot. The monsters killed a lot of people. So, how about we start killing 'em back?!"

And that got a tentative couple cheers. I took a step back again, standing next to and behind Marie. She gave me a thankful nod, then continued speaking. Hers were more practical terms, with a little bit of inspiration mixed in.

But most of the speech focused on distribution in the group. Where would the Reflectors go, where the Edians? Apparently, we were to be the tip of the spear, in a fanned out triangle formation, while the Edians would be in the middle. Hopefully, they'd be safer there.

For a few moments, I zoned out, choosing to focus on my heartbeat instead of the situation. The organ thumped loudly in my chest, and I could feel Qi bubbling forth from my wells with every heartbeat. It flowed through me, through my blood and my muscles and my tissue. Bits and pieces of it were turned malleable, connecting with one another and mending.

And the pieces that came back were more suffused with the magical substance. Tougher, by a major realm. My endurance, too, was higher now. How long could I keep fighting? And... I looked at the city with trepidation. Would it be long enough?

Then, Ann bumped her elbow into me. "You'll be fighting, hm?" she asked with a mischievous smirk. "I wasn't aware of that."

I gave her a grin. "Seems like I'm full of charming and tantalizing mystery."

She snorted in reply. "Oh yes, so charming," she said, giving me a kiss. For a few moments she stared into my eyes, happily. Then, her smile faded, replaced by a more serious expression. "Make sure you live."

"Always." I nodded, holding her gaze. We would live, no matter what.

For a few more seconds, she looked at me. Eventually, her lips curled up into a smile. Ann gave me a hug and I squeezed her tightly, ignoring the small pinpricks of pain it caused in my chest. Then, she let go, giving me a strong nod. "Always." And she was off, to wherever she would be needed.

I swept my gaze over the Edians. A ragtag band of people, some kids, some old, most in their adult years. There were hundreds. Some seemed afraid, some enraged, others again hopeful. I didn't know what it took for them to receive the Divine Gift, but if none of them got it after participating in the battle, I would have been surprised.

They needed weapons.

This was something I could help with. Another one of the Reflectors in our group seemed to have the ability to shape wood to a degree, with a strange mix of magic, Qi, and singing. I approached them, Soren, and they looked up from their meditation.

"Can you make me some spear shafts?" I asked.

"What, you want throwing weapons?" they returned, tilting their head a bit. It made their hair bounce slightly, shoulder long and bright.

I shook my head. "No, I want to make spears for the Edians."

They paused, regarding me once over again, scrunching up their eyebrows. "... Metal Qi?"

"That's right," I nodded.

"Hm. Sure. I'll make you those, they said. Couple hundred... ah, it might take me... fifteen minutes?"

"Sounds good, thanks," I said, receiving another nod from Soren as I walked off again. The Edians had huddled together a bit, to where they would eventually be in the formation. I called out to them. "Anyone who wants a weapon, hand over some metal! Cooking pots, pans, belt buckles, anything from solid steel will do! Silver, too!"

Using silver wasn't exactly optimal, as it wasn't the strongest metal, but some monsters were weaker to it, and it was certainly better than nothing. I spent the next half hour making more weapons.

Some of the Edians carried daggers and wanted something with more reach. So, I would push my Qi into the metal, then force it to take on the shape of a speartip, firmly attaching it to the wooden shafts Soren provided.

Sometimes, when we had especially little metal, I made my partner in smithing form a wooden spearhead, then simply covered it. The weapons were of poor quality. They were sharp, sure, but not sharp enough, since I couldn't exactly make edges that smooth with metal Qi.

Shaping it with my Qi also meant that there would not be as much hardness from tempering and quenching and whatever other things blacksmiths did. But they were still poky metal things, and Liam was handing out dozens of whetstones each minute.

... Why the heck did he carry that many whetstones?

I shook my head, quickly getting rid of that extraneous thought, instead focussing on my task again. The manipulations I performed were small, but somewhat frequent. It drained my resources, but at a slow, manageable pace. My capacity and manipulation had increased, too, so I was handling my power with greater skill than ever before.

Minute after minute ticked by. Plans were finalized, people went to their positions. I got stationed with Matt and Emilia, Ann a bit further behind. Reya was closer to the middle, there would not only be one spot needing healing today, and we were short on healers.

A warrior cleric of Ru stood a little ways to my right, and a duo of mages a little ways to my left. They would pull their weight, I hoped. Trevor was on the other side of the wedge

formation, but one of us would most likely save the other when chaos broke loose. It always went that way.

With a glance, I looked over my party members where they stood. Liam was close to the front, on the other side and a bit further forward than us. We would face the horde, holding them back, the other side would have to carve the way through the monsters into the city.

The rogue was bouncing in place, staying warmed up, shadows swirling around him as he tested them. Reya was already patching up small injuries that would be troublesome in a fight, trying to remember all the Edians. Eric stood by her side, looking nervous, but still outputting just as much Divinity.

Marie was close to the middle as a leader. Her bow glowed with green magic, a spell she had most likely woven herself. Her eyes, too, glowed faintly, surveying the battlefield ahead. Emilia was to my right, steadfast and calm. Her mace slung over her shoulder, the battered shield in the other hand.

She gave me a glance. "It'll be a long day, princess. Let's stay standing at the end of it all."

I nodded, turning to look at Matt. He was characteristically silent. I saw it in his eyes already. The way his lips faintly curled up, the way his fingers held onto the grip of his sword. He breathed, deep and hard. That same manic glint was in his eyes that he always had before a fight.

He would be fine, I knew that much. Lastly, I turned to Ann behind me, and she gave an encouraging wave. Somehow, her robes seemed brighter, now. She'd probably applied temporary enchantments during our bit of prep time. Mana regeneration or something similar, if I interpreted it correctly.

I waved back, flashing her my brightest smile, then turned forward. The monsters were still coming for the city, crashing against the wall and barely being held off in a trade of blood for blood and flesh for flesh. If I focussed, I could hear their screeches.

Expanding my lungs, I drew in a deep breath of air, despite the ache it caused me, then slowly let it out.

Let's see just how much they could screech.

Chapter 85: Worming through the Sky

Fighting on unfamiliar terrain, generally, was a poor idea. In this case, however, most of the terrain was flat. The forest around the city had been cut away in order to see enemies when approaching, and not give monsters breeding grounds.

This also meant that the city guard saw us coming. It was a strange feeling, my perspective shifting as I moved. It was quite a long, uncomfortable run, too. More of a jog, given that the Edians had to keep up.

Despite that, it took some adjusting. When we got close to the monsters, my sight changed. More reflective surfaces entered my range - chitin plates, armor from the guard, and dozens of sets of eyes, and my sight changed, shifted and morphed.

‘Cass?’

[On it.]

The disorientation disappeared a moment later, with the extra vision settling into my head like... a minimap? It brought a small smile to my face.

[Taking quite a bit of processing power. Won't be able to trigger any abilities for you.]

‘Got it,’ I nodded along. A glimpse at the minimap, which was still somewhat surreal, revealed the amount of monsters in the full scope. My lungs ached. My chest hurt. A grin spread on my face.

My grip on my spear tightened. I spun it in my hand for a moment. Then, the tide of monsters crashed into us.

From one moment to another, my world became a whirlwind of blood and violence. With a rapid flick of my wrist, a bornin was torn in half. A moment later, I cut a torin apart. Magic soared over my head, icicles and fireballs and blocks of stone.

Matt had turned into a whirlwind of death, massacring dozens of weaker monsters with storms of petals. Emilia sent blasts of stone up, spearing monsters and funnelling them away from the weaker fighters. Marie controlled the battlefield by creating thorny patches of vines and sending out exploding arrows.

I decided to quickly put my companions in the back of my mind, focusing on my own fight. This was going to be a test of endurance - I needed to conserve resources. With barely any

exertion, I started cycling a consistent, small amount of Qi. Enough for my wellspring to consistently regenerate as much.

The energy coursed through my veins with newfound skill, giving my skin a metallic sheen. My vision shifted slightly again as it did so, and I smirked as everything within a few meters of me was now within my immediate vision. Apparently that much was possible for my brain to handle.

From behind me, refugees stabbed forward with spears, and I made sure to leave enough room for them to stab, but not enough for monsters to get through.

The second wave of the hoard fell on us, then. Drytz came up from the ground, and were swiftly dispatched by Emilia and our mages' stone spells. I focused on enemies on the ground, stabbing and slashing and smashing wherever possible.

Some of the monsters got close to me, and with my armor already in tatters, they managed to bite my skin. I didn't bother to dodge or avoid them. Their fangs slid off my enhanced skin, boosted by my resilience and the power of my [Golden Body]. It was kind of funny, watching a bornin shut its maw, then open its eyes in confusion when I swung it from my forearm like a club into the other monsters.

My breathing soon grew laboured and I felt my chest burning, but my endurance kept me going. I supplemented for lack of oxygen due to lowered lung capacity with more Qi. Now, my wellspring couldn't quite keep up anymore, and my capacity would slowly be draining, but that was fine.

I weaved in more [Reflections] into my fighting, to use both my wells to their full potential, marks of claws and fangs appearing on monsters. My Qi coursed through my spear, enhancing it, resonating with it, elongating the blade whenever needed.

With supernatural speed, the weapon stabbed forth, cleaving apart fur, flesh and chitin alike. The tide broke against my steel.

And we kept running. Forward, always forward, into an unending slew of enemies. I cut apart weaker monsters and stronger ones. Scorions began appearing, having come inland from the black sands, and wielding weapons infused with Qi.

Stopping one of their clubs was my first true injury. It was necessary - if I hadn't the weapon would have slammed down on the Edians behind me, so I raised my spear to block it, digging my feet into the ground, but the shock it sent to my shoulder *hurt*.

I gritted my teeth with fury, quickly lashing out with the butt of my spear, using golden Qi to simulate a metal spike at its end. It stabbed deep into the scorion's side, but the things were more sturdy. It took another half dozen exchanges before the giant chimera gave me a chance to carve deeply into it.

But I did it. I defeated one by myself, with only a couple bruises to show for it. If it had been the me of even a few months ago? I could not have won that fight on my own. Now it was a challenge, but not an insurmountable one - even while injured.

The grin on my face grew as I stormed further forwards, keeping pace with the group. Matt and Emilia followed along with my stride, thinning the horde. The city walls were in sight, but we still had plenty of monsters to go through.

Projectiles, magical and mundane, flew overhead. I cut and thrust and broke the monsters approaching me, one after another. Bornins and zurulen and torins, but also the bull headed flying fish like gyuki, that were more common locally, broke against my weapon.

Sometimes, ones passed by me. It was unavoidable. I was... honestly glad that the roaring of monsters drowned out any possible human screeches. My breathing was laboured and my heart beat heavily against my chest. All my organs were reinforced by Qi, too, to handle the blood pressure.

That familiar weight of burning muscles and exertion settled onto my body, growing more heavy each moment, yet it was not uncomfortable. Familiar, really. Not easy, but... this was an everyday fight. This was doable. Possible.

Up until it suddenly wasn't anymore.

It began with the trembling of the ground. The earth shaking beneath my feet. I turned to look at Emilia, and she shook her head, moving her mouth. I knew what she was trying to say, "Not me, princess!", she probably yelled. I didn't hear it against the monsters.

Then, I looked around. The notion was still useful, despite my ability to tap into other people's sight. My own was the most familiar. But there was nothing around that should have made the ground shake.

But it happened again, of course it did. More intensely. Then, in an instant, my world suddenly spun.

Now, that... was a strange experience. One moment I stood on stable ground, the next, the world was all sideways. The ground had broken apart into fragments of stone and dirt. Suddenly, I felt multiple pulls on my senses.

First, a simple visual sensation. My body was spinning uncontrollably in the air. Like someone had turned a blender on high settings, except I was the spinning blades. The wind rushing by my ears was almost loud enough to cover up the earth shattering noise of... earth being shattered. Everything was suddenly disoriented.

Secondly, a much more ethereal pull on [Lost and Found]. There was a gateway fragment beneath me, ever so close, only a fingertip away. Only hidden beneath layers and layers of monster skin.

Thirdly... the ground wasn't coming closer the right way. I was falling upwards. *Accelerating* upwards.

[Gravity shift detected on you.]

I bit my lips. That confirmed it then.

With a twist of effort I manifested platforms of gold above my feet, soon crashing into them. A shock went through my knees, sending them aching as I caught the momentum of my spin and leapt to the side and down in a desperate maneuver.

Not a moment too late, since a second later, the monstrous maw of an enormous worm closed on my previous location.

Matt and Emilia, too, had been thrown into the air, most of the Edians being launched backwards. I was glad for that. The thing had eyes, a dozen of them in a ring around the maw. Each of them burnt red with fury and hatred, each one glistened with hunger.

I saw Ann in the distance, and a spell settled on me. Suddenly, the pull of the new gravity was less oppressive. I was almost weightless, really, hovering in the air. I smiled.

The usurper below me was already getting closer to the ground again, and with it, gravity on me flipped once more. I was falling now, the gravity affecting me growing heavier and heavier. It increased beyond normal, despite the spell, and a moment later I was plummeting to the ground feeling thrice as heavy as I usually did.

'Fuck it, COMMIT!!' I thought, pushing the thought into Qi and towards Matt and Emilia crudely.

Thinking back on it, that might not have been necessary. The battle maniac swordsman was already falling down on the worm with a hungry glint in his eye, and Emilia was falling with her shield in front of her, ready to smash the worm into the ground.

I sent a monumental wave of Qi into my spear, burning through truly prodigious amounts of power in my golden well, turning the blade enormous, twice as long as I was tall, and half that wide again.

A moment later, the three of us crashed into the ground.

Matt landed on top of the worm, his sword stabbing in, and his petals bouncing off. Emilia, on the other hand, landed below, but the ground underneath her turned soft and springy, then she bounced right back up, slamming the rim of her shield into the worm hard enough to make it reel.

I landed last, having been flung up the furthest, cleaving my spear towards the worm. Sudden sideways gravity tore my swing off target, leading to a glancing blow, as the worm's jaws opened again.

Without any hesitation, I spawned platforms to catch my momentum as the world suddenly flipped sideways again, my eyes and brain struggling to make things match. Suddenly, the floor was like a wall in front of me, a wall full of jaws.

But the bite never came. Instead, sharp stone rose from the ground as tendrils to stab at me. I barely reacted, sidestepping some of them, with Marie blowing one up with an arrow. The explosion pushed me out of the way of yet another, the fight suddenly chaotic.

Then, gravity flipped again for me, just as Matt and Emilia were hacking into the thing. The world spun, and I fell upwards, catching myself and leaping for the worm, which was suddenly *rising into the sky*.

Once again, jaws approached me. I braced for a bite, when the thing *screeched*.

My ears instantly bled as splitting pain assaulted my head. My sense of orientation suffered more, setting the world spinning. Then it shifted even more, gravity flipping to the point where the ground was the ground again, with me falling into the still open, still screeching jaws.

With a desperate leap, I jumped to the side, triggering [Reflection] just to be safe and suddenly burning through a quarter of my mirror Qi as a stone spike I hadn't noticed was returned into the giant worm's flesh, breaking upon its carapace.

A moment later, I slammed into the ground alongside the creature, Matt still latched onto it, holding onto his sword, his body fluttering like a flag in the wind as gravity acting on him constantly shifted.

Emilia was already waiting below, making each step heavily and with exertion, but when I threatened to land on my back, she caught me in her arms, grunting with the effort. Still, she shot me a grin.

“Didn’t expect to end up carrying you here,” she said, or so Cass relayed to me. She was using my own vision to analyze her lip movements, since I could barely focus enough for it.

Instead, I relied on my combat instincts, spinning in the air, and somehow placing a foot against Emilia’s hand. With a wide grin, the amazoness *tossed* me, against the force of much more than tripled gravity, at the worm.

Once again, wind rushed against my ears, and I moved too quickly for gravity changes to matter, swinging my spear and imbuing it with yet another massive chunk of Qi.

The worm tried to wrangle its body out of the way, but failed, shadows wrapping around it for a moment and digging into its stone hard skin. Then, my blow made contact.

Stone shattered against my metal, the enormously enlarged weapon gouging deep into the worm’s flesh. The thing screeched again, giving me a splitting headache, but I simply drew back and swung again, shaping my Qi as a glaive and cutting deep into the thing.

More of its power focused on me, my body suddenly falling sideways, unstable, then plummeting downwards hard enough to crack the ground as I smashed into it. With a gasp all air was driven from my pitiful lungs. Rocks dug into my open wounds and I felt blood pool in my mouth again.

Then, there was an enormous crash and a light so bright it seared my eyes. I knew it, instantly. A howling firestorm raged across the worm, with Matt in its centre, his petals joining in.

Blazing flames and razor sharp petals simultaneously assaulted the worm, digging into its hard exterior, slowly tearing it apart. But it wasn’t perfect. The gouges I had left suddenly became exploitable, both fire and petals digging into the wounds, turning clean cuts jagged and burnt.

It only lasted for a few moments, but I would’ve sworn the fire was so hot it burnt white rather than red. The moment it was gone, Emilia jumped in again. Her own mace was enforced

with the power of stone, slamming into the creature's maw and shattering part of it entirely, the damaged stone breaking apart under her manipulation.

A warm hand laid itself on my shoulder, then I could suddenly breathe again, and hear again. The next moment I was on my feet once more. Another spell woven into the other one, this one making me stronger and faster, alongside the Qi burning through my veins. Another second later, I was racing at the worm again.

Chapter 86: Status Update

My next swing, with my halfway ruined body, would not have cut as deeply as my last one. To make up for the difference, I charged enormous amounts of mirror Qi through my body, blasting through another quarter of my resources.

The gold extending from the tip of my spear turned into a radiant glaive, then the glass underneath my skin shifted. It felt like there was a mirror of myself, some alternate version, always a handful of steps ahead. Like I was strung along by a faster, better version of myself.

Glass wrapped around my bones, then dragged them forward, my muscles infused with shiny, silvery radiance. My body moved, Qi charging through it, and the golden weapon slammed into the side of the worm.

Vines, conjured up by Marie, held the thing in place against its thrashing, burning through her mana at incredible rates, but she stopped it in place just long enough for me to hit. Its hide might have resisted my body before, but the worm was injured. Every bit of its flexible carapace had been burnt and scorched by Ann.

Now, it was enveloped in a cracked, weakened shell of rock. I felt the resistance slam into my body as though I'd thrown myself against a steel wall, and my bones creaked underneath the effort, but it was nothing I couldn't fix with brute force.

[Swift Spear] triggered a moment after the impact, speeding my weapon back up and driving it deeper and deeper into the worm. My blade carved almost halfway through its body before I was interrupted.

A stone spike slammed into my chest, turned aside by a last moment [Reflection], stabbing into the worms hide and adding yet another wound to it, but also bringing my mirror well to horribly low rates.

Luckily, Matt slammed into the thing next, alongside Liam and Emilia, bringing our artillery to bear.

Our most frontline warrior slammed her mace into the monster, and, in an expression of brutal control and willpower, ripped its control of its own hide away from it. The sight was horrifying. Her attack landed, then the stone carapace rippled, shivered, then collapsed in on itself.

The massive sheet of liquidy rock suddenly lost that quality, turning coarse and hard as it contracted into a tiny ring, crushing and tearing the monster's flesh and cutting that whole part of its body off. With monstrous strength, Emilia stomped forward again, grabbing onto the thing with her shield hand, and tossing the headless half of its body aside.

Liam attacked the open wound. Shadows coalesced around him, forming an ever shifting shell of knives. The weapons of shadow spun around him like a blender, and the soft, vulnerable flesh exploded into a shower of gore in front of him, which the rogue faced with absolute calm.

Our swordsman, however, had chosen to not take any easy path. Instead, he was bearing the full brunt of the thing's gravity attacks, dancing through an ever shifting world, as he fell up, then to the side, then down, constantly dancing on small platforms made from flower petals.

Each footfall landed gracefully, and somehow, the bastard managed to shift his increased weight perfectly with each movement, bringing it to bear as power against the worm, constantly slashing at its jaw in a storm of pink.

Not to be outdone, Ann and Marie barraged the other, still writhing half of the worm, incinerating the flesh that seemed intent on living without its head. I charged in again, swinging and cutting until the world turned red and my vision faded.

Because my vision did, in fact, go dark. It was an uncomfortable sensation, but there just wasn't enough air for me to keep going the way I was. Regardless of it, my endurance helped me stay on my legs. Slowly, things faded into red and black, but before it happened, the worm breathed its last breath.

Running purely on instinct, I carved another gash into its, now soft, corpse, and ripped out the gateway bits it had inside of it.

For a moment, all I saw was silver. Then I breathed in deep.

There was another figment. Another piece of myself, from another dimension to give advice. I knew, because my own voice rang in my ears again.

“Lean forward. Hands on your thighs. Breathe, deeply.”

I followed the advice, using Qi to keep myself upright. I focused on my breathing, making sure I was expanding my lung properly into my stomach, and it slowly came easier. Divine warmth flooded me one more time, but by then, the darkness had already been receding.

What a silly message. I had to smirk as I thought about it - did this mean another version of myself had suffocated here? That was... such a pathetic way to die on a battlefield.

After that thought, I coughed up quite a bit of blood again. Then, my breathing slowly settled bit by bit. My mirror well was much fuller again after absorbing the fragment. My golden well had a little under a fifth remaining.

With deep breaths, and a thankful nod towards Reya, we faced the horde again. Many of the smaller monsters had perished as collateral against the worm. Its gravity effects had been slightly sweeping, crushing smaller monsters under heavier ones.

Shards of rock dug had flown about, as well as sharp petals, exploding arrows, and more. The chaos had thinned the horde considerably, giving us a clearer shot to the city gates, though not exactly what I would call clear.

Trevor flew around in front of me, covering our flank, with aerial assistance from Evelyn. Despite the blood covering him, he shot a confident smile, drawing back a bit and letting me step forward.

Golden Qi surged again, flowing from my hand into my spear.

Then, monsters broke against my weapon again.

- - -

I stood at the altar in the local gateway hall. It was gonna be annoying, but better than the divines. With a deep, painfully stinging breath, I reached out.

[Greetings, Fiona.]

Jam's hollow voice was just as jarring as usual.

[Establishing connections. Reading contribution data. Processed. Reading personal data. Processed. Significant injury detected. You are recommended to put your body in stasis in the gateway in order to recover.]

'Lovely talking to you again, too, Jam. I will not be going into stasis, though. Not keen on having my soul ripped out,' I told the guidance spirit.

My gateway was stronger now, but not strong enough.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **12**
- Fragments: **16**
- Figments: **2**]

The categories now also helped me understand better. Strength very directly enhanced the raw power of my abilities. I could step further through reflections, see through ones more distant as well. Fragments gave me potential and instincts I wouldn't have had. Figments were like lifelines, where another version of me would bail me out.

But. It was not enough for me to enter another gateway yet - it was far from enough. Right now, the other keepers would still have torn me apart like a piece of cheap paper.

[Accepted. You are required to pay a portion of your contribution in order to acquire a mending potion and imbibe it before continuing your growth.]

That was frustrating. But needed. The wound had worsened during the battle. Heck, in another world, I had died from it. So, reluctantly, I confirmed.

A small, green vial appeared in my hand, and I downed it immediately. It tasted like slightly salty spinach-broccoli soup. Not... miserable, but not exactly my favourite meal. Still, I could feel it working.

Potions of mending were different from healing ones. Firstly, they were far more pricey, because they required high level alchemical skills and more rare herbs, some of which could only be found rather deep in the frontier.

Secondly, they worked differently. Rather than try to immediately heal any wounds, they enabled stem cell production and enhanced the DNA's ability to replicate itself without flaws. Which led to the possibility of reconstructing injuries that would have been permanent, and

also reduced the risk of cancer slightly - though that was something Qi and the other energies already helped with.

The potion also did its work over a much longer timespan. For the first time, my current status read 'Healing'. How lovely.

With that dealt with, I took a deeper breath, facing Jam again. 'Done. Can I browse, now?'

[Affirmative.]

Having the robotic voice's approval, dozens, then hundreds of choices appeared in front of my inner eye, immediately overloading my mind. The pounding headache set on, compounded, then slowly faded as the information settled.

'Never gonna be less uncomfortable...'

[It will be, slightly,] Cass provided. [As you grow, you will become more able to handle this kind of stuff. It scales with manipulation.]

'Thanks, Cass,' I thought at the little ghost in the machi- in my head, 'help me sort through it all?'

A small noise of affirmation later, we leafed through the choices.

[You have amassed significant contribution, Fiona Bellum. It is enough for you to increase in levels and gather new abilities if you so wish.]

I didn't give more than a small recognition to that. Jam must have been leaving through my status sheet - something I would also be doing after picking these abilities. There were, unfortunately, hundreds to look through. Each one with only a title and vague description, as well as the feelings it invoked in me.

One by one, I checked the abilities, discarding them one after another. I would not purchase basic swordsmanship techniques. I would not purchase advanced spear techniques - a lesson from my master, skills like that were only worthwhile when earned.

"Always bet on a warrior who trains," he'd said.

Very solid advice, that. So, I discarded most of the non-esoteric weapon skills. More strange ones, such as [Thrice-Cruel] I did consider, this one letting me "deliver a vicious strike with greater power the more hatred you harbour."

Sinister. Also, gimmicky, and not worthwhile. I wanted something else something to properly synergize with me. And eventually, I found something.

[Spear Spirit (Your weapon has resonated and fought with you. Now, it actively cooperates.)]

This was clearly a technique borne from weapon resonance. Something enabled by the fact that my spear was bound to one of my wells. An ability I had essentially no chance of picking up myself.

'How much?' I asked the spirit of growth.

[Twenty percent,] Jam supplied calmly.

It felt... low. 'How much to level my primary class?'

[Ten percent,] Jam replied again.

Wow. I had *really* amassed a *lot* of contribution, then. That was... impressive.

That skill was definitely getting bought.

[Fio!! Found something, something incredible!]

Cass' voice rang out in my head, and I followed her prodding instantly. She was diligently going through abilities, albeit quite a bit faster than me. Somehow, she seemed rather nimble inside my head.

I saw the technique she'd selected and already felt that it was a rather potent one, related to my gateway abilities. And by potent I meant *powerful*. The ability was at the higher end of things I could purchase, and entirely unrelated to anything I could hope to achieve by myself.

[Gifted Fragment (Your paths grows with each branch. Grant others pieces of their branching selves - and take some for yourself. Root your network deeply and reap your future.)]

Three sentences of description were the most I had ever seen. And... it was perfect. I had felt it, after all. The differences in our party. The way Matt and Ann left the others behind. This was an equalizer.

I wanted it.

[Fifty percent.]

Jam's voice cut deep, and hard. I grit my teeth. It was necessary. This was fine.

With that in mind, wanting to purchase some levels meant that these would be my two abilities. One on the border between my golden core and my spear technique, the other firmly rooted in my mirror Qi. I finalized the selection of the abilities, using the rest of my contribution to buy levels - one in Spearwoman, two in Gateway.

Once the selection took hold, I felt an immense power settled down on me and spread from within me. Liquid ambrosia settled into my veins, flowing all throughout me. My legs gave in, as they always did.

My cores burnt in my chest like bonfires, my battered body writhing with power. It was like every muscle was being reattached, replaced with steel cords. My strength became worth more. Every drop of myself became *more*.

A hopeless laugh left my throat, but I shoved down all other emotions until the sensation ebbed. Eventually, the euphoria ended, and I raised myself up again. No one had batted an eye at the display - Reflectors collapsed and laughed around the altars constantly.

Carefully, I stood on my legs, the feeling of standing a little foreign again. While my brain was adjusting to all the new sensations, I decided to call up my status page. I had a couple fights' worth of growth to look forward to, after all.

[Name: Fiona Bellum

Class: Spearwoman (9) / Gateway (7)

- Techniques
 - Spear Techniques
 - Spear Technique - Fundamentals (High)
 - Swift Spear (Intermediate)
 - Momentum Shift (**Intermediate**)
 - Qi Techniques
 - General
 - Aura Suppression (Intermediate) (Keeping your Qi contained inside your body allows you to appear perfectly ordinary)
 - Aura Sense (**Basic**) (Perceive your surroundings by being in touch with the energies suffusing them)
 - Golden Well
 - Spear Qi (**High**) (Manifest your Qi outside your body and on your weapon)

- Golden Body (High) (Flood your body with your Qi to temporarily improve all physical attributes)
- Weapon Resonance (**Intermediate**) (You and your weapon are one. It resonates with your Qi, amplifying its effect)
- **Spear Spirit (Low) (Your weapon has resonated and fought with you. Now, it actively cooperates)**
- Mirror Well
 - Gateway (Basic) (You are a Gateway, with all that entails)
 - Reflection (**Intermediate**) (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)
 - **Gifted Fragment (Low) (Your paths grows with each branch. Grant others pieces of their branching selves - and take some for yourself. Root your network deeply and reap your future)**
- Stats
 - General
 - Strength: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Agility: **Greater (Inferior)**
 - Endurance: Greater (**Lesser**)
 - Resilience: **Greater (Lesser)**
 - Manipulation: **Greater (Inferior)**
 - Capacity: Medium (**Superior**)
 - Absorption: Medium (Superior)
 - Qi
 - + Gold
 - Mirror
 - Purity (Perfect)
 - Realm (Mirror Wellspring)
 - Stage (**3rd Step**)
 - Path (Imprint upon infinite Self-Similarity)
- + Disposition

Current Status: Healing]

I was not disappointed. Three of my main attributes had broken through a major realm. My agility... it must've made the jump when I forced my body to move at the worm in the end. I could feel my skeleton accelerating before my muscles could. Which was an experience, to be sure.

For resilience, the catalyst to push it was my stab wound, and the fact that I was recovering from it. Plus, reinforcing my body constantly to heal it certainly helped. Manipulation was more insidious to raise, and not something I would have considered my specialty, but it must've been from mirroring the others.

By combining techniques for cycling my Qi, I had practiced my manipulation an incredible amount. Constantly doing so until I passed out for weeks at a time... if that didn't raise it, I didn't know what would've.

My other stats were all on the precipice of major realms as well. I would have to make sure not to slack on my training from now on.

Seeing my mirror well also increase by another step was a pleasant surprise. I had not expected it to increase, but there were plenty of experiences for me to cultivate on. This was the part where I could sit down in a cave for a month and meditate.

Of course, that wasn't happening. My paths were based on freedom, so that wouldn't exactly be very helpful. I could digest my previous experience, of course. Or, I could do that and make new ones to move forward at the same time.

A quick glance at the improvements to my Skills was also very satisfying. My ability to channel Qi through my spear had also improved a lot. I could feel it in the way the weapon responded to my desires. Now, with [Spear Spirit], that effect would only be enhanced.

Happy with the enhancements I turned around.

[There is additional information the divines want me to relay.]

Oh, lovely. I just couldn't catch a break.

'All right, Jam. What kinda information?'

[Restricted. You must pay a portion of your contribution to access it.]

'Is this some kinda joke?' I asked. Why would the divines tell me there was information, then restrict it. That seemed... silly. 'Who restricted it?'

[That is also restricted information.]

I blinked at the altar spirit. 'You're kidding.'

[I am not. Acquiring the restricted information will require eighty percent of your current contribution. Acquiring information on who restricted the information is not currently possible for you to buy.]

Eighty percent was a lot, but at the same time, not much. With how much I had left over, it was... maybe five percent of my original contribution? Fine, sure, I'd play along. 'Buy the intel.'

[An eclipse is beginning.]

Fuck.

Chapter 87: Respite

'What do you mean there is an eclipse?!'

[The information you paid for has been delivered. Your contribution is not significant enough to acquire additional intel. Please vacate the altar for interaction by other users.]

Rage. 'Jam, you can't just say that and then fucking blow me off.'

[Please vacate the altar for interaction by other users.]

'An eclipse?? And you're telling me I can't leave?!'

[Please vacate the altar for interaction by other users.]

I ripped my hand from the cool stone with impunity, stumbling aside, my legs not moving quite the same way they were supposed to. On my way out, I bumped into another Reflector, stumbling and falling to the floor. She extended a hand and for a moment I almost growled at her.

Then, I realized just how much the intel messed me up.

[Breathe, Fio.]

Cass had been talking for a while, I'd just zoned her out. Following her advice, I stumbled up, past the confused woman, and out the door of the gateway hall. I took a couple deep breaths, leaning against the stone wall for support. I saw people pass by.

In and out, a handful every couple seconds. All of them had their faces set. These were people who had chosen to stay in Eden. Despite the hordes of monsters, despite the sigils no longer working.

A rueful smile wormed its way onto my face. They'd all made their choices, to stay and fight. And me? I was whining, that's what. So *what* if there was an eclipse coming? So what if there were assassins after me? Would I run just cause I was afraid?

I slammed my shaking hand into the stone walls. No. I wouldn't just run. I couldn't, anyway, not to Neamhan. But I would choose to stay and fight.

[We'll get through it together, Bell.]

'Thanks, Cass,' I thought at her, my breathing slowly evening out. I summoned my spear, leaning on it a bit as I walked. There was one more pitstop I had to make now, before going back to my guild. The temples.

On my way there, I thought about it. The fact that there was an eclipse coming... I definitely wasn't the only one who knew. Any truly powerful Reflectors would know, and so would any Edians. Orvan? Iryel? Both, yes.

And it made sense, too. The protections failing. The monsters already coming towards the city before the hunters drew them there. A usurper at the city gates... It all made sense if it was an eclipse.

"No coincidences," I muttered, trudging my way towards the temples, stumbling over my own feet a couple times. Eventually, though, I made it there. Instantly, I walked up to Hir's altar, and placed my hand on it.

'Ah, Fio. It is a pleasure-'

'What the fuck do you mean there's an eclipse??' I interrupted the chorus of voices. I could swear I could hear the divine flinch.

There was a pause for a couple seconds. 'Well, you see,' Hir eventually spoke again, their voice almost unsure, 'we couldn't just tell you...'

'Oh yeah? Why?' I demanded.

'That's... not something I am at liberty to tell you,' they said, the resignation clear.

Not at liberty to tell me. I was acting angry, yes, but that didn't mean I couldn't think clearly. Someone was stopping the divines. And... it was probably better if said someone didn't realize I knew they were interfering.

'Sure you aren't. You wouldn't spill your secrets to save my life,' I thought angrily at Hir.

'You misunderstand-' they started, but I didn't let them finish.

'Oh, do I now? Are you divines and your world-spanning plans too big for a little mortal mind like me? So big that I'm not even worth a warning?' I demanded.

Finally, I could hear the veneer of patience crack. 'And what would you have done if we *could* have told you? Not returned to Eden?'

'I would have *chosen* to fight, Hir. You took that choice away.'

'We did no such thing!'

The divine command boomed inside my head, sending me to a knee. My nose bled, each drop onto the stone floor ringing loudly in the empty prayer hall.

A weak smile placed itself on my lips. 'Sure you didn't.' Then, for a moment, I withdrew from Hir.

'Cass. Send an information package. You know, encrypted, like computers and stuff. Make it so it can only be opened by the divines - use a cypher or something.'

[A riddle. I can do riddles. It'll only open when the divines give the right answer. Two servants, one guild, one silent, one loud. What may the silent one never speak?]

'That works. Lurelia will get it. Tell the divines we are on decent terms, but I thought this call might be monitored. Tell them I know they didn't hide the info on the eclipse.'

[Who did?] Cass asked, more to herself than out loud.

'Later,' I chided. 'Send the package, now.'

A moment later, I felt a brief flash of heat in my mind. Good, that was done. It had only taken a moment, the conversation happening at the speed of thought. My attention turned back to Hir. 'You divines. Always so self-righteous. You want us to save your world and let us come here for that only. Then, you entice us to stay.'

'We give a gift!' Hir thundered.

My head hurt, but I continued anyway. 'You give a poisoned chalice. You *want* Reflectors to get addicted. To come back here. To forsake the other world and fight your battles. Because you're *losing*. So you manipulate us, manipulate *me* into coming here, and risking my life, and-'

'Do not insult me to my face!'

This time, the blast was more powerful. It felt like a cannonball struck my stomach or something. I staggered back a few steps from the altar, showing a vicious snarl. "Yeah," I muttered out loud, "that's what I thought."

Then, I shook my head in exasperation, or at least acted like it, and shambled out with my spear as a crutch, still acting as though I was off balance.

- - -

'So that went about as well as it could've gone,' I thought at Cass once we were a bit further from the temple. She seemed less thrilled than me, somehow.

[Well? That seemed borderline suicidal, Bell! I hope they understand your hidden message!]

'They'll get it,' I brushed her off. 'I'm sure. Otherwise, they wouldn't seem very divine.'

My keeper huffed. *[So we'll just bet on that?]*

'No, no. See, we're kinda screwed anyway, right? The keepers hid the fact that an eclipse is happening. Well, either them, or the usurpers. I don't see why the keeper would hide that they did it.' While talking, I also kept walking back towards the guild, soon stopping my limping, and dispelling the spear. The nascent spirit in it almost seemed to wave me goodnight as it disappeared.

[You think the Usurpers hid the eclipse from us?]

'Oh, there's definitely a chance, isn't there? They need to have forces on the level of the divines, otherwise they would've stopped them invading already. They have a strong motive to keep me on Eden: wanting to get at my gateway. Even more so than the keepers. If I'm on Neamhan, I can't absorb more gateways, and they'll just get the thing if I ever want to go back to Eden at all.'

[... huh.] Cass hummed. She reached to trigger the avatar technique, and I let her. A moment later, her ghostly body that seemed like a 2D sketch in 3D reality appeared on my shoulder.

She weighed nothing, of course, but she loved riding on it, in the same way Butterfly often did.

[What now, then?]

“Now we wait,” I answered her out loud, giving a shrug with my free shoulder. “Either one of the divines sends us some priest or angel, or they don’t. It doesn’t really change much. I need to get stronger, so it’s time to learn to handle the new techniques. And, you know, let that potion do its work and heal my chest.”

And so we did. I walked back to the inn we were staying at. I saw Emilia sit with Marie, Matt and Reya at the bar, downing drinks. Rabbit was barely holding onto his stool anymore, though, so I quickly scooped him up. Marie directed me to which bed I should deposit him in.

I left his room, then remained outside the door for a few moments. The eclipse was coming. I should tell them. All of them, absolutely. But... not today. Not when half the party was black-out drunk. I sighed. So much to do. The eclipse... could wait until the morning at least.

Shortly after that moment of contemplation, I went back down. “How’re the Edians?”

“Settling,” Marie said. She’d been overlooking that process. “They are currently staying at various inns. Houses might open up soon. Well, as long as there’s not too much property damage. The city expects that some houses might... free up soon.”

“Riiight,” I nodded along. That was a little depressing. The inns were usually where Reflectors stayed, but now, all that infrastructure for a moving population would go to the Edian refugees. Houses would also free up. Cuz of death. So that was lovely.

“It’s a bit grim,” the older woman admitted, taking another small sip from her glass, “but we make do.”

“That we do.”

I swiped my gaze over the establishment. It was reasonably busy. Soldiers and guards who’d only put off the most weighty parts of their armor, sitting in their gambesons while their weapons leaned against the wall.

Of course, there were also plenty of other people. Edians who’d just lost loved ones, drinking away their sorrows. Others, trying to find a place to sleep. The doors opened and shut every couple minutes, letting some cool night air into the warm room.

Reya and Emilia were still talking, communicating with their hands and feet as best as they could. When in doubt, the priestess wrote things down, though I could tell the alcohol was helping neither her handwriting, nor Emilia's ability to read it.

Our tank was genuinely using her Qi to empower her eyes, just so she could make out the scribbles on a piece of paper. I let out a small giggle at the ridiculousness of the situation, then sighed. "How're the others holding up?" I asked Marie.

She gave me a long look. "Well," she said, drawing out the word. "I think I am fine. You... seem okay. Emilia is doing well-ish," she gave the woman a look, but she was too focused on reading to hear us. "Struggling a bit with being unable to protect everyone."

I nodded. Heroism troubles. "Reya is holding on. I can tell she's tough, but she's also kind. She wants to help, and can't, but the idea of not trying would eat her up even more. Liam has been supporting her. He's a good kid, and he'll deal, but he's got a lot of pressure on his shoulders."

"Yeah. He worries about his use, doesn't he?"

"Mmh," she hummed in agreement. "But he doesn't mind the fighting. He'll make it through. Hopefully, he can look out for himself. Matt, though, I'm a bit worried about."

"How so?" I asked, tilting my head a little.

"The fighting. He's gotta make sure not to get lost in it. And there'll be a lot of fighting going forward. We should find something to keep him grounded, something he can do for leisure," she explained.

"Ah, yeah. I agree entirely. We should get him into board games or something."

Marie chuckled. "Hah, I, uh, doubt that would work."

I gave a smirk. "Really? And here I was so hopeful. I might be able to get him to cook with me more often."

"He hates it," she said.

"How'd you know?"

The older woman just blinked at me. "Because I see him being miserable when cooking?"

I shook my head slightly. Of course she knew. When didn't she? "Right," I said. "But I do think we can get him into it more. Might be something he enjoys more when doing it with others."

She nodded tentatively. "Okay, yeah. We can try. Also, let's ask him if there's anything he enjoys doing, too."

"Well, I know he likes taking walks," I said. Marie nodded along, encouraging me to keep going. "He likes talking about movies. Joking. I think it might be kinda the only thing he knows how to do, as far as I know his parents aren't the most supportive of having many hobbies."

"Right," she said, leaning back a bit and taking another sip. "We'll figure something out. Talk to him, if you can. I'll try as well. If he doesn't know what he likes, we'll have to try things out."

I nodded. There was a brief silence. "How about Ann?" I asked, quietly.

Marie sighed. She stared at the wall for a while, letting the background noise of drinking drown out the silence. "It's hitting her," she said, eventually. "She feels for the Edians a lot, I think. More than any of us, and I think we already care more than the average Reflector."

"Hmm," I hummed non-committally. "Yeah. I'll check on her in a minute. How about Eric?" I asked. The question came after Ann, as if to take my mind off the topic. Maybe that was the reasoning a little.

She frowned. "Eric. He's... here, certainly. Mainly because of Reya, I think. It's hard to put a finger on it. The destruction isn't really wearing on him so much as he's afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yep," she nodded along. "Everyone is, of course. Not being afraid is suicidal," she gave me a long look saying that, "but I feel he's starting to really worry."

"Should I talk to him?" I asked.

"Maybe. Do you wanna?" She gave me a long look, then shook her head. "No. You don't. I can see it, Fio. Eric is a part of our party, yes, but he's not really established himself, to you. He's not hung out with anyone particularly much. He's not engaged a whole lot. And that's fine, but it means you don't know how to talk to him."

I nodded, feeling a small lump in my throat.

Marie sighed, closing her eyes for a scant few seconds. "Look. If you wanna talk to him, you can. But you don't have to. Don't overextend yourself. You shouldn't spread yourself thin. Go. Talk to Ann. Be there for her. I'll see about talking to Eric."

Slowly, I nodded at her. "Thanks, Marie."

She smiled, bright and happy suddenly. "It's what I do."

Chapter 88: Tavern Time

I stood in front of the door to mine and Ann's room for too long before I finally worked up the courage to knock. My knuckles tapped against the wood exactly once, then the door swung open before I could tap it again.

Ann stood in front of me. She'd swapped out her mage robes for a purple, slightly baggy shirt and black pajama shorts. Her red eyes were as vibrant as ever, and her short hair dark from what seemed like a recent wash.

"Uh, hey," I said, smiling at her. I felt a slight buzz of butterflies in my stomach again. Not as intense as when we first got together, but the feeling of affection was now familiar, and comfortable.

She blinked at me for a moment, seemingly worried, then blushed slightly, leaning against the doorframe. "Uhm, yeah, hi, Fio!" she said, crossing her arms. "Fancy seeing you here."

I stared at her, then slowly grinned. "Fancy?"

Her cheeks turned even more red, but she still met my eyes. "Yep. Fancy. For sure."

With a smirk, I quickly shuffled into the room, closing the door behind me. Ann still leaned against the frame, enough space there for her. We stood close to one another, and I felt those familiar butterflies again.

I was slightly taller than her, and it was pronounced slightly because of her leaning. In a small shuffle, she stopped doing so, getting back to her own feet. I wrapped her in a hug.

Her hands clasped around my back as if she was looking for something to hold onto. I took a deep breath, squeezing her slightly. Not too much, more like a weighted blanket.

For a long, long moment, we just stood there like that.

Eventually, Ann pulled away. I would have held her for as long as it took. She had her hands on my forearms still, rather than my back now, looking into my eyes. It felt like she was trying to say something, wrestling with her words.

I waited.

For a few long minutes Ann stood there, and eventually turned her gaze away. "Sorry," she said quietly.

Lightly, I shook my head. "It's okay," I said, my voice calm. "Take your time." I moved to hug her again, and she leaned her head against my shoulder.

We stayed like that for another long while. This was a bit of a difference from my usually fierce Ann, but really, who had never been upset before? She needed comfort, and I was happy to be comfortable to her.

Eventually, after a long while, she spoke. Her voice shook slightly, but didn't break. "Can we... sit down on the bed?"

"Of course, love," I said, guiding her there. I sat down on it, the mattress a bit harder than what we had on Neamhan. That didn't matter. Ann took a seat next to me. For a moment, she hesitated, then leaned against me once more.

I wrapped one arm around her, and pat her head with the other. She closed her eyes, but hummed to show me she liked it. After some time, I gave her a kiss on the cheek, which even elicited a small smile.

That made me smile as well in turn.

"Thanks Fio," she said, eyes still closed.

I kissed the top of her head. "Of course, love. For as long as you need."

"I-" she paused, struggling with the words. "I think I might not tell you today."

"That's okay."

"Is it?" she opened up her eyes again, looking at me with worry. "Are you sure?"

"More than sure," I nodded, giving her a smile and ruffling her hair. "C'mon. I might be a lotta things, but have I ever lied to you?"

There was a pause in the conversation, and I saw the faintest hint of a smile cross Ann's face. First genuine, then mischievous. "Yes, of course. Like when you told me you would make sure to heal up, you know? And then what did you do, Fio?"

She pushed my shoulder a little, making me shake slightly. I gave a nervous laugh. "I, uh. No comment?"

"You," she said, punctuating the words by poking me again, "went and fought a giant worm!!" As she finished, she pounced on me, knocking me onto my bed. Even with the hole in my chest I was more than sturdy enough to endure it.

The wound had healed enough from the potion to not really ache anymore. I just had to be careful not to reopen it, and it would take more than a bit of play-fighting to do that. Especially with my new levels and enhanced stats... no, I wouldn't get hurt so easily.

Ann sat down on my tummy, looking down on me, finally wearing a smile again. It made my heart race a little; I was incredibly happy to see her enjoy life. Despite all the troubles, despite the fact that the world was gonna come close to ending soon. She was able to smile, in part because of me.

It meant the world.

"Look, to be fair, the worm really deserved it?" I said, giving her half a shrug.

She frowned in mock-annoyance. "Really now?! What a flimsy excuse! Matt entirely had it covered!"

"I think Emilia actually contributed the most," I hummed. "Tearing it in half like that..."

Ann grinned. "Oho? And yet you don't even know, do you..."

"Don't know what?" I asked. Somehow, I was a little glad she didn't comment any further.

"Wouldn't you like to know, Fio?" Ann teased, booping my nose. I scrunched up my face in response, and she giggled, a light, pearly sound. I smiled.

"Indeed, I would," I readily admitted. "I'm impatient you see. Tells me so, right in my disposition."

"Pfft, disposition, disposchmition," Ann mocked. "Those divines don't know what they're talking about. Back in my day..." she let the joke trail off, wearing a small smile.

I laughed, making her smile widen some more. "Indeed. Those young'uns. They want a world that is livable! How dare they, such entitlement!" I rolled my eyes in faux-annoyment, and Ann laughed.

Really, it was a bit of gallows' humour. Some old people back on Neamhan really did think that way. Absolutely wild, really. Imagine poisoning a planet, then saying how entitled kids are for wanting to breathe clean air.

"Fucking Zinnic," Ann sighed.

Again, I laughed. "Okay, let's not talk about those for one day. Please. There's enough bad news to go around, aside from me having put myself in the truly bad graces with a megacorp."

Ann smiled. "Alright, we can do that." She cupped my cheek, running her thumb over it. "You're looking gorgeous right now, you know that?"

A slight blush spread across my face. "So are you, love."

She smirked. "Don't you go around stealing my compliments."

"Not my fault if it's true!" I protested. When Ann laughed, I quickly moved to sit up, hugging her tightly again and kissing her. It was a long kiss.

Eventually, I leaned my forehead against hers. "I love you," I said, entirely genuinely.

I could almost hear Ann's smile. "I love you, too."

For a while, I let the moment stay, kissing her a few more times. But there was something I knew that I had to share. So eventually, I forced myself to pull away.

"Ann," I said, now with a bit of distance between us. "I do have to tell you something."

"Oh?" she asked, teasingly. "And what would that be?"

"Nothing fun, unfortunately," I said, as much as it pained me to see the smirk fade from Ann's face. "There's an eclipse coming."

Then, Ann paused. She looked at me for a long moment, her face neutral and almost unreadable, except to me. Her brows were creased ever so slightly, telling me she was thinking. I let her.

A minute or two must've passed like that until she spoke again. "That's... troublesome," she admitted readily, all playfulness gone from her voice.

I nodded quietly.

"Do the others know yet?" she asked.

"No," I said, shaking my head.

She gave a slow nod. "Right. That makes sense, since they were a bit out of it today." I nodded in agreement. "Thank you for telling me first."

"Of course," I said, though my mouth felt a little dry at her neutral tone.

Ann noticed and gave a small smile. "Love, I really appreciate knowing," she said. "I don't want to worry you. I believe we can get through this together. But it will not be easy."

"Yeah, I know that," I said, leaning against the wall the bed stood against. "But we've been through worse things."

"I... doubt that," Ann said, her smile turning crooked, "but I admire your optimism." She paused again. "We are staying in Eden, right?" The question came out quietly.

"Absolutely," I affirmed. The words left my mouth before I could think, but I was sure of it. I couldn't go back anyway, because of the keepers. Would I stay if leaving wasn't an option? That was a question I couldn't answer, but seeing Ann like that? It made me lean towards yes. "I'm staying. I'd... hope you are as well, though I want you to be safe, of course."

She smiled slightly. "I'm staying," she said. "I wouldn't leave you alone. Or the people here, for that matter."

That was so her. Ann always cared, no matter if she thought she was hiding it well. I returned her smile. "Okay. It'll be at least the two of us then."

"Knowing the others? I'd wager much more than just us," Ann said, then leaned forward, kissing me on the forehead. I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a hug.

"Well," I said, huffing slightly, "maybe right now, I'm okay with it being *just us*."

Ann smirked again, seemingly amused at my antics. "I suppose I could stand to be in a room with you for a bit."

The rest of the night passed rather quickly.

- - -

When the next morning came, I took a shower before putting my backup set of armor on. The other one was riddled with holes from the amount of stabs and bites I had taken, which would have been even worse if it hadn't been for the armor. I'd given it to the innkeep, who took it to a blacksmith.

Some poor apprentice would be fixing it up over the next couple days, making sure to mend it or replace any parts that needed replacing. Pay was already done; I'd given them some of the novae the divines had given me for the amount of usurpers I killed.

Knowing there was some apprentice working on my armor late into the night would always be a strange thought, but it was also one that I could live with. It did mean that we would remain in this town - Elyrstead - for the foreseeable future.

I was fine with that. It was further away from the frontier than Renvil had been, though with that city destroyed, maybe this would mark the new frontier, instead.

It went like that a lot. Edians and Reflectors would push back the usurpers, reclaim Eden's territories, establish cities and outposts. Then, eventually, when an eclipse came, the usurpers would gather more territories, as powerful beasts came from the rifts.

Those could often only be defeated by archmages, like Orvan, and even then, they were often just fought to a standstill. Then, they'd hide until the next eclipse, like that giant monster that shot black flames. It had been here before this eclipse began, so it must've been in this world for a while.

And even then, we were still only in the beginning phases. Now, formations and arrays would become less reliable - larger ones breaking first, hence why the protections around cities worked more poorly than personal ones - then, the sun would get darker, and eventually, rifts would tear open.

But that was all something for me to worry about when discussing it with my team. For now, I took solace in the fact that I was wearing armor again, though its protection mattered significantly less with my increased levels of resilience and [Golden Body]. Still, every bit would matter.

When Ann was also ready, wearing her mage's robes, we made our way downstairs together. Marie was already up, talking to some locals, probably gathering information. Liam and Eric were seated, too, mostly browsing through their gifts. I could tell Liam was cycling his Qi, and Eric seemed to be doing some stuff with his divinity, though I was unsure quite what he was doing.

I took a seat at the table with them, receiving two nods in greeting. “Reya, Emilia and Matt still nursing headaches?” I asked.

“My sister is, unfortunately, hungover,” Eric said with a sigh. “She’ll probably cure it once she wakes up. The fact that she uses her divine healing for it is something I won’t understand.”

Ann shrugged. “What’s it for if you don’t use it?”

I glanced sideways at her. That was... unexpected. Ann rarely commented on what clerics did.

Eric shrugged in response. “It just seems disrespectful to Lurelia, I suppose,” he said.

“So?” Ann asked. “If Lurelia minded, she can tell your sister herself. That’s what [Divine Communion] is for, isn’t it?”

The cleric gave her a long look, then smiled slightly. “I suppose. Seems strange to provoke a goddess to respond to pointless use of her powers, though.”

“If it lets her fight more, Lurelia would approve, I’m sure,” Ann said.

“You seem to know a lot about my goddess,” Eric commented, somewhat snarkily.

At that, Ann gave him a long look with an expressionless face. “I’ve dealt with clerics before, some who used her powers a lot more loosely than you two.”

“Oh?” This time, Eric seemed more genuinely curious than annoyed.

Ann decided to answer, though she ordered a glass of water beforehand. After taking a small sip, she looked at the cleric again. “Yes. The worst abuse I’ve ever seen was a hitman. He would attack targets while they slept, taking away their pain using a special skill, then heal all their wounds to the point where the healing fatigue killed them. It made for murders that were astonishingly hard to trace, you see, and bodies that could not ever be brought back properly.”

At that, Eric’s face fell visibly. “Oh,” he said, this time more as if sick.

“This, of course, was something that Lurelia *did* disapprove of,” Ann continued with a straight face. “So, she cut him off from gaining additional levels. Divines cannot withdraw levels already given, you see. Having a sponsor divine helps to advance as a cleric, but isn’t strictly required, and any gift once given cannot be demanded to be returned.”

“Did... he ever get caught?”

"Of course," Ann nodded. "Paladins. A whole dozen of them surrounded him after knowing about a hit. They crashed into the room right as he was about to deliver yet another killing blow. Instead, the assassin died that day."

"... Right," Eric said. "In comparison, Reya's actions do seem less... antithetical to the goddess." It felt like he was trying to lighten the mood.

"Quite," Ann agreed happily. "She is taking away pain, after all, that is why Lurelia bestows healing onto mortals like us, isn't it?"

Eric just nodded in reply.

The silence hung in the air until Marie sat down with us. The locals, sadly, didn't seem to know much about what was going on. "I do," I said when she was done reporting. "I know what is happening. But I'd be a lot more comfortable if everyone was here when I said it."

Marie gave me a long look, and I returned a small nod. "Okay," she said, without hesitation. "Let me go drag the others out of bed then."

"Do you need my help?" Eric asked.

"No need," the older woman shook her head. "I have a minor boon from Argus. For my nature magic. It lets me deliver tiny amounts of healing, just enough to cure a headache." She said with a wink, and her teasing seemed to dispel a bit more of the lingering strangeness around Eric.

He gave a half amused nod as Emilia set off, coming back with three zombie-looking creatures a minute later. Soon, they were all seated at the table, and a minute later, they all looked awake. It was time to bring them the news.

Chapter 89: Decisions, Decisions.

"There's an eclipse coming."

It was starting to feel like that sentence was one of the heaviest strings of words I'd had to say in my life. On par with "I can't come to school, I'm attending my brother's funeral." and "You can't come over, my dad is drunk off his rocker right now."

But this time, the reaction was none of the awkward stumbling I usually got as a reply. Instead, there was a heavy silence hanging over our group.

The inn around us was busy. I had used my voice transmission to tell the other's directly, so none of the patrons would be scared away. Really, the background noise just made the silence feel more awkward.

I saw Liam's Qi fluctuate for a moment before it stabilized, the rogue schooling his expression back to one of neutrality. Marie wore a deep frown, but her eyes wandered over the others.

Ann gave my hand a squeeze, and I squeezed back. Right, we would get through this together.

Matt was looking at me, too. There was a question there. I shook my head slowly, telling him that no, I could not just go back to Neamhan. Then he nodded.

"I am staying," the swordsman agreed.

"Me too," Emilia said without any more hesitation.

Marie smiled, a tiny, fragile, worried expression, but still nodded grimly. "Then I'll stick around, too."

Liam seemed almost bemused as he nodded. "Same here, then," the whisper rang out next to my ear. I saw him turn to Reya. She smiled.

"We're leaving, right?" Eric asked his sister.

I turned to him. Ann did, too. I think I looked surprised, though I certainly know she didn't. Ann looked... furious.

Like she was about to set his ass on fire.

"What?" he asked, glancing around the table. "It's an eclipse! We're going home, right, Reya?"

The woman looked at her brother for a long moment. Then to Liam, then to me, then back to Eric. Very slowly, she shook her head. She signed something, but I didn't speak sign language yet.

Eric seemed stunned. Like he couldn't believe what was happening. "Sis, Reya, please. Don't- this isn't a joke or something, right?"

She shook her head again.

"Are... are all of you serious?" He looked around the table for help.

Emilia reached out. She laid a hand on his shoulder, her expression frozen somewhere between angry, disappointment, and compassion. But then it faded, and she simply looked sincere. "Dead serious," she assured him.

"You too, Emilia?" Eric asked, his voice trembling.

She nodded.

The cleric turned to his sister. "Reya. You're... staying?" She nodded, too. I saw as Eric dropped his face into his hands for a moment, his fingers interlacing with his hair, turning it more messy. "Fuck," he gasped from between his hands. "Divines... fuck."

Marie seemed sympathetic to his pleas, really. Like she was just about to reach out and grab his hands, but Ann looked at her, and shook her head. She wasn't just angry, she was *beyond* pissed. Why? Just for me?

A minute ticked by, then a second one. Eric shook once, probably sobbing. I... zoned out a bit. It felt so distant now. The fact that I had received so much more support than expected made this bit of pushback hit unreasonably harder.

"Eric," Ann's icy voice cut through the air, and he raised his head. "You can leave now." It wasn't really giving him permission so much as it was demanding he do it.

He looked at her, then at Reya again as if seeking help. She shook her head, though it seemed like it was breaking her heart. Then, Eric's expression hardened in real time.

In just a couple seconds he went from close to sobbing back to composed and frigid. "Fine," he said, raising with a scrape of the chair against the wooden flooring. "Reya. I'll make sure. When you die, I'll make sure you have someplace to return to."

She signed again. "She won't die," Liam said. He didn't whisper it, either. He told Eric, upfront, standing as well by now. I'd barely seen him get up.

Reya looked at Liam, then gently pushed down on his shoulder. The rogue gave her a look, then sat back down. Reya turned to her brother, and gave the saddest smile I ever saw. Her lips moved soundlessly, but I could read them. "I love you," she said.

Eric clenched his fist, trembling. Then he turned, walked to the door. "I'll wait on the other side, sis," he said, then left.

The door fell closed louder than I think it had any right too. I saw Ann reach for her drink in the silence that hung over the party. Reya still stood, looking at the door. Then there was the sound of wood splintering, as Ann crushed the tankard into a thousand pieces in her hand.

"Ah," she said, her voice dry. "I appear to be mildly angry."

I put a hand on hers, and she looked at me. She would have scared me if I didn't love her. Her eyes, usually fire red, seemed more like pools of blood, deep as the ocean. Her fury wasn't the usual flaming kind, but more like unfathomable depths trying to swallow me.

So, instead, I pulled her into a hug.

She was tense, and I could feel every muscle in her smaller frame tightened. From her back, down her arms, to even her jaw. Really, she seemed just short of shattering her teeth. It was a testament to her practice that she was still able to enunciate her speech so clearly.

"I'm fine, Fio," she said in that same frigid tone.

"Yeah, of course," I lied. "I'd just, uhm, like to hug you if that's okay. For purely and entirely selfish reasons."

She didn't deign me with a reply, but I felt her lean onto my shoulder slightly, and that was all the confirmation I needed. I held her for a long, silent moment.

When I finally turned to the group again, I looked everyone over. Marie and Emilia seemed pensive. They understood. They knew why he left, and were saddened by the decision, but compassionate.

Reya was more sad than them, though. Liam had given her a hug, but now just had his hand on her shoulder. She stared at a wall absently, alone with her thoughts. The rogue seemed more preoccupied with her than with Eric leaving. The two hadn't really interacted much, after all.

Ann was still furious, but now she just seemed... defeated. All that rage driving her was slowly dissipating, and all that was left was a gaping hole of disappointment. She had expected more from Eric.

And then, there was Matt. He seemed... shockingly neutral. Like this was the expected outcome and he had dealt with it already. He looked over at me, then gave a crooked smile. My eyes widened. He *had* expected it.

"When?" I asked, quietly, barely above a whisper.

"The moment you told us," he answered. Then he shrugged. "Nothing wrong with being a coward," he added. "Being brave is about fighting even when you're scared. I... honestly wish I were more like that. Bit of fear would do me well." His crooked smile turned sad.

Emilia nodded. "Nothing wrong with being a coward."

Ann stared at the two of them, her eyes reddened, both from fury and some tears I imagined. Maybe angry tears. "How can you say that? People will die because he left."

Marie gave Ann a long look. "He's not killing them, hon."

"They'll die because of his choice!!"

"*He's not killing them*," Marie affirmed again, more solidly. "He's made his choice. We've made ours."

"Marie, I can't fucking forgive that. He's despic-

Reya spun over at Ann to slap her. I lightly caught her hand, looked at the cleric, then shook my head, slowly. "Ann," I said, maintaining eye contact with Reya, "Eric is back on the other side. He made a choice, one that he is free to make. You can be as angry as you'd like, but please do not insult him in front of the people he wants to keep safe."

From the corner of my eyes I saw Ann bite her lips, hard. "Yeah," she mumbled. "Yeah, yeah. Fucking fine or something."

I kissed the top of her head. "Hey. If he's gone, we'll just work extra hard to save all the people he would've."

At that, I saw Reya give a small nod. She signed again, though I didn't understand. "She says 'fuck yes we will'," Liam provided, still using his own voice rather than the whispering he usually did.

Ann froze at that, then cracked a tiny smile. She shook her head, and I saw the world in a myriad of tiny reflections as scattered droplets of water almost too small to see flew through the air. "I- yeah. We will. Thank you, Fio. Liam, Reya," she said, shooting them a smile that seemed only slightly forced.

I kissed the top of her head again. There was another moment of silence, until Matt talked. "So uh, I guess I'll go pay for that," he said, gesturing at Ann's broken tankard, "and order you another drink? You look like you could use it. For like, hydration I mean."

The mage took a long, shaky breath, then nodded. "Yeah, I'll, uh, take a glass of water. Definitely."

Emilia shot her a small smile. "Hydrate don't diedrate, eh?"

"Hydrate don't diedrate," Ann confirmed, shaking her head at it.

Chapter 90: Archmage Saif Zolycc

"One way to *break* the news, eh?" Matt joked when we were outside later.

I snorted. "Seriously?"

He sighed, giving half a shake of his head. "Nah. I'm not the one who broke anything."

"Pfft," I said, then pinched his cheek. "Listen here, brat, don't you speak to me like that."

"Or whaa?" he asked, his words coming out muffled with me holding onto him.

"Or I'll shake you down for your lunch money."

He huffed in amusement, then lightly smacked my hand aside. For a while, he just stared up into the sky. It was still early enough, people just coming to the streets - most of them walking towards the walls and repairing them. Our shift was coming up in just a little while.

"Hey, Fio?" he asked, eventually.

"Yeah? What's up?" I replied. He was still looking into the sky, but I knew he wouldn't reply with a childish retort. Matt had a thinking expression on his face. He was actually serious for once.

"If I die-" he held up his hand as I moved to interrupt him. "Let me finish, Fio. Please. *If* I die, here, then I want you to live. Got it?" he looked at me intensely.

"You won't die," I said, meeting him right on.

He smiled. "Of course not. This is a 'what if' scenario, silly."

"Matt," I said, grabbing his shoulder. "You aren't dying."

"I understand that-"

"No, no, I don't think you do. You're thinking something like, well, you're so likely to die, because you're addicted to fighting," I mimicked his voice, "isn't that right? But listen here, you rat, if you ever get close to death, it's gonna go very simply. I'll touch you, and I'll send your ass straight back to Neamhan."

His eyes widened. He took a step back. "You wouldn't."

"I would," I said. "Matt. You don't get to pull any of that. No self-sacrificial shit."

"Fio, if something happens to you-

"Matt. Listen to yourself. You're saying that I should let you die? Just in case? No. If *anyone* from the party gets close to death? Beyond saving with healing? I'm sending their asses back. Each and every one."

"Fio-

I stepped closer to him, jabbing my finger into his chest. "Don't fucking 'Fio' me, Matt. This isn't a joke. This is an eclipse. Renvil got *wiped off the fucking maps* in an hour. We called in an *archmage* and that's the only reason we could *evacuate*. You don't get to throw away your life for me, not even just one of it."

He smacked my finger aside. "Neither do you," he hissed. "You don't get to throw away your life for me either. Not again. Never. Again." The mix of anger and sadness in his voice was enough to crack my heart.

"Neither of us will," I said. "We'll both live. I'm staying in Eden. I'll grow my gateway. I'll become strong enough to fuck up each and every damn keeper, and then we'll be just a regular elite team."

"And what if? What if you die?" he hissed.

"Then I'll die. And it'll be miserable. But you bet your ass I'm going down *fighting*. I'm not gonna leave my friends behind to save my hide."

Matt gave me another long moment of silence. "Fine," he eventually said. "Fine, cool. Sure, fuck it, I'm *in*. We'll throw our lives away together, how about that?"

"What?"

"If you get to go down fighting, so do I, Fio. Don't send me back to Neamhan. Promise me you won't do that. I don't think I'd be able to live with myself if you did." He gulped, and I saw tears forming at the edges of his eyes. Still he refused to look away.

I stared back. "I don't think I can-"

"Promise me, goddamn it!" Matt grabbed my shoulder and squeezed it. "I need you to say it, Fio."

I bit my lip. "Okay fine-"

Just then, we were interrupted. "Sorry, huff," someone said, taking deep breaths, as if they'd just sprinted here. "Are you a... Ms. Bellum?"

Turning towards the source of the noise it was a young man, still a kid really, with sticky, short black hair. He was small of stature and looked a little thin, holding his legs as he panted. One of his hands was wrapped around a letter.

"... Yeah, that would be me. Why?" I asked.

"The higher-ups, huff," he took another couple gulps of air. "Archmage Zolycc wishes to see you. At the palace."

"I'm sorry, my shift at the wall starts in-"

"Your shift has been moved," he said between breaths. "Uhm. You're to go there as soon as possible, just after reading the letter." He handed it to me. "If you wish, you may bring your, uh, guild, huff. Arrangements for the wall have been made."

I looked from him, then to Matt, who shrugged. "Go on, read it," he said, nodding in the direction of the letter. There was still some of that intensity in his eyes, but he seemed somewhat placated, since I had said okay. What a fucking shitshow.

To distract myself from the emotional trainwreck I was going through, I opened up the letter, breaking the wax seal. It was the usual stuff, really. Something something your special abilities have garnered our interest something something come immediately.

"Alright, Matt? Let's grab the others, we're heading out. Thanks for your service," I told the courier. He gave me a quick nod, and a salute, then ran back off to make another delivery I guessed.

The others were still inside the tavern, drinking and quietly chatting. Matt and I made our way over to the table. "Hey, looks like we're moving up in the world," our swordsman said in a weak attempt at humor, "we've been invited to the castle."

Marie arched an eyebrow. "Us? Why?"

He pointed a thumb over here. "Fio, of course. Special gateway powers. Maybe just a recommendations from our archmage buddy, or the divines themselves. No real way to know."

I gave a crooked, half-hearted smile.

"What about the wall?" Emilia asked.

"Someone else is covering for us. You're all invited," I said. "We're supposed to be there as soon as we can."

"Whelp," Marie said, getting up with a light scrape of her chair. "No use wasting time, then."

With a nod, the others rose. Liam held Reya's hand as we walked out of the tavern.

- - -

Finding the palace wasn't exactly difficult - it was built on a hill in the middle of the city after all. It helped that it was large.

Only a couple minutes later, we stood in front of the guards, who let us through rather quickly when I showed off the letter. An older manservant picked us up from there, a man whose salt and pepper was really more of a salt and darker salt.

"Ms. Bellum. You've been expected. I thank you in the names of the lord and lady, as well as the archmage that you have made it here so soon," he said, leading us through the halls.

"Uh, thanks," I said, unsure. "What exactly do they want from me."

Rounding a corner, he chuckled lowly. "I do not presume to know about the intentions of our rulers. But I suspect it is an offer of cooperation - nothing to fear, I believe."

It was a bit annoying, since this was eating into my time to try out the new techniques I bought, and especially the one Cass recommended seemed like the sooner I got to it the better. But I also knew that making royalty wait, especially when they sent an urgent invitation was considered poor form.

"Right, then. Thank you for your guidance, Mister..."

"Gregor will suffice," he said, a thin smile on his lips. Then, after some more walking, he gestured at a large wooden door. "Here we are! The throne room. My employers are ready to meet you inside."

At his approval, I pushed open the door, using both hands for it. Inside, as expected, there were two thrones... and a wheelchair?

The lord and lady of the city were easy to pick out. They didn't wear anything opulent, and their thrones were carved from wood, rather than endowed with much gold. Still, their regal behaviour and hardened eyes gave it away.

But my letter had come from an archmage, and seeing her in question was a bit different than expected. I took her in more as I stepped closer to the thrones.

Archmage Zolycc was not human, that much was easy to tell. Her skin was a pallid grey - which might have been from sickness, but I knew it wasn't - and her eyes dim circles of pale lilac. Her hair came in hundreds of thin strands that floated in the air behind her. She was one of the sky spirits.

Her left side was covered in a large scar, well, the parts of her that remained there, at least. She was missing both those arms, after all. Her upper left arm was missing at the shoulder, her lower left severed in the middle of her bicep. It started at the stump left of her shoulder, turning her grey skin a lighter, almost paper-white, and snuck up the side of her neck to her ear.

The woman's legs were covered in a pale pink skirt, and she wore a loose shirt. She looked at me, and her face turned a bit brighter. It was impossible to tell her age, as it was with most sky spirits, but she still extended her right arms to greet us.

"Ah, Ms. Bellum! My friend Orvan has told me much about you. May I call you Fio?" Her voice was melodic and sweet.

I tried my best to return her smile, still wary, but if Orvan endorsed her, that was a good sign. "Sure, yes, archmage Zolycc."

"Oh, please," she waved her upper right arm. "You can simply call me Saif."

That *did* put her in my better books already. "Alright then, Saif," I said, my thin smile a little more genuine. "I believe you called me here. I was unaware that Elyrstead had an archmage stationed here."

Her smile turned a little sadder, and she let out a wistful sigh. The brush of air was enough to send her hair scattering behind her, each strand seemingly only barely as heavy as the air surrounding them. "Well, I wasn't stationed here before. I have been called to the frontier-

she interrupted herself with a small scoff, “the *new* frontier, in order to preserve the alliance’s territory.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Most archmages have been called to Frontier cities. Archmage Dreyfa has been stationed just further south, but he is also leading excursions into the frontier, to thin the hordes I hear,” she explained. “The other archmages are in similar positions. The forces of Eden are being leveraged properly now. People like me are needed to keep the stalemate, you see?”

“Stalemate?”

“Between the usurpers and the divines, Fio. Well, and the keepers, but those have much less of a hand in the game.” Her eyes glinted, then. “Perhaps I should say *had* less of a hand in the game, though. You see, that was until you came into the picture.”

“... Right,” I hummed.

“Is it alright if I come a little closer?” she asked me. I only now realized I was still standing quite far from the thrones.

“Uhm, sure,” I nodded, stepping closer as well. I saw her quickly flick a lever on the side of the wheelchair, which seemed to engage some rod that let her turn the wheels on both sides by turning them on only one.

With a bit of elbow grease, we soon stood closer. The archmage smiled. “How old do you think I am?” she asked me.

I blinked at the question. “Uhm. Like, fifty?” She looked younger than that.

She chuckled. “Close, really. I’m seventy-two years old now, though. I cannot say to have seen the very first beginnings of the war between worlds, but my ancestors sure did. Kids like you to shake up the order... is just what we need, really.”

“Okay?” I was a bit confused.

The old archmage gave me a smile. “So, Fio. Tell me, would you like to know a bit more about this war we wage?” I instantly leaned forward. “If I told you it came with a personal story, would you still listen?”

Instantly, I replied. “Yes. I would.” I needed to know more about the keepers and usurpers.

Chapter 91: History Lesson

She smiled, faintly, then gave a small bow towards me, though as she did so, her eyes flitted over the rest of our party. “Your guild, Dawn of Ambition, may listen as well, of course. It may be a bit rude of me not to greet you all individually, but I can assure you, your services are valued. Please indulge an old lady for a while.”

“It’s no trouble, really, archmage,” Marie said.

The old lady smiled at her, too, then turned back to me. “So, then. About the war... where do I start?” She smirked. “Perhaps with myself? That’ll do, yes.

“You see, I was born without the use of my legs. Divine magic can only do so much, and returning them to full function was not in those cards. The life of a warrior was, therefore, never really for me. Instead, I focused my pursuits on knowledge.

“Archiva became my patron, eventually. She gave me the Gift, you see. Suddenly, I could buy knowledge, not simply books, but actual, applicable knowledge, if I simply helped the efforts of fighting. It was invaluable. And I fought.

“Tooth and nail. Really, I was a bit feral back in my younger days.” She reached out to touch the remains of her left arms. “These... I lost them a while ago. During the beginning of an eclipse - not even the main fight. What a joke, right?

“A mage with two right arms - quite literally,” she chuckled. “But I made it work. I learnt how to cast magic with them, do the sigils with one hand, improved my mana shaping - ah, the kids call it ‘manipulation’ these days, do you not? I practiced my mana manipulation until I mastered it.

“In fact, I would wager that even among the archmages, none can match me in sigil-less casting. And despite all of this, despite my mastery, my practice, the battles I waged... somehow, you throw yourself into greater damage than even I did.” Her eyes glinted with mirth.

“Life isn’t something you should throw away, girl,” she leaned forward, placing a hand on my forearm. It was faintly cool, despite the slightly oppressive warmth in the throne room. “But, and this is the cruel part, people like you are hardly granted a choice, were you?”

“So, all I can do is grant you the knowledge necessary to fight. To struggle, like a rabid dog, to fight tooth and nail, until you can eventually walk up to those who took your choice away and rip their throats out, isn’t that right?” She said it with that same kindly, old voice.

I nodded, dully.

“Right, so let me tell you then.” Her eyes darted to my group for a moment, before locking onto mine again. “There used to be seven divines before,” she said, casually dropping an enormous secret. “Can you imagine that? Only five left now, though.”

It... made sense. Seven was an important number here in Eden. Seven main stats. Seven steps to each realm of cultivation. Seven realms, as far as anyone knew, seven magic circles, too.

Saif smiled. “You get it,” she said. “Yes. It all comes in sevens. The divines used to, too, then two of them died.

“It’s a bit complicated what happened from there, but suffice to say, it changed the other divines. Ru became more violent, Hir more sombre. It was a difficult time in Eden, but things stabilised both times. Now, we have five divines, and I hope that their numbers remain as such.

“What really matters, after all, is the usurpers. They are limitless, Fio, but not because they are mindless. They aren’t, after all. Some of them are unbelievably wise, even. They have upper echelons, just like the divines, they are simply different.

“They are soldiers. Made for war by their higher ups who are hungry for power. Once upon a time, after all, the usurpers had their own worlds. Until those were swallowed by the void. Those experiences turned them jagged, and now, they want more worlds for their people, and invade new ones.

“This puts them at odds with us, of course. Because, well, I certainly enjoy Eden without the twisting of the Usurpers. In order to make it hospitable to them, they change the landscape, twisting it to fit them, and frankly, I do not think this planet deserves that. None do, isn’t that right?”

I choked back a laugh. "Yeah, none of them do," I agreed readily. Were the usurpers really just like Zinnic after all? How ironic.

"Now you know about the divines. They were here and want to see the world remain as it is - which, of course, isn't quite right either, is it? Worlds must advance. Move forward. Keep changing. That is in the nature of us mortals, after all. But the usurpers, which seek to bring in their own status quo? They are also in the wrong. So we pick our closest allies, as long as our goals align."

For a moment, Saif closes her eyes, with a frown and creased eyebrows. "Apologies," she whimpered, eyes still closed. "This is what I am getting for what is being perceived as Blasphemy. Archiva, you are a goddess of Knowledge are you not? Let me be honest with this warrior."

For a few more moments, her face remained twisted, then relaxed. She took a deep breath, opened her lilac eyes again, and gave me a bright smile. "Onto more blaspheming," she joked in a conspiratorial whisper.

"What about the keepers?" I asked.

Her lips froze in that smile, then slowly sank down to a thin line. "The keepers. They are... interdimensional. They know no compassion for the worlds themselves. They care about their own reach, and reach only.

"I know that the keepers bring you to our worlds. That they work with the divines. They do this, because it allows them to spread their fingers into this planet. To make more gateways. You know what keepers would do for more gateways? *Anything*.

"They are temporary allies at best. They are always only a thin line away from enemies, both ours and each others'. Constantly seeking to tear one another apart, simply for more reach. Another world, another mirror, another parallel existence, just one more mirror. They would break worlds for that - *have broken* worlds for that."

I gulped.

"And they want to break you for that," she said with an empathetic sigh. "Fio. Let me tell you this. I don't know everything about the divines, or the usurpers, because they are complex. They know compassion, they know cruelty. They know all of that.

"The keepers do not. They do not care for you, or for me, or for this world at all. What they care about is just another shard of glass, any shred of profit they can squeeze, no matter the

toll of lives, mortal or immortal. Never trust them. Never think they have your interests at heart, because those interests only align while you are giving them more power to utilize.”

That... sounded suspiciously like what Zinnic did. Were they...?

“Can keepers assume mortal forms?” I asked, quietly.

Saif looked at me for a long moment. “They can, certainly. They would view it as disgusting, beneath them, even, but they would, without hesitation, if it let them get a shred more.”

Were they really already on Neamhan, then? Had they ruined our world? Just so they could spread their influence farther?

Or was it really just human folly? Were we... any better than those things?

I felt a second cool hand touch my arm. “Fio. No species is inherently good or bad. Cultures, sometimes, can be, but even bad cultures occasionally produce good people. Growing up in a moral society will increase the likelihood of good morals, as long as those allow one to thrive. But they are not always a guarantee.

“Take a look at Cass, for example. I know her name through the divines, I do hope this isn’t considered prying.”

Cass appeared in her avatar form, drawing a small amount of my Qi. “It’s fine,” she assured Saif.

The old mage smiled. “Thank you, Cass. While Cass is a keeper, a simple fact of her species, she is not at all included when I talk about how power hungry they are. Because that is referring to the keepers’ society, which she is not a part of.”

“Any living creature can be greedy, power hungry, and cruel. Any living creature has the potential for kindness and selflessness. And there is a whole spectrum between that.”

I nodded, quietly. Right. The keepers probably didn’t single handedly ruin our world. Saif was right, of course. Humans were perfectly capable of ruining things ourselves. There was, as of now, little reason to assume keepers were involved in it.

They weren’t improving things either, though. Zinninc was definitely exploiting the existence of keepers for profit, and the keepers were happy to continue letting them use the gateways, because the bodies would feed them energy.

It was all a stack of greed. I shook my head to clear it, focusing on Saif again.

“Thank you,” I said. “This explanation has been eye opening.”

She smiled, gently, but her eyes gleamed with fire. “I am glad to hear that. Now, how about we go out there and show them why they should keep their greed in check?”

I glanced over at the city lady and lord. The two had been watching the entire conversation, but not said anything. “Don’t they, uh, need something from me?”

Saif shook her head slowly. “No,” she said, looking at them.

The lady cleared her throat, and spoke, her voice deep and gravelly. “We are not currently in needs of further discussion with Ms. Bellum. You were invited here because the archmage requested it. We hope your stay in this city will be enjoyable, as far as possible, and that you will contribute to the city’s defense when we all upon you.”

I gave her a nod. “Of course,” I said.

With that, Saif let go of my arms. “I believe we may talk again later,” she told me with a small wink, then folded both her right arms onto her lap.

After another short wave from me and the party, it was finally time to take our shift on the walls.

Chapter 92: Blackmail...?

A week passed like that. We fought on the walls, and in front of them, holding back the tides of monsters with the other Reflectors, before hiding back within the city. Reya was spending every drop of Divinity she could spare on patching people back together.

The hole in my chest healed, thanks to the potion, and I improved my Qi cycling some more, focusing on regeneration. Maybe, in a couple more weeks or months, I’d be able to heal a wound like that without any assistance. That would be awesome.

I also, after our first shift on the wall, finally got a chance to experiment with [Gifted Fragment]. Apparently, the “gifted” in the technique’s title was a reference both to giving something away, and to the Gift itself.

It allowed me to create a network of half as many people as I had gateway fragments, and then allowed those to partially share talents. As in, ones from the talent tab in the menu.

Suffice to say, I included our entire party in the network. With Me, Matt, Ann, Marie, Emilia, Liam, and Reya, that meant seven of my eight slots were filled. I had sixteen fragments, after all, allowing me to connect eight people with one another.

Keeping the technique up was easy. Every member of the network donated a small part of their energies to keep it running. It was a bit of a hidden blessing that we didn't have it function off only Qi, since Divinity and Mana might have been prerequisites for certain talents.

The feeling of it was strange, though. None of the effects fully carried over, after all, but the others experienced some of the effects of my [Precipice] for example.

From Matt, we inherited a fragment of [Prodigy], allowing me to advance my cultivation faster. Liam had [Observant], meaning learning from others was easier, which worked well with [Mirror Mind]. Ann's [Genius], which she used mainly for mana, helped me grasp Qi manipulation significantly faster.

Marie provided [Fundamentals], a talent that allowed new knowledge to be assimilated and usable much faster, while Emilia added her [Stalwart Patience], which made it so that skills became easier to learn the longer you practiced them. Finally, Reya had a talent called [Practical], which meant abilities were learnt more quickly when used in actual applications rather than training.

For now, we could all only share one talent each, but that was sure to increase as the ability grew. I was also simply maintaining it as that switch the Gift gave me, rather than understanding how it functioned. If I had to say how much of the talents I was granted, then maybe it was a tenth of their original power.

Which was still outstanding, of course. Especially with the learning bonuses stacked on top of each other... I couldn't say that advancing became a breeze, but it felt like I was learning more with each bit of practice I did.

Still, that peaceful while of practice only lasted for a single week before it got interrupted.

Because, after that week was over, I heard a knock on my door. Ann was currently out, doing things, so I opened it up.

In front of me stood a young man. He had a handsome face and messy, dark hair. His eyes were a bit intense, as he focused on me, like he was looking for some kind of weakness. Looking at him made me tense up.

“Good day,” he said. “Is this Fiona Bellum I’m speaking to?” his voice was polite, but he spoke with a strange undertone, like he was waiting for something.

“Yeah, that’d be me. You need anything?” I asked.

His smile widened. “Yes. I was sent here to kill you. I have your brother, one Ivan Bellum.”

I tensed up. Instantly, my spear appeared in my hands. I felt the nascent spirit within boiling with fury just as I was. But at the same time, I was terribly afraid. Why was Ivan in Eden?

“Who are you?” I demanded. “What do you want from me?”

If he had Ivan, then that meant he had done his research. He knew who I was. Somehow, he found out my brother was in Eden despite me not knowing. Had Sarah brought him here? Did he join Zinnic?!

The man simply smiled. “My name is Chikrotekete. You can just call me... Chris, if that is alright with you?” he said, his voice even and polite.

“Chris,” I said, barely keeping the hate from my voice. “What do you want?”

“Ah,” he said, looking at me, his expression slightly shifting. He saw the way my fist clenched around my spear, the knuckles turning white. He observed the muscles in my arm and shoulder growing taut. “I appear to have misstepped.”

He said it so nonchalantly, as if there was nothing to him just admitting to kidnapping my brother.

“Tell me already,” I ground out.

“Of course, my mistake. I would like to build an amicable relationship with you, Ms. Bellum. May I call you Fio? I have heard you prefer that, from your brother,” he told me.

Why... why would Ivan tell him that?

“No, you may not,” I said.

He frowned, almost imperceptibly. “I see. I appear to have offended you. I would like to build an amicable relationship with you.”

"Then *why* do you have my brother?"

"... I believed it would make it easier to speak with you?" He tilted his head, as if curious.

"You're here to kill me."

"Oh, no, no. I was *sent here* to kill you," he said, smiling brightly. "I plan to disobey my orders."

"And why is that?" I asked.

"Because I believe that your existence is more valuable to this world and me personally than the price my employers are paying." Something about their voice shifted, then, not quite belonging to the young man in front of me anymore. "Your brother is safe," they said, eyes glowing. "In fact, he currently appears to be drinking water. An activity I believe is commonly partaken in when trying to maintain good health?"

"Why the fuck do you talk like that?" I asked, angrily.

"Oh. I see. My disguise, yes, right. I am triz-adu. I believed my name gave it away."

It did. I... was a little too angry to focus on that. Even now, I was worried. "And why would you tell me you have my brother?"

"Because he is in a safe location."

"You said so right after saying you were sent here to kill me!"

"I am clearly displaying nonhostility and not even holding a weapon."

The way Chris spoke with utter nonchalance was absolutely infuriating. It made me want to break a chair over their head. "Take me to Ivan," I demanded.

At that, they grimaced. "My apologies, but I cannot do that yet. There is a request I would like to make of you."

"Fucking *what?*" I asked again, hoping to finally get an answer.

"That technique. It allows you to share talents. I would like to be allowed into your network."

How the fuck did they know? The triz-adu were known for being spies. They crafted their own bodies, or stole those of others. They could hide in birds, and similar. Some could even make immobile bodies for themselves, like tables or benches.

But even then, *how?* We had only talked about it in private, we-

"You appear surprised. I have gained this information from my employers. They are maintaining surveillance upon your mirror-aspected abilities."

It clicked. "The keepers sent you." I didn't ask.

They nodded. "Yes."

"You're another assassin."

Another nod, this time they had the audacity to smile. "Yes!"

"Fucking fight me, then!"

That seemed to confuse them. Chris blinked at me, tilting their head. "Why? I simply wish to grow stronger. We have no need to fight. You would lose."

They said it as if it was obvious, self explanatory even. I didn't feel any energy from them, though. Which was usually a good sign, meaning that I could crush them. But here? I doubted it meant that.

No assassin lived long without a lot of power. Catching people off guard could only do so much. Plus, Chris had two other bodies. If I crushed this one, they would simply make another one. Worst case, *Ivan* would end up as the next skin for that thing to wear. The thought disgusted me.

"Your... shell, you call them?"

"Yes! Shellcrafters, that is what we are."

"The one you wear now. How did you find them?"

Chris looked at me in confusion. "They tried to kill me, I killed them back." As if to prove it, they pulled down the collar, revealing a nasty scar on the side of the neck, where a dagger had been run through it.

"You can't prove that."

"Ivan said to tell you 'stop being a hothead' if you kept being hostile. Is this an appropriate time?"

I stared at them for a long moment, feeling my anger. There was a lot of distrust there, too. Eric leaving had hurt, and made it even harder to think of Chris as having good intentions to me at all.

But yelling wouldn't bring Ivan back.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to let part of that anger go, and put the rest aside, to slowly disperse as Chris proved themselves. "Fine," I grumbled. "Take me to my brother."

"Gladly," the triz-adu told me, then spun around on their heels and walked off. I followed them down the stairs, onto the streets, past a couple blocks, and into an old warehouse.

"There we are!" they said, pointing at a table full of glass tools. Vials, beakers, funnels, and so on. Alchemy equipment. Of course Ivan would be into alchemy.

And there, at that table, sat my brother. Raven hair, and a mostly well maintained beard, combined with his dark eyes. Now, he even wore grey robes, making him look like a viking scientist. I held back a snort.

"Ivan?" I called.

He turned around at the sound of my voice in a way he hadn't when Chris called. Instantly, he shot up from the table. "Fio!" he yelled right back, running into a hug with me. "Holy shit. I- I almost didn't believe it all. This- a whole world!! It's incredible!" he gushed.

I laughed. It was the only thing that seemed reasonable in the moment. "You find a new world, and the first thing you do is get yourself abducted so some assassin can find me?"

Ivann snorted. "No, that's not at all the first thing I did. The first thing I did was select a class, choosing to be an alchemist."

"You're so pedantic," I rolled my eyes.

"Precision is important," he chided.

"What's important is *why the fuck* you're in Eden!"

At that, his face hardened a little. He distanced himself from me slightly, still holding onto my shoulders. "No, Fio. What's important is that you hid this from me. From your whole family."

"No," I said instantly. "If you're here, you know exactly why I didn't tell you, or mom or dad. Because of this. Because it's dangerous."

"And you think I want you risking your life?" Ivan shot back.

"I know you don't, Ivan," I said. "And, as callous as it sounds, I don't care. It's not your decision. Mom and dad would think it's theirs, but it isn't."

His face fell, and he chewed the inside of his lips. He knew I was right, and he hated it. "Fio. You could've shared this-"

"Could I, Ivan? Could I really?" I asked. "Neamhan is a shithole, broski. You're busy making air breathable again. Do you wanna worry about a whole second world, too? How much saving are you gonna do? No, this world doesn't need geniuses like you. It has simple problems, ones that I can solve by hitting them hard enough."

"... You thought this through, huh?"

"A thousand times over," I said, laughing even as I felt tears coming from my eyes. "Of course I thought about it, Ivan. You're my brother. You're keeping this family together far more than I ever could. Hell, if it weren't for you, I think I wouldn't be on speaking terms with mom and dad anymore. And some days, I hate you for that. But you're trying, so hard, to be the best brother, and to make time for me, and to talk about all my troubles."

He took a shaky breath. "Fio, you're crushing my shoulder a bit."

"Sorry," I yelped, letting go. "Sorry."

The silence hung in the air briefly, before Ivan talked.

"I'm sorry you didn't have anyone to share this with," he lamented. "It must've been so hard-"

"It wasn't," I said, shaking my head. "Not at all. I have friends here, you know? Built a whole life. We met up on Neamhan recently, and just... talked. Hung out, drank, had fun. I felt alive, accepted, loved."

He swallowed dryly.

"I mean, for the love of the divines, I've been dating my girlfriend here for... almost two years now, Ivan. This place has been amazing. It's made me not want to go back to Neamhan at all. Sometimes it feels like I'm only going back there out of an obligation. Because I 'owe' it to mom and dad."

"That... sucks."

"Yeah, it does. Seeing our parents has become *tolerable* on the good days. You know how often they promise to change, only to have the exact same talk with me again the next time around? Must've been dozens of times by now."

"Fio, I really don't wanna interrupt but... could we focus on the fact that there are *multiple worlds*?" he asked.

“Right, sorry,” I said, wiping away a couple tears. “I guess, what I mean to say is, I’m rather happy here. You don’t need to worry about me. How are you handling all this? Where’s Sarah? Did you join Zinnic?”

At that, he burst out laughing. “Bahahahahaha! Join Zinnic? Surely you’re joking? As if I’d ever, pfffft. No, no. Absolutely not. Right now, I got a sponsorship specifically from the city. I’m making potions for them, so they’re providing ingredients and tools and such.”

“And you’re still working in a shabby warehouse?”

“Look, if I, a beginner alchemist, don’t look like a shady drug dealer, then I’m not doing it right,” he said with a smirk. “As for Sarah, well. She has a team, and does active combat missions. That’s not for me.”

I nodded, honestly glad to hear it. “And now? You’ll stay here and just... do this?”

He laughed again. “Hah, absolutely not, no. You said it yourself, Fio. Neamhan’s a wreck. I got a world to save over there. I wanted to see you, that’s all. Sarah told me you were a Reflector. A special one, too, from what I hear.” His eyes glinted proudly.

“Look, this whole shtick you’re doing is dangerous, sis. It’s messy, and risky, and generally a bit irresponsible. But. I’ve not seen you smile this brightly in years. I mean, you met your love here. Friends. I would never get between that and you. No. Before this gets too dangerous, I’ll dip. Back to Neamhan, permanently. You don’t need to worry about me, okay?”

I cried a little again. Fucking Ivan. I always knew he was smarter than me, but he’d understood it all immediately. Why this mattered, why it was something I had to do regardless. He knew I met my friends here, and that it was what let me get some self-worth.

“Thanks, broski,” I muttered, drawing him into another hug.

“Of course, sis. Though I have to say, this “Gift” thing is pretty cool. The disposition bit is a bit eerie, the fact that it can sum up my character, but knowing just how amazing my talent is? Worth it.”

“Your talent?”

“Oh, I’ve got a few,” Ivan said with a smile. “Namely, though, there is [Grasp], which lets me learn much faster when I take apart the objects I’m trying to understand with my own hands, as well as [Deconstruct], which lets me grasp the fundamental principles when I learn about complex things. Both incredibly helpful for alchemy, as you can imagine.”

"You're impossible," I said, shaking my head at him. "Divines. What did I do to be constantly surrounded by geniuses all the time!"

Ivan tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

I smirked at him. "I started with *one* talent, Ivan. I bet you have more than that. Wanna know what it was? [Slight Edge]. You are slightly above average. That's *it*."

He gaped at me, eyes wide open. "Oh," he said. "Oh. But... you got more?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "I, uh, don't think you'd like them. One of them requires me to be near death to learn faster."

Once more, Ivan just stood there and blinked. "Well, I-" he stopped, thinking. "I guess the rapid emittance of adrenaline and other performance boosting neurotransmitters might lead to enhanced cognition in the moment of death. This talent could play into that? That's amazing, sis."

"... I needa almost die if I wanna keep up with geniuses like you. Regularly."

"Oh shit!" he scratched his head. "Yeah, that uh. That sucks. Big time."

I smiled. "Not that bad. Got a nice eyebrow notch out of it," I pointed at the scar.

"Riiight," Ivan said, drawing out the word. "Well. At any rate. You gotta introduce me to these friends of yours! Not here though. Not now. I've been hearing that something bad is coming, and I'm guessing you don't want me here for that."

"Dead on," I nodded. "Now, you ready to go back to Neamhan?"

"This isn't a dream, right? I'll remember all this?"

I shot him a grin. "Every last bit, given your memory at least."

Ivan gave me a crooked smile. Briefly, I considered incorporating him into the network. It would take the last slot, though, and I was... unsure how willing to wait Chris was. Plus, his talents sounded more suited to science than fighting.

"Okay, sis. You're amazing. I'm so proud of you. Show this world just why you're so fucking special, okay?" he said, giving me a big, toothy grin.

"Alright, broski," I replied with a smile, laying a hand on his shoulder. "See you on the other side."

“See you on the other side.”

Then, I triggered [Gateway], and a moment later, Ivan was gone.

Chapter 93: Welcome to the Party

I took a long, deep breath to compose myself when Ivan was gone.

The fact he'd made it to Eden... was certainly something. It did not make me like Sarah very much. But it could also be a good thing. I was glad he didn't get roped into anything bad, though. Not that I should have worried. Ivan was brilliant, after all.

His relationship with Sarah was his business. I wouldn't meddle.

Shaking my head for a few seconds to get back to the situation at hand, I turned to Chris.

“So,” I said, letting out another deep breath. “I thank you for keeping my brother safe.”

They smiled. “It was rather simple. He did not make it difficult. Finding you was harder, though my employers assisted me in this venture.”

“Assisted you?” I asked.

“Quite,” they nodded. “I received a small beacon pointing to the nearest gateway, as well as knowing your general location. Then I kept moving until the gateway it was pointing to was mobile.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” The fact that the keepers could just grant a boon like that did suck, though. Hopefully they didn't hand them out easily.

“Yes. Now, to the network. I would like access to it, please,” they said, bowing slightly.

At that, I froze up slightly, raising my metaphorical guard a bit. “And why would I do this for you?”

They raised themselves up again, looking at me with a neutral expression. “I believe it would be to our mutual benefit. You gain an ally. We gain the ability to progress. I would contribute my part, as well.”

“I don't think I am comfortable just handing this out,” I said, chewing on my lips. “Is there any guarantee you won't backstab me?”

Chris tilted their head. "Why would I do this? The network depends on you. It would be in my best interest to keep you alive."

That was a fair point. "Then how about your motivation, why do you want to grow stronger?"

At that, they became sad. It was a quiet, small sadness, in the slumping of their shoulders, and the way their arms sagged a little. "Ah, this is not a nice thing to speak of. But if I must. One of my old shells, one of the first I crafted, is still out there. Puppeteered around somewhere along the northern frontier. I wish to put it down, finally."

They said it with conviction, as if it was truly important. It made me wonder, briefly, what those shells were like for them. How much time and effort went into one? Clearly, right now, they wore human skin as one of their bodies.

Was this respectful? Was this a culture of burying things to them? How did one go about discarding a body? If someone else was wearing it and they weren't, how disrespectful was it? Like a slap in the face, or like digging up a relative's corpse?

I didn't ask them.

All I could do was answer. "I... see." Then mull the decision over some more, but really, it was set in stone already.

Chris had been nice. They had also appeared honest, albeit a bit bad at communicating that honesty. How paranoid was too paranoid, though? Should I demand an oath or something?

Despite all my hesitation the triz-adu just stood in front of me, waiting with a neutral expression. The sadness had faded. They didn't threaten me, didn't say I would be hurt if I denied them. Before gaining anything, they'd brought me to my brother.

I sighed. Fuck it, time to take a chance. "Alright. I'll include you," I said. It was my last slot for now, but I was sure there'd be more in the future.

With a quick tap to their shoulder, it was done. Chris smiled. "Thank you," they said, then gave a short pause, before asking bluntly. "Is it possible for me to join your guild?"

For a second, I stared at them. Then, I gave a small shrug. "We, uh, haven't exactly been receiving applications. I suppose you'd wanna talk to Marie about it."

"Are they your leader?"

"She is, yeah," I nodded.

“Then I would like to speak with her if possible,” they said, giving yet another short bow.

“Uh, sure, I’ll take you.”

“Would it be acceptable for me to bring my other bodies?” Chris asked.

“You... have some in reserve?”

They shook their head. “No, the other ones I’m using right now.”

I blinked a few times. “Right. Sure, I suppose? Are they nearby?”

“One is stationed in another house, having kept watch over your brother. The other is out in the frontier, fighting against the usurpers. I shall call them both here. Please give us a few minutes.”

The request was a bit surreal, alien, even, but it made sense. If they were gonna join our guild, we’d wanna know all their abilities. Only a couple dozen seconds later, the first new creature came in, a hound-like thing made from rocks. Their body was rough, with many of the larger ones not quite fitting the shape a canine would usually have, but it was... kind of cute, in a bizarre way.

Its “eyes” were little pieces of ruby inlaid in their reddish body. I would’ve guessed it was made from granite or something, but I was by no means an expert.

Chris made no effort to introduce their other self, though the wolf-thing did give me a small bow. I nodded my head back at it, them, I mean, and they seemed to take that as affirmation enough. The other body would take a bit to get here, so I decided to check what Chris contributed to the network, for now.

Very quickly, I found the talent they had decided to share. It was something called [Malleable Mind], making it easier to adapt to new sensations, perspectives, and general mental frameworks. A quick test showed me that it also made my reflection-vision easier to digest, which was rather lovely.

I did a few more tests, seeing how helpful it was for cycling Qi, and it felt like a minor boon to learning most manipulation-related abilities. Quite lovely. By the time I was done testing, Chris’ final body had arrived.

This one was made from wood, mainly, and a few bones and leathers they seemed to have attached to it. It was a tall thing, almost three metres including the antlers, with a deer skull for its head. Dim, green glows lingered in the empty eye sockets.

It reminded me faintly of the gangly giant of black flame that had so effortlessly destroyed Renvil, yet it looked at me with clearly different interests.

I saw it - them, dang it - tilt their head, and gaze at me with curiosity. They extended one long, wooden hand, their fingers carved into crude claws, and then gazed at me with anticipation.

Slowly, I reached out and shook their hand. They returned the handshake with enthusiasm, jostling me up and down slightly, as the glow in the eye sockets brightened. After a few moments, they took a step back and gave me a small bow. It was not easy to notice, given the giant's hunched position in the warehouse, but I returned the gesture, and they seemed pleased.

Chris' human body gave me a faint smile. "I hope this experience is not too alien for you," they said, though I felt there was some amusement in that statement.

I did my best to return the smile. "Getting used to it."

They nodded, a small gesture, then continued. "Shall we meet your leader, then?"

"Sure, yeah."

And with that, I started walking to the inn the others were staying at. They should be up by now, surely. Walking through town with all of Chris was, of course, an experience. The rock dog and forest giant certainly drew more than a couple wary looks.

But, surprisingly, no one attacked us. Maybe people were too preoccupied with their own safety. Maybe they were intimidated. I didn't think I looked particularly intimidating, having unsummoned my spear and wearing civilian clothing.

Of course, that was probably made up for by the nonchalance Chris walked with the monsters - or, well, their other shells.

They seemed faintly happy with the proceedings of the day, wearing a small smile all the way until we were back at the inn. Then, they eyed the building.

"It is a bit small," they remarked.

"What?"

"I won't fit," the triz-adu in the shape of a young man told me. I blinked. After a moment, they pointed at the forest-thing. "*I*," they emphasized, "will not fit."

Right. The thing - I really needed to figure out a better way to refer to it - would certainly have a tough time with the tavern. "Uh, do you want me to call the others out?"

"That would be rather more polite," they nodded.

Fine, I could do that. With small words of affirmation, I headed inside the tavern. Luckily, Marie was downstairs, at a table, with Ann. She must be back from running errands. The two were currently working on some arrows, adding enchantments to them.

I waited for them to be done with the one they were currently working on, then gave a knock on the table to get their attention. Both of them turned like squirrels shaken from a tree. I suppressed a laugh at Ann's surprised look.

"Fio!" she said, quickly smiling. "Where've you been? I was a bit surprised when you weren't home when I checked in!"

Ah, I didn't exactly have a good answer prepared. Telling her I went with an assassin certainly would get the wrong image across.

"Okay, I need you to hear me out-" I started.

This was the point at which Matt was making his way down the stairs, giving me a bit of a laugh. "Haha, this is gonna be good. What're we hearing you out on?"

I rolled my eyes at the swordsman. "Someone showed up at my door, telling me my brother was in Eden."

"Oh, fuck," Matt said, no longer amused.

"This person appears to be well willed and has asked to join our guild. *But*. They were hired by the keepers to kill me."

Ann stared at me. "You went along with an assassin?!"

For a second I considered whether her anger was justified, then remembered she had been doing chest compressions on me last time. It... was probably justified. "Let me elaborate. They did tell me by then that they had no plans to hurt me."

"... And you believed that?" Matt asked.

"They had Ivan."

"They could've been lying!"

"But they *weren't*, Ann." I stared her down. "I saw my brother. I was able to have a peaceful talk with him. I was able to send him back home to Neamhan, before this whole place goes up in flames. And I am entirely unhurt. They told the truth, with every bit of it."

"Why did you believe them?" Marie asked, calmly.

"Because it made sense. Ivan hadn't been on Neamhan for a while. I knew his new girlfriend was a Reflector. Plus, they wanted me alive for the networking ability, because they have a personal vendetta."

The older woman nodded, leaning back in her chair. "Okay. I... see your point, Fio. I would've liked it if you asked us for help, though."

I bit my lip. "Yeah, that's... understandable."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," Ann said, staring at the table. "I-

"They probably came in *because* you were out, Ann," Matt said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Not your fault. It's what assassins do."

"Right," I nodded. "Plus, we might walk out of this with another ally. In fact, since they asked to join the guild... they are waiting outside."

Marie raised an eyebrow. "Outside? Why?"

"Triz-adu. One of their shells doesn't fit in," I explained.

Ann nodded. "Yeah, they can be particular about that. When making decisions that affect all their shells they want them all present, preferably."

"Nerd," Matt teased, once more trying to diffuse the atmosphere. It worked, a little.

"Let's go meet them, then," Marie said, getting up from her chair. She stretched slightly, having probably been hunched over the arrows for a little while too long.

Not long after, we stood in front of them on the outside.

Ann's hostility dissipated a little when she saw Chris. "These are well crafted," she muttered, looking at the other bodies. I saw her eyes glow a little, she must've been looking at the mana in them. "The weave... extraordinary."

Chris smiled wide. "Thank you! We take pride in our work."

Given Ann's expression, the pride was warranted. Before our lovely mage had any chances to disrupt the discussion any more, Marie spoke up.

"So," she asked, drawing out the word until all three of Chris' bodies turned to look at her. "You wanna join our guild, is that right?"

They nodded. "Yes, that's correct," the human mouth replied.

"Right, great. You got the Gift?"

"The Gift? Ah, yes. The divines have bestowed it to me a little while ago. I exchanged enough contributions to be inaugurated," they explained.

Marie nodded again, slowly. "What's your goal in this?"

Chris tilted their head slightly. "Well, growing stronger I suppose. Making sure Fio remains alive so I may benefit from my increased talent. One of my once-shells is still out there, being used by another being. I wish to put it down."

"That's... all?" Marie asked.

"All? I thought this was a more than sufficient reason," Chris said.

"Usually, uh, people ask about like... payment, and stuff. Contract length, employment hours, that kinda deal," Marie elaborated.

Tilting their head even more, Chris sounded a little unsure. "... I would like to eat food occasionally?"

Almost absentmindedly, Ann explained. "Triz-adu rarely need to worry about sleep or rest due to their multiple bodies. They'll usually only require bare minimum maintenance and throw themselves at any problem with everything they have. They don't need comfortable beds, good hours, or even pay, they simply expect their maintenance to be taken care of." She said it without lifting her gaze from the forest-thing shell even once.

"Yes!" Chris excitedly confirmed. "Maintenance. I will occasionally need rocks and sticks and mosses. If they are magical, that is better. If we remain in human lands, then I may need... crowns to acquire them?"

"The currency is called novas," Ann helpfully provided.

"Thank you, novas then," Chris said, smiling. "I can buy rocks with them, yes?"

Marie nodded. "I suppose so."

“Then, if we find no maintenance materials on the road, I shall require some novas to purchase them,” Chris beamed. “I will also require a somewhat soft surface to rest my talking shell upon. And human food to sustain it.”

“Entirely reasonable,” Marie said, still a little perplexed. “How, uh, long are you planning to work with us?”

“I would expect to be working with you until I am powerful enough to lay to rest my wayward shell. My expectations are for this to take half a year of ordinary exploration type activities. I understand you may not all remain in Eden for that long?” they asked.

“No,” I said. “We’ll most likely head back in a month, maybe two, depending on how long the eclipse lasts.”

“Ah. If there is an eclipse, I expect it to not take much longer than until that ends for me to become strong enough. Either that or I will die. These are acceptable conditions, for now. I may lengthen this “contract” if you have need for me for longer, afterward, and are amicable to my presence,” Chris said.

“Well, I mean, does anyone have anything against them joining the party?” Marie asked.

Liam, Matt, and Reya shook their heads. Emilia kinda shrugged, while Ann was still transfixed by their magic, but gave at least a half hearted wave of her hand. I finally also agreed.

Marie turned to Chris. “Welcome to the party, I suppose?”

Chapter 94: Fighting

The battles never seemed to end.

Day after day, shift after shift, time after time. Monsters would swarm the walls, and every time they came, we’d be sent out there.

I swung my spear, dozens, hundreds, tens of thousands of times each day. I swung my spear until my hands bled. Until I could barely lift my arms anymore, until it felt like I was chained down by cinder blocks.

It was a horrible, unsustainable rhythm. Slaughter until I couldn't do it anymore, then run just before I ended up on the wrong side of the fight, pass out, wake up, do it all over again. Pass off any broken pieces of armor to the crafters, put away my bloody clothes, and get new ones once I awoke.

Everyone in the city was constantly working, just to maintain even basic comfort. Being able to wash myself was a luxury not always present. The amount of days I woke up with caked blood in my hair, only to go and fight again...

Miserable. Truly miserable. Sometimes fighting was miserable, but it was also necessary.

'Cause people would die otherwise.

Sometimes, there would be a brief respite when Saif came to defend the wall. The amount of destruction archmages could cause was still rather impressive. She'd slowly roll up a ramp to the side of the wall, raise her two right arms, and then monsters would start being torn apart by the wind.

Of course, things could never proceed simply. Not that waking up, killing shit, then collapsing into bed was easy, but it was, in a way, simple. Requiring focus and precision and constant awareness? Certainly, but it was predictable. Just fight.

Eden's war machine had fully revved up at least. I didn't need to worry about anything other than slashing and hacking away. Until, after two weeks of ever growing waves of monsters, I woke up to someone new at my door.

A man in a fancy suit, with strikingly blue eyes and short, blonde hair. He looked... put together, if barely. The suit was clearly tailored and expensive, but not pristine. Like it had been worn for too long, with slight bits of dirt.

"Hello, is this Ms. Bellum?" he asked.

I recognized that voice. That was the guy from Jules' apartment. The one that had an elevator installed. He sounded tired. Then again, so did I.

It was one of those lovely days where I still wore bloodstained clothes, not having taken off all my armor, only the damaged bits. So I wasn't exactly looking pristine.

"Yeah. Need anything?"

He looked up from his clipboard, as if he had just read what it said. "Yes. It says here that you damaged some of our resources."

"Oh fuck me, you're Zinnic aren't you?" I said, sighing, and leaning against the doorframe.

"Do you want money? I really couldn't care less."

"Money, sadly, will not do. The reparations we have been forced to undertake-"

"Look, buddy. Let me be extremely real with you. Piss off. Go home, cry to your dad about a failed job, tell him I'm not going to be taking shit. I offered to pay," I sighed. "I'm not gonna recruit people for you, I'm not bringing new people into Eden for you."

He seemed to narrow his eyes at my tone. "We may see ourselves forced to take countermeasures and see if we cannot collect our lost resources."

I stared at him. Very slowly, I reached out, placing a hand on his shoulder. His face scrunched up in disgust, but it got my message across, and would distract him from recognizing me. I did not want Zinnic knowing who I was on the other side.

"What's your name?" I asked, holding his eyes.

"Richard Terril," he ground out.

"Alright Rich," he opened his mouth to interrupt me at the nickname, but I held up my free hand. "Let me make it very clear what merchandise I damaged, alright? The divines gave me a task to clean up trash. People who'd killed Edians. You know that shit is taboo, right?"

I shook my head at him. "So, Rich, imagine my surprise when four people from Zinnic had done so. Imagine my surprise when they attacked me after I told them what they'd done wrong. I hurt them. They came after me again, and I *hurt them more*. Now, if it isn't *crystal clear* yet."

This time, I really held his eyes, squeezing his shoulder. "I'll do it again." My patience was running real thin right now. "I'll hurt people, Rich, if I need to. I cut off a woman's hand. I didn't enjoy that. I hope I never see her again and that she learns." He gulped.

"So, go home. Cry about the mean woman who won't give her contribution up. Because let me tell you, if you attack me, I just might cost you more precious resources."

Despite the clear apprehension, Rich spoke. "We have a reputation to uphold. If we let this go unpunished-"

"If you let this go unpunished I promise not to take any more blood tax from Zinnic," I said.

"This should be a prerequisite!" he complained, so engorged in his usual negotiating that the threat went by the wayside.

“Rich,” I hissed. “Be quiet for a sec.”

Then, I held out my free hand, summoning my spear. His eyes widened. I smiled at him, holding my weapon right at the blade. “Careful, don’t flinch. It’s sharp,” I warned.

Ever so slowly, I brought it closer to his picture-fucking-perfect face. “Rich. I need you to know, this isn’t a blood tax, okay? I’m not gonna harm you.” My voice was succinct, but the diplomat was suddenly frozen.

He flinched back slightly as I brought the spear closer to his face, but I maintained my grip on his shoulder. So I brought it a bit closer.

Coursing Qi through my spear, it even hummed softly. I could hear Rich start breathing faster.

With a light touch, my spear moved, and in the blink of an eye, I had cut off some of his perfect bangs. The hair floated slowly to the ground, but I unsummoned my spear, plucking one curl out of the air, and holding it up to him.

“See? You’re safe. Unharmful. I know about Zinnic, about your reputation, about your fucking *policies* of reclamation. I almost didn’t wanna take the divine job. Almost turned it down. Almost let *murderers* go. So, and I ask this so fucking kindly, don’t make me a human killer, yeah?”

I let the sentence sink in for a few silent seconds, then clapped Rich on the back. “Well! Off to battle I go. Got monsters to massacre my way through.”

Dunno how long he spent in that hallway afterwards. I didn’t care.

- - -

When I came back from the wall, I threw out the bloodstained cloth, then took a shower, almost passing out in it. As I crashed into the bed, I closed my eyes, trying to get in the barest amount of cultivating I could.

Seeing and fighting so much did wonders for my wells, and a breakthrough felt close. So I plunged into the golden Depths, diving deeper and deeper. Ivan, Chris, Zinnic, my knowledge on the usurpers and the keepers... the world was a vast one. I would see it all.

My underwater scene shifted. Beautiful corals appeared in the darkness. Specks of hope for me to explore.

I smiled.

[Golden Wellspring advanced to **3rd Step**.]

I took a deep breath, then fell asleep.

- - -

The hordes were growing more intense. The air constantly swarmed with usurpers. I had grown accustomed to sleeping with the sound of swords and screams in the background...

I was less accustomed to waking to the smell of smoke.

... Despite it, I was so tired I almost simply turned and closed my eyes once more.

But it was hot enough to shake that idea out of my head. Why... was it so hot? Ann's practice usually didn't cause that... did she set herself on fire?

My bed was burning.

Finally, adrenaline coursed through my veins, activating any remaining survival instinct I may have had, and I quickly coursed Qi through my body, glowing with a slight sheen. "Ann!" I called for her.

From a few meters away, I heard a tumbling, then a new perspective opened up in my mirror-vision as Ann opened her eyes. I saw myself hop off the bed, charging through the smoke as a dim silhouette. Picking her up, and rushing out of the building.

She conjured wind mana to help her breathe, a small spell. "Fio? What's happening?" she asked, drowsily but yet alert.

"Building on fire, I guess," I said, rushing out. "Respiration buff, quick."

Obliging my request, Ann chanted and moved her hands. Soon, I found myself with a thin mask of mana across my face. Then, I charged back in, calling for the others. I slammed open the doors to their rooms.

Matt woke up when I entered, hand already on his sword and dashing towards me, when his eyes cleared. "Out!!"

When he was down the hall, Marie was already at the door. Liam quickly appeared next to them. I rushed to Emilia's room, who was quickly snatching up her armor, giving her a nod, before heading for Reya.

As a healer, she was the least physically powerful out of us, and with all the fighting happening... she was wrung dry. Unsurprisingly, she still remained slack on her bed. I

quickly channelled my Qi harder, grabbing onto her roughly enough to slowly wake her, as I dashed back down, trying to keep her in areas with little smoke.

We were outside seconds later, and I saw it. The inn had been lit ablaze... by an arrow. Of *black fire*.

Ann chanted, as my gaze snapped to the walls. It was there. *It was there*.

A giant skull, its sockets alight with dark fire was at the city. Within its monstrosly long arms was an enormous warbow, arrows of sinister, boiling darkness coalescing in its hands. It was aiming at me.

For a moment, I realized it was too late. None of my figments were recharged yet. I didn't get a warning this time, no re-dos.

The arrow finished forming. I could see the fire in its eyes flicker gleefully, as if certain it had me now. It moved the bow, adjusting slightly, then, finally, began releasing its fingers...

Saif rose into the air. Her grey form was so unassuming in the sky. Her legs dangled below her, two arms outstretched.

Seeing her magic... it was as if I'd never seen a storm before.

Calling it a tornado would be doing it a disservice. The raging winds the archmage summoned could only be described as terrifying. I was just beginning to grow aware enough to notice the screams, only to have them all buried.

The wind howled so loudly, it swept away all other noise. The burning building was like a candle in the path of a hurricane. Chris darted out from the wooden boards that were now being broken and snapped as the fire was snuffed out.

It felt like time slowed down as the storm raged. It tore through the skies, a truly horrific mass of moving air. It slammed into the monster, and the fire in its eye sockets flickered. The bow was knocked off course, the flaming arrow flying off into the sky instead.

Ann was screaming something at me, but I could not hear her. The wind was too intense. She screamed again, then paused, quickly growing more measured. I smiled. She truly had an amazing head on her shoulders.

Taking control of only a tiny sliver of air, inconspicuous enough to not matter in the face of the grans spell, Ann whispered in everyone's ears. "Let's move."

I looked at the monster. We weren't ready to fight it, not at all, but... I couldn't run. Not again.

Marie looked at me, and held my eyes. She knew what I was thinking. A moment later, Ann got it, too, then Matt.

The swordsman was the one who brought it up. "Screw running," he said, his voice coming with the brief smell of plum. "Let's tear up the frontier?"

We looked around at the group. It all snapped into place. Every last person here... was sick of running.

Despite my fear, my wildly beating heart, and the howling wind, I couldn't help but give a manic grin.

"Let's run into the frontier."

Chapter 95: Wraith

Now, among my *many* stupid decisions, this one does stand out. Because, quite frankly, being out in the frontier is generally a poor choice. It has monsters, after all, and usurpers.

On the other hand, could I justify remaining in cities? When the wards were down, and I was being hunted by usurpers? No. That would be cruel. There were people in those cities that couldn't defend themselves, people that I couldn't defend, either. Those don't deserve to die.

So, into the frontier we went.

Honestly, by now, that line had moved far. We went southwest, to avoid the giant of black flame, though Saif seemed to be doing rather well at fighting it off. Not to say that this was easy, either. We had to carve our way through plenty of monsters.

Bornins were rushing across the grassy earth in droves, with drytz coming through the ground. Zurulen and scorions occasionally headed the packs, working as larger, more powerful anchors.

But we cut through them.

None of us were the same anymore. I had grown stronger, but so had everyone else. Emilia, Matt and Liam had crossed into wellspring, Ann had unlocked the fourth circle, and Marie was both in the third circle and the mid steps of the core realm. I didn't exactly know how progression among a priest's path worked, but Reya had grown too, without a doubt.

Additionally, we had Chris. We were already a decent team when I first got the whole [Gateway] thing going, but now? We could be considered elites.

So, we carved through the monsters. Emilia single handedly stopped a zurulen, a giant monster of stone and crystal, before Matt cut it in half. Emilia shot out both eyes of a scorion with two rapid fire magic arrows. Liam controlled the monster's own shadows to strangle them, while I couldn't even be touched by their attacks due to [Reflection].

It was a massacre, as we moved deeper into monstrous territory, with the glow of Divinity wrapping around us, making us even faster. The weaker creatures didn't stand a chance, and even monsters we used to hunt as a group we could now take on in single combat. This last... half year or so had probably been some of my fastest growth in Eden.

Then, there was a pang of danger from the nascent spirit in my spear, and I felt Cass trigger [Mirror Mind]. My body bent, ducking under a sharp quill, soaring over my head. Through the reflection of Liam's eyes I saw what had shot it at me. A large, gorilla like thing, with sharp spikes on its back. It plucked off another one, using additional arms to balance, and threw it at me.

This time, I was ready. I caught it, enveloped it with enough Qi that the ephemeral, golden energy solidified, and formed the ghostly image of a spear, then tossed it back even faster. My Qi-spear dug deep into the monster's abdomen, as we ran on. I didn't see it do anything after that, since it was enveloped in a storm of pink plum petals.

Soon after that, we broke through the cover of the forest. Saif's storm was no longer ravaging above us, so there were flying monsters again, but none of them got close before being enveloped in gusts of fire from Ann.

Chris' shells, the stone-wolf and the wod-thing, stalked forth into the trees. I could still see them, often through the eyes of monsters, before they were torn apart. And it was, indeed, a brutal affair. The shells fought roughly, with the natural weapons that were their bodies, mauling and ripping and tearing things to bits.

We fought, and cut, and ran until we were getting tired. Until the sun started hanging low in the sky. Marie set up the campsite, we had a meagre meal, and then set up watches.

They were desperately necessary, now that repelling formations no longer worked because of the eclipse. I felt the nascent spirit imbued in my spear hum slightly as I sat in the quiet forest. The winds had settled down, by now, as if the air itself for dozens of miles had been exhausted by Saif's spells.

Nights in Eden were already eerily quiet. There were no crickets. No cicadas or birds tweeting. Only the sounds of plants and air, and even those were gone today.

So I simply sat, listening to my spear hum. No one could hear it but me, but I could tell it was there. It was absorbing Qi, drawing it from my wellspring, though at a rate so slow compared to my generation it hardly even mattered at all.

In fact, my wells had filled up again during my rest, so Cass was able to summon her avatar, too, without causing any trouble.

She didn't say anything, her shimmering, pale body simply taking a seat next to me, also staying on the lookout. Not that she really needed to. It was cold, and tiny amounts of dew had collected on the leaves already, so I could see a large area around me.

I fought that first night. I'd woken up before, when the others fought off minor patrols of monsters, and so when it was my turn, I stepped through the reflections occasionally, cutting off a bornin's or a drytz's head before they could get too close to the camp.

Then, once I was done, I went back to bed.

- - -

When I woke up in the morning, I noticed that the world looked a little dim. It had been getting dimmer slowly, of course, but only now did that really settle in. It would get faster, bit by bit, until for about a week, Eden would face an endless night.

'You can feel it too, right, Cass?' I asked her.

[Yeah,] my keeper replied. [The gateway's resonating. The boundaries between worlds are growing thin.]

With a nod, I told the party. "Rifts will start opening. We have... maybe another two weeks until the eclipse starts properly."

Everyone nodded. We were prepared for that, after all. Rifts would open. More powerful usurpers would come through. New species of them, some maybe already holding gateway fragments from other worlds.

"What's the plan, then?" Matt asked.

Marie was whittling a bit of wood into another arrow as she answered. "Simple, we kill monsters, we protect people."

"How do we find them?" Chris asked. "I can go scout." Liam nodded his agreement, clearly itching to go as well.

"No," Marie shook her head. "Cutting down weaker monsters, or looking aimlessly is pointless. But we have a technique for just this, don't we? Fio, you can find other gateways, can't you? How about seeing if there is one nearby that's moving," she said, throwing a smirk at me.

"Oh," I said, grinning, "I think I like that idea."

The usurpers had come after me for a while now, trying to hunt down my fragment. Maybe it was time I hunted theirs, then.

Closing my eyes, I called out to [Lost and Found]. I'd neglected the technique a little, but with my vastly improved control over Qi, I could still utilize it a lot better than I used to.

Dozens of gateways pinged my senses, like looking at the sparkling stars in the night sky. I felt thin threads connect me to each one. An invisible draw, a shared similarity, maybe, or a bit of fate. Not that it mattered.

Many were intact, especially pointing towards the east, where further cities still stood. There were hardly any gateways out in the west, in the midst of the frontier. Last time I triggered the skill, the hall of gateways in Renvil had been like a beacon, but now... it was like a patch of bright stars had been wiped blank.

Not too far east from us, I felt a powerful, corrupt glow. Gateways, multiple full ones, inside a single body. The giant of black flame. We would not be hunting it.

But down south, there were more. Dozens of tiny pinpricks, the threads thinner than spider silk. They would be held by powerful monsters, ones that had already survived destroying cities, without a doubt. That sounded good.

"South, for now. The nearest one is... slightly to the west, but we'll have to go east afterwards," I said, after checking again. "Actually, we want to hunt it down, right?"

"Yes," Ann said without hesitation. "We'll hunt them."

"Right," I nodded. "Let me try something."

Then, closing my eyes again, I called on Cass' help. She was a bit better in tune with the gateways, so she already added the direction of the nearest monster as a small thread and pull I could see and feel if I focused on it. But I wanted something better.

'Cass? Help me reach out really quick,' I asked her, and after a quick affirmation, we both extended our hands.

The feeling was strange. A tingle in my fingertips as Cass' smaller hand merged with mine, a bit like when she shared my sensations. But I felt the difference. The glass that was always just underneath my skin now seemed to envelop it like a fractal glove, infinitely repeating vestiges of myself in it.

My affinity with mirrors seemed to temporarily be at its peak, though I felt it consume quite a bit of Qi, so I did what I meant to do. We reached out to the string, connecting me to the nearest usurper with a gateway fragment. Then we grabbed it.

With a yank on the string, I felt the creature on the other side react. I yanked again, harder this time, and the string quivered. It didn't fray, or break, or stretch. It just made it aware of where I was, and maybe hurt it a little as I pulled on its soul.

"Come and get me," I whispered, grinning, as Cass' and my own hand separated again.

[Lost and Found has reached (High)!]

Yeah, that seemed about right.

"What did you do?" Liam asked with a whisper. "The amount of Qi you channeled just now was incredible."

"I think I pulled on the connection between our gateways to taunt the thing."

"That's awesome," Matt said.

"It seems rather useful for hunting," Chris nodded. "Is it approaching us?" They tilted their head in their usual fashion as they asked.

Another quick check revealed that yes, it was, and I told them as such. "It is. We can probably head straight south and let it come to us."

"Amazing," Marie said, patting my shoulder. "Let's head out then. Everyone ready?"

After a set of nods, and even an affirmative hum from my spear-spirit, we headed out.

- - -

The journey south, by itself, was uneventful. We moved quickly. Chris' stone wolf was remarkably fast, helping Liam and Marie with scouting, while my vision through reflections was greatly aided by the morning dew.

Additionally, Chris' forest-guardian body, which they called a leshi, showed incredible talent at navigating the forest as well. They used nature Qi and an ability called [Plant Guardian], which let them feel when grass was crushed underneath someone's steps nearby. So they were very effective at detecting drytz through the roots of plants.

With all these advantages in terms of vision, Marie having bought more nature related skills as well using her contribution, we quickly made our way down south. There were dozens of tiny skirmishes, many against monster's that were not really at home in forests.

We met more scorions, some even in packs, with powerful matriarchs, but we always had the drop on them, and were able to dispatch them quickly. There were more of the gorilla-porcupine monsters, which Ann knew were called irideres. They lived further down south, and became more frequent as the day went on.

By the time noon came around, we must have already ran a hundred miles. Ann and Reya spent some of that time floating, and so did Chris' human body, but we were still making incredible time.

During the afternoon, we finally had to cut out to the west a bit, to meet the gateway delivery I'd ordered. We were wary, of course. Up until now, encounters with monsters that harboured gateways had always been brutal.

So, when none of us could find the creature, it was disappointing, but not exactly surprising.

I could feel it. I knew it was nearby, but it seemed entirely invisible to us. Ann didn't sense any mana, nor did it disturb our environment at all. According to Liam, it didn't even have a shadow.

Tensely, we stepped forward. The forest was dim in the afternoon sun, looking more as though it was already dusk, the leaves hanging low. Gingerly following the thread my technique showed me, we stepped into a clearing.

The grass there was wilted, and covered in a layer of mildew and frost. It smelled stale, moldy, and no wind swept through the area. A frosty mist hung just above the ground, clinging to blades of grass and small patches of mushrooms.

Leshi-Chris stepped forward first. It was what we had agreed on.

They went into the center of the clearing, brown grass crunching underneath their wooden legs, yet nothing happened. The forest remained deathly silent. Not a breeze disturbed them.

Until there was a twinge in my soul. A pang from [Lost and Found] that told me my fellow gateway was close enough for me to hug it, if I just reached out.

The spirit in my spear let out a quiet rasp, as if breathlessly asking for more Qi, and I infused it more, every muscle poised for the slightest change.

Leshi was gone.

I had been distracted for a moment, channelling my Qi, and Chris' shell had disappeared. The centre of the clearing was empty.

Without hesitation, I lashed out, slashing through the air with my spear, and things changed.

[Lost and Found] told me that the other creature was further away again. My vision had also shifted, however. A perspective was missing.

"Where's Matt?"

A howling laughter rang out across the clearing.

The frost moved now. The mist no longer clinging to the floor, but billowing in a sudden gust of wind. I blinked for a moment, as bits of snow and mushroom spores seemed to land in my eyes, quickly conjuring a barrier of Qi to protect them.

In the moment that took, I found myself trapped in a deep mist. Suddenly, the entire clearing was covered in white fog. I breathed out and saw my own breath condense in the air before me.

My spear sent a warning to me, again, and I stepped to the left based on the vague impulse it gave me.

Where I had just stood, something strange happened. As if by itself, the fog condensed together, forming a dense cloud of freezing cold air, which then sliced down in an arc, leaving behind a crescent of pure ice.

"What the fu-" the words choked as I felt the freezing air enter my lungs. I hacked out a cough, stumbling backwards out of the way of another, similar, icy crescent. The resulting sculpture fell and shattered on the floor, before quickly sublimating into fog again.

Covering my entire head in a bubble of golden Qi, I sent it coursing through my entire body, like a raging storm. Every fibre of muscle was reinforced, and my spear itself was also included in the cycle, with Qi flooding into and back out of it, enveloping it in a sheen of gold.

[Getting flickers from reflections, Fio. Your companions are around, the mist is just reducing its range a lot!] Cass notified me.

‘Got it. Next time one pops up, tell me, so I can step through.’

[Understood!]

Another slash came, and I deflected this one with my spear. The moment the blade touched the dense cloud, it dissipated, the Qi of the technique brought into disarray by the pure power of mine.

There were a few more close calls, since I could barely see the attacks coming, but by angling my spear, and using the first on the floor, I could at least get a decent visual in a small radius around me. Then, in the middle of a swing, Cass’ message came.

[Now!]

Without hesitation, I triggered the skill, stepping through the reflection, and appearing somewhere else entirely. The next moment I threw myself to the floor, and a mace rushed through the air where I’d just been.

“Emilia, wait!!” I screamed. Projecting my voice in the middle of keeping so many techniques up was enough to send my head spinning, not to mention the disorientation from the teleportation, but I did it anyway.

There was a short delay, but eventually the answer came. “Princess?!”

Not an instant later, my vision was once again filled by dense fog, though not an isolating one, but the kind that came just before an attack. But I wouldn’t let this wretch separate us again so easily.

The cloud of cold air impacted against my [Reflection], instantly disappearing in the mirror sheen, and half a second later, an abhorrent wailing reached my ears. It made my vision swim, and was most certainly imbued with some kind of harmful thing, maybe rot or decay magic.

Emilia caught my shoulder and helped me keep myself upright. “Hey, princess, you okay? What’s happening?”

“I think we’re fighting an apparition!” Fuck, projecting my voice hurt, it made my ears ring even worse, but I grit my teeth anyway.

“Okay. What’s our move?” she asked, calmly.

"We got shit affinities. Best case, we bait it out. It wants me, after all. Keep me safe?" I asked.

"You got it!" Emilia said without hesitation, already raising her shield high.

"Can you detect the attacks?"

She nodded grimly. "Barely."

"Cass? Get your avatar out. Warn Emilia. You're her eyes now!" I told her.

A moment later, her ghostly appearance wove itself, a thin tether connecting her to me. "Got it. Emilia, three o'clock, downwards slash."

"Understood!" The warrior raised her shield to meet it, the cloud dispersing harmlessly against the metal wrapped in grey.

"I'll start moving now!" I told her, then placed my trust in being safe. I closed my eyes. Cass was no longer there to direct my sensations, so instead, I focused on [Lost and Found].

Coursing the mirror Qi through my body, I yanked on that string again, which elicited a growl from the mist. There was something in there. I felt the frost and the decay try to rot away my Qi, but I ignored it, marching on.

There was the sound of clanging around me, of ice striking metal, and stirring rocks as Emilia conjured up stone to protect herself and me. I ignored all that, focusing further.

The world faded away, until I was borderline cultivating. I felt myself, enveloped in the mist, as if I was in the golden depths, almost weightless, yet confidently striding forward, as if I was walking the path into the sky of imprint.

I let that sensation guide me, walking forward through the mist step by step. The presence drew away whenever I got closer, so I walked faster. Eventually, I started running. There was the sound of wood shattering, and splinters raining on me. Emilia must have shattered a tree in my path. I grinned.

What a friend she was.

Following the tether of [Lost and Found], I spent more Qi, yanking on it. My mirror well protested at the rapid expenditure of Qi, the volume of it so great it burnt as it coursed through me, but I didn't care. When I pulled, the thing paused.

Then I caught up.

I felt it the moment it happened. Rather than following a tether, it was suddenly just *there*. Right in front of me. I coursed even more mirror Qi through myself, emptying my well at once.

It braided with the liquid gold already coursing through me. The energies melded, reinforcing me in a way that should not be possible. I felt the liquid glass underneath my skin roil at the moment, and willed myself forward. Willed *it* forward.

The glass moved before I could.

[Golden Body has reached (Great)!]

Liquid gold, polished to a mirror sheen, leapt from my fingertips, grasping at the mist in front of me, and it caught something. A moment later, my hands of flesh and blood caught up, snatching the thing.

I slammed it into the floor, and with a horrifying wail that sent my entire world spinning, I knew the mist was gone.

A moment later, the ice that I just now felt grippin all my bones was replaced by a scorching heat. I opened my eyes, breathing heavily, and saw an inferno. Flames so bright they had turned incandescent blue raged over the mist wraith, burning away its frost, and the rest of the mist until that was gone.

Once the inferno abated, though, a storm of petals swept through the area again, and I smelt plum. It dispersed the feeling of rot that was still hanging in the air.

Still after that, I knew Marie and Chris were using nature magic to combat that vile corruption, and finally, even Divinity swept through the area, truly burning it away. Only once Liam collected even the shadows of everything in the area, and we disintegrated those down to ash and let them reform, was the cleansing done, and the thing truly dead.

[Lost and Found] cried out to me, and I stretched my hand forwards, wrapping my hand around what had been the core of the wraith, and crushing it. From within, a sliver of glass flowed into my hand, soon melding with the rest that was already inside me.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **15**
- Fragments: **19**
- Figments: **3]**

I grinned. We were hurt, of course, but everyone lived. Chris would need to mend their shells, especially the Leshi, which had taken severe damage from the rot. Reya had been hurt, and lived only because Liam was with her, having dived in her shadow the moment we were separated.

But we lived.

And we were stronger again, I knew that much.

“Blue fire now, Ann?” Matt chipped. “You know, if we keep growing at this rate, maybe you can create rainbow fire in time pride month rolls around on Neamhan, eh?”

I laughed so hard my cheeks hurt.

Chapter 96: The Frontier

Somehow, someway, we lived in the frontier.

Calling it difficult wouldn't be right. It wasn't just difficult, it was harrowing. We had to adjust, every moment, be ready to fight. Being high-strung wasn't enough.

There were nights I woke up to yelling. There was no time to get ready. We slept in our clothes, because our armor had long since broken a bit. Because when there was screaming, there was no time for hesitation.

A single whiff of plum at night made my eyes tear open, and my spear appear in my hands. I had to summon it so often that my speed improved significantly. Spending so much time holding the weapon... I felt closer to it.

Things got so far, that I began to try and cycle Qi during my sleep. [Golden Body] was my highest technique now, after all, so I tried to push that to its very limits. We fought, and then we would cultivate, then scramble for food and rest wherever we could get it.

Every living moment was fraught with danger. Because of this, maybe we should have argued more, gotten angry and snapped at each other, but... it didn't happen.

When we were woken up in the middle of a night by some abomination looking to kill us, trying to claw my gateway from my soul, we got up and fought it together. No one got angry. No one yelled, no one argued. We simply battled and went back to sleep.

My least favourite nights were the ones where I was woken up by blood splashing over my face. It was always miserable. But we lived, and got stronger.

This kind of gauntlet forced it. I felt the effects of everyone else's talents, too. The network got stronger as we worked with each other. I could pull more from some if I wanted to.

In order to get my Qi coursing through me at night, I leaned heavily into [Prodigy] from Matt, as well as [Stalwart Patience] from Emilia. The longer I tried, the more likely I'd be to succeed.

A couple days passed like that. The world was starting to grow darker, and with the dim twilight being the brightest it got, our sleep cycles were thrown off. We would fight, then half of us passed out from exhaustion, usually waking up to more fighting.

In the rare moments we got to choose to sleep, I would hold Ann close, and run my fingers through her hair. She was doing the same thing as me, trying to practice her mana control until she could do it in her sleep. Holding her helped her focus a little, but it was more about showing that I loved her.

Those little gestures became all the more important as exhaustion set in. Doing things for one another became a high priority. We divided up tasks, helped each other cook. I often went foraging with Marie or Chris, who could find food the best. Matt and I meditated together.

Reya taught us a bit about how Divinity healed wounds, and we practiced emulating the effects with Qi or Mana, slowly learning to improve our healing. Liam showed us a trick about cloaking himself in shadow, which would become more important to learn as our clothing degraded. I had spare sets, of course, but not infinite of them.

Ann would summon water with any spare mana she had, both to wash ourselves and to drink. Whenever my wells were full, Cass would summon herself and keep watch, or talk to the others. It was important to retain morale.

I wouldn't call it peaceful, but it was strangely... meditative. Simple, almost. Fight when there was fighting to be done, walk when there was walking to be done, help when there was helping to be done.

The cycle of journeying, battling, and interacting advanced my cultivation. I immersed myself in that, too. Feeling the limits of my wellsprings grow slowly. Not enough to break through a new realm, but steadily, observably, they grew.

It was something I noticed, too. When my cores were full, my wellsprings would still produce more Qi, simply doing so far slower. They'd expand the boundaries of my power. Giving me a larger total pool. It was not immediately noticeable, since cultivating my paths did that same thing, but thinking about it in a time sense - how big must the pools of old monsters be?

I let that thought trail off; there were better things to do than worrying. We were walking again, after all, so I closed my eyes and immersed myself in the golden depths, journeying to see ever new magical sights as I digested things.

Every fight, every emotion, every experience, was fuel for my path. Sorrow, anger, fear, worry, determination... I let it all feed into the endless waters, growing them. And we journeyed on.

After five days of heading southeast, we finally reached the location where the city had once been. In the meantime, we had picked off another creature carrying a single gateway fragment, raising those from 19 to 20, and my gateway's strength from 15 to 16. My network now had two open slots.

It was satisfying to know, but any satisfaction was crushed when we saw the ruins.

The city was a scene of ruin.

So much carnage. Buildings had been broken down to rubble, walls cracked and knocked over. Dust and death hung heavily over the ruins, monsters still crawling through them, searching for more morsels.

There were elemental auras from stronger foes hanging heavily in the air, creating colourful clouds that merged into one giant, chaotic mess. The walls of the city served only to contain the tide of horrors inside.

But none of that was the worst part.

When we got close enough, I could feel the Qi in the air shift. I could usually feel its affinities - forests were dense with nature Qi, while the black sands had a lot of death Qi and so on. This city, though? It wasn't just chaotic, as we would have expected given the amount of monsters... it was different than that. Sinister.

And it was easy to tell why. There was a rift in its center, after all.

Seeing a rift for the first time is hard to describe, you know. It simply hung there, in the air. It looked two dimensional. Flat, really, and it had no backside. No matter where I went, I was always facing the front of the strange portal.

It didn't have any proper colour. I could have called it iridescent as well as I could have called it monochrome. A tall, jagged scar, which seemed entirely out of place, defying all rules of physics and reality.

In as clear terms as I could put it: Staring at the rift felt like looking into another universe.

Physics didn't apply to it. Gravity didn't make sense. It broke space, and it broke logic, and it, in the most real sense of the world, carved a tear into reality. There was a whole different world behind it, a myriad of perspectives that shifted as I moved, and I could make sense of none of them.

Eden and Neamhan were at least similar, you know? They had the same amount of spatial dimensions, similar gravities, overlapping species. But this...?

Looking at it made me dizzy, and I wanted to throw up. It felt wrong - I knew it technically wasn't, that it was simply something I could not understand, but I could feel that it had no place *here*. No place on Eden. That it would, inevitably, damage the integrity of this world.

Slowly, I tore my eyes away from it, turning to face my companions. They, too, had strange looks in their eyes. Staring at the rift.

The city was broken, destroyed, and a gouge of reality right in its middle. It was, in all meanings of the word, a hunting ground. There was just one more thing to look for...

Channelling Qi into my eyes, my vision improved, and I began swiping my gaze over the city. Ruin after ruin was passed by and discarded. I was looking for something very specific, something important... There.

Halfway between the rift and the northern city walls, there was a ruined building. One with its roof caved in, broken and devastated. It had, once, been the gateway hall, housing dozens of entryways in and out of this world, as well as the statues of the gods.

[Lost and Found] told me that none of the gateways remained in there anymore. They had been shattered and usurped, taken and twisted to bring more usurpers into this world. I still felt some chunks writhe and slither in the city.

But that did not make this building useless. All that we needed was a single divine altar, and we could exchange contribution points. Beat back this plague, before it had time to become an even worse infestation, and bring one city back.

The archmages could hold the line. Perhaps one would visit us, eventually, if we established a channel of communication with the divines, or maybe an angel. But first, we needed to carve a path through the city.

It was time to get to work.

Chapter 97: A Place to Stay

Before we headed into the city, we took some time to look over everything we had. Without a doubt, we would need to do some looting here. Food was beginning to become a priority, and I would really like to restock my set of spare shirts.

Armor was less of a priority, since between [Golden Body] and Ann's barriers, my skin was rather tough these days. Marie wanted decent materials to make arrows from, maybe enchanted ones if there were weapons stored in the keep. She could summon ones from Qi and Mana, but it would tire her out faster.

Chris' shells had taken some damage, too. They were able to repair their leshi-self just fine with the materials of the forest, but they wanted to find some prime stone, preferably enchanted, in order to restore the hound. Reya was hoping for some divinely blessed items, since she, and us as well, could return those and receive contribution in turn.

That was the central point, though - we wanted contribution. Cleansing this city, or halting any further monster hordes that would pass through here, was certainly going to give us more contribution. If there was a single altar, anywhere in this city, be that to Jam or any of the divines... we could use it.

And it was almost certain that there would be an altar - those were supremely hard to break. Especially since most of the usurpers seemed rather like wild animals than a coordinated unit, they were still killing each other in the city, occasionally, it was unlikely they had targeted them.

Even if they did break those in the gateway hall, there might be secret ones hidden away in churches or the keep. We would just have to find them.

So, essentially, our goals were: grabbing gateway fragments for me, any useful materials for the party, including items and clothing, and finally, some kind of altar to turn in our contribution.

It seemed doable.

"Before we all go in, please give me a moment," Liam whisper-spoke to us. "I'd like to see how the usurpers behave."

"Okay," Marie nodded. "Go ahead."

A moment later, Liam sunk into the shadows, then darted off into the direction of the city.

Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes. We were tense. After all, there was a chance Liam returned with a monster or two in tow, or that we would be attacked from behind. Cass was keeping a lookout, too, but still.

After maybe ten minutes, our scout returned. He looked a little worse for wear, his breathing ragged. "So? How are things?" Matt asked, as Liam caught his breath.

"Bad," the rogue whispered. "Streets full of them, strong ones, too. The weak ones already starved or moved on. They're killing each other now. Trying to establish territories, where they absorb the Qi, and twist it to their element."

Ann clicked her tongue. "Leeches."

Liam gave her a glance. "Just a few of them, most have parts of other animals, and a couple are so... different they hurt to look at."

She rolled her eyes at the first part, then listened intently to the second. "Ah," she said.

"Those would be the ones right from the rift. They don't always fit into our world properly."

Emilia blinked at her. "Where'd you learn that?"

"Mage school," Ann shrugged, getting an amused huff in return. "Getting info on monsters was my job in our guild, wasn't it?" the mage added cheekily.

Chris seemed a little interested. "The strange ones. Would they make good shells?"

Ann shook her head. "Hardly, I think. Might be too alien to adapt to, even for you."

They paused for a moment, then shrugged. "I can find out eventually. If it is safe to try. I will not endanger myself over this. My current shells suit me well."

Emilia clapped him on the shoulder. "That they do," she said. "Quite handsome, too."

Chris tilted their head, in their usual manner. "This is not a characteristic the triz-adu usually derive from shells."

"Huh?" the warrior asked.

"Someone's shell is an expression of their self, of their artistic taste. It is not their true self. For that, you must look at the spirit," Chris lectured, as if it was the most sensible thing in the world.

"... And how would I see your spirit?"

Chris smiled, somewhat teasingly. "For that you must get to know me. A few days will not suffice," they said.

Matt gave a huff at that. "Sounds like you're demi to me."

"Demi?" Chris asked.

"A concept humans developed to explain certain types of developing attraction," Matt said. "It means that you only develop romantic or sexual attraction to someone you already enjoy platonically."

Chris gave him a long look. "I see," they said. "It does sound similar. Attraction after knowing someone... I find myself liking it." Chris gave a small smile, which Matt returned. Then, after a few moments, they turned towards the city. "Ah, but we should start exploring. Before it gets... well, it's already dark. Before it gets darker."

Marie nodded. "Right. We should go find somewhere to stay. Liam, did you find a spot?"

"A few candidates," he whispered. "There are a couple empty houses that are mostly in decent condition. We'll need to kill something to free up the area, though."

"Of course we will," I rolled my eyes. "So, what's the best spot out of the candidates you have?"

"An old forge. Large, unoccupied basement with plenty of space. The building is well made and still mostly intact. Houses a nasty creature, but nothing too terrible to handle. It seems to mainly ambush anything that visits," Liam explained.

Marie nodded, patting some dust off her clothes. "Alright," she said. "Let's get to it."

- - -

Ambushing the ambush predator went about as well as it could have. Liam made shadowy ropes, and Marie got a couple in place at once by attaching them to arrows. Then Emilia, Chris and I held the thing down, Reya applied some buffs, and not long after, Ann and Matt had done the killing.

Was it unfair to kill the thing while it slept? Maybe, but we didn't care too much.

The monster had been a kind of chameleon-scaled bull, though it certainly had more horns than any bull ever reasonably should, spread all over its body. Marie was already collecting those, and probably planning to make arrowheads out of the horns and shafts from the bones.

I left her to it, instead beginning to inspect the basement. As Liam had said, it was almost undamaged - the hatch to access it blended into the floor rather well, and would have been too small for the bull to fit through anyways. Instead, it'd just slept on top of it.

Now, we were reaping the rewards of that lack of destruction. The basement had *food* after all. Canned and pickled vegetables, some dried fruit and jams, and even a few loaves of somewhat stale bread.

Matt smacked my shoulder. "You're drooling."

"Speak for yourself," I retorted. "I am simply looking forward to a somewhat decent meal."

"Mhm," he smirked. "Sure, sure. I'll see if I can whip something up. You know, there's even spices here." He indicated a bag of salt.

Before I knew it I was already walking up to the bag, then quickly stopped myself under my friend's watchful gaze. "I-" I started, paused, then turned away. "I think I should explore the other parts."

Matt smirked. "Sure, knock yourself out."

Dismissing the swordsman with a nod, he slowly went through the foods, while I moved on to other places. There were still more rooms to go - as I said, the basement was large. Emilia was raiding a room full of tools; saws, files, hammers, scrap metal, the works.

Liam was in the shadows, keeping a lookout, while Marie was up above, seeing which parts of the main workshop might still be useful. She was also dressing the corpse, with Chris' help.

Which left Reya and Ann. I found them in the next room, which seemed a bit more... personal, I suppose? Maybe cozy was the right word.

There were a few bookshelves stacked in the corners, though the books had been knocked out of them and strewn across the floor. It was all covered in dust from the ceiling shaking, but it had survived.

There was a somewhat comfortable looking cushioned bench in a corner, with a small table in front of it. Another part of the room housed a sewing machine, the kind with a mechanical foot pedal, as well as a few rolls of mostly beige cotton fabric, and some more generic needle-and-thread utensils.

Ann and Reya just kinda... stood there, looking at it. While I paused in the entrance, the mute cleric kneeled down, and carefully picked up one of the books, brushing the dust off it. The title shimmered for a moment, before the letters rearranged themselves to something I understood as the translation kicked in.

"Everlasting Grief." There were a stylized man and woman drawn on. It seemed like a romance story, maybe with some tragic elements.

Reya got up, and carefully placed it back on the bookshelf. Then she picked up a second book, placing it back. Then a third, fourth... the fifth one seemed a bit different.

It was a children's book.

We paused as Reya picked it up. It was a story about a caterpillar learning to spread its wings, and that becoming a butterfly wasn't all that scary. The cleric handed it to Ann, who placed it back on the shelf.

I started helping too, wordlessly.

You know, until then, it hadn't really kicked in. We were all... too high-strung to think about it. But this had been a home, once. The upstairs was ruined, of course. There must have been a bedroom there, at some point, but it was broken.

Still, someone had lived here.

They'd had taste in books. They'd had hobbies and interests and jobs. And, apparently, they'd had a kid, too.

I bit my lip, carefully placing another book back on the shelf.

We were going through the stuff of dead people. They... wouldn't mind, of course, they were dead, after all. Even if they weren't, I doubted they'd want to come back here. But suddenly, it felt like we were intruding on a foreign space, and it was only right to be somewhat respectful.

None of us cared if it was silly. We dusted off the books, and placed them back on the shelves. After a few minutes of work, that part was restored. I then walked over to the sewing machine.

Slowly, I traced my fingers over the metal that made the machine. It was a little different from the ones back on Neamhan, but the purpose was unmistakable. I blew the dust away.

Reya stopped next to me, giving me a question look and forming some signs. I looked at the gestures, unable to tell much from them, but guessing from her expression.

"You've... sewn before?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Are you asking if I'd like to learn?" I asked again.

The cleric smiled brightly, and nodded again.

I looked down at myself, the torn shirt and all, then back up to her, giving a crooked smile.

"You know, I think I'd like that quite a bit."

Reya quickly nodded, then also gave a look at Ann. The mage didn't notice, though, scanning the spines of the books for their names, until our cleric snapped her fingers. Then she looked over.

"Ah, sorry," Ann quickly said. "Distracted. What do you need?"

She gestured at me, making Ann look over, and I awkwardly pointed at the sewing machine, unsure what to say. She wrinkled her forehead for a moment, then smiled. "Oh. Fio will sew?"

With a big smile, Reya nodded.

"And you're asking... for me to give her my clothes to fix?" Ann raised an eyebrow.

Reya let out a gurgling kind of snort, shaking her head, then pointing at me and the machine again.

"She'll teach me," I supplied sheepishly.

“Oh!” Ann said. “Right, then. Nice. I’ll be going over some notes, I think. There’s a desk, and I think I saw some stoppered up ink.” She made her way over. “So I should be able to think on some research, maybe even do light testing.”

“Sounds good,” I said with a smile. Then, once Ann was seated, I pulled out a damaged shirt from my inventory. It was reasonably clean, at least.

Reya took it from me, then gestured for me to come closer as she took a seat at the machine. She pulled some fabric to her, and grabbed a large pair of scissors to cut from it. The job didn’t need to be super aesthetic or anything, so she just cut out a few patches.

And, always gesturing for me to look where it mattered most, the cleric began stitching up my clothes.

I’d have the evening to learn. Luckily, I’d been rather talented recently.

Chapter 98: Ann the Goddess

Learning to sew was honestly rather fun. There was quite a bit of practice involved, though, and seeing Reya try to teach me was amusing.

Since she couldn’t exactly *tell* me what to do, there was a lot of gesturing involved, and keeping my eyes on both her and what I was actually working on proved rather challenging. She would sometimes gesture for me to slow down, or tap her feet at a certain speed to show me the rhythm for the pedal.

When I made an especially crooked stitch, she put her hands on top of mine to show me how to guide the fabric through the machine; which wasn’t much at all. It felt more like I was holding it back as the machine pulled it in faster.

I didn’t exactly get away unscathed either, nicking my fingers more than a few times, but since my skin was rather tough, it left barely any mark at all. That was the benefit of being high level, after all.

After a few dozen minutes of practice, Reya deemed me decent enough to let me go loose on our actual clothing. We cut the patched out together, hers turning out more beautiful than mine, of course. Most were squares, but we had some more specific shapes, too.

All of Matt's robes were mended exclusively with flowers, for example. Ann got a few flame patches, and with the small amounts of light blue and pink fabric, we were able to stitch together a makeshift trans patch for Liam. The rogue was rather happy with his gift, and hugged Reya and me upon receiving it - this one was mostly made by the cleric, since I was not that good yet.

Honestly, seeing how doable this was, especially with the machine being reasonably quiet, I was tempted to throw the whole thing into my inventory. Storing rolls of fabric would be a lot easier to get in bulk and replace that full on shirts. Then again, patches would only do so much, eventually.

Worth a thought, anyway.

Eventually, we deemed it good for the night. The group got together to discuss over Matt's meal. Emilia cried a little, happy to finally be eating good food again.

We presented our evening's spoils, with me showing off our stitched up clothing. Emilia had found some tools; hammers, nails, some wooden boards and such. Enough to reasonably reinforce this place if needed. Nothing that would outlast a powerful monster, but the metal scrap was useful for her.

She'd scraped together a bit of armor. By moulding the metal using her Qi, she made it fit her. It wouldn't be nearly as strong as something that was properly forged and tempered, but it would take her Qi and be reasonably defensive enough. A good spare set to have.

Liam scouted out the surroundings, picking off some remaining, smaller monster who may come nearby. He had also maintained all our weapons, sharpening them, and even lightly oiling the metal with some stuff Emilia found. The budding spirit in my spear seemed rather pleased with it, so I was pleased as well.

Marie and Chris had taken apart the bull and turned most of its bones and horns into arrows. The fletching were a bit cobbled together, but they would fly. The tendons had been turned into spare bowstrings. As for the muscles and hide... none of us could do leatherwork, especially not this quickly, so we had simply stashed it away for now.

Ann had mostly been trying to get some runes that might work during the eclipse, but not found much luck yet. She did manage to alter them into a somewhat monster-repellant spell, though. It needed active concentration, and would only supply a weak, subconscious effect, but it might be enough to keep us safe for a few more hours at night,

All in all, the evening had been productive. I was rather pleased with it, honestly. Plus, Ann and I got our own room. There was a decent amount of space in the basement, especially after we cleaned up a bit, and so we could afford such a luxury.

Additionally, neither of us had to take the first watch for once. It was quiet. Calm, even.

Holding onto Ann, I ran my fingers through her hair, petting her head. She hummed slightly in response, hugging me tighter. "This is nice," she murmured.

"You're nice," I replied with a wink she didn't even see.

She laughed, though. A quiet giggle. "You're nice, too. But I meant... this place. Being able to sleep under a roof, y'know? It feels less..." she trailed off.

I ran my fingers through her hair once more. "Less violent?"

"Yeah," she nodded up against me. "I don't feel like I'll need to blow something's head off in the next minute or two."

"You're plenty mindblowing already, don't worry," I teased, smiling.

Ann giggled again. "Idiot."

"Mhm," I hummed my agreement. "Yours truly."

The mag let out a contented sigh, wrapping the blanket a little tighter. It wasn't particularly cold, and we didn't particularly need it, but blankets gave a feeling of normalcy in a world that'd been slightly upturned.

Ann murmured something.

"What was that?" I asked.

She shook her head slightly. "Just... talking to myself."

I rolled my eyes. "Uh-huh. If that was you talking to myself then I must be into guys."

"What?!"

"Yeah, rather unbelievable, I know," I smirked. "So. You don't have to tell me what's up, but I'm here to listen if you'd like."

Ann's somewhat shocked face softened at that. "... thanks, Fio," she said. "I appreciate it. Really. I do."

I ran my fingers through her hair again, and Ann cuddled up to me once more. "Always gonna be by your side, love. No matter what."

"... No matter what?"

"Yeah," I assured her honestly. Then paused. "Well, it's a slight exaggeration. If you stab me to death I might not be thrilled, exactly, but you get what I mean."

Now it was Ann's turn to roll her eyes; a duty she performed amicably. "Uh-huh. You just had to ruin the moment."

I smiled. "What does that make me?"

"An idiot."

"Yours truly," I said, this time sticking out my tongue at Ann, at which she first laughed, then kissed me. It lasted for a while but was still far too short.

For another long moment we laid there silently, me patting her head and listening to Ann's breathing. I enjoyed every second of it, letting my mind actually relax for once. I briefly considered the chance of anything interrupting us, but if it did... well, they were in for a surprise.

"Hey Fio?" Ann eventually asked, her voice cutting through the darkness of our room.

"Yes, love?" I replied.

"That thing I told you I'd tell you about, do you remember?" she asked, suddenly sounding unsure.

"Yeah, I do," I nodded. "What about it?"

"I think I might wanna tell you now," Ann said.

Taking a deep breath, I flashed a small smile. "Okay, yeah," I said, patting her head a bit more. "Whenever you're ready, love. Take your time."

She smiled at me. "Thank you. I appreciate it, I really do. If it's okay, can I ask you to just listen for a bit? No questions until I'm done?"

"If it makes you more comfortable? Absolutely," I agreed.

Ann gave me a long, loving look, then took a deep breath to steady herself. "Okay, so," she started.

"I'm kind of a goddess."

I blinked at her for a moment. On the one hand, I instantly had about a dozen questions. On the *other* hand, this was definitely something to turn into a flirty comment. Something about that made my brain short-circuit, so I just stared at her.

She smiled a little. "Thanks for not flipping out."

'Keeping all my flipping out on the inside, got it,' I noted.

"To elaborate. Eden once had seen divines, as you know by now. Two of those died. But it's really rather hard for divines to properly die. One of them, after a close battle with an especially powerful usurper, losing all their avatars and a chunk of their temples, sacrificed themselves to gain enough resources for the other gods to make the whole Neamhan stuff happen. That one is never coming back," she explained.

"However, that still leaves six gods. Out of whom, another one was killed. Specifically, killed in a fight. None of this self-sacrifice.

"During the high point of an old eclipse, this goddess fought against an invading usurper god, out in the void. And she won, but was grievously injured and succumbed to her wounds. Before that though, that goddess of magic cast a little spell, to essentially reincarnate herself.

"The child was born as normal, and grew up as normal, but had from the beginning inherited the goddess' talent for magic. At her eighteenth birthday, this child received the memories of the dead god - a good chunk of them, at least, a little like a library in their head.

"Now, that also means that this child was *never from Neamhan*." Ann paused, gulping a little. "The divines love her, seeing an old friend in her, and willing to grant some favors, made her a body to visit her girlfriend on Neamhan. A girlfriend she met based on coincidence. Simply because the two seemed to like each other very much."

I looked at her, and the room was silent for a whole 5 minutes.

"Uhm," Ann said, seemingly uncomfortable with the silence at some point. "So, uh... that's it... what I wanted to tell you..."

I hugged her even tighter. "Can I ask now?" my voice was calm.

"Y-Yeah," Ann said, then paused. "Actually. Maybe a few minutes?"

"Sure," I nodded. "However long you need, Ann."

I held her tight up against me, one arm petting her back, the other her head. She seemed so lost all of a sudden.

This... was a bit of a shock, but it explained a lot of things, really. Why she knew all those monster names. Why she cared so much about the people in Eden. Why she never talked about her past on Neamhan. Why she had been late to the meeting. Why she had been so angry at Eric...

Ann started crying slightly, and I focussed on her again. "I'm sorry, Fio. I'm so sorry. You must hate me..."

"Ann?" I asked, calling her name as softly as I could. "Do I... sound very angry with you?"

"... No, I- no, y-you don't."

"Yeah," I nodded. "It's cuz I'm not angry." Slowly, I placed my hand from her head onto her cheek, wiping away the stray few tears, though more were still coming. "You must've been scared, weren't you?"

"I was... I still am."

"Yeah, I get that. It's okay, love. I'm right here. With you. Not going anywhere." I held her.

"... Okay," Ann said, speaking shakily into my chest.

"I love you, Ann."

"B-but I lied. I- I-!"

Once more, I wiped away a tear with my thumb. "I love you," I said.

Ann cried a bit harder. I think she murmured about loving me too, but I couldn't be sure. So I talked.

"I get you were scared. I see why you'd think I might be angry, but I'm not." There was a rule there, that I was breaking. The second one. Love can eat you. I didn't care. "I like you for *you*, Ann. Whether you're a goddess, or a mage, or a warrior, or a cleric, or a baker or a blacksmith or a computer programmer... none of that matters. You're still my Ann.

"This isn't going to drive a wedge between us. Thank you for telling me. Thank you for trusting me. I love you just the same. Thank you for caring about me."

"You sure...?" she asked, her voice a little less shaky.

“Very sure.” I pinched her nose slightly. “I wanna support you. If you have secrets you’d like to share, I’ll listen. What you had to go through sounds so stressful, but I am glad you ended up by my side.”

“Me- me too. I promise there was no trickery there.”

“I believe you, love.” I held Ann for the rest of the night.

Chapter 99: Strengthening the Gateway

Of course, one single evening couldn’t exactly solve all the talking we needed to do. I wasn’t unaffected by this news. It was surprising, and for a while, when Ann was already asleep, I’d wondered whether it changed how I should think of her.

Eventually, I had decided that... it shouldn’t.

She’d trusted me with this. Because she thought I deserved to know. Despite being afraid.

Was it a bit of dishonesty? Well. I suppose she could have told me earlier. Then again, this was the kind of thing one would keep secret, no? I... couldn’t bring myself to hold it against her. She deserved kindness. Was I the first person she’d ever told? I would not make it hard for her.

After everything, she was still the same Ann I’d fallen in love with.

I took a deep breath. We spent much of the next morning quietly, with things feeling slightly awkward, though I made sure Ann knew I was not mad at her. I held her hand, and kissed her cheeks, giving her smiles. She nodded a little at me, but put a finger to her lips. She didn’t wanna talk, and that was fine.

Acknowledging it with a nod, I let her take her time. We got ready for the day and stepped out of our room. Marie had prepared a simple breakfast and we ate together.

There was a coppery smell of blood in the air, coming from upstairs, but none of us commented on it. Something had died during the night - and it wasn’t us, so it didn’t matter.

Reya, Liam, Matt, Emilia, and Chris joined one after another, grabbing their own bits of food. We still had the ability to survey the area, and while eating, Cass and I shared senses. It was a calm morning, contrasting yesterday night. Ann and I sat shoulder to shoulder.

Today, we'd begin hunting in the city.

We didn't have forever to clear it. The eclipse proper would start in just about two weeks, after all. So, maybe... eight, nine days tops? A bit ago, that would have been impossible, but not anymore. The wellspring realm let us recover Qi much faster, and with Reya here to supply first aid, we could get back into fighting shape again pretty quickly.

So, after a rather quiet morning, I summoned my spear, listening to the growing hum inside it. Soon, that nascent spirit would awaken. Only a matter of time.

For now... it was time to clean up.

- - -

Bleeding. I was bleeding again.

I hardly felt the pain as I reached for the monster, ripping out the gateway shard it held. The glass under my skin rippled, and the shard sunk into me.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **18**
- Fragments: **23**
- Figments: 3]

Three fragments and two strength. Not bad for a first hunt.

We'd split into smaller groups to hunt down more monsters, always staying near enough to reinforce one another. Slowly, we were carving minor paths of destruction through the city. Marie and I had teamed up to take this monster down.

It was a chain wielding thing with too many limbs, turning the pieces of metal into a whirlwind. I had blocked one with my spear, but it bent around the shaft and slammed into my arm, flaying my arm open. Blood was pooling around me, and as the adrenaline wore off, I suppressed the pain with [Iron Will].

"Good job," Marie called, jumping down from a nearby roof and landing next to me. "Can you keep going?"

"Yeah," I said, through a mild grimace. "Give me ten minutes and I'll be ready to go again."

With a nod, the archer jumped back onto the building, keeping a look on the area to make sure I could recover safely. I also saw her occasionally take potshots at the monsters the

others were fighting. A hint of plum smell once found its way over, and I saw a blast of pink over the rooftops.

“Flashy Rat,” I whispered to myself, smirking a little. My Qi coursed through me, golden glass covering my wound and preventing me from leaking more blood as it slowly healed. New skin grew over the facsimile of flesh.

The skin wasn’t perfect. I could only facilitate the growth of it after all, not make sure that there were no scars left behind. It would, however, stop me from bleeding, and make my arm fully mobile again. Which meant more hunting.

Five minutes passed, and there was a thin layer of pale, pink skin. Another ten minutes later, it didn’t feel too raw anymore, looking more like a bad sunburn than the flesh wound it had been minutes before.

“Took a bit longer than I thought,” I called to Marie, “But I’m ready now! Let’s head out?”

It was me with her, since I could heal myself rather decently, and Marie could stay out of danger.

Emilia was with Reya, since the cleric could heal her up, Liam with Chris, both having decent self healing ability, and Matt was paired with Ann to... burn the enemies down before either were hurt. Not exactly perfect, but they both had methods to avoid getting hurt, so it worked decently enough.

Ann had also revealed to me that she could perform the most minor of healing with the tiny bit of lingering divinity she held. It was a true source of it, meaning she could grow it, but it was still slumbering and tiny, so she could barely use it. Just rough to close a couple scrapes.

Amusingly, the healing was flawless, which was what contributed to her lacking any scars and having such smooth skin. I would have been jealous but... I wore my scars proudly, so that was fine.

“Alright! Moving out. Follow me. Enemy about fifteen buildings ahead. Looks like an agility type,” Marie said.

“Got it! Following!”

Marie dashed over the rooftops, and I remained briefly behind her. Through her eyes, I saw the enemy in my mind. A creature too thin to be called lean, almost stick thin, but with vicious claws and dense muscle fibre that looked woven from shadowy lightning.

“Marking,” Marie told me, her voice a whisper on the wind, reaching only my ear. She drew an arrow and shot it at the same moment. It broke her hiding abilities, but landed true on the creature, giving it a faint glow and leaving a mental tracker on it.

“Engaging!” I called, grasping my spear tightly and dashing forward. It didn’t hold a gateway fragment, so this should be doable.

- - -

Three minutes of intense battling later, I was on my back, panting for breath. The thing was unbelievably fast. It also had lightning and shadow affinities, stunning me whenever I stepped on one of the dark spots between buildings, until Marie lit up the area with brightly glowing arrows.

Eventually, we wore it down. The creature was blazingly fast, and unbelievably powerful, but its techniques drained a lot of energy it seemed. Which I had felt, too. One had clipped my leg and burned a lightning pattern right into it.

“Should I call Reya?” Marie asked.

I was still catching my breath, and took a bit to answer. “No,” I said, eventually. “It’s fine. The Qi’s gone. I can heal.”

“Got it. Scouting,” she told me. I gave a short nod of affirmation, and she was gone to the rooftops again.

Slowly, as I coursed my Qi, the burn faded. My skin and muscles had become tougher, and my levels made my base form even more powerful. It was why armor was going to slowly become redundant, unless we got some kind of soulbound artefact. Something to consider spending contribution on.

Eventually, the pain was gone, and I could move my leg again. Healing “smaller” wounds like this was great practice for my technique. That gold-glass blending I had done for the wraith was becoming a little more natural, too. Improvements were... so much easier, with all these talents.

‘Thanks again, Cass,’ I thought as I rose up from the ground.

[You are very welcome, Bell.] she assured me.

Taking a breath, I centered myself. “Ready!” I called to Marie.

The archer gave me a nod. “Marking,” she whisper-spoke to me, firing off an arrow.

And so, I fought again.

- - -

[Mirror Wellspring advanced to **4th Step**.]

At the end of a *very* long day, I was breathing heavily, my clothes were sweat through, and frequently marked with holes and bloodstains. I dragged my feet back to the house, where the others sat. Liam took my spear, pulling out a whetstone. He and Emilia were on weapon maintenance.

I got handed a bundle of clothes. Ann soaked them in their magic, washing and drying them, before Reya and I repaired them. Matt and Marie were cooking, while Chris kept a lookout, this time.

Incidentally, they left their rock-hound body at base, while using their human shell to explore some of the nearby buildings around the monsters we'd cleared out. Hopefully, there would be some usable things amidst the rubble.

We also chose them because... well, Chris could stomach the bloodstains a lot better than most of us. Especially if there weren't just stains.

I took a deep breath, taking my mind off those thoughts, and focussing solely on sewing. We were avenging the people, and that was all we could do. So, for now, what I needed to do, was make more patches for the others.

We ate dinner together, too, once Chris' human shell was back. They ate with us, bringing some spoils from their inventory. More canned food, a couple pieces of usable fabric, spare blankets, soft paper, eating utensils... It was all rather helpful.

After dinner, I looked at my gateway again.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **29**
- Fragments: **27**
- Figments: **4]**

It had grown a *lot*. So much so that I closed my eyes and mediated on it again, the outside world slowly fading. I stepped through the gateway inside me, like I had done so long ago, finding myself in the astral again.

Cass was there, with mirrors floating in the air all around her, letting her see through reflective surfaces back on Eden. “Heya!” I called out to the spirit.

She turned to face me. *[Oh! Bell! Hey there. Checking your progress?]*

I nodded. “Just that.”

[Well, let me say, today has been a good day hehe! See for yourself.] She quickly flew past me, pointing in the direction where the gateway was.

Then, I turned around and saw it.

Looking at my own gateway was still a surreal experience. It felt a little like seeing myself stand in a different place. It was, after all, so intrinsically connected to who I was. Really, it was a part of my soul.

Compared to last time, it had certainly changed. Most noticeably, the actual mirror surface itself was now spotless. No longer covered in little cracks that were still mending. It had a beautiful silver-gold frame, which looked to be covered in fingerprints.

My fingerprints, specifically. There were also four handprints at the top of the frame, shimmering with the same silver gold. Two seemed full of the liquid, while two were still refilling. Those must be my figments, then.

The fragments also still manifested around the mirror, though rather than showing in pieces attached to the actual mirror part, they now hovered around it, like a secondary frame made from shards of glass. It looked... pretty.

I reached out and touched them, the sharp edges feeling harmless to my skin. It was part of my soul, after all. I smiled. It felt stronger. Reinforced by part of who I was. If this kept going, the keepers wouldn’t be able to take it from me anymore.

Soon, I’d be truly free again.

I took a deep breath, letting that sink in. Free. What an amazing thought.

[Beautiful, isn’t it?]

Smiling, I nodded, then looked around the whole of the astral again. “Where do I see its strength?”

Cass floated next to me and put a hand to the back of her head. *[Ah, that’s a little more complicated, Bell. But you’ll notice it if you try to walk further away from the gateway.]*

“Hmmm,” I hummed my agreement, then did as Cass asked me to. She, meanwhile, sat down weightlessly on my shoulders, letting her legs dangle. I didn’t mind carrying her along.

The first dozen metres came easy, almost effortlessly. Really, it felt like I was floating, almost weightless. Then, for two dozen metres, I felt normal. Like my body was filled with Qi, and I could walk for ages.

After that, though, that strength faded, and I was left feeling mundane for a bit. Still fit, but not nearly as strong. The further out I went, the more that feeling of weakness crept in. After another dozen steps, I felt drained, as if I’d just ran a mile.

Exhaustion was deep in my muscles, and as I moved further, my pace slowed down to a crawl. I felt the tether to my gateway, the way it sent me strength, but it was just not enough. I couldn’t move forward anymore.

Taking a single step back, I went from a borderline decrepit state to something somewhat manageable, and as I neared the gateway again, I began to feel as good as before. I took a minute for my breathing to settle again, then turned to Cass. “I see. The strength determines how far out that tether reaches?”

[Essentially,] my keeper nodded along. [It determines our territory, since it also works not only to strengthen you, but also suppress anyone who steps into here. So it’s essentially our strongest defense mechanism. Any foreign body that comes close to our gateway will feel just as weak as you did before.]

“So, how much strength to stop the keepers from stealing it?” I asked. If it was what decided the suppression, then it was probably one of the most important stats for that purpose.

[Over forty, definitely. If you reach fifty, we’ll be safe from almost anything, even if you use another gateway entirely.]

I nodded. That was the goal then. We were staying in the city for a little while, and the eclipse meant there probably wouldn’t be a shortage of usurpers with gateway fragments anytime soon.

All I had to do was collect them.

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.

- - -

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...”

- - -

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.

Chapter 101: What is a Rift?

We hunted down more creatures within the city walls. One after another, sometimes many at a time, we killed more usurpers of stranger and stranger shapes and sizes. Hiveminds and swarms. Soldiers carved from stone. Creatures as tall as houses with more limbs than you could count.

But we could never fully clear the city. Not with the rift open. Every day, more usurpers poured in. Sometimes, I would feel it. Wake up in the middle of the night, a shiver running down my back as I felt a new, tainted fragment resonate with the gateway inside my soul.

It was wearing on me. The exhaustion and all. However, we did also receive a dropped item for the first time.

The "items" were also not quite normal. In the "network" section of the gift - a list of people currently connected via my network, which let me read some of their information, as well as

listing the empty slots - there was a subcategory of "Transference", which listed items and owners.

Since they were bonded with the system, it was a bit different from regular armor, or even bound weapons. I could summon my spear anytime, anywhere, near instantly. It also grew more powerful alongside me.

These... didn't work quite that way. Summoning one took a bit, a handful of seconds to call it forth, as the magic essence would manifest. It was like liquid glass spilling from the air, then coalescing into the item, then gaining colour, in an altogether strange process.

Our first item was received by Ann. Which made sense, she killed a lot of creatures with her spells. I could read it in Transference.

[Treasure: Burden of Lordship

Owner: Annabelle Belleflamme

Description: To be a ruler is a heavy weight. To be a tyrant is easier. The previous owner of this item chose the easy path, and was crushed by his own choices - Make better decisions and your enemies will be crushed.]

That was all it said. Ann had summoned it, and the Treasure wove itself into existence on her forehead. It was a thin, regal looking diadem, a purple gem inset in the elegant, silver frame.

Its effect was similarly simple; when injected with mana, it would cause gravity to press downward heavily on whoever Ann deemed a target. She guessed there were more hidden conditions to the power, but that was the long and short of it. The Treasure was still useful, though, since she could keep it summoned permanently, and the effect initiated near-instantly.

We used it liberally to hunt down more creatures. It was also possible to trade them, however, that needed a half hour of focus and somewhat close physical proximity - no more than a couple metres apart.

When summoned by someone else, the Treasure also took a different shape. For Emilia, the crown was thicker and wider, as well as having the sides extend downward farther, almost turning it into a steely headband. When Matt wore it, on the other hand, it wove itself through his hair, making him look a little like an elven prince or something. Chris, strangely enough, could summon the item on any of their shells separately.

In the end, Ann got to keep it. There'd be more in the future, after all. It also looked incredibly pretty on her, so I wasn't complaining.

By then, a few days had passed, and my gateway had grown further. It felt powerful. I didn't quite know how to describe it; it wasn't like an engine the same way my cores felt, nor did it give me energy in the same way food did or anything. It just felt... real. Like I belonged, no matter where I went.

It felt right, I guess.

I took a deep breath. My fingers clenched around the shaft of my spear, the nascent spirit in it chirping at me. It had grown so much, too, fed by the fighting and Qi pouring through it. I was confident it would awaken soon, and it was already showing its worth. The spear seemed to almost magnetically right itself in my hand.

Another deep breath of air filled my lungs.

"You feeling ready?" Marie asked.

I looked at the rift. It was tall and imposing. A gate into another world, but not at all like the gateways we used. It was less like a sealed doorway that opened and closed for anyone who stepped through. There was no decontamination in between.

It was a tear. One that allowed free flow of energy. Qi and Mana from here leached out of this world, and those from the other side flowed in. It was a troubling sight. Around the rift, things were more desolate.

Plants from here could not withstand the altered atmosphere. Different air, different blend of energies. They wilted, and crumbled to dust. *That* was a part of why the frontier had become so messy. The rifts bring together things, where neither were fundamentally wrong, but they were incompatible.

So they caused destruction.

I breathed, tearing my eyes from the alien world on the other side.

Looking at Marie, I nodded. "Yeah. I... think we should tackle this."

She smiled. This had not been her idea, but we had decided we would do it. There were ways to close rifts, or at least prevent them from growing further. My master had burned one, once, so that worked.

They could be overwhelmed, but brute force was not the approach we should be taking. Instead, Ann would do it. She knew a ritual to close it, but it would require some time. She needed to draw the whole thing out, after all.

In the meantime, we would hold back the monsters. That much should be easily possible for us. We had been handling anything that crawled out of it well enough, after all.

"It's the right thing to do," Marie agreed. "Hopefully we should be able to do it."

"The divines seem to think we can," I said. "This one is weakened. The archmages just aren't coming because the other cities are still facing the hordes. Some of those are from here. So, by closing it, we'll be relieving some pretty significant pressure."

I nodded again. "Yeah."

Matt gave us a look. There was a faint smile playing on his lips. He breathed, too. Then, he swirled his hand through the air, playing with a thin stream of pink blossoms. "How much longer?"

"No longer," Liam whispered. "The way is clear. Let's go."

Not needing any more words than that, we all walked, towards the tear in reality that had doomed this city.

- - -

It was kind of surreal walking to the town after hunting in it this last while. It felt longer than it really had been. My hairs stood on end every time I turned a corner, expecting some kind of abomination to jump out of me. For Liam to have missed something, but it was quiet.

We had tinned the horde here, and now, the streets were walkable. Somewhat. Our path was winding, taking us along the edges of territories, and through contested bits as well as streets we'd cleared. We avoided all the most powerful creatures, slowly making our way forward.

Steadily, the rift grew in our vision. It hurt a little to look at it, the alien shapes seemingly unfit for my mind. Like something about me was insufficient to witness it. So, instead, I focused on each step forward.

Seeing my feet move was so mundane it was calming. Placing one foot in front of the other was something I could do. Not worrying about the monsters quite yet.

The feel and smell of the air changed. Rather than the smell of dust and rubble that permeated most of the ruined city, here it also smelled of... things she couldn't quite parse. Unpleasant.

It was like rot in its early stages, as well as the sharp smell of ethanol, mixed with that of sulfur. But even all that didn't do it justice. It made her head spin a little, like inhaling gasoline fumes.

There was Qi in the air still, which clearly also existed on the other side of the portal, but it felt the same way that the frontier felt in Eden. It was wild, and unsafe, downright dangerous. Rather than the milder effects though, this was aggressive.

Like liquid acid, it hummed through the air, the unmistakable buzz of power turned dangerous and sinister. I drew my cloak of Qi tighter, shutting it out and the feeling faded, reduced to a dull heaviness and thickness of the air.

All of it only got worse as the rift approached. It felt so clearly hostile that I wondered how the usurpers lived over on this side. They must either be supremely adaptable or specifically prepared for invasions.

Not that it mattered.

Once the feeling in the air grew even heavier, and there even seemed to be some kind of ethereal heat spilling from the other side, making my skin all itchy, Ann stopped us. "Here. I'll have to start drawing the circle."

We all gave a short nod, and she pulled some chalk from her inventory. The skies were clear, so it wouldn't wash away. That was good.

Ann kneeled down, and drew the first line. Then another, and another. Only after a dozen swipes was there any response from the atmospheric mana. It began to gather towards the ritual.

"Okay," she said. "Clock is now ticking. I can't stop anymore. I'll also need to chant, so get ready to fight."

A moment later, we all nodded, and Ann spoke. The first word that left her mouth was one that I did not know, and one that the Gift did not bother translating for me. I *felt* it, though.

The word slammed into the air with such force I felt a shockwave and my hairs stood on end. Another word flowed forward, smoothly and instantly, and Ann chanted with cadence, melody, and incredible speed.

I'd seen her practice, of course. Doing vocal drills and breathing exercises, but never liked this. Her hands... one moved across the floor, drawing perfect lines of smooth, white chalk. The other one flicked from sigil to sigil, arcane symbols that seemed to burn into the air for a moment before settling.

Her voice rang out in tandem, and the atmospheric mana stirred. First it moved slowly, imperceptibly. Twitches and small shockwaves, but then it roused.

Like a sleeping dragon, it moved.

First, there was a pullback, then a push. It ebbed and flowed, higher and higher. Every word Ann spoke, every sigil, every line and shape pushed it a little further.

I now understood why the ritual did not need to be centered on the rift. It couldn't be centered on it. Because if it was, it would stir that hostile, horrible energy, and given the way Eden's mana was already beginning to hiss against my skin, I bet that usurper-based mana would be intolerable by now.

Ann was gathering a tsunami of energy to burn out the rift.

And the rift noticed.

The energy swelled, reaching new heights every moment. Ann's voice crashed into the mana like a song of thunderclaps, the ritual only speeding up. That's when the howls pierced the air.

Screeches of usurpers came in, and Ann moved towards them, drawing more of the circle. Emilia moved in tandem with her, flattening the ground, pushing away rubble and debris as the cobblestones turned into a smooth sheet of grey. A canvas for magic.

I looked to Liam, and he nodded, indicating a direction. I turned towards it, and pulled back my throwing arm. The nascent spirit of my spear whispered to aim a little higher, and I adjusted, then waited.

The air was thick. With mana from Eden, the eroding power of the usurpers, the screeches of monsters, and Ann's chants... but for a moment, none of that mattered. I had the rift in my field of view, but the headache was pushed aside by my iron focus.

"Little to the left," Liam whispered.

I adjusted.

"Go."

At his command, every muscle in my body tensed. Qi coursed through me so fast it heated up. Sweat evaporated around me in the form of steam, the power so dense it almost turned visible.

I directed power through my legs, into the turn of my hips and rotation of my upper body, then forced my shoulder, elbow and wrist forward.

When the spear left my hands, another thunderous boom split the air. My spirit sang with raw emotions, soaring, like a bird spreading its wings for the first time. The golden Qi enveloping the metal turned even brighter, as if the air around it burnt.

The first creature came from in between the buildings, and was instantly smashed to bits by my throw, a hole carved through the middle of its body.

In the next moments, carnage began.

Chapter 102: Defenders of Eden.

How much blood do you think the average person sees in their life?

How many liters? Dozens, maybe? How much does a doctor see? A surgeon, stitching people back together all day everyday?

Was it enough to taint entire roads red?

Well, calling the blood I was seeing “red” may have been doing it a kindness. The usurpers didn’t sport a uniform colour of bodily fluids, see. There was blue blood, green blood, black blood, yellow ichor... All of it splattered across the buildings in a colourful, gruesome story.

Corpses were strewn about the flattened landscape. We had to carve channels that the blood could flow along into the floor so it didn’t mess with Ann’s runework. The steady heartbeat her magic created in the air was now a familiar companion.

Her deafening voice still slammed into reality at every moment, every stroke of the chalk turning the energy dense. The Mana was powerful enough to see it twist with every manifestation of Qi. It showed in the warping of the air when I swung my spear, or the heat haze I saw when I enhanced my eyesight.

We had been fighting for close to two hours straight by now.

It doesn't sound like a lot, but... it was. Trust me. Fighting for that long, without a single break was *grueling*. It was painful. Not that we were even doing normal fighting.

Every single movement had to be done at a superhuman speed, with superhuman precision. My body had been torn open and knitted back together more often than I could count. My wells had been emptied of their whole volume twice over, and still more Qi bubbled forth. By now, the steady stream of power barely spent any time contained anymore, flooding straight into my muscles and spear.

Golden Glass shifted under my skin. The nascent spirit in my spear directed my strikes to be more precise, waste less motion, and hit the most important target. I took a step forward, leaning slightly to the left and letting a barbed claw streak by me. Then, my weapon lashed out, the Qi-empowered metal cleaving through a chitinous leg, and spilling yet more ichor onto the street.

The yellow splatter mixed with the surrounding blood into a greyish, sticky mass. It clung to my boots and my clothes. The usurper's screech joined a chorus of similar howls. My spear lashed out again, taking its head.

There was no break. A moment later, I had taken another step to the side, grabbing a pair of horns with my free hand, then flexing every muscle in my body, empowering them until they sung with golden power, and tossed the freakishbull back into the horde.

Not that it did much. Seconds later, more monsters were crawling over the body, an endless flood of flesh and blades and bloodlust. A faint aroma of plum rifted by me, and Matt took another head. I stepped forward to cover for him as he retreated.

A wound on my thigh burnt. Reya was conserving her energy, and the wound was not significant enough to need her attention. She was, instead, busy healing one of Chris' human shell's cut tendons. They could barely walk one moment, then a couple seconds later, they plunged back into the battle with reckless abandon.

Chris cherished their shells. Seeing them plunge forward with such disregard for the integrity of their flesh was a bad sign. But there was no other choice.

The heartbeat of magic rang in my ears again. I could see Ann from a dozen angles, reflected in the blood all around me. The ritual circle was beginning to close around the rift. Maybe another half hour. That was all we needed to hold out for. Another little while...

I grit my teeth stepping forward and back, engaging in a dance of death with dozens of inhuman monstrosities. Limbs that were too long and too numerous were cleaved from the

bodies they were attached to. My skin brimmed with enough energy to have bones shatter when the creatures touched me.

Looking at myself from an outside perspective was an interesting perspective. I was like a whirlwind of golden steel. My spear lashed out, lengthening and shortening as it needed to. Brutally separating bits of bodies.

Some were more material and some less. My spear cared naught. A strange spirit of rotating ice met its end on my spear just the same as a living flame did. I overpowered their energy. When attacks struck, I reflected the brunt back.

A new monster attacked me from my shadow, only for Liam to descend on it like a dark deity, tearing the creature apart with claws of darkness before it had fully formed. An explosion rocked the world as Marie sent arrows imbued with power into the crowd.

I saw the earth open up to swallow great beasts, tossed into spontaneous ravines by Emilia. Divine light descended down onto the horde once, burning an especially vile thing to smithereens. Flashes of pink darted across the frontlines, a storm of petals that tore and shredded at anything in its path.

Then, there were the monsters on our side.

Roots blossomed wherever the Leshi stepped. Green flames consumed monsters. Spores paralyzed them. Mushrooms grew from their corpses, consuming the blood and infecting the living, eating them inside out.

The rock hound consumed debris, rotating boulders around itself and wielding them like giant, telekinetic sledgehammers. Monsters turned to pulp wherever it went. The earth shifted to accommodate it, and any creature that got too close was viciously mauled to death.

In comparison, Chris' human form was almost tame, but that would have been inaccurate. They fought with such ferocity that calling it bestial would be underselling it. I watched through a reflection as their arm was torn off, only for them to stick a wooden construct thrown over by the forest-spirit-shell into the bleeding wound, then tearing an insectoid head off with the prosthetic.

My spirit hummed, and I shifted my body backwards. At the same time, I lunged forward, leaning low, the spear shooting at the attacker and digging a hole through its center of mass before I could even identify the creature.

Blood trickled from a new, shallow cut on my forehead, but I ignored it. The pain didn't matter. My mind focused on the perception of the reflections around me. I stepped through one, then slashed a usurper that was attempting to stab Matt in the back in half.

A moment later, I teleported again, to Emilia's side. I fought harder, gritting my teeth, bearing the pain and exhaustion, as the warrior paused her fighting, turning her back to the horde. The ground around me turned liquid as I cut and stabbed through the horde of bodies, then the stones flattened.

Here, right next to Ann, the buzz of magic was deafening. The power was so great any mundane human could have seen it as a blue haze hanging in the air. The runes absorbed it like a sponge, glowing with magical fire. Ann's hair billowed in the torrent of power, her eyes seemingly ablaze, and her voice thundering across the battlefield.

She drew another rune, the magic lighting up the air, the mana spiking into the sky like a beacon.

Five more minutes of fighting passed, my body growing weary and exhausted. [Mirror Mind] combined with the fragments of talents from the network and the effect of [Precipice] and my spearwork improved faster than it ever did before. My mind was clear, empty of any extraneous thoughts. There was only me and the horde.

I shifted an incoming claw. It slid along the length of my spear's handle, digging into another monster's neck, while I thrust into the original attacker's eye.

[Momentum Shift has reached (High)!]

Learning at prodigious speeds, my movements became even cleaner, more perfect, with less margin of error. I optimized every tiny adjustment, guided by my hard work, years of practice, the whispers of a nascent spirit, the movements of my old master, and the talents all my friends had gifted me.

My Qi shifted, my spear moved. I advanced.

[Spear Technique - Fundamentals has reached (Great)!]

The quality of my fighting changed again. Now, my technique was able to keep up with my physical power. Qi flooded my weapon as the days of hunting and fighting yielded epiphanies. My movements were near-flawless, my spear reaping life after life after life.

Minutes ticked by and I was unable to track them. There was nothing except the spray of blood across the flattened ground, the assistance my friends sometimes needed, and the movements of steel through flesh.

Air entered and left my lungs in great amounts, my chest heaving like bellows. Qi coursed through me like a raging river. It felt like I was holding my breath even though I fought with all my spirit. The world was clear-

Then it broke.

At some point, we had finished circling the rift. From up above, there was a great, flattened ring, full of runes and the glow of magic up above it. I could see it because one of Matt's cuts sprayed blood high enough into the sky to give me a partial bird's eye perspective.

As the droplet came crashing back down to the earth, so did my awareness. Suddenly, I was seeing the world through my own two eyes again. Sensations other than combat returned. The usurpers' flood had stopped, finally, a wave of mana rushing out and holding them at bay.

The weaker ones were torn right apart by the magical energy. Ann chanted a final few words, her voice hoarse. Her hands flicked through a final two sigils. Then, she stood up, her legs shaking almost as much as the world around us.

She walked over to me.

She laid her hand on my cheek.

"Hey, love?" Ann croaked, eyes tired and voice strained, "I'll take a nap now."

Then she collapsed into my arms like a puppet with its strings cut, leaving a single, smudged, pale handprint in the layer of caked blood covering my face.

The ritual, though, was another story.

Its power only swelled. The mana from the air trickled in more. It was a working of magic on an absolutely unprecedented scale. For a brief moment I had a thought. This must be what an archmage's spell looked like, wasn't it?

More and more mana poured into the ritual. Like liquid sunshine, the magical energy coalesced from the sky, crashing down with a physical weight, and empowering the runes. It gathered, like the swelling of an ocean before a tsunami. The mana grew so thick it was not

longer a mist, but a collection of solid crystals hanging in the air above the runes like permanently suspended snowflakes.

Then, all at once, it stopped.

The everpresent humming of magic in the air grew silent. It was so quiet. No screeches from the monsters, no sounds of blood or battle of magic.

I heard my heart beat. Felt my blood rush through my ears. Heard a breath enter my lungs.

When I finished breathing in, the world turned black and white. All colour leached from it. Matt's pink hair turned a dull grey. The sky was no longer lilac but a dull white. My own golden glow was stifled down to a colourless smudge, too.

"Ah," Ann murmured sleepily from in my arms. "The spell is called 'Chromatic Aberration', by the by."

Another whole second ticked by after she spoke, before the world shifted again.

Like a torrential wave, magic spilled forth. It was in volumes great enough to be absolutely horrifying. It was a wave great enough to eclipse all other senses. For a brief moment, I was blind and deaf and tasted nothing but dry ash. I could faintly feel my feet leave the ground as I was tossed into the sky, my whole form wrapped tightly around Ann.

The world spun, and I could not tell where I was anymore. I was weightless, yet crushed from all directions by the sheer volume of magic. For a moment, it felt like my skin was heated up from friction, as though ropes of ethereal power dragged across it.

Then again, it turned into a frigid cold, as if my entire being was tossed into an icy bath.

The mana was so dense it seemed to ionize, losing cohesion and shape. It grew so chaotic, that some of it shifted its alignment into what seemed like almost purepower and poured into my golden well.

[Golden Wellspring Qi Purity increased to (Superior)!]

And the flood was over. It left me gasping for air. In two seconds, both my wells were refilled to about half full. The mana had finally passed me by, and I opened my eyes, finding myself a few dozens meters in the air. Quickly, I spun my body, summoning ethereal platforms of Qi under my feet. They wavered a little, the residual mana seeming to drag them along, but I managed to hold them in place and stand in the sky with the rest of my party.

In front of us, the mana slammed into the rift. It was like a blizzard, crystals of raw power digging into the shard of reality, overwhelming the corrupting influence it had on this realm. We watched as the other side, alien and strange, was twisted into something more akin to eden.

Green trees and grass sprouted as the edges of the rift twisted, growing more narrow, the empty space filling in. Inch by inch, metre by metre, the dimensional gap was closing.

It went from towering, to the size of a building, then shrunk down until it was barely person sized. Then, it shrunk a little more, the storm of mana finally beginning to die down a little.

Until a hand poked through the gap.

It was small, like that of a human. It sported wickedly sharp black fingertips, attached to a three fingered red appendage, with an oversized, bulbous wrist. Through the rift, that was not only a little over a metre tall, stepped a figure.

The creature had to duck a little to pass through. It had four of those arms, each of its joints slightly bulbous, looking oversized for its thin appendages. Its head was spherical and almost frog-like, but somehow simultaneously sharp and spherical. Its eyes were large, protruding, and entirely black orbs, four of them. Its mouth was filled with razor sharp teeth.

On its alien, emaciated body, it wore... a black suit. With a suit jacket, a waistcoat, even a tie and a folded up little napkin in the breast pocket. There was a watch attached to the collar with a golden chain. Its ticking was quiet, yet I heard it even from where I stood.

The thing took a deep breath from two thin slits on its sharp, frog-face. One of its hands was still stuck in the rift, that was now almost entirely closed. In fact, it was only a small circle around the usurper's wrist that remained.

It was small, somewhere around a rather small human adult. It was thin, like its muscles were underdeveloped. And yet... somehow, looking at it gave me goosebumps. There was deep seated malice in that eternally smiling face.

Those pits of black that served as its eyes swerved around the battlefield, surmising the extent of the carnage. Meanwhile, it seemed to hum an almost peaceful, contemplative, and deeply disturbing tune.

Soon, the eyes landed on us. "Ah," the creature spoke. Its voice was sharp, hissy. "You up there. Hail, fighters. Are you the ones that closed this rift?" It blinked, slowly. "Ah, you must be. There is no one else around."

It looked behind itself. “Oh. I should say. Almost closed.” It wiggled the hand stuck in the dimensional gap, as if to show off. “See? All open. No harm done. Now. How about you all simply behave and hand over all your energy until the rift is rebuilt? No harm no foul, that way.”

The words from its mouth were polite but nonsensical. I blinked. While my eyes were closed, I noticed something. To my gateway perception, I felt a connection with this thing. Stronger than anything I had ever seen before. This thing... held a gateway more powerful than the black-flame giant.

“Cat got your tongue?” it asked. “Come on. Say something.”

One of those hands extended forward, grasped the air, and pulled. A moment later, it held Emilia by the neck. “Come on. *Defenders of Eden, speak.*”

Chapter 103: Hopeless

There were a lot of thoughts running through my mind at that moment. Maybe a few more should have been dedicated to fear... but that kind of blanked away when I saw Emilia hurt.

Marie moved faster than any of us. She was decisive, and before I’d even made up my mind, she was already coming forward, nocking an arrow, and firing it.

The usurper swatted it out of the air with ease, one of those arms moving in a blur. “Now, now. Cease the hostilities, or I snap this one’s neck,” it said calmly.

Emilia’s mouth was opening and closing like a fish on land. “What do you want?” Marie ground out.

“I thought I’d been clear? You will stay here, donate any energy you generate until the rift is bigger again, and then you will leave.”

Marie looked back at us, then slowly shook her head. “That is not really an option.”

The usurper squeezed Emilia’s throat harder. I could hear her skin pull tighter through the absolute silence that reigned in the aftermath of the mana typhoon. “Not an option, you say? Then I suppose I’ll see about drawing out whatever I can from your corpses. I’ll try to make it quick.”

It spoke the words casually, with a hint of disappointment to it. Like it was talking to unruly children. I felt my blood go cold.

Once more, the creature's hand tightened, squeezing the life out of Emilia, her spine creaking. Then, there was a noise. A loud, horrible clang of metal. Matt stood next to the thing, having slammed down his sword.

He'd used a technique I'd not seen him use before, his storm of flower petals coalescing around him like a shawl rather than flowing with his strikes. It seemed to make him far faster and stronger, while reducing the area of effect of his attacks.

What he ended up doing was breaking his sword.

I could spot it, Ann still in my hands. The metal struck the creature's arm, the blade breaking where he struck, about two thirds down the blade. The tip broke off entirely, deflecting off the frog-like face . The monster... barely budged. It only left a thin scratch on its skin.

But it budged. The usurper wasn't tall, and Emilia's feet touched the ground - which was made from rocky rubble. Instantly, I felt Qi pouring out from her wellspring, as a shell of stone manifested between her and the claw, shoving her backwards and leaving the usurper with only a lifeless mannequin to break.

"Ah," it said. "What a shame. It seems you will suffer after all."

"*Run!*" Marie commanded, and both Emilia and Matt instantly followed her command. There was nothing else to do. But the usurper simply reached out again, extending one of those four arms in an almost hopeless gesture.

Some kind of twisted energy began swirling inside its palm, and a vortex appeared in front of its hand. It glanced around us as if trying to settle on a piece of meat. Its eyes drifted over Matt, and it extended the grip.

Instantly, as if driven by some kind of additional instinct, the swordsman leapt, spending another sizeable chunk of Qi.

The place where he'd been disappeared.

A crater as big as a house appeared where he'd been just a moment before. Meanwhile, a pebble of darkness appeared in the creature's hand. "Ah," it says. "Like rabbits before wolves."

It chuckled darkly, as though about to play some demented game. One of its four arms was still in the rift, keeping the door between realms open, and the usurper, thankfully, locked in place. This left it with three arms.

Dark vortices appeared in front of them. It raised an arm. At me.

My mind finally caught up, and I stepped through a reflection, dragging Ann with me, somehow. It cost a significantly larger chunk of Qi, and I was thankful that she was entirely spent on mana. If she'd had more, the transfer would've probably been even more expensive.

There was a scream, and when I looked over, Marie was missing an arm, from the elbow down.

Goosebumps raced across my skin. I felt dizzy for the first time. Fuck, that was... so much blood. So much fucking blood.

As I watched, the usurper simply tossed the pebbles aside, holding one that seemed even darker in its hand for a moment. Crimson mist swirled from it, feeding the rift, making it slightly larger, but not enough to stabilize it. The thing sighed. "Ah, shame. I'll need to feed all of you to it to get it to take, I think. Well, what can you do."

Its hands reached forward again, dragging Liam *out of the shadows* he was hiding in, only for the rogue to swiftly dissipate into thin air. The Leshi had stepped through a plant, and the rock hound through the ground.

Marie, letting out another grunt of pain, pulled out a red potion from her inventory, splashing it over the wound with shaky fingers. Some splattered onto the ground, but it would have to be fine.

Reya, too, fell to her knees, holding her head, eyes glowing with bright amber. Lurelia had picked *now* to communicate.

I... needed to do something. Needed to help.

Undignified, I grabbed the tiara from Ann's head, quickly placing it on my own. My mind raced, trying to come up with solutions, desperately, as I already channelled my Qi.

The creature was raising its hand, and I was left without many options, or much time at all. Rather than think, I simply followed instinct, engraved in me through training, the talents from the network, and the nascent spear spirit I held.

My Qi flooded the weapon in droves, golden power thrumming through the steel. Even more energy flooded the tiara, building, ready to be applied. I leaned back, and *threw*.

It was a haphazard, imperfect throw, but the sheer amount of energy packed into it was enough to make it weighty. The usurper turned its head, curiously, and reached for my spear with a dark vortex.

There was a horrible screech as the golden aura surrounding it was peeled away like layers on an onion. The creature seemed a little surprised, catching the undamaged metal in its hand, though my spirit groaned in the connection. It had kept the metal intact.

“Huh,” the usurper muttered.

With all the force in the crown, I made the spear as heavy as I possibly could. Its weight doubled, then tripled, then increased more than tenfold, and the usurper staggered for a moment. It could easily lift the spear, of course, but it was off balance. Weight was, after all, hard to resist.

This pulled its fists off course, gouging pieces out of the clouds. Winds whipped up as the air was compressed and sucked in, but we lived. I tugged on my binding connection to the spear, recalling it into my hand-

The monster held onto it.

“What a strange weapon,” it mused, turning it in its hands. “Perhaps...” it began holding it closer to the rift, and I heard the metal *screech* alongside the nascent spirit.

“No!” I screamed, reaching out and *pulling* as hard as I could. The spear remained right where it was. Until Emilia appeared from underground, slamming her mace into the usurper’s arm.

The metal bent at the collision, but she had not been idle underground. Since the beginning of the fight, she must’ve been channelling Qi into the weapon, because the strike was absolutely deafening. I saw a single scale crack, and a small trickle of black blood poured out.

A droplet impacted the floor, and hissed as it boiled into steam, dissolving some of the stone with it. The creature’s pupils briefly contracted, and it swatted at Emilia as one might at a fly, but she was already a step back. Its short stature was getting in its way, given the need to keep a hand on the rift.

When it focused again, my spear was in my arms.

The metal had an imprint of its hand on it, glimmering an ashen white. It seemed as though the life had been sucked out of it, the Qi channels through the weapon feeling raw and eroded. Pitiful.

I heard the spirit squawk through our connection. It was alive. I was... glad about that, at least.

Then, a hand gripped me from below, pulling me to the ground.

Behind me, the rubble of a building collapsed in on itself, into a tiny, dark bead. The usurper looked at me from behind an outstretched claw. "Stop this charade. Just go on and *die* already!"

Liam's voice made me tune it out. "Reya got a message from Lurelia. An archmage is on their way," he whispered.

Relief flooded me at that. We could live. We could stall, create distance...

The others were ahead of me. Emilia and Matt were further out, and Reya nowhere to be seen. Liam must've carried her out. I picked up Ann, threw my spear, throwing myself the opposite direction as that dark pull once again missed. Then I teleported to the glossy steel of the weapon.

We were-

There was a bloodcurdling scream.

Distance wasn't enough. Emilia laid about halfway between the edge of the standing buildings and the monster. Her left leg was torn off below the knee, the metal armor around the stump twisted and full of jagged edges.

Marie instantly dashed for her, picking her up, and dragging her.

The usurper snarled, pointing its hands at us, looking for opportunities. It was like staring down the barrel of a gun, literally. I hadn't felt this powerless since the last time I was held at gunpoint.

I stared at the dark vortex, and the world seemed to slow down. In a moment of thought, I grabbed a roll of fabric from my inventory, and tossed it. Instantly, it unfurled, hiding me from the monster.

A moment later, I heard a terrible noise from behind me and kept running. It had done its job, valiantly.

Around me, Matt was quickly releasing his petals in a storm, and the shadows grew darker, all in an attempt to obscure lines of sight. I had mirror powers. I could help here.

Violently coursing Qi through my abilities, to the point where the energy almost burned under my skin, I created [Reflections], not of attacks, but purely visual ones.

Suddenly, another Matt stood near the original, darting the opposite way. Another Emilia, carried by another Marie. They looked virtually the same to me, but without the ability to dodge... half were torn apart by the next attack.

I was still running, holding Ann, desperately digging at the energy bubbling up from my wells, channelling it into any ability I could think of to help. What else was there, what else-

With the sound of glass shattering, all my illusions were broken. A storm of pink was surrounding the monster, but it blasted the nuisance away with raw magic. The shadows boiled, and it summoned a *miniature sun* to banish them.

Scorching light hit my back, and I could smell my clothes begin to smoke. Finally, though, I ducked behind cover - only to have the entire house behind me compressed into a tiny sphere within moments. My heart was racing, but I was drawing blanks. Another blood curdling scream. He'd targeted Emilia again, and Marie hadn't managed to get them both out of the way. It was unwinnable.

But then, *finally*, space twisted a different way, and two regal figures in robes stepped out. It was an old, blind man, someone I recognized because my master used to have tea with him. Erasmus the seer.

Next to him stood a lady dressed the same way. Her back was a little straighter, her hair a little more wavy, and her eyes more vibrant. The air hummed with a dull purple around her.

"Worry not, kids, the geriatric cleanup crew is here," she said, smirking.

The usurper simply scoffed, extending a hand at the woman, that same dark vortex twisting forwards... then stopping. It was locked in place.

Around the woman, even more dense mana radiated. "Now, now. I just teleported us all the way here. It would at least be polite to let me refill my mana."

It sneered. "You can feed it to the rift when you're done, grandma."

"Oh? Let me see you talk shit when I send you to space," she replied, twirling an oversized staff carved from pure amethyst.

The old man appeared next to me. "Are you alright, child?" he asked, offering me a hand up. "Come, come. I apologize for not having foreseen this sooner. We came as fast as we could."

I simply blinked, blankly taking the hand he offered. A moment later, we stepped through space. There was a small clearing with all our party.

Well, all might have been an overstatement.

Emilia was still missing her leg below the knee. But that was by far not the worst. Marie...

"Ahhhh, this really hurts," she muttered, even as Reya's healing enveloped her. "Like, really, really hurts."

On the left side of her body, a huge chunk of it was carved out, from her leg all the way up to her waist. Blood was pooling on the ground beneath her. No amount of healing was going to close up those wounds.

I kneeled down next to her, red staining my clothing. She looked at me, eyes blurry. "Oh, Fio. Hi there. I feel a lil woozy. I dun think the sky's meant to spin like that..." She slipped back into her accent.

Gently, I put a hand on her shoulder. I smiled, even as tears formed in my eyes. "Nah, it's not," I said.

Marie smirked at me. She reached up with her stump, then frowned, and reached up with the hand that wasn't just torn out. Her smile returned. "You're so brave, girl. Don't let anyone tell ya otherwise. I'll..." she coughed blood, droplets of red smattering against me. "I'll fuck 'em up!"

"You would, yeah."

"Take care of 'em all for me, will ya?" Marie asked, looking into the sky, smiling.

"I will."

"See ya on the other side," Marie said. "Sky's so pretty here. Lemme remember it."

"I promise."

The others kneeled somberly in the pool of her blood, giving her some last smiles. "Bye Marie," we all said. Her last sight must've been all our faces against Eden's lavender sky. Then, I activated [Gateway], sending her home.

“Later, y’all.”

Chapter 104: A Person named Marie

Marie disappeared from Eden that day. She hadn’t thought it would happen to her, but that was how life often went, wasn’t it? Every danger felt so distant, so irrelevant, until it happens to you.

She’d felt about leaving Eden like this the same way she thought about car crashes. Of course she knew they happened. They were downright common. But despite that, when stepping into a car she never expected to have one.

The peaceful thoughts were interrupted when Marie was shunted back into Neamhan. Usually, the process was smooth, but not this time.

Unlike all the other times she’d gone back and forth, she hadn’t gone through a fixed gateway, simply taking a step and ending up in another world. Instead, she was moved by Fio, while missing an arm and a leg.

So, instead of gracefully stepping out of the mirror, Marie stumbled and fell, her face slamming against the wooden boards of the floor. She attempted to get up, but her damn leg wouldn’t move.

Pins and needles wracked her once-injured body parts at the same time as the phantom pain set in. Marie drew in a sharp breath, feeling stifled and suffocated. It didn’t help. Dozens of seconds went by as she laid on the floor, gasping like a fish on land, curled up in hopes that her body would stop aching.

Minutes ticked by, and eventually, the acute pain faded. She still felt numb. Slowly, she crawled across the floor, grabbed one of the pots of her bed, and pulled herself up. She sat down on it, managing to hold the position.

Then, she put her elbows on her thighs, and her face in her hands, and started crying. “Fuck,” she muttered. “Fuck.”

It had *hurt*. That pain was, easily, the most agonizing thing she had ever gone through. But the uncertainty was even worse. Were the others okay? Would they survive? There were archmages there now, sure, but that... *thing* had been terrifying.

She hyperventilated again, then choked down a sob. 'Breathe,' she thought to herself. 'Just breathe.'

Another ten minutes passed before Marie stopped shaking. Her hands, finally, felt somewhat normal again, the strange numbness and pulling sensation fading into the background. "I'm safe," he muttered out loud, more for herself to hear.

Slowly, she lifted her face out of her hands, and faced the coming day. They'd spent a long time in Eden. New year's had passed. Winter was slowly fading away to spring. It was still chilly, but she could see the first stems of hardy grasses outside.

Marie took a moment to appreciate the view. Her home was... unusual, to say the least. It had windows on all sides of the cabin atop the tower. Around her were... forests. Some of the last that remained on Neamhan.

Hardy trees that had somehow been overlooked during all the deforestation. Shrubbery that had just started to recover. They weren't doing amazingly, with all the pollution in the air, but they were alive.

She basked in a ray of sunlight. It fell onto the arm she remembered losing, and the dull, pulling pain reared its ugly head again. She drew in another sharp breath, but let it fade naturally.

The amount of synchronization between her bodies hadn't been this great before. Was it another facet of Fio's ability? Then...

No. She sighed, shaking her head. She didn't want to know, yet. Marie breathed, basking in the sunlight, staring out at the forest from her ranger cabin. She left that small flame of hope linger in her heart. The thought that she might be able to use Qi or Mana on Neamhan now. She let that flame burn, and shifted her focus.

In the corner of the cabin stood her mirror. It was taller than she was, hanging on a wooden frame that allowed it to spin. She walked up to it, tracing her fingers across the surface, leaving a faint trail.

Usually, it would ripple at her touch. Respond. But now, the glass was inert. It only showed her own reflection, that of an old, hardened woman, who had just spent minutes crying and shaking.

"I look like shit," she said, scoffing slightly. She took a few steps over to the pantry, limping slightly, pulled it open, took out a can of tomato soup, and started devouring it. She was *ravenous*.

After half the can she started to feel sick, but still forced the rest down, then sat on her bed again.

She didn't do this as a job anymore. No one paid her to be out here. She didn't even have an obligation. She made enough from Eden. But the few people who mattered to her in this world were the other rangers.

Taking a deep breath, she walked to the radio. She wasn't supposed to have one of these; they were government issued. Only rangers could cue into them. But, with her old contacts, getting an old one and fixing it up hadn't been much trouble.

One more, she breathed, reaching for the mic with a shaky hand. She pressed the button to turn the whole thing on, hearing the crackly static that calmed her nerves. Then, she activated her mic. "This is Marie," she said. "Back in tower three-O. I'll be here for the foreseeable future again. Looking forward to working with you. Andy, you here?"

She let go of the button and waited, rapping her fingertips on the table. Fuck, she felt like shit.

Eventually, the radio crackled more. "Yeah, here, this is Andy. Welcome back, Marie."

Andy's voice was husky and rough, from a lifetime of smoking and breathing road air. He was in his early sixties, now, but still strong as a bear. "Can you set me up my supply drops again?" Marie asked.

"Course," the man replied through the crackling. "Earliest I can do is overmorrow. That fine?"

"Works perfectly. Thanks, Andy."

"No prob." A long pause on the radio.

Then, there was another voice, younger. "You sound like shit, Marie," they said with a bit of bite.

"I feel even worse," she replied truthfully.

"Hah!" Jamie, the younger colleague, barked a laugh through the mic so loud that it peaked, sending a slight squeal through the ranger cabin. "Catch some sleep, then. No hikers in the

area anyway, far as we know. If you spot smoke, just let us know, but with the melting snow, things are wet anyway.”

“Will do. Talk to you later, Jamie. Andy.”

“Later.”

The legs of the chair scraped across the wooden floor as Marie got up, almost stumbling. She slapped her leg a few times, trying to get the circulation going a bit more, but it felt dull and distant. She grimaced, then limped to her bed, and flopped down.

Draping an arm over her face, Marie sighed. “Fuck,” she repeated again.

There was a ball of emotions in her chest. Anger, sadness, worry, happiness, fulfillment... she’d done so much and yet it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

Now the others were on their own. She hoped... Marie choked back a sob. She *really* hoped none of them would forget her.

All she could do for now was remember them, the way she’d seen them before her return to Neamhan. Smiling, for her. She already missed her friends.

- - -

I stared blankly at the spot where Marie had just been. Emilia was the first to leave the formation around her. She draped back against a tree, holding her stump in pain. “Divines,” she muttered. “I think I might pass the fuck out.”

Reya got up next, kneeling to the warrior, and glowing with divinity. Her eyes were closed, her face a mask of silent mourning. She channelled it to try and help where he could. Ann still peacefully slept.

Liam... cried. I saw tears streaking down his face. He shook. I placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it. Chris had lost their human shell, but stood vigilantly with the bodies of the forest spirit and rock hound. Watching out. The wooden one turned to where the body had been and gestured.

I started at them for a while. “Oh,” I said. “You wanna build a marker?”

They nodded. “Yeah. I think that might be nice.”

Nodding, they kneeled down, and began casting magic. I stared blankly, still.

The archmage, Erasmus, looked to us. "A valiant sacrifice," he said. "A brave woman who leaves this world in its service. You did a remarkable job closing the rift. Losing only one Defender-"

Matt stood, and slammed his fist into a nearby tree, splintering the wood. His face was a mask of rage, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Say one more fucking word, old man," he ground out through a sneer. "One more fucking word and I'll skewer you, you bastard."

He was serious. Erasmus looked at him sadly. No, not quite. It was *with pity*. "Then I will leave and we shall take care of the usurper. We will return to you afterwards."

"Kill it," I told him. "For her-"

Erasmus gently shook his head. "I don't suppose that will be possible. But we will drive it back to the other side of the rift." Then, he stepped through space, and was suddenly gone.

Matt slammed the tree again, with another resounding crack. He'd almost smashed the whole trunk by now. "Fucking useless," he said staring at the sky. "They're useless. Not even revenge. All we get is a petty 'good job' and a pat on the fucking back. For what? *For what?!*"

I slowly stood up, gently taking my hand off Liam. "Matt?" I asked.

He turned to me, barely suppressed rage in his eyes. "Yes?" he said, probably as politely as he could manage, his voice shaking.

"Let's take a walk." I heard my own voice shake a little as well, but not from anger. I felt... defeated.

Matt glared at me, those pale pink eyes alit with fury. Despite that, he took a long, hissing breath, and held it in. "Okay," he ground out.

For a few more seconds, I stood, nodding slowly and holding onto his shoulder. I watched as Chris' shell worked, the Leshi growing a tree where Marie had disappeared. It wasn't huge. More of a shrug, really. She would've loved it.

When the wooden giant stood and walked away again, I turned to Matt. He nodded curtly, and we headed out.

A few minutes passed in perfect silence.

The only noises we heard was the crunching of leaves under our boots, and the faint ringing of combat in the distance. I did also hear Matt grind his teeth, but I decided to ignore it. The afternoon was almost tranquil. The air felt so calm now, compared to the buzz of mana. I

was almost out of Qi, only keeping a thin layer of it around myself to not attract any monsters.

I simply looked at the sky as we walked in tandem.

Eventually, Matt broke the silence. "Why are we doing this?" he asked.

As he asked, I turned to face him. I was crying, for sure. I let out a small sniffle as I looked at him, and I saw about half of that anger disappear in an instant, winking out. "Cuz I need it," I told him. "And I think- I think you do, too."

Matt... didn't reply at first. I heard him draw in a long breath through his teeth, then breathe out again. He repeated the motion a few times. Then he walked another couple dozen steps simply staring at the ground, thinking.

It was almost funny. I knew him well, so much so that I could almost see the cogs in his head turning. He was working through it. He was grieving. In a way, we all were, even though Marie wasn't dead. She'd suffered for us. And she was gone, right now.

After some time, he opened his mouth, then closed it again, thinking some more. It took him a while to decide on what to say. "Sorry," he said. "For-"

I decided to interrupt him, stopping our walk, as cathartic as it felt for voyage, and grabbed his shoulder. "Matt," I said, getting his attention. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"But-"

"Nothing," I repeated, squeezing harder. I stared at him, downright boring into his eyes, not letting him look away. I think I was still crying, tears streaking down my cheek.

He looked. Then slowly, shakily nodded. "Okay," he said, eventually. "Okay. I- thank you. For walking with me."

"Of course."

"Marie was... she..." he paused. Looked at me helplessly. He couldn't find the words.

I breathed in. "She was your mom."

Matt blinked. "What?"

"Not just yours," I shrugged, "but more so than anyone else's. Matt, when was the last time your mother praised you?"

He froze. There was another, longer silence. “Oh,” he eventually said.

“Yeah,” I answered, finally releasing his shoulder and letting my arm drop limply. I kicked a pebble aside, looking at the floor. “So, Matt, please grieve. In whatever way you need to. Get angry, get frustrated, scream and yell. We’re out here, now. You can do whatever. No one’s gonna judge.”

Matt pulled me into a hug. “I’m a bit selfish, huh?” he asked, whispering.

I wrapped my arms around him. “A little. But that’s okay. I- All of us get it, Rabbit.”

He breathed, then sobbed, and I felt my patchwork shirt get wetter. He held onto me like a buoy in a storm. I held him, too. The poor guy was so hurt. After his grandma, this was the second mom he’d effectively lost.

“She remembers us, you know?” I whispered, when his sobs quieted a little.

I felt him nod. “Yea,” he said with a hiccup for air.

“We’ll see her again.”

“Mhm,” he nodded again.

“But it’s still okay to be upset. I’m upset. We all wish we could’ve saved the others, but that’s just not how it went. So we’ll mope,” I said.

“Mhm.” Matt hugged me silently for another few minutes. Eventually, he took a long breath, then pulled away.

He looked at me with eyes that were grateful, but remained silent. He’d cry again if he talked. I knew the feeling.

Instead, I saw his fingers slowly trail to his hip where his broken sword was sheathed. He pulled it out, slowly.

Now, it was only the length of a dagger, the ending of it jagged and rough. It would eventually heal with enough Qi, especially at wellspring rank, but it still fucking *sucked*. Maybe he would spend some contribution reforging it?

Matt, oblivious to my wandering thoughts, unsheathed the sword. He looked at his own reflection in the fracture metal. He choked out a pained laugh, running his free hand over his face and through his hair. He, obviously, looked like a fucking mess.

Gently, I turned the sword in his hand so that the broad side wasn't facing him anymore. No need to worry about his own reflection.

Slowly, looking more like a puppet on strings than a human, he swung. It was a simple overhead slice, executed at a speed more like flowing honey than anything else. After almost half a minute, the first slash was completed, and he transitioned into the next one.

I could see his worn down muscles working underneath his skin. A terribly faint smell of plum enveloped the forest. It seemed to quiet the wind around us, even as a raindrop fell from the sky.

The forest was wrapped in a deep silence as Matt moved. Step by agonizingly slow step, he moved through the forms of his swordsmanship. He gazed at me occasionally, as if looking for mockery, but after his first glance, I shook off my stupor.

With a faint, encouraging smile, I leaned against a tree, and pulled out my spear. It was worn down. The blade had chipped, the shaft, too, not to mention the imprint of where the usurper had grabbed it.

Despite that, I heard the faint chirping of the spirit in it. A buzzing sound that blended into the falling droplets of water.

In the silent forest, I began channelling my Qi through the spear. Repairing it, strengthening it, feeding the spirit. It felt hopeless, but those were the times when it mattered most.

In the silent forest, I lived on. Marie wouldn't have had it any other way.

Chapter 105: Tough Bitches

I dreamt of golden waters. Of calm seas, and endless horizons. Of reaching up and grabbing the sunlight in my hands.

Of beautiful, peaceful days. Breathing deep. Sprawling underwater coral reefs.

I woke up to a notification.

[Golden Wellspring advanced to **4th Step**.]

Perhaps it shouldn't have come as that much of a surprise. Talents stacking atop each other was potent, and the enormous influx of power in the aftermath of Ann's ritual was also quite

helpful for cultivation. So was... well, grieving, I suppose. It was part of any journey, too, after all.

Saying goodbye.

With a soft sigh, I pushed myself up in the meagre tent. Ann laid next to me, her lips faintly parted, a single strand of hair draped over her face, laying the bridge of her nose. I smiled, brushing it aside, and she leaned into my hand slightly.

For a few moments, I let myself enjoy that lingering sensation. The aftermath of a dream, and the presence of what I wanted to live for. Who I wanted the world to be for.

Then, letting my wistful smile fade away slowly, I focused on the presence. Where we were. Who was outside. What needed to be done.

I wrapped my Qi around myself like a mantle, braiding it with an almost casual ease. Some of it flowed through the connection with my spear, feeding the waking spirit. It was dormant still, barely so.

Another part siphoned off my mirror wellspring, feeding a specific technique, as a humanoid body wove itself from greyish magic. Cass' avatar soon floated in the air next to me. I gently laid a finger on my lips, and she understood the symbol.

Before heading out, there was one thing I still needed to lay eyes on. My training recently had been intense, especially in terms of manipulating Qi. It was time to see the results.

[Name: Fiona Bellum

Class: Spearwoman (10) / Gateway (9)

- + Techniques
- Stats
 - General
 - Strength: **Greater (Inferior)**
 - Agility: Greater (Inferior)
 - Endurance: Greater (**Intermediate**)
 - Resilience: Greater (Lesser)
 - Manipulation: Greater (**Basic**)
 - Capacity: **Greater (Lesser)**
 - Absorption: **Greater (Lesser)**
- + Qi

+ Disposition

Current Status: Metamorphosing]

I only called up my general stats. I had seen all the updates to my Qi, and my disposition was still the same. Same with my techniques - save for [Gifted Fragment] having been subsumed into the new tab. [Weapon Resonance], [Spear Qi], and [Spear Spirit] all felt on the verge of a breakthrough, and I had the feeling that once the spirit awoke, it would take the other techniques up a notch with itself.

But for now, all I managed was a barely visible smile of content at the increases. All my stats were now in the greater realm. My strength crossed over, maybe from all the hauling. My endurance was stretched to its limits with the never ending wave of usurpers during the ritual.

My capacity and absorption, however, had leapt into the greater realm and, simultaneously, into the second step of those. Absorption was steadily growing more powerful as I used my Qi, being dedicated to the production of it. Capacity was simultaneously self explanatory.

Manipulation, too, had leapt two steps, which came from my steady practice and use of more esoteric abilities. Melding my two types of Qi together must have been a major step forward there, as well.

I could hardly be compared to myself from just a year ago, now. I could beat that Fio with both my cores near empty, myself blindfolded, on one leg and with an arm tied behind my back.

The comparison was unfair of course. I even improved faster than back then, the talents of my friend taking root and blossoming within the network. I could feel it - as time passed and I used them, they grew stronger. As my gateway grew, they grew, too.

A part of Marie was still with me; that uncanny ability to fully assimilate the building blocks of Skills faster. Silently, I thought a 'thank you' to her.

Then I reopened my eyes, and pushed the tent flaps aside, stepping outside. The sun hung high in the lilac sky, and despite a good chunk of it being covered in darkness now, its rays warmed my face.

"Ah, you're awake," the hoarse voice of an old lady greeted me.

I turned towards the archmage that was here with Erasmus. Lyria, a space mage. She also dabbled in time and gravity magic, but her greatest skill was in space. Which is why she

often played taxi for other archmages - and worked with Erasmus to be at emergency sites as early as possible.

"You didn't sleep," I noted.

Lyria gave me a hoarse laugh, then coughed, and cleared her throat. "No. No, I did not," she said. "I thought you could use it more."

"Can't judge that without knowing how much you needed it," I said with a shrug, sitting down across from her over the embers of the campfire. I threw in a little more wood, preparing to make some breakfast. The others were still asleep, worn out and tired. My endurance was the highest among the group - courtesy of my habit of pushing myself.

"Your friend in armor might not be fighting any more battles soon," the old woman remarked.

At that, I looked up from the fire I was poking around in, meeting her eyes. They were dark blue, almost black, her hair greying, full of silver streaks. Her skin, on the other hand, was full of wrinkles and lines that showed her age.

Then, I snorted. "Pffffff. You would think that."

She blinked. "What?"

"Emilia, not fighting any battles? *Yeah right.*" I chuckled again more softly this time.

"Apologies, but she lost a limb," the archmage said, seemingly worried.

I shrugged. "So she did. I don't see this conversation going anywhere, so let's just wait and see. Don't you have important mage business to attend to?"

Lyria gave a long sigh at that. "After taking Erasmus to the healers, I do not. His injuries will take a while to mend - a day or two. Less than would be expected facing an enemy of this caliber. Had the usurper not been chained to the rift, one of us would have died."

So it had been just that dangerous. I drew in a long breath. "Then, until he is ready you will just... what, sit here?"

"Recharge my mana," she said with a shrug. "Space magic demands great volumes of it. I can hardly fold the world in half on an empty vessel. So I must meditate."

"And you can chat next to that?" I asked.

The corner of her lip quirked upwards. "Why yes," she said easily. "I can multitask quite well."

"How'd you become an archmage?" I then asked brazenly.

She tilted her head a little. "Hmm? What are you getting at."

I dangled my feet at the edge of the seating, idly watching as the fire finally took hold of the branches I'd added in. Not looking at her, I continued. "There are seven archmages. Each one of you is a little different. Driven. What drives you?"

Lyria blinked, then gave me a soft chuckle. Her hoarse voice grated out the sentences. "You're right. Do you know what drives all the archmages, Fio?" she asked.

"No," I shook my head.

The old woman hummed slightly, then smiled. "Erasmus wants to know the future because he desires control. Maximum benefit for minimum cost. It's why he approved of saving you - because by all measures you did well.

"Orvan wants the stars because this world isn't enough for him. His ambition is selfish, driving upwards because he cannot stand having anyone above him. Calio researches barriers to be left well alone, and they achieved the exact opposite.

"Then there is Finnyr, who simply wants a life of convenience. Saif, who cannot bow her head, and Klein, who simply cannot stand to see others get hurt. Not that he cares about most people.

"Finally, me." She smiled, showing me two rows of teeth. "I learn space magic, because I love this world. Because I want to see every single corner of it. I want to meet people, see places, I want to do it all. People like you, Fio," she said with a smug, self-indulging grin, "are why I want to keep this world alive. So I can have talks like these."

I nodded slowly. "I see."

She smiled even wider. "I don't think you do. Just like how I don't understand your friend, I don't think you understand me. And that's fine. People don't always need to understand each other. Suffice to say, I think this world is worthwhile the way it is right now, and I think it'd be a real shame if someone tried to take it away from me."

Lyria took a deep breath, finally, gazing into the sky, pausing her rant. I saw as the ecstatic glint in her eyes faded to a more dull one, reminiscing rather than reaffirming her wants. "I've seen so much of it all. Waterfalls and dunes. Dark castles, sunsets by the ocean, people of different species. Creature big and small. I've spent hours watching bugs, and seconds

crushing titans. And I'd spend hours more on it. So, suffice to say, I *despise* those that try to take this world from me."

Her eyes lingered on the lilac sky. "I'll kill 'em," she said hoarsely under her breath. Then she looked at me again. "I'm not a war mage - not like Saif or Orvan. But I'll do anything in my power to keep this world as it is."

Lyria paused and clicked her tongue. "Well, not as it is. Change is necessary, of course," she said, waving her hand. "Rivers will erode mountains. People will change, move. Old fossils like me will die, and new people like you will rise to power. Some conventions will become unacceptable, and some will become more acceptable. That is how things are supposed to be."

Then, she shook her head. "But I do not want a genocide to come from the outside, tear this world apart, and then change things. Replace our trees with theirs, our soil with theirs, our animals with theirs, our *magic* with theirs. Of course, if it went peacefully, and equally, that would be fine. But we are in a military conflict, and the usurpers have done this to other worlds before."

She breathed. "Not this one," she croaked. "Not this one."

I swallowed heavily, looking at her. Archmage Lyria had, in a way that seemed rather effortless, poured her heart out to me. Were all people with that kind of conviction so readily able to do that?

Given her eerily wide smile, I doubted that. No, this was some kind of special skill. I took a deep, long breath, then met her eyes again. "Thank you for explaining."

"Of course, Fio," she said. Her eyes flicked to Cass' avatar in the air near me. "I hope your keeper friend also has learned a little more about my motivations."

Cass nodded. "I have," she said, her voice smooth and calm. "Your drive is admirable."

Lyria nodded, leaning her face onto her open palm. "How diplomatic of you." She opened her mouth as if to talk more, then pushed her lips close together, knitting her eyebrows. It accentuated the lines on her face, making her look like a rather angry statue. "Ah," she said. "It seems I've been called on. Erasmus is in worse shape than expected, and needs better healers. Pleasure talking to you, young defender. I'm sure we'll meet again in this war."

Before I could reply, the chatterbox of a woman flicked her wrist, and space tore open.

It wasn't a gracious portal, looking more like someone ripped a hole into a shirt. She stepped through without turning back once.

When space closed behind her, I felt a small shudder, the hair on my arms raising. The ambient mana was slowly increasing. I hadn't even noticed but with it being that low... she must have drawn in mana for dozens, maybe hundreds of meters out.

"Terrifying," I muttered.

Cass looked at me. "She doesn't seem too bad."

I shook my head. "Yeah, no, not too bad," I agreed. "Just *intense*."

My keeper nodded. "Definitely," she agreed. "But was that unexpected?" Cass teased with a smile.

It made me snort for a moment. "I suppose not, no," I said. Then I sighed, stood, stretched, and grabbed a few rations from my inventory. We had enough food for a few days, but then we'd need to see about getting more.

While pouring some preserved soup into a metal pot, I thought about the future. What, exactly, was next? Given what we'd done, we probably had some contribution to turn in with the divines, but it wasn't an urgent priority.

I squeezed my fist, feeling the strength in it. The raw stats combined with my levels to make me genuinely strong. Despite that, I felt a little... aimless. If we just hunted a few more usurpers with gateway fragments, we could just... drop this all. Go home, come back another day.

But, having seen the destruction... it didn't feel right. It-

My train of thought was interrupted when Liam sat down next to me. He'd replaced his mask, the old one having been soiled when Marie died, but he didn't even wear it. It was pulled down to under his chin, showing me his whole face.

He breathed slowly next to me, not saying a word. I listened to that, watching his slumped figure from the corner of my eyes. Slowly, as the seconds ticked by, he sat a little straighter, and his gaze focused on the food.

"What're you making?" he asked. It was entirely his own voice, no whispering.

"Breakfast soup."

"No normal person has tomato soup for breakfast."

"Never claimed to be normal," I said with a shrug.

It coaxed at least a small smile from the rogue. I reached out hesitantly. "Can I?" I asked.

He nodded faintly.

I put a hand on his head, ruffling his hair slightly. He gave that same, faint smile again. Then I hugged him, and he returned the gesture.

"The soup's burning," he muttered up against me after a few moments. I smiled, taking the hint, and letting him go as I stirred.

"Thanks, Fio," he said.

"Anytime, Liam," I replied. "Take it easy. We'll figure out what's next when the others are here."

He looked up into the darkening sky, and nodded. "Okay. Yeah. That seems... doable."

We spent the rest of the morning in silence. I added some more spices and vegetables to the soup to make the meal less miserable, and slowly, the others trudged in. Matt and Reya. Chris' two shells. Eventually, Emilia stumbled out of her tent, too.

I watched her plop down on a rock, her stump bandaged up and scabbed over. She was tough, and it was already healing over. Gingerly, I handed everyone bowls of soup.

Everyone ate silently.

Emilia finished first. She let out a long sigh. "Could you give me a second portion?" she asked. "And stop staring like that," she added. "I'm okay."

Reya signed something that Liam tried to translate, falling back into the familiar whispering pattern. "She's asking if you're sure. And if you need anything. Ah, she's offering to help."

The warrior woman smiled and looked around. I refilled her bowl, as she took a deep breath. Then, without warning, she smashed her gloved fist into the rock she sat on, sending a crack through it.

"I'm fucking pissed," she said, still wearing that same smile. "I get moping. I really do. I feel like shit, too. I'm in pain, I'm exhausted, and I feel like a giant fucking failure." She stopped, taking her bowl back, and putting a spoonful into her mouth, swallowing quickly. "So, what I'm going to *do*. Is eat well. Recover."

She clenched her fist in the rock, and the dull grey thing took on a life of its own, melting, reshaping, flowing into a new form. "I'm gonna get strong again." She pressed the shifting construct against her stump, and it slowly flowed into the shape of a prosthetic. "And then I'm gonna kill something."

The crack from the stone shattering must have woken Ann, because she walked out of the tent, bleary-eyed.

"Because if Marie fought with us, then we gotta keep on fighting without her. Because that's what tough bitches do."

Chapter 106: True Beginnings

And so we fought.

We talked to Ann, who was, understandably, rather shocked. Marie was gone, Emilia had lost a leg, and Chris didn't have any shell to speak to us with anymore. The archmages were gone, but at the very least, the rift was closed.

Each one of us had contribution to spend, but with the increasing prices as we grew stronger, and the bitter taste in our mouth from the battle, no one felt like taking the long journey to a town to do so. The altars here had been blown apart as the archmages thought the usurper.

There were spoils for us to see, however, since my network included magic item drops.

Liam, for example, now wore a cloak, and one of his knives seemed to come attached to an almost invisible string. Emilia could manifest pauldrons on her shoulders, that seemed to twinkle like liquid crystal.

Reya wore a bracelet, having received it from one of us, and Matt had a flower woven into his hair. As a group, we also got some generally useful items, such as a piece of rather good flint that regrew over time, and a bottle that could hold incredible volumes of water.

For my own part... I'd received a belt.

[Treasure: Wanderer's Key

Owner: Fiona Bellum

Description: Once there was an adventurer, who was always held up in her travels. So she asked the world to stop troubling her, and received an item in turn. This sash allows greater freedom of movement. See the world, wanderer, do not let your obstacles stop you. Walls are simply unopened doors.]

As always, the description was somewhat vague. But the item seemed to have three main effects. Firstly, it made all forms of movement more energy efficient.

I could more easily create platforms of Qi to stand on in the air, and also stick to them upside down or sideways without much trouble. Stepping through reflections was always cheaper, now, causing less trouble.

The second was a minor active warping effect. If I channelled energy into the sash, it would slightly condense the world when I stepped, increasing my speed, and letting me cover greater distances with a single movement.

Finally, there was the enchantment of why it was called a “Key”. With enough power, it could create what was essentially a tunnel, allowing me to step through walls. I could make these “doors” appear anywhere, though the closer to me, the easier it was.

It felt like that last ability still had some untapped potential, but its essence was to avoid trouble, so to speak, which meant obstacles, but it would most likely also warp projectiles and attacks around me, though it was rather expensive.

Still, it... suited me. In general, the drops seemed a little more themed this time, their powers seeming a little dependent on the creatures that dropped them, as well as the people who did the killing. Since one of my paths was travelling, and the things I killed came from a rift, I got a warping-type ability.

Liam had gotten the silky string for his dagger from a spider-type monster, now easily able to twirl it around and retrieve it after throwing. Emilia's pauldrons had come from a crystalline zurulen that she'd smashed to bits, and since she had rock powers...

I smiled. The ability wasn't entirely random, then. Of course, we'd still need to do more testing, but having these items was rather useful.

We spent the rest of that day resting. It was necessary; all of us were exhausted, and we weren't ready to fight again. Matt's sword would need a while longer to fix itself, but we'd head out again before that happened.

For now, though, I hugged Ann and patted her head. She was blaming herself for all the trouble, because of course she was. So I stayed there with her, whispering, and giving her the time she needed.

Eventually, she stopped crying and fell asleep again.

- - -

The next day, we awoke to darkness. The sun was rising, but almost all of it was covered by now. I looked around, and saw everyone's faces set with grim determination. Tomorrow, the eclipse would start properly. Tomorrow.

Before then, though, we had things to do. With practiced motions, we packed up our gear, placing it into our inventories. I took some more time to stitch up the biggest damage in our clothes, too. Hopefully we'd get some armor drops or something soon.

A few minutes passed until we were all ready. Chris' wooden shell stalked ahead, Liam following it in the shadows, and when the path was declared clear-ish a few minutes later, we moved out.

For the rest of the day, we just trekked through the wilderness.

It was strange, really. The area was so calm. All the usurpers had been attracted by rifts and people that there were few critters about here. The frontier was shifting, and this land had been swiftly abandoned as the usurpers moved farther eastwards.

But they left their traces. I could feel it in the way the air hummed, in the way the world felt even more hostile than usual. Traces of that lingering energy.

When I was weaker, I couldn't feel it, but with my rise in levels and stats, it was there. Like a pinprick at the back of my neck. A faint haze that told me... that I was unwanted here. That this was no longer human- no longer *Edenian* territory.

It showed in how we didn't encounter any other people. In the way the air shifted and ate at the thin barriers on our skin. In how the world, ever so subtly, seemed out of colour.

The darkness of the eclipse highlighted it, too. Everything was cast... almost in monochrome. Like an old movie. It felt like dull static hung in the air, the kind that crackled and popped quietly.

And, of course, it showed in how there were *few* usurpers here, not *none*.

Every so often, Liam and Chris would hack apart small troops, or take us along for slightly bigger ones. Often, when we came upon those, the air felt even more hostile, subtly different. It made me think - were there nests around here?

None that had gateway fragments, that much I knew. [Lost and Found] would have told me. So it would have to be, what, biological nests? That created more of whatever they spawned by eating Qi and nutrients, rather than relying on calling them over from another world?

The brix nest we'd destroyed those months ago had owned a gateway fragment, though a small one, and had also still devoured bits of this world. As much of it as it could, even. Now, did these nests sustain themselves only from Eden?

I shook my head, stopping the speculation. We weren't here for those. It would be important to reclaim this territory, yes. At some point. But not right now. Not when there were people actively being killed.

So, we marched through. Whenever there was trouble, we beat it down. The main front of the usurpers was further northeast, so that is where we headed. Kind of... in the direction of the capital of the Edenians.

But we'd cross that bridge when we got to it. For now, we simply kept marching.

- - -

We marched through the night, as well. With stats as high as ours, it was little trouble. I practiced moving my Qi more, channelling it into my spear, manifesting an aura of liquid gold on it, then having it change shape and disappear.

I felt a small push back on the exercise from my spirit. It felt as if... wait. I chuckled to myself.

"Seriously?" I asked it in a low whisper, not receiving a reply for now. I shook my head.

"Alright, then..."

Changing my mindset, I focused a little more. I held my spear in my right hand, but that is not where I channelled my Qi. Instead, I focused on my left. There was no spear there, but... ah, no it broke. Maybe I needed a little bit of help?

With a quick swipe of my weapon, a long wooden branch fell into my hand. I tossed it up once and caught it. There were leaves still attached, and it didn't have a sharp tip, but... 'Eh, close enough,' I thought, and focussed.

I convinced myself that in my left, I was holding a spear. I coursed Qi through myself, out of my wellspring, through the dense meridians in my body, then into the 'weapon', in the patterns I'd do for a normal spear, and then...

My Qi took hold. I opened my eyes, and the branch was encased in a golden shell, taking the form of a spear. "Pffft."

Ann looked over at the noise I made, and saw me holding two weapons now. She cocked her head. "What's... is that a branch?"

"Yeah," I nodded with a snicker. I tossed up the golden 'spear' and twirled it. "Well, yes and no. It's a spear, clearly."

And according to my spirit... everything could be one.

I threw the branch casually and lightly, with enough force to pierce into a tree but not through it. The golden construct lodged into the wood then dissipated. I smiled, no longer holding anything in my left hand... but that didn't matter, did it?

My Qi was all I needed.

Smiling, relying on the instincts I had from the spirit, my years of muscle memory, and the talent and practice I'd put in, I [Single-Mindedly] focused, and...

[Spear Qi has reached (Great)!]

A golden spear of solid crystal Qi manifested in my empty hand. I blinked.

I twirled it around, and it spun easily in my hand, mimicking the weight and balance of my core bonded spear. "Huh," I said, grinning ear to ear. Then I looked over at Ann, who stared back with equal surprise.

"Huh," she mimicked my expression. She flicked a finger against the tip of the weapon, and a clear, metallic ring came from it. "That's... awesome," she smiled.

Slowly, a grin crept into my face. "Hey, Matt?" I asked.

"Wazzup?" the swordsman asked, turning to me. I tossed the spear at him with an almost casual motion.

"Got my weapon Qi to great just now. Check this out. No longer even need a spear to be a spearwoman," I bragged.

He twirled it, raising his eyebrows. "... Huh. How?"

"Well, it feels a little like acknowledging that there's a weapon there, even though there is none, and then just having your Qi flow the same way it would when enhancing a weapon," I explained.

"Hmmm," he hummed, stretching his arm forward, and focussing. Qi coalesced in the air, swirls of pink smoke and plum smell spilling forward. "Hmmm." He kept humming, changing his Qi flow a few times per second.

"No," he shook his head. "It's not clicking. Yours..." he looked at the spear in his other hand, "it clicked into place, didn't it?"

I nodded. "Yep."

"Yeah, this isn't... my kinda thing, it seems. But I've got an idea." A faint smile bloomed on his lips, and he drew his sword. "Let me just..."

Watching with curiosity, I took a good look at his Qi. It twirled in his body, spilling forth from his wellspring. His hair lifted up into the air faintly, the wind playing with the strands. A stronger plum smell came, now, and slowly but surely, those same petals that usually enveloped him in a storm of pink began appearing.

But they didn't rage or roar, instead... the calmly twirled through the air, then landed on his sword. And stuck to it.

Petal after petal of razor sharp pink Qi landed on the broken jagged blade, and fused into it. Matt's brows were furrowed in focus, but his eyes were bright and a smile played on his lips. A dozen seconds of wind passed, and then it slowly lowered in intensity, until the smell was almost imperceptible.

"Huh," I said. "Not quite like mine, but... seems like it'll work."

He shot me a wide grin. "Oh yeah? I think so too." He tossed the sword and caught it again by the handle. The blade was now as long as it had been before, the shape the same, but it was made from a dozen pink blossoms. "This gives me some ideas, too. Thanks, Fio."

I smiled. In fact, I also already had the bud of a new idea, looking at the way he manipulated his Qi. "No prob."

The march went on.

Hour by hour ticked by in the darkness. And eventually, morning should have come, but only the faintest wisps of sunlight made it past the sun. It was being choked out now.

Another hour passed after dawn, and then one more. When the sun was finally approaching the center of the sky, I felt the shudder happen.

It hadn't gotten brighter as the sun rose, instead, the black disc covering it had only grown bigger, and the last rays of light finally disappeared.

When it happened, I felt a shudder pass through the world. Night descended, even though it was the middle of the day. My hair rose to stand on end, and a shiver crawled up my back.

The world was colder. More hostile, more fragile.

Like a delicate snowflake in the throes of winter wind. Ready to be broken apart.

And it did, a tiny tear appearing only a few hundred meters in front of us.

Chapter 107: Fragile World

It turns out not all rifts were made equal. In fact, the vast majority of rifts were small, tiny tears.

The danger was that they did not greatly enjoy *staying* small. Even as I watched the tiny tear in the air, it expanded. A hand reached through, and I felt my heart stop in my chest.

Before I had the chance to experience any more fear, Matt moved. Instantly, there was a storm of flowers. It lasted only a single moment, then it crashed into that hand - a bornin's hand. Instantly, a red mist spilled forth, and Matt's Qi crashed into the rift.

It closed under that assault of pink and plum smell. He sheathed his sword of interlocked flower petals, and slowly turned towards us. The motion was just gentle enough to hide the gritting of his teeth and look of absolute fury on his face. During it, his face slowly faded into a neutral mask, then he tilted it lightly, and gave a kind smile.

"Ah, I kind of overdid it. Sorry, guys," he said, holding that same kind expression.

Slowly, second by second my hairs laid down on my skin again. The world... it all felt so fragile. In fact...

I put a hand to my chest, and *felt* my Qi in my cores. It was bubbling slightly. Ripples spread across the top of my golden sea, and my path through the skies of reflection seemed shaky. My footsteps were vibrating as though it was a set of hanging bridges.

And my heart quivered a little, too. It felt like I'd taken too much caffeine. Everything felt raw, fragile, sharp. Ann squeezed my hand slightly and it made me feel as though my skin was paper thin and about to tear.

What a strange thing. It was almost like I could reach out... and rip the world right apart. For a moment, I even extended my hand forward, fingers curling as if to pull at the air- then I stopped myself.

I turned to Ann. "That's dangerous."

She gave me a slow, controlled nod, as if any faster movement was too much. "Yeah. It fades."

Following her lead, I took slow breaths, slow steps. The feeling of the air and my clothes felt so scratchy. I could feel each inch of my throat every time I took a breath. No wonder Matt's battle lust had taken over so easily.

It was almost impossible to keep a calm head, but I forced all that down with iron discipline. My feelings settled slightly as I took hold of them. My skin less raw, the world less wound with stress.

We took a moment, acclimatising partially to this new world, each drawing our defenses a little tighter. It was important, now that even the wind felt hostile.

Eventually, Ann spoke again. "Let's continue onwards," she suggested.

I nodded and took a step, the crunch of the forest path under my soles feeling far too loud and poignant. My mind seemed to wanna hold onto every single little detail, like a scared animal scurrying about at great speeds.

Not that it was easy to stay calm. There were rifts out there, opening and growing right now. And there would be more. A war would start between those trying to close them, and those opening them. How long would the eclipse proper last this time? How-

Ann grasped my hand again. "Hey," she whispered. "Close your eyes. Just focus on walking. I can take the rest."

Almost without thinking I listened. It was such routine, since I had a habit of cultivating while walking, this really was just like an invitation to do that. So, I closed my eyes, shutting out the outside world.

It didn't come as easy as it usually did this time. The world itself felt frigid on my skin, the wind like needles, and the ground like sandpaper against my feet. Hell, I could even still faintly feel light against my closed eyelids despite knowing it was perpetual night out there.

But I kept them closed, and, ever so slowly, those sensations faded away. Minutes of silent walking ticked by, not interrupted by anything. In fact, I think at some point, I unconsciously put up Qi barriers over my ears, and the world grew a little quieter.

Slowly, ever so faintly, it grew bearable. Until, eventually, I found a gentle brightness against my eyelids. I opened them, and found myself in the golden depths.

Honestly, opening my eyes to that familiar scene of dull sunshine and pretty coral was comforting. The feeling of floating weightlessness helped me forget about the way my skin had felt just minutes before. Like paper about to tear.

Now, I was simply floating in a soft, golden embrace. Weightless. Free.

I breathed, even though I was "underwater", and dove deeper. Deeper and deeper and deeper. Until the sunlight winked out and I found myself in blissful darkness.

This was my realm. I felt safe, and knew I was. Out there, Ann was walking with me, and I trusted her with my life, much less preventing me from stumbling as some distant part of my mind moved my legs.

Luckily I was used to cultivating like this. I slowly converted the absorbed energy into golden Qi, which worked even for the influence from beyond the rifts. It would have been a little troublesome if that turned me into a usurper, but I was safe.

So, for a while, I simply swam deeper down, until all that was left was silence and darkness and weightlessness.

A long while passed like that.

- - -

When I opened my eyes again, it was still dark outside, as it would be for weeks, but I felt better.

My skin still felt strange, and so did the whole world, but after being given some respite, I was more prepared to handle it. Emilia took it in stride, always having been brave, and Ann seemed to deal with it almost routinely, but besides them, everyone was struggling at least a little bit.

Even Chris' rocky wolf-like shell seemed to shiver occasionally, whenever I saw it weave in and out of the forest. But we bore with it, and marched.

When the time came, we slept. There was no longer any point of keeping track of morning and evening. We simply marched on through the darkness. And marched. And marched.

Occasionally, we'd run into some minor fights, but by now... the kind of monsters we found outside of the main hordes and the powerful rifts were easy. Well, that wasn't to say we couldn't get hurt.

Emilia sometimes stumbled, her footing not quite sure after losing a leg yet, as was expected. Reya had trouble controlling the stream of divinity, sometimes pumping out far more divine power than necessary, and sometimes only bringing a thin stream to bear. The barriers between realms fluctuated.

It made her dizzy, too. She threw up more than once when we received some lighter wounds, and the world shifting seemed to treat her pretty roughly generally.

The same went for Iryel, the angel, when he finally showed up.

He looked like shit. Even more than usual. His appearance could barely be called a landing. Rather than flying it was more like his wings made a clumsy parachute, making him slam into the ground rather than splat into a little more than a spear.

Rising from the impact, he coughed dirt and mud. His eyebags were even deeper now, and frankly, he looked like he hadn't slept in days. Tattered wings and robes, and hell, he was even covered in some minor injuries.

"You look like shit," I greeted the angel.

Iryel shot me a look between astonishment, offense, and great humor, then laughed, then hacked out a cough. "Hahahaha- ack!!" He held his chest for a few seconds, then flashed me a slight smile. "Lovely to see you again as well, Miss Bellum."

"Reya, can you heal him a little?" Matt asked our cleric, who nodded, and laid a pair of shaky hands on the ragged angel. His wounds mended a little, and we spoke as his treatment went on.

"So," I asked, "you here for any reason?"

He gave me a somewhat rueful look. "No good news, I fear."

"When's it ever," Emilia commented with a scoff. "Just give it to us straight, holy man."

With a faint smirk, he leaned back. “Not dealing with sycophants is lovely. So many nobles need a gentle delivery of their evacuation notice when I’m dragging them away from their death. So averse to life.”

Slowly, he drew a deeper breath, even taking the time to wipe some dirt off his face. Or at least smear it around. “You’ve grown into an elite team by now. Two events of note have happened. One is a one-handed swordswoman asking to meet with you, miss Fio.” He held up his hands, stopping me from interrupting.

“Surprisingly, to both of us I assume, she is doing so *politely*. In fact, she was determined to seek you out herself, until I asked her to stay put. She seemed amicable to help, in fact, so long as I delivered this request to you.”

My face hardened a little. “I will try to heed it.”

Iryel nodded. “I am glad to hear that, since she is currently placed in the same city the divines would have sent you to defend. Almost evacuated, just west of the capital, there is Inu. It will fall to the horde, but we must hold it until the innocents can run. We have archmage Orvan stationed there, too.”

I tilted my head. “He won’t be able to hold it?”

Mournfully, Iryel shook his head. “Archmages have their limits. Numbers are one, exceptionally powerful foes another. Orvan’s spells cause massive amounts of destruction, too, so the fighting will take place further from the city walls. Otherwise, he might accidentally break the town before the usurpers can.”

“Ah,” I said. “That’s... surprising.” I turned to the others. “What do you think?”

Matt’s knuckles were white as he grabbed his sword handle tight. His face was a stony mask, and his words came out hard pressed. “Yeah. I’m ready for another fight.”

“What else would I do, Princess?” Emilia asked with a smile. “Let me beat ‘em down. It’s what I do best.”

Liam gave a soft shrug, seemingly uncaring, while Reya just faintly nodded. As long as people were helped by this, they were fine with the idea. Chris, too, seemed to like it, ready to face more of the horde. And, perhaps, eager to pick up a new shell capable of speech.

Ann, for her part, laid a hand on my shoulder. “We’re ready, Fio. Whenever you are.”

A series of nods later, I turned to Iryel. I smiled, a faint, fragile smile. "Yeah. What's one more fight, right?"

The angel looked at me for a long, quiet moment. His wounds were better now, returning some of that calm, aloof presence. I held his gaze for the long, quiet moment.

All the way until he turned away.

Softly, he clicked his tongue. "Alright," he admitted. "I do not know what I expected, but... I am sure you will do good things for the city. All of you. Regardless of what anyone else says, the divines are grateful for your help in these trying time."

I held out a hand to him, and he took it. I raised him from the ground, placing the unkempt man back on his own feet. He stood, if a little shakily. Once more, he met my eyes.

My words came out calmly. None of the shaking in my voice that I felt, not at all reflecting the knot in my throat. Apprehensively, I made perhaps the worst decision I would ever make.

"Lead the way, Iryel."

Chapter 108: Rousing Dragons

The march was fine. It wasn't easy or fun, but it was fine.

I hadn't lost my love for travelling at all. But part of what I enjoyed was seeing new sights at the destinations, and that... was taken away. Most of the landscape we passed through was not in a pleasant state. Trees had been razed, broken apart. There were carcasses, still dissolving into ambient energy, laying around.

Blood soaked the ground in more areas. There were so many usurpers that infighting had apparently started. We saw them tear at each other occasionally. For what? Territory? Glory? I couldn't tell.

Honestly, I didn't care enough.

Without a thought wasted, I cut them down. It felt cruel. It felt callous. But at the same time, I was so wrung dry that I couldn't bring myself to care.

The usurpers, despite everything, were not all evil. No species was. Most of them were creatures that just didn't quite fit here and were predatory towards the Edians, like an invasive species.

Usually, I would have preferred to just place them back in their habitat, but that wasn't an option right now. So, we killed them. One by one, stroke after stroke of my spear. Like wielding a paintbrush, splattering red onto a dark background.

Blood soaked into the ground, where it hissed softly and evaporated into ambient energy. Then we marched, and marched, and marched.

Did we sleep? A little. Collectively, maybe two hours a day. With bodies this strong, we didn't need much more. I would have preferred three, but this was fine, too. Time was short, so we marched.

Really, for a good chunk of it, we ran. It made my cultivation slower since focussing while running was quite a bit harder than while walking with my eyes closed, but I could still do it. The fact that the trees would splinter and break if I ran through them also helped.

That was loud though and attracted monsters, so I tried to avoid it.

Generally, it was quiet. Almost peaceful. Liam and Chris picked off any stragglers. Vines and shadows broke bodies before we even saw them, leaving only parts behind. We hadn't seen any Edian or Reflector corpses yet, though they might have already dissolved, too.

For three days, I mostly focused on breathing. One foot in front of the other. Killing, cultivating, running, sleeping. That was all.

Until, eventually, the walls of Inu came into view.

The city was close to the capital, so it was a massive population centre. People considered it safe. *Had* considered it safe. The place was known for enchanters and smiths. Working with resources that could easily be moved from the frontier without decaying. Alchemy had been done further west.

Instead, these cities had towering walls and fortifications. Magical ballistae and disc launcher to slaughter hordes. Towers full of archers, solid, enchanted stone protecting them. Right now, volleys of magical arrows reigned down on a horde that ground against the walls.

I saw dozens of tiny rifts further back, slowly growing, then contracting as waves of power washed over them. Thousands- no, more than that. There were so many usurpers it was like an endless tide. A millstone grinding at those fortifications.

They'd break. There was no way they wouldn't. After all, the usurpers had multiple worlds under their full control. It was a simple matter of resources.

Having that knowledge click in my head was depressing. The fact that, essentially, these people would flee westwards until the eclipse was over, and then we would go back to the frontier, pushing it back. Rebuilding. Until the next eclipse came.

Cycle after cycle, eroding the spirit of resistance.

I felt my grip tighten around the spear, as I coursed more magic through it. The horde was in sight, so we would do what we always did. I turned to Ann and she smiled. A calm, knowledgeable smile, like she knew exactly what I was gonna do.

My own smile was crooked in reply. It felt misplaced. The fatigue was set deep, weighing down my limbs like lead... But my will was stronger, and my body powerful enough to move even if it was made from lead.

Within me, I roused my energy. Both my wells stirred, and it felt a little like two sleeping dragons awakening. The energy moved slowly at first, having been happy to rest, recover, and grow.

Out there, in the horde, there were creatures that wanted to kill me.

Gold leaked from my fingertips, forming a second spear in my left hand.

They were coming for this world.

I moved, left foot sliding backwards as I prepared to throw. I breathed out.

No way I would let them succeed.

With a roar of magical power and a deafening crack, I threw the golden facsimile of a weapon. A similar fake of my spirit flew with it, adjusting the course, and having it slam into the horde. A dozen bodies were broken apart before its blade, splattering.

A moment later, more power coursed through my magical belt, and the space between the horde and us vanished. Within moments, all of us were amidst the fray. Blood sprayed. Bodies broke.

My skin split open, defenses weakened by the eclipse. Every battle was waged as though on the edge of a knife. But whenever I was hurt, I felt a faint trickle of divinity pour into me, Reya having our back and Iryel flying into the sky, lancing the battlefield with bolts of power and healing.

Emilia, despite her unsure footing, was smiling. Power poured out of her in droves, reshaping the ground. Boulders smashed everything apart. She opened up holes to swallow usurpers in droves.

Matt moved in a whirlwind of violence. His sword killed with every stroke, blood tinging his pink petals a darker shade. Violence followed in his wake, and so did carnage.

As for Liam? I could barely even see him. He stuck to the shadows, but I saw the effects he had. Quickly and silently, he spread death. Monster after monster felled by their own shadows, the darkness writhing and boiling.

Fire and ice rained in front of me at Ann's will, carving bloody furrows into the ground. Her magic was a torrent of noise and power, and it would have been awe inspiring if I took the time to look at it properly.

Finally, Chris moved across the battlefield with both their shells, breaking monsters with mixed magics. I saw them look around too, as if searching. Would they find a new shell to join the battle? I blinked. Perhaps they were taking note of other triz-adu? By now, the species all fought together.

Beastfolk warriors carved into the hordes by my side. There were people floating in the sky on wings. I saw the spirit people fight, too. Pale skinned sky spirits in the sky, or fire spirits, weaving through the battlefield in a blaze of glory.

Dozens of sights entered my mind in moments, until a long breath left my lungs.

I forced the ringing in my ears to be silent, until my breath was all that I could hear in the whole world. The time for violence had come once more. And so, I slaughtered.

- - -

An hour later, covered in blood, breathing heavily, I still fought. My body felt even heavier, but my wellsprings still poured out more power. Qi coursed through my body, making my skin shine with liquid gold.

From the outside, I must have looked like a cast metal statue of a warrior, breaking the hordes. I charged in far, and fought and killed. Monsters, large and small, fell before my spear. The spirit guided me, and with my affinity for mirrors, I had no blind spots. With my ability to make more spears, I was always armed. My skin itself was my armor.

So I fought, and battled, and carved through the monsters - until I was stopped.

It was a rather simple, innocuous encounter, really.

I cut down a zurulen, a giant made of stone, and then... it stood there. A leyburn. A rhino-like creature with dark hide, humongous and silent. An oily sheen seemed to cover the air around it, and suddenly the world fell entirely silent.

Slowly, those eyes trailed towards me, and I saw recognition within them.

The creature looked at me, and let out a huff of hot air, as if challenging me. It was the same one that had crashed into us all those days ago in the black sands. The one that had nearly killed me. The one that had cracked the ground and sent me to the underground ruins where I'd found my gateway fragment.

The one that had *spared my life*.

I gripped my spear tightly, shoving down the fear. This creature was not unintelligent. It knew who I was. It was eager to test itself against me once more - not as a target of slaughter, but as warriors. Somehow, it felt like it would get along well with Ru, the war god.

"Fine then," I said, fighting to stop my arms from shaking as I gripped my spear with both hands. "Come at me."

Slowly, almost gracefully despite its towering figure of flesh and muscle and stoney hide, the leyburn stepped forward. When its hoof impacted the ground, it vanished.

A moment later, the impact slammed into me hard enough to rock my entire world. It had slammed its horn right into the tip of my spear, targeting me head on, and I gritted my teeth hard enough to almost feel them shatter.

Every muscle in my body screamed with pain, but with a great deal of effort, willpower, and a lot of Qi, I kept them in place. My feet remained on the ground, locked in place by my Qi.

The clash lasted only a moment, but I let out a roar as I pushed against the creature. [Momentum Shift] layered atop [Golden Body] layered atop [Mirror Mind]. It combined with my strength and technique and my general ability to manipulate Qi. My stats, that I had worked so hard for, combined with all the levels I had gained, and with a great deal of effort, one that made it feel like my arms would break...

I moved the creature.

With my own power, I shoved aside the living castle that was a leyburn, redirecting it and pushing it to the side.

For a brief moment, our eyes met again, mine open with surprise at what I had just done, the leyburn's filled with... was that *pride*? Something I could only identify as a warrior's spirit seemed to glint from within it.

It was a brief moment, though, and a second later, I moved. My spear lashed forward, driven by years of training and muscle memory and honed by hundreds of fights to the death. Qi roared out from my core, resonating with the weapon and the spirit inside it. Reinforcing the edge, and slamming into the hide of the leyburn.

My attack landed cleanly on its side with all the force of a truck combined into a point as fine as a needle. It split open the grey hide, penetrated a few inches - and then stopped. Up against the hardened muscle of the creature, my weapon didn't pierce far enough.

So, I launched another attack. A brutal lance of Qi, extending out like a second stab from inside the creature.

Now *that* hurt it. A second impact slammed into the leyburn, and it roared, spun, and slammed into me before I could withdraw my spear. I let go, of course, grabbing its horn with both my arms to absorb the momentum, and I heard my bones creak.

A second later I was tossed backwards, slamming through some other creature's body, showering me in blood. While still flying, my spear appeared in my hand - I fucking love bound weapons - and my Qi anchored me in the air.

I launched myself back at the rhino, and we clashed again, and again, and again.

Each clash sent my muscles on protest. Each one sent my instinct reeling. Hell, I was fighting a monster the size of a small house. This thing could flip a tank on its side with barely a thought. And yet... here I was.

Exchange after exchange, we found ourselves *equal*. Power roared out my cores, two roaring streams of Qi pulsing through me. The glass underneath my skin had shifted into liquid gold again, as all my talents worked in tandem. The world felt crystal clear. I was fighting a battle for once.

Not a desperate one to survive, or one I dominated, but one where I was winning by the skin of my teeth, giving each clash my all. And I learned. Thrived. Threw myself onto that precipice, practiced my motions again, and again, and again.

Horn slammed into metal, Metal into hide, and horn into golden skin. Step by step, my focus narrowed, honed in on more details. Whispers were in the back of my mind, something else rousing. Cass directed me on where to move to keep the fight uninterrupted.

I almost laughed inside. How unfair. This was me and the entire team I kept inside me versus just one creature. But that was okay. I saw that the leyburn knew, and that it didn't mind.

So we clashed. Over and over. Until my muscles were mangled from the impact, and its hide was covered in gashes. I'd chipped its horn. How mad was that?! I'd chipped *its horn*!

And eventually, we came together one more, and my Qi roared, two dragons tousling, braiding, flowing through my spear like a raging river, braiding glass and gold into liquid metal. Reflective, shining, and gloriously powerful.

And an invisible barrier inside broke. An eggshell cracked.

[Spear Spirit has reached (Intermediate)!]

It awoke. Within my spear, that nascent consciousness turned very real, rousing, awaking, and bringing with it a rush of power and instinct and companionship that coursed through my veins like fire. This was *my* spear. *My* spirit. It would be with me until we both died, and that was that.

[Weapon Resonance has reached (High)!]

Instantly, my Qi sent the metal of my spear ringing in high tunes. The weapon, the spirit inside it, practically sung as it cut through the air. I slammed it into the leyburn, and the great creature was knocked back.

A living castle, trailing great furrows into the ground, slick with blood. Its eyes widened, and a grin split my face.

"Good morning, little one!" I greeted. "Come on. Let's win, and we'll find a name for you!"

My golden, burning, gorgeous spirit *sang* in response. Our moves aligned, and we fought. Everything felt fluent and radiant.

I pierced through the oily sheen, through all defenses of the leyburn. I thrust my weapon forward, coated in a volume of Qi that could make people of lesser stages unconscious by sheer volume, and hit its horn straight on.

Burning with power, my spear crashed into the material that had once shattered all my defenses effortlessly... and my spear cut through it.

Within a moment, I stopped the blow. The leyburn looked at me. Its eyes were full of awe. It dipped its head as if to congratulate me on a battle well fought.

The great beast took a step backwards, my skin sliding out of the small nick it had made in the horn before I stopped the blow.

And the living castle that had once made me despair gave me a huff of recognition, then turned around, and rampaged among the usurpers, tearing their ranks apart side by side with me.

Chapter 109: New Beginnings

With more force on our side, we were able to split the tide of enemies. Break the waves against us. My team was a spearhead, diving deep into the ranks of the usurpers, taking them down by the dozen.

At some point, the city mages began relaying messages to us through telepathy and voice projection, similarly to how Liam usually did it, and we began hunting down priority targets.

Matt and I fought against a humongous creature made from steel chains that whipped around, breaking it apart one slash at a time. Ann incinerated some kind of fast, small beast of ice, by enveloping that entire section of the battlefield in fire. Emilia and Reya wore down another monstrosity by brute force, and Liam assassinated some more priority targets by appearing and stabbing them in their weak points.

By now I was sure he had some kind of ability to target weak spots, because otherwise, with the variety of anatomy we encountered, pinpointing them was hard. But we fought anyway.

Tides of bodies wreathed around us, as usurpers fell by the thousands. Reflectors and Edians died too, though. Sometimes, the ground would shake with a more devastating attack, or the sky would light up in the distance, out where Orvan fought.

Iryel did his best to save the dying, while Chris found a new human body to occupy, mending the wounds on the corpse with a little fleshcrafting until it was presentable enough to walk up to me.

They now wore the skin of a woman with raven hair, the tips of it dyed a patchy blue. Her features were sharp, and her face had wrinkles set into it that indicated she frowned a lot. Which made it somewhat strange when Chris gave me a bright smile from her once-dead face.

Strangely, the paleness of the scar that carried from her right temple in a thick, jagged line down to her left cheek almost looked pretty in contrast to her dark eyes. But I shook off the thought a moment later, focusing on the person inside that body as they spoke to me.

“Fio! Hello there. I appear to have found a new shell. This body is flexible and strong. I find it quite pleasant, though I will still need some more time to adjust to it. Please be so kind and have my back,” they asked, then promptly turned around and fought.

It took me a moment to recognize them as Chris, but with that knowledge, the strangeness was dispelled. As the triz-adu moved, I saw the body they occupied shift occasionally, their shell-crafting taking effect to adjust it.

Arms grew slightly longer, nails a little sharper. The woman’s form became slightly bulkier, and when Chris dodged, the body would twist a little too far, then snap back into place. Their movements were somewhat clumsy, yet refined with mastery.

Every moment that passed, the form adjusted to them as they did to the new shell. It was strange to see, but I snapped out of that thought rather quickly when a bornin leapt at them from behind, threatening to stab their back.

I took the creature down with an effortless flick from my spear, the metal moving to meet my intent before I even finished the thought. My Qi flowed effortlessly, springing forth from my wells and turned instantly into boiling power.

For a little while, I tempered that power. Chris was managing well, and I simply provided a somewhat safe space for them to adjust, but as time went on, they wielded new abilities. Water and wind scythed forward from their thin fingertips, blades and thin spikes, near invisible, staking usurpers through the heart.

Were these the abilities of the shell they now inhabited? Did those mix with their own? I realized I knew little about the way triz-adu functioned. Did they mourn the loss of their last

body? Would they have wanted to bury it? Had Marie's... *return* taken away their moment of grief?

Once more, I pushed the thoughts aside, [Single-Mindedly] focussing on the fight. Distractions faded away into nothing, and the world dissolved into swinging my spear, over and over.

Blasts of Qi eliminated dangers near me, my vision spread all around the battlefield. I warped space to save others, stepped through reflections to be where I was needed, and walked around like a grim reaper. Usurper after usurper fell in the army.

Minute after minute ticked by. Hour after hour. And eventually, my wells rang dry. All I was left with was the spring of energy that continued to pour out of them, only able to fuel my abilities with whatever Qi I regenerated.

Eventually, my arms became heavier. Impossible to lift. I could no longer reflect blows, and the world stopped warping with my steps as the belt I wore lost its power. And eventually, I was told to step back.

I did not want to. It felt like not enough. More monsters were coming in, just the same as before. Thousands of usurpers pouring at the walls, an endless tide, crawling out of rifts from other worlds. Devouring this one to spawn more of themselves.

Changing the ambient energies to suit them and be more hostile to the Edians.

Still, I moved back. Because otherwise, I was *in the way*. Other defenders came out. Powerful people of their own right who had the opportunity to rest while we fought instead. And now we would rest while those fought.

On and on, until the civilians were safe, and the city was lost. What a miserable display.

I gritted my teeth and retreated, the others following along. Chris' new shell was right among my heels, carried forward by blasts of their chosen elements, as I pushed the Qi generated within myself to move through the world.

And eventually, we were back behind the walls.

- - -

The city communicated with us again through their mages, but Iryel mainly took charge of filling out the reports for us. We were offered a brief time to use the local temples, but declined. Not enough use yet.

Chris spoke again, following with three of their shells now. They seemed pleased with this one, already attached, and would feel loss when the body died again. But such was the life of the triz-adu, they'd said. Loss was simply part of it.

We fell asleep in the barracks to the sound of war. The bed was soft, but despite that, the sleep was miserable.

- - -

Only two hours later, when my cores were almost full again, we were woken up. It was enough sleep to make me feel energized, but not enough to be well rested. Energized would have to do.

Some poor page was sent to get us and seemed to shiver in his boots as he spoke to me. A boy, barely older than fifteen, maybe. "Ma'am... your presence is asked for at the keep... a swordswoman saw you and is requesting an audience. She waits for you there. With..." he swallowed heavily, "the archmage Dreyfa."

I nodded, faintly. "The rest of the team?"

"Required at the frontlines," he said again, shuffling slightly.

That one, I noted, was not as much of a request. They were needed. So was I, but apparently, this took precedence. "Alright, thank you," I told the boy. "I'll be at the keep soon. The others will fight soon, too."

Hastily nodding, the runner took off to bring that message back. I was unsure if that was necessary, because with me having Qi to burn, I could be at the keep before he was there, even with the head start. Lots of mirrors in a city, after all.

My gaze swept over the group. Iryel, who sat slumped against a wall, tired. He'd poured more healing into Emilia, letting her regrow a bit of her leg. It was slow, and horribly itchy she said, but it was progress. Emilia herself, with deep set eye bags from fatigue and pain.

Ann, barely awake, and already flickering through shapes of mana, hoping to find a little more mastery in the brief moments before she went to fight. Matt, with petals falling gently around him as he sat cross-legged, his eyes closed. Chris, crafting their shell a little more, hardening their skin and toughening up the muscles.

Reya and Liam, too, were relentlessly preparing. It was what war did. I breathed in deeply, slowly. The fact that I would be dealing with a mild amount of politics while they fought was annoying. But, then again, nothing to be done about it.

Once more, I took a breath, then kissed Ann on the head. "Be safe," I said simply. She nodded, smiling.

"You too, Fio. See you soon."

"See you," I nodded.

With that, we both got up. She roused Matt from his meditation, and I took a step through the reflections. Then a second and a third, and then I was in the keep. I was gracious enough to appear out in front of it, the one single guard on duty there, rather than on the walls, looking surprised, since I used her armor as a teleportation node.

"Good Morning," I said in the long night, "I'm Fiona Bellum. Asked to see the archmage."

Instantly, she put down her halberd, and gave me a quick nod. "Right," she said, voice raspy. "Just head on inside. Avoid the hallways with rubble and- oh, who am I kidding. You'll find your way. Thank you for your service."

I nodded at her thanks, then strode into the castle. With some Qi, my Wanderer's Key let me walk through the walls, and quickly find the room I was meant to be in. The fact that I didn't walk in through the door seemed to somewhat surprise Olivia. She yelped as I stepped in front of her.

Orvan was in the room, too, leaning against a wall with his eyes closed. His robes were in tatters, same as my clothes were. His hair was matted with blood, same as mine, and his face looked tired. But still, we were both here, ready to fight.

Before that, I talked to the one-handed swordswoman. "Why am I here?" I asked, curtly.

Olivia looked at me, her blond hair striking even though it was matted with dirt. Her eyes met mine, and there was a mix of emotions in there. Fear and hate and worry and determination and exhaustion and frustration and defiance all at once. And yet, respect, somehow, above all others.

"I wanna learn from you," she said simply. Her voice still carried that bloodthirsty, uncaring attitude. "Cuz I was thrown away like a broken tool. And that pisses me the fuck off."

At that, I shook my head. "And why would I help you?"

"Because you hate Zinnic as much as I do," she replied.

"So what?" I asked. "There's an eclipse right now. If you want to get strong, get out there and fight. Save some people for a change."

She frowned. "I have. Old man can vouch."

Orvan nodded as I looked over, the faintest motion. "She has."

With a fiery expression, Olivia turned to me again. "So. Let me learn from you. You're strong. You fight like me. We're similar-

"I have never killed a person, Olivia."

"Are the usurpers people?" she asked, a quiet hiss. "Because I think saying they're monsters is a pretty fucken petty excuse."

Anger crept into my veins as I stared at her. I felt the urge to break her legs again - and paused. I took a deep breath. Then I suffocated that anger, and looked at her, genuinely, for the first time.

She was doing good things. Otherwise, Orvan never would have called me here. "Make your case," I said slowly, "but try to not insult me too much, yeah?"

With a huff, she nodded. "Fine by me. I learnt a lot about this world recently. Foremost, that the people are real. I knew, before, but I didn't *know*. I still don't care a whit about them, same as on the other side, really, but at least I think they don't deserve to be killed.

"I also think," she continued, "that the usurpers are people. An invasive, conquering people, who deserve to be fought back here because they would genocide this world in a heartbeat, but still *people*. So you have killed, and you will kill again, and so will everyone in this damn eclipse."

A short look at Orvan and he nodded again. We were killing. It sucked, but I'd already known that and made peace with it.

Olivia continued. "I am not as strong as you. Not even close. But I have potential. I learn fast, and Zinnic recruited me for a reason. I've killed enough of the usurpers to even get granted more power by the divines, entered a special contract and all that said they could relinquish what was given if I hurt an Edian again."

That was shocking. Gifts could never be taken back, but this... was more like a loan. An individual condition. How interesting.

"So I'm gaining power again. I'm advancing. But physical power can only take me so far. I need to learn how to use my Qi the right way. Teach me, so I can kill the usurpers better. So

I can get back at Zinnic for how they discarded me. So I can prove to this world that I fucken' matter!" She was almost roaring by the end, eyes wild.

I looked at her, for a long moment. "I wanna see your Disposition. In your status, your Gift, or your contract. Whatever you call it."

She frowned. "Fine."

Then she pulled it up.

[Name: Olivia Tyrdin

Class: Swordswoman (9) - SHACKLED

- + Techniques
- + Stats
- Disposition
 - Covenant
 - Worth (Show the world you matter, and who matters to you)
 - Temperament
 - Ferocious (Your defiance burns quickly and brightly.)
 - Equilibrium (No life is worth more than another by default; worth must be proven.)
 - Turmoil (Your worldview was cracked and shaken. It is reforming. Guide it well.)
 - Disconnected (Physical matters matter little to you.)
 - Talent
 - Raging Passion (Your desire for growth is hard to match.)
 - Swift Learner (You pick up new skills quickly.)
 - Warmonger (In the heat of battle, you grow.)
 - Connections (Every single ability is connected. Your growth in one direction benefits your growth in others, too)

Current Status: Determined]

I read through it all, then looked at Olivia. She was an angry woman, who enjoyed vengeance, and would grow quickly as a fighter. I had earned her respect by crushing her in what she should have excelled at. Now... here we were.

She had been wronged, discarded, taken for a fool. Zinnic had made a mockery of her [Burning Passion] and spit in the face of her [Worth]. I sighed. I saw where she was coming from.

And... she was talented. Determined to follow me along. I glanced at Orvan again. Suddenly, I was a little curious about his status, but his eyes remained closed, his breathing flat.

"I'll have a few conditions," I said to Olivia.

"Of course," she agreed. "I imagined."

"No killing innocents. No harming my party. Follow my orders. Try your hardest," I said.

She frowned but nodded. "Obviously."

I nodded, then extended my hand for her to shake. It went against my [Familiarity], but I needed allies, so I would deal with it. "Fine then. Welcome to the team." She shook it.

Hesitantly, I bound her to one of the spots in my [Transference], grabbing access to her [Connections] talent.

Chapter 110: Stargazer, Startaker

"Fio," Ann told me, holding her face in her hands. "You *have* to stop recruiting people who tried to kill you."

"You know, if I had nickel for each time you brought over an ex-assassin and asked if they could join the group," Matt said, "I'd have two nickels. Which isn't a lot, but it's weird that it happened twice."

Ann had her arms crossed, while Matt raised his eyebrows.

I stood, with Olivia in tow. Emilia, for one, seemed excited to have someone else join the group. "Now we have an uneven number of hands and legs," she said. "It's only fair!"

Which was a statement that made Liam spit out some water he was drinking, and Reya to break down with gurgling noises that were probably laughter.

"Okay but to be fair. It turned out really well the first time!" I defended myself. Olivia simply stood behind me with a slight smirk, seemingly a bit amused at the situation.

Reya signed something, which Liam then translated. "It's also really funny, she says," he said.

I tried my best to hold back a blush. "Look, archmage Orvan also supports this."

With a sigh, Ann gave a shrug. "All I'm saying is that this really, really shouldn't become a theme."

"Don't worry," Emilia teased with a grin. "I'm sure she'll run out of assassins soon. How many more people have tried to kill you Fio? Ones we might technically still be able to recruit."

"... Three."

Matt let out a low whistle. "Dang, that's an impressive number. Doesn't sound like we'll be running out anytime soon."

Ann rolled her eyes. "Fine then, it's fine just this once. I really hope there won't be a next time."

"I for one find this a quite interesting change," Chris said. "I already feel the changes from the new talent. The connections between my shells feel different now. More vivid. Perhaps, it'll let me use some powers between them? More testing needed."

"That's kinda creepy," Olivia said, speaking up for the first time. "Your smile, too. It's all wrong on that face. I like it," she added at the end with a grin. "I think we'll get along just fine."

Chris simply tilted their head in response, dark hair spilling to the side. The faint smile disappeared from their face, replaced by a blank, curious expression that made the corpse-pale face look almost doll-like. "It does not sound like you were complimenting me. Is that ending statement sarcasm?"

"Not at all," Olivia said. "I genuinely think we'll get along fine. I've been told I have some creepy habits myself."

"That seems like a strangely direct and unnecessary comment to make. Do humans often do this?" Chris asked.

The swordswoman shrugged. "I wouldn't say so. Just happened to be surrounded by particularly blunt people, I s'pose."

"Hmmm," Chris hummed thoughtfully in reply. "I see. Thank you for sharing your experience."

Watching the two of them engage in such a stilted bit of conversation, I shook my head and turned to face Orvan. He had found some time to visit the whole group, even in his feral look.

None of the pleasant, well-maintained wise aura of court wizards remained around him anymore. His beard was scraggly, his robes matted with splatters of dirt and blood, his hair was in a tangle. The man looked borderline feral.

And yet, he seemed entirely composed, though his eyes had a dangerous and manic glint in them. I still wanted to ask him about that. About what had him smiling, now. In the middle of an eclipse.

I shook off the question and focused on the present moment. "There," I told him. "We've integrated her into the network and the group. Are you happy now, Orvan?"

The old man looked at me for a long moment, steely eyes drilling into mine. "Not quite," he said after a long moment. "That... [Transference] of yours, it's called, right?"

"Sure, yeah."

"I want in," he said plainly. "I want those talents."

For a moment, I felt surprised at that. But it made sense. From everything I knew, one did not become an archmage without a good bit of ambition. "I don't know if it'll work on Edians," I said.

"One way to find out," the wizard shrugged. He swapped his staff from his right hand over to his left and extended out a hand to me. "So? What say you?"

I blinked at him. My slots *were* limited, but then again, was an archmage not worth one? What kind of talents did he have to become this strong. Hell, if I integrated *all* the archmages, how fast would we grow then?

"Sure. Let's try it."

With that, I reached out, grabbed his hand, and saw my entire world change.

"Curious," Orvan observed so calmly. "It seems I am offered a choice of what talent to contribute. But the strongest one seems almost magnetized to your ability. As if seeking it out."

He smiled, noticing my stunned silence. "Ah, pardon me. Perhaps I should have warned you? I think quite a large chunk of my talent was shared. Maybe there is some kind of magnification effect based on the strength of your gateway applied to that ability?"

Another silence, as no one replied to him. “Fio,” he said, waving a hand before my face, which finally shook me from my stupor. “Come on. At least read the description of the ability.”

I did as asked.

[Stargazer: To reach the firmament, you have to see it first. Gaze into the stars, then ascend high enough to grab them from the sky.]

That was all it said, but it had, in fact, changed my entire perception of the world.

Suddenly, every member of my party was a constellation of stellar dust. Constellations swirled within every aspect of the world. The grass, the ground below, the stones of the very buildings we stood in, the tables and chairs and beds... and the people.

Divines, the people.

Ann glowed as brightly as the sun in the sky. Thousands of tiny specks of power and potential swirled within her, around a cracked core of blinding, divine radiance. The fragment of godly power she still held.

The stardust swirling around it were her own powers. Physical, mental, magical, her talents, her attitude towards life, her willingness to work hard. She was beautiful. Utterly radiant.

Everyone else glowed, too. Matt swirled with pink stardust, ephemeral but powerful. Emilia's was more subdued, but grounded, like a reliable rock in a river. Liam's was dim, as if obscured, but then the darkness itself swirled and I learnt it was part of his power too.

Reya's was bright and divine, with a tether leading to the goddess, refilling the divinity she used to fuel her abilities. But... that was not all. Within herself, there was a furnace of divinity, too. Some fragment of the stuff she absorbed was slowly changing herself, and her belief in herself was forging something in herself.

How curious.

Olivia had a strange network of interconnected tiny pinpricks of stars that, put together, created a weave of gorgeous light. And Chris' was even more strange.

Their haze was a dim background glow, with some nodes attached to it. As if held in slots. Could they take over a certain amount of abilities from bodies they possessed or crafted? How strange. But... theirs was *changing*.

Ah. With [Connections] from Olivia, [Stargazer] from Orvan, [Genius] and [Prodigy] from Ann and Matt to boost their understanding, and their own [Adaptable]... Chris was changing,

fundamentally, who they were. Working these powers into themselves. I watched with fascination as their web spun and changed.

“Fio,” Orvan’s words called me from my stupor again, and my eyes landed on him, instantly giving me pause once more. He was... A galaxy. No, a whole universe. What the fuck-

“Fiona,” he sighed. “Focus. Come on.”

I blinked, and finally, reclaimed my own mind enough to respond. “Yes?” I asked, somewhat dazedly.

“You’re looking, but you’re not reaching,” he said, smirking. “I made this talent myself. Crafted it from the ground up, with magic and wonder and desire. This is me. You’ve gotta build on it, too.”

Distantly, I nodded, already thinking about how to work it. Then he interrupted again.

“But before that,” he said solemnly. “Look upwards.”

It was strange, you know. The talent was called [Stargazed], but I hadn’t... taken the time to look at the star. And when I did, a shiver went through my body, and my hair stood on end.

The sky was no longer dark. It was *bright*. Five shining, radiant, blindingly bright constellations hung in the sky. A distant, dim, dead one sat over the horizon, too, forever sinking.

“Those are the divines,” Orvan said, looking upwards. He was still smiling.

“They’re enormous,” I said.

“Sure,” Orvan nodded along. “They’re also *the same as us*.” He placed a hand on my shoulder. “That right there? Anyone can glow just as bright. That’s what I firmly believe.”

It seemed impossible. Looking at the divines up in the sky, their suns, their stars were so vast and blinding it hurt my eyes to look at them, but I couldn’t look away.

“Do you remember what the talent says?” he asked.

“Reach for the stars,” I whispered.

Orvan nodded. “That’s right. I’ve been getting closer. Every day in this damn eclipse. I fight, blast everything with mana until I run dry, and then I rip more from the air around me only to do it again. It’s exhilarating.”

He was just like Matt.

“Your swordsman,” he said. “He gets it. Me and him? We’re alike. Me and you, too. That talent of yours, [Precipice], right?” He grinned. “Coulda come from me. I want you to take that away from this. From your first look upwards.”

“No matter how distant the stars are. No matter how huge they may be. You can always, always reach out and pluck them from the sky.”

I nodded. Gripping my spear tight enough to turn my knuckles white. I felt Cass within me, also entranced by the beauty, and so was the spirit in my spear. I held the weapon high, pointing it at the sky, and the blade was wide enough to cover the blazing brilliance of the divines.

A grin spread across my face. “No matter how far,” I whispered.

“No matter how big,” Orvan replied.

My spread vibrated with excitement in my hand as my hairs stood on end. It had decided on a name, then. Now, within my body, it was me, Cass, and Astraesus.

With that decision made, I looked at myself, the revolving sphere of power that was the constellation within me. Stars, blazing bright and powerfully, spreading light around me, two roaring, entangled constellations. It was gorgeous. I meditated, and grew it some more. The stars were within reach. I just needed to pluck them from the night sky.

Chapter 111: Rhythm

[Golden Wellspring advanced to **5th Step**.]

[Mirror Wellspring advanced to **5th Step**.]

It took little time more on the frontlines for my combined talents to begin truly shining. Seeing the stars resolve in the usurpers was strange. I could see theirs were different, colours that I could not describe and that made my eyeballs itch on the inside.

The feeling was miserable and disgusting, a power I was entirely incompatible with, yet, when they fell, that power, too, became just power. It was nothing that special. They were also simply people wielding what they were given, and suitable for.

If I twisted my own galaxy enough, could I make myself receptive to the power of the usurpers and invade their worlds in return? Would that... be fair, at all?

The question mattered little, as I cut another one apart with my spear.

Next to me my companions fought through the hordes, putting their new talent to work. It affected each one of us differently, but we all grew more because of it. And Orvan grew, too.

He was an absolute monster, the archmage. Having gotten access to my [Precipice], he threw himself into the hordes over and over, emptying his mana until he was left punching monsters to death as a regular, fragile old man. But he survived, miraculously, summoning torrents of power and destruction wherever he went.

In the last few days of fighting, I had also gotten used to the leyburn showing up when I was on the battlefield sometimes. It seemed to have deemed me “worthy”, choosing to fight next to me whenever we were faced with the hordes.

Which made me curious. Was it originally from Eden? Was it a usurper? Its network of stars seemed to indicate a little bit of both. Perhaps it had evolved... or simply learnt to use the strange, malformed Qi of the usurpers.

The final, truly strange thing that [Stargazer] revealed to me was about the enchanted gear module of [Transference]. Whenever I killed a usurper, parts of their energy, sometimes even their entire body would be siphoned away, and a magic item would appear sometimes in exchange.

And the items carried some of the same radiance from the monsters.

Within the magical metal, within the glowing runes and conduits of power forged by masters from other worlds, there were hints of the monsters we'd killed. And hints of ourselves, crafted from lingering energies our attacks left on the corpses.

My sash, for example, carried mirror Qi. It used that to fold dimensions and let me move so fast. But there was also gravity mixed in, and a bunch of other magic that I could hardly discern.

It was beautiful to see. And it was something I could interact with.

Whenever I reached out to the stars, within myself and within others, I felt I could rearrange them. For myself, it was easiest, and still terribly hard. Then came inanimate objects, then magical items, then people whose permission I had, and finally, enemies.

Someone who did not want their constellation altered had it encased in an inviolable sanctuary. I could not simply rip out another's talent. Even the faintest bit of resistance became an insurmountable wall.

But still. I could now learn to change my magic items. Perhaps even create new ones, by implanting sources of power in mundane items, and studying their constellations and-

Because of the thinking, an attack grazed my face, barely batted aside by Astraeus. The spirit chided me slightly, almost as if he were pouting within my spear, and it made me crack a faint smile.

"Right, right," I consoled him. "I'll focus up."

My habit of getting distracted throughout the battles was something that had recently popped up because of just how much *information* I was getting. With my mirror vision through [Reflection] I saw so much, and all of it counted as being seen by me for the purpose of revealing the constellations of [Stargazer].

Everything was a mess of light and sound and brightness and I was still adjusting to it. Cass was helping with it, of course, but she could not lift worlds, either. But we were mastering it. And once we were there, the talent would only be an even greater boon.

Already, we were learning so much faster, being able to consciously see what changes things made within me. I was able to speed up my cultivation even more, digesting everything I'd seen and lived through now.

So, I fought, and fought, and fought some more, until my Qi ran more than dry, and my arms were endlessly tired, and I could not go on anymore. Then, finally, our shift was over, and we headed back to the dorms.

There, we slept for a few hours, then I kicked Olivia out of bed, and it was back to practicing.

Fighting against her in sparring matches, Olivia truly was talented. Worthy of being picked up by Zinnic. She adjusted stunningly quickly when taught something new, and hardly ever made the same mistake twice.

Ironic, then, that she tried to fight me twice before.

"You're smiling that smile again," Olivia said with a frown. "It's like you're mocking me inside my head."

"I'd never," I said, letting the butt of my spear fly at her from the side. She barely brought up her rapier in time to parry. Astraeus gave me a few pointers to correct my form, and on the next strike, my fundamentals had advanced again.

My weapon hit Olivia with all the force of a gentle feather. With the spirit inside my spear and my high [Weapon Resonance] I could control every minor movement, dull the blade when needed, and even make my strikes nearly weightless, or weigh more than they ever reasonably should.

Since Astraeus had picked a name and truly awakened, my spear had felt even more a part of me - because to a significant degree, it *was*. Similarly to how Cass was tied to me and we would forever work together, Astraeus and I shared a similar bond.

Core bound, even. I smirked.

"Sure you wouldn't," Olivia said between breaths, panting. "What... did I mess up... this time?"

"Your feet," I said. "You bent your knees inward to absorb the blow, but it made you too slow to sidestep my thrust."

"Ah," she said. "Makes sense. Again?"

"Gladly," I said.

Of course, for the spars, I restrained my physical supremacy over her to a reasonable level. In fact, often I would hold back my stats enough to be slower than her, working on minute mastery with Astraeus and Cass. Every strike, I saw my master executing the same one with [Mirror Mind] and learnt a little more from him.

And every spar, me and Olivia grew.

Matt eventually woke up. Stretched. Poured a bucket of water over himself, then joined us, that glint in his eyes. With casual ease, he laid Olivia out on the floor.

The woman grimaced, even at the soft impact. "And what did I do wrong this time, *master* Matt?"

Our swordsman cringed at the epitaph. "Just Matt, dang it. And that was just cuz you were getting too cocky in your movements. Fio didn't have any openings, you just got lost in the sauce since you felt so fast."

Her grimace deepened, but he was right, so she just nodded, got up, and brushed off the earth. "We'll do alternating spars, as usual?" I asked Matt and he nodded.

"Sure, sounds good," he said. "Should we two spar?"

"Watch closely, Olivia," I reminded our student. Then me and Matt went at it.

For him, I did not restrain my physical stats at all - his were at a similar level after all. My endurance was higher, on that I'd bet money, but I was also sure he had better manipulation than me.

So, we learned from one another. He tried to overwhelm me with sheer force, attacks raining in from all sides, while I used the breaks between my attacks to slightly angle Astraeus and see attacks coming from behind me with Cass' help.

It soon turned into a blazing exchange of metal on metal. Whenever someone got hurt, despite the dullness of our weapons, Reya and Iryel were there to patch us up. The cleric was now also aware about the forge of Divinity within herself, and had consciously begun trying to regenerate her supply of it on her own.

Which was always strange to see, since she would close her eyes, and suddenly that inner radiance stirred.

Chris took to the new talents quickest, and already showed results. They had managed to make it so that a portion of powers from all their shells would become part of their true self and carry over if they took on new bodies. Never again would they lose access to the wind and water powers their current human form had. It would be diminished, but they could grow them again, albeit slower.

Liam soon also joined, getting involved in the sparring, while Emilia watched and meditated. Her cultivation had been advancing at a breakneck pace, as she threw herself into the bloody battles happily.

It was amazing to see. Her raw physical prowess increased so much with each step upon her path it was genuinely inspiring. There was nothing quite like seeing your friends advance at breakneck speeds to make you wanna keep pace.

By now, it was pretty clear that more and more of the talents were seeping through [Transference], because I, too, was growing far faster than I should reasonably have any right too.

Especially now. With every clash, I could feel my own constellation changing, taking form, rearranging. Watching the stars move was mesmerizing, and showed me every improvement I made, as well as ones I had yet to make.

When my spear clashed against Matt's sword, his grin widened. His own nebula was changing, too. Forming clumps of stardust in the shape of a great tree. Almost every exchange we learnt, improved, and came back a little stronger the next. The tiredness didn't matter.

Even when my hands ached from the vibrations through my spear as we clashed, I swung again. My footwork got better, and every twirl of my spear was a little faster than the last. My cultivation became faster, each step a building block, taking me a step further on my path.

And then, the battle ended. Matt and I came apart, panting heavily. The stars at our centers were churning, moving like leaves in a storm. Then, he turned to Olivia, still breathing heavily. "You next," he proclaimed, leaving no room for arguments. "Show me your swordsmanship."

Instead, I turned to Liam, who had placed down his whetstone soundlessly. I met his eyes, already trained on me, and saw them light up in mirth. He rose limberly, stretching a little, before flicking his hand and catching a knife in it.

I smiled at him, and gave a simple nod. Then, he vanished from my sight.

Without hesitation, I raised my spear, feeling the impact grind against its shaft, the stab coming for my throat twisted aside in the same motion that blocked his knife at my side. My eyes coursed through the air, and I couldn't see him, so I listened. No sound, either. No movement of energy.

It was like I was fighting the air itself.

Except... a small disturbance, as he strengthened himself in anticipation for a blow. I slammed the butt of my spear forward, and felt the air shift around it as Liam twisted out of the way, so I slammed it into his direction.

Moving with inhuman flexibility, Liam sunk down further, bending his back until the spear sailed above him. But it gave me enough time to step back as he stabbed at me. But he let go of the knife, throwing it.

With some ability, he even hid the sound of it coursing through the air, but with Cass and Astraeus giving me instincts and vision beyond what a single human mind could handle, I felt

the glint of metal and knew by instinct what had happened. Coating my hand in metal Qi, I snatched the weapon from the air.

Briefly, I stared stunned at myself, then the dagger was pulled back. No matter how strong I was, I could not resist Liam's full strength when holding onto the weapon with one hand. A moment later, I was once again blocking a whirlwind of attacks I barely knew were coming.

But still, the cosmos at my center moved, thrived, grew.

Eventually, the training paused, as we were warned our shift was coming up. We took a few minutes to catch our breath, regenerate our Qi, and when we were ready, I took Ann's hand, stepping into the air.

Once again, we stepped forward to battle.

Chapter 112: Joy of Freedom

I don't quite know how we survived those days, not to mention how we managed to keep morale generally high. Every day was a grind. We still hardly slept, though more than when just marching. Battle was tiring, after all.

Every day, I would empty out my wellspring multiple times over. In sparring, in fighting. Once, I awoke in the middle of the night, and found Astraeus floating besides me, enveloped in slowly coursing Qi. Enhancing the material he was made from even further.

Fighting, fighting, then more fighting. Those were my days. And the cosmos within me shifted, grew and pulsed. It was bizarre to see it.

My allies rampaged on the battlefield. Regular soldiers cheered when we approached. An Edian asked for my autograph, once.

That was a bizarre experience, but I cannot say I minded walking into battle alongside cheers. The leyburn would turn up, too, whenever I did, as if oathbound. The coordination among our group improved, as Olivia grew at a staggering speed - though she was far from catching up.

She fought with the fury of a rabid animal, though, and once even took a monstrous claw through the arm to protect someone. That was a day she spent quietly, and we left her to think.

It was impossible to keep track of time, watching the eternally dark skies now light up with fiery, divine radiance to my new sight. As the battles ticked by, though, I grew used to seeing the stars. They no longer distracted me, and I was able to focus.

And that was what I did. Focus, focus, focus. Hold the wall for just a day longer. Just another minute. Just another second, as Edians streamed out from the other side, retreating towards the capital. Inu, our city, would fall.

But I couldn't stop the desire to protect it.

So we fought. I talked with Ann at the end of the days, and hugged her and kissed her sometimes. Once, she proudly asked me to look, presenting me with a bright green flame upon her hand. Apparently, she really was going for rainbow fire; according to her it was an excellent way to practice different mana infusions for her flames.

It would help against barriers, or so she promised. I just smiled and nodded. She was incredible, as she always was.

One day, Chris talked to me, too. "Fio? Do you have a moment?" in that calm voice they always used.

"Sure, what's up?"

"Please listen to this," they said, pulling up a part of their status. "I have crafted a new talent, with the help of [Stargazer]. Let me read it to you. '[Permanency]. You have embraced your nature as everchanging, and unforgetting. Whatever is part of you once, a little of it will stay forever.' That is what it says."

I gave a small whistle. "That's rather amazing."

They smiled. The face had gained some amount of new wrinkles, so it no longer looked as bizarre - which, by itself, was a strange thought. "I think so too. It is, amusingly, acting retroactively. I have regained some measure of power from my previously lost shells."

My eyes widened slightly. "What?" That was... terrifying. A talent that reached through time? Monstrous. "And how many shells have you lost?"

At that question, their smile turned sad. Mournful. "Half a dozen."

For a moment I almost commented that it was not that many, but then bit my tongue. To them, it was like losing family members. "My condolences."

They brightened. "Thank you. Sincerely. But I mainly broach this, because I wish to show you one of the talents I had crafted in a previous shell. It was related to weapons. I wished to gift it to the group. You deserve to see it first, since I believe all of you may approach it a little differently."

I tilted my head. "That... seems like a rather personal gift."

"It is," Chris nodded diligently. "But I believe you deserve it. For everything you have done for me." They bowed, deeply. "I am grateful. The talents I have been given are nothing short of enlightening."

I blinked. "Ah, you don't need to do that. Seriously."

Gently, they shook their head, still bowing. "I believe I do. Annabelle has explained that humans take attempts upon their lives seriously. The fact that I was hired for one makes me untrustworthy, and yet you accepted me. I understand how much this gesture means, now. And for that, you have my gratitude."

"Okay, okay. Uh, gratitude accepted. Please, raise your head." I flushed slightly at the gesture. But at the same time... I was glad I'd given Chris a chance.

Swallowing heavily as they rose, I quickly composed myself. "Uhm, thank you as well. Could you maybe show me the... weapon thing?"

They smiled gently. "Of course. Let me demonstrate."

A sword of ice formed from the air, using the capabilities from their current shell. They held the large crystalline formation, and closed their eyes. "The trick is a little... strange, so let me see if I can make it work for you. It's a little like... the weapon is one of your limbs, yes? Now imagine you could detach that limb."

I blinked. "That's uh, a difficult mental image."

With a small smirk, they nodded. "I imagined. Perhaps it makes more sense to you if I explain it as... using your tie to the weapon more thoroughly. It is core bound to you. Who says that means you can just make it reappear in your hand?"

"Huh," I hummed. That was an interesting thought.

"Watch," Chris said, throwing their sword upwards - where it stopped. Hovered beside them in the air. Without a single movement from them, the weapon began twirling, hovering

around them slowly. “You see,” they explained, though their voice was heavy with strain, “I can do this with a weapon made from Qi. That bond is enough. Yours is far stronger. Use it.”

Astraeus almost vibrated with excitement in my hand, and I smirked at his enthusiasm. “Okay, let me give it a try.” With a somewhat awkward motion, I threw my spear upwards. Then, I felt for my connection with it. It was a little like using [Lost and Found]. That realization then was enhanced by Olivia’s [Connections] and suddenly, my tie to my spear felt more solid.

It froze in the air. For a brief moment, then suddenly disappeared and reappeared in my hand. “What a strange feeling,” I mused.

Chris smiled faintly. “This is just a starting line. But, I suppose, what I mainly wanted to say is to trust in yourself. Explore your abilities. It feels as though it is in your nature not to care about limits, so don’t impose them on yourself.”

With another bow, they walked away, letting the surreal experience sink in. When I looked at myself, the stars within my chest had shifted again. I understood my spear even better now. What a strange feeling.

- - -

More battles past, coming in shorter bursts now. Time to rest grew even more sparse. No matter how many usurpers we killed, there were always more. Bodies dissolved into energy. Whenever we stepped out in front of the walls, the feeling of static in the air gnawed at my skin a little more, like a building wave.

Something was coming, we all knew.

But we fought anyway. Because it was only right. Because every second we bought was valuable.

Iryel felt it the most. The divines themselves felt nervous. In uproar. He complained about headaches, and the fact that they were bickering even more than usual. So, eventually, we went to the temple.

I placed my hand upon Hir’s altar.

‘Ah, Fio. It is good to speak to you. I assume you have questions,’ the divine spoke, though I could feel they equally had things to ask of me.

‘Yes. What is happening?’ I asked.

Hir's chorus of voices sounded worried when they answered. 'More usurpers are pouring in than ever before. Powerful ones. It seems that they may have recently conquered another world. More forces are pouring in than they should.'

I frowned. 'So?'

'So our resources are becoming even more strained. Especially because with the change of the energy balance we are under more sanctions. The keepers are asking for more payment in order to supply us more chances. We are considering opening a passage to a third world. Whose people may come here, like those from Neamhan.'

'What payment?'

'One of our lives,' Hir replied. 'One of the divines.'

'Oh, shit.'

'Indeed,' they spoke mournfully. 'We are forced to consider it. None of us, however, wish to perish.'

'Obviously,' I thought. 'Do you have any message for me?'

Hir hesitated. '... Yes. We wish for you to hold the city. Please. If we may ask, do not flee.'

If they were asking that way, I *knew* there had to be a pretty darned good reason for me to consider fleeing. Not that I wanted to. 'Not until the Edians are evacuated.'

'We are grateful. Your contributions are great, but so is the price for more power, if you wish for it.'

I nodded. I'd need everything I could get if they were this worried. 'Yes.'

'By all means, then. Spend it.'

And so I did. With that sickening feeling of information appearing in my brain, I selected to level up my gateway class to 10. The extra stats would be powerful. But that was not the true goal. I *knew* what I was about. Because of [Precipice].

When I was in danger, I grew. When I was free, I grew. When I made my mark on the world, I grew.

The divines couldn't upgrade my cultivation speed. That was a personal journey, after all, one I could only take by myself. But there were things I could get to help.

[Are you sure about this, Bell?] Cass asked me.

I nodded. 'I am,' I told my keeper. It was Orvan who had told me to look for it, and there it was. 'I'd like to buy a Class Ascension.'

Hir's gaze felt a little heavier that moment. 'This will use up the remainder of your contribution to come even close. Are you sure? You will still have some way to go.'

Once more, I nodded. 'Yes. I can get the rest of the way there. I'm sure of it.'

'Fine then,' the divine acquiesces. 'You may need it. I shall take your contribution and deliver your rewards then. May you survive to defend our world another day. You have our gratitude, Fio.'

With that, Hir's presence disappeared, and the terrible feeling of the level up invaded my body, making it difficult to move. But, with iron determination, I remained standing, then walked out of the temple.

At the door, I saw Orvan enter, and he gave me a nod with a faint smile. What did an archmage buy, I wondered? With his contribution... I shook my head slightly. I'd just find out when I was strong enough. For now, it was back to practicing. Astraeus appeared floating besides me, twirling, moving, bending as I willed him to.

I breathed the fresh air, then stepped into it, platforms of golden Qi holding me afloat. A small smile bloomed on my lips, and I leapt through the sky. This was my path.

Occasionally, I would see a usurper get too close to the walls, and blast it with a spear of golden Qi from the sky, but that soon ended as I was back at the small base my guild was staying in.

Ann greeted me with a hug and a kiss, and I returned them. "All done?" she asked, and I nodded. "Great! Practice with me. I've been working on something."

"Again?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Yes, again," Ann said, rolling her eyes a little. "Something more physical. I want to see how it holds up in a fight."

I walked along, to an open spot. "Fine then," I said with a smile. "Hit me."

"You asked for it," Ann replied, grinning.

For a moment, I considered if I should be worried, then the mana in the air suddenly grew so thick it gave me goosebumps. I didn't even have time to say "What've I gotten myself into now" before the ground came alive underneath me.

Spikes of earth from below. Thick spears of ice from above. And, to combine it all, Ann brought down incredible gravity on me, making every movement a dozen times harder. And as if that wasn't enough, her mana was so thick in the air that she could form tiny needles purely from the magic essence.

All of it was entirely solid, with full capacity of stabbing into me, though not through my reinforced skin. But it made for incredible training, and I doubt anyone without omnidirectional vision could have done nearly as well as I did.

Dodging between spikes, keeping my balance on shifting earth, deflecting attacks from above, below, and all sides simultaneously... I would not have called it easy, but hearing Ann laugh through it all, even in her focus, made me laugh as well.

My spear buzzed through the air, deflecting attacks as I twisted. It felt so freeing to move. I leaned back to let an attack pass over me and saw the skies above. I reached a hand upwards, as if to pluck the stars from the sky, even if I only deflected one of Ann's attacks.

Even with my body so heavy, it felt amazing to move. Even as I was attacked from everywhere... I felt free. What a strange emotion.

Even with closed eyes, I could see it all. Even as I floated within the golden seas.

[Golden Wellspring advanced to **6th Step**.]

I laughed with Ann, as we both celebrated the freedom of using our strengths and moving.

Chapter 113: At the Threshold

I felt like a shooting star.

Every day that passed, I could feel the constellation within me roar. I could feel my Qi scream. Feel the world buckle at my demand, feel reality itself become malleable to my power.

Every day that passed, more people survived. More usurpers fell. The walls *held*. They stood strong against any and all assault. We fought and we thrived.

It was stunning to see how the constant battle drove us to excellence. The exhaustion was wearing on us, but we still kept morale high - still somehow found time to *spar* on top of it. We were being pressured to become diamonds, and that bright shine was emerging.

So, as every other day before it in Inu, we made our way to the walls. We were welcomed by the guards, excited to finally get some rest. Some of them happily dropped their weapons and fell on their behinds as we approached, drenched in sweat and entirely exhausted.

They'd barely slept, without the inhuman constitution our group had. We were, compared to all these people, monsters by now. People who had beaten insurmountable odds again and again. When we turned up, the battle turned in the people's favour.

With a smile, I waved off the guards and reflectors whose shifts we were taking over. "Go and rest," I told them as Iryel spread his wings. "We've got this."

Grateful smiles came our way as the angel lifted off the ground. The bags under his eyes had grown deeper, the exhaustion wearing on him more than us, but still he fought. His haggard face was set with a kind of acceptance.

Somehow, despite it all, Iryel was at peace with his duty. "Time to head to work," he said, a monotone sigh in the roar of battle. Then, he took to the skies, and crashed down into the hordes with an explosion of divinity. Around him, shields bloomed, and wounds mended themselves.

Emilia crashed down, shredding apart a few monsters with explosions of stone. One beastblood warrior, who had been stuck on a usurper's horn, was freed, and her wounds promptly mended by Iryel's divine radiance.

It was a sight to see each of my allies descend onto the battlefield.

Matt jumped into the fray in a violent storm, instantly carving dozens of creatures into smears of gore. Ann sent waves of elemental destruction over the field in front of the walls, her hands moving with blazing speed as magic coursed out in droves.

Liam silently appeared from a shadow, slicing down things before even being seen, while Reya applied widescale buffs, bringing others back up to health, and increasing their power. Chris' shells each turned into bringers of destruction, occasionally cooperating with each other for even greater devastation.

And finally, there was me. When I entered the battle, the leyburn, a staunch companion these last few days, also entered the fray with me. The feeling was intoxicating. Descending

to the cheers of people whose lives I was saving. Qi roared through me in droves, Astraeus reaping lives with every movement of my arm.

Cass directed me towards the greatest threats, making sure I was in the right place at the right time. Aware of everything I needed to know. Graced with supernatural strength, vision, instinct and mobility, I could appear anywhere, anytime. Stepping through reflections, or simply space itself with my sash. Throwing attacks back at those who tried to kill me.

We didn't just fight on this battlefield - we rampaged. There were opponents who tested us, yes, but one after another, they fell. Because we weren't alone. We were a group, and we were coordinated. With projected speech and telepathy, we communicated, each appearing when another needed us most.

And step by step, we beat back the endless hordes of the usurpers. It was terrifying. My life was on the line each moment out there. And it was thrilling, because my life was on the line with each moment out there.

Seeing that the hordes were endlessly replenished was still a strange sight. Despite the explosion, despite the literal meteors Orvan was calling from the sky, they streamed forth endlessly. Nonstop.

Such was the power of having conquered dozens, if not hundreds of worlds. The usurpers were hungry and ever expanding. They had forces to expend, so they flooded us in raw numbers.

Yet they still broke against us. Explosion after explosion, the outpouring of power around us seemed to never stop. We were like stars in the sky, blazing brightly and streaking our way through the world.

Again, and again, and again I came out victorious. My spear crashed through hide and scales and stone and crystal, through elemental wisps and strange illusions, and rended apart the creatures casting them. Each one fell, just like the one before it.

Each one fell.

Then I felt the air change.

For a moment, I thought the time stood still, as a gentle shiver ran down my spine, crawling over each joint. Drops of sweat on my skin suddenly felt ice cold.

It was Mana. An *ungodly* amount of Mana that washed over us. An amount only seven people in this whole world possessed - Orvan was here. Which meant that he had *retreated* closer to the walls where we were, while stilling bringing the full power of his magic to bear.

Sure enough, moments later, the Archmage appeared in the sky, wrapped in blinding bright magic circles and star-like constellation spells. He zipped through the air with precision and blinding speed. But he was not further forward, not holding back the tide.

Then I saw why.

Like a horribly dark omen, it was there. On the horizon. A pair of antlers crested the sky. They were dark, almost invisible against the everlasting night of the eclipse, but I saw them - because they rose high enough to block my line of sight to the stars that were the divines.

Next came that horrid skull. Two pits, filled with darkness and fire and hatred. Limbs that dragged on the ground. Multi jointed arms that uprooted trees.

Somehow, the horrible giant had grown even larger since our last encounter. Its arms, too, now sported the flames, the blazing bow manifested in its hands seeming to almost suck in the air around it.

A wave of disgusting, misaligned energy washed over me. The kind that spilled over into this world from the rifts. I felt it *eat* at me. Like the giant was trying to pre-digest me. Turn me into a morsel before it even reached us. Before it even got to the wall.

I dragged burning hot energy from my wells.

Qi roared through me like never before, and the fear was torn asunder by the power blazing through me. I roared in the creature's face. Carved through the hordes, breaking usurpers at unprecedented speeds. I stormed through them, watching as a thousand tiny pinpricks of light appeared around Orvan.

Star after star connected, a beautiful dance of radiance, forming a thousand geometric shapes. Each one another magic circle.

The power stacked on each other, and the eclipse itself seemed to shudder. Pinpricks of sunlight hit the world for a moment, radiant beams of golden light. The giant raised its second arm to the bow, carrying an arrow of black flame.

I ran, as fast as I could, towards it. No more fear, no more waiting. Just murder.

With a horrible roar, the arrow of dark fire was drawn back. Then, moments later, Orvan's spell completed, and a blazing star wove itself into existence.

Suddenly, the night turned to day.

A second sun blazed in the sky.

Massive amounts of mana and heat roiled off it, enough to set the fur of those who were too close on fire. The mana rolled through me, as Orvan's constellations stirred. The man was lit up like a sea of sparkles.

Then, the air exploded. Noise like no other hit my ears. The arrow was released, the titanic bowstring crashing forward with a shockwave of dark radiance, sending my ears ringing. Darkness washed through the light, and the arrow slammed into the sun.

Almost instantly, the entirety of the dark fire was devoured - then the sun dimmed, and dimmed. Moments later, it was barely half its original size. The giant nocked another arrow.

I stepped through space, through reflections, through every eye I could see, and then I was suddenly in the forest.

It was dark. The light of Orvan's second sun didn't reach here, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. It was quiet, too. The chittering of teeth and claws suddenly silent. They kept their distance from the giant, probably for fear of getting crushed.

Through the canopy, those stygian flames still blazed. An abyss that seemed hungry to draw me in. Now, so close, I felt that resonance. [Lost and Found] rang out with gateways - ones I hadn't felt approach before because the giant had hid that.

Another shiver ran down my spine. It was smart. Not at all mindless.

More crashes rung out in the sky, Iryel and Orvan battling the creature. Divine light and blazing fire roared against the darkness, each crash spreading enough Mana and malevolence to make the soldiers up on the walls throw up.

Silently, I stalked through the forest. Always closer to the giant. A moment passed, I blinked, and suddenly Liam was next to me. Then Matt came from above, and Emilia rose from the stones below. Even the leyburn, storming through the woods behind us.

We only nodded at each other, not speaking a word. Striding forward, faster and faster and faster yet. Towards that abyssal draw, towards those all-devouring flames, hungering for light.

It was our purpose here to fight, and fight we would.

Waves of power roiled over us, but it was truly only seconds until we reached the giant, the world warped by my sash to let us get there faster. I was terrified, ice coursing through my veins right alongside bright, hot power. But I wanted to, no, I needed to kill this thing.

There were still people in Inu. People who deserved to survive. People who relied on us to save their lives. I *needed* to do this.

Gritting my teeth, I took that last step, my companions with me. Divinity flowed through us, courtesy of Reya, and I already saw the glimmer of spells from Ann forming in the distance, even through the trees. We stepped past broken wood, and cracked earth, and finally, I was right in front of that giant.

For a fraction of a second, I looked upwards. The giant was, in all words I can say, titanic. It was bigger than anything I had ever fought before. Bigger than most people could reasonably imagine. It towered over buildings. Over city walls. Over ginormous trees. Calling it a force of nature would have been generous.

Yet, I did what I always did. I roused my Qi, coursing blazing gold and shiny glass through my veins. I gripped Astraeus tight, and heard Cass speak calmly in my head.

I would make my mark on this world.

[Mirror Wellspring advanced to **6th Step**.]

No matter what.

Chapter 114: Dark Fire

“Let’s go.”

As the words left my lips, I didn’t even need to check whether or not my guildmates would be with me. I knew they were, from when I took the first step towards the giant. And they were still there as I took my first step into the air.

I stepped down hard on the Qi platform, using my enhanced manipulation to slingshot myself up into the air. As my foot landed I took a deep breath.

With an [Iron Will], I took hold of the raging energy. I drew from my wellsprings, a torrent of Qi that flooded my every muscle. I burnt with energy, golden and silver power rushing underneath my skin intensely enough to make me sparkle slightly. I coursed it through my body, becoming tougher, faster, stronger...

Then I pushed.

With each fibre of my being I leapt into the air, Qi platforms being woven into the air with each step I took. My allies rose with me. The giant was still kept busy by Orvan, firing arrows of stygian flames that were extinguished by a prodigious amount of Mana.

Until we crashed into the battle of titans.

Rocketing into the air, I found footing on platforms created by myself. I drew power from then, pushing energy from the balls of my feet through my body, and releasing it as I explosively stabbed forward.

My spear slammed into the monster's tough skin, enhanced by my power, my Qi, my supernatural strength, and the weapon itself having grown beyond anything mortal smiths could make. It was a terrifying noise that it made, slamming into iron hide.

When it hit, my spear lodged itself a foot deep into the monster... then stopped. Barely a scratch given its size. I grit my teeth, trying to drive my Qi into its body, but the energy was instantly ravaged and consumed by black fire spilling forth from the wound.

Acidic blood sprayed as I withdrew my spear, trees wilting and their leaves melted from the fetid liquid. I grimaced, quickly doing another slash to remove the corrosive from my weapon. Around me, more impacts hit the giant. Matt slammed his sword forward, Liam was there with a storm of daggers, Emilia's Mace slammed into its ankle...

We left surface wounds. Chris had the most success out of all of us, by targeting the ground rather than the giant. Shifting the earth underneath one of its enormous legs made it stumble for a moment, which allowed Ann and Orvan to land more attacks.

Projectiles of fire and earth and air and ice slammed into it, digging into the tough hide. But the giant didn't seem bothered. It simply took another step, regaining its footing, then its shoulder blurred.

I jumped back a step on instinct, as with a whip-crack the flaming arm passed by in front of me.

The air howled in its wake, the winds tearing down a few trees in the forest, as a wave of black flame swept forward, consuming part of the world. I had dodged... but it hadn't even bothered to *look* at me.

How? We had grown so much? How was it still so far above us?

It made me furious. I saw it with my allies, too. They wanted to break this monster. Yet it felt hopeless.

I thrust my spear at it again, breaking skin and spilling a faint amount of blood. I stabbed it again, breaking muscle fibers, but then I heard a vibration in the air again. A moment later, Matt was sent flying through the forest.

Pink petals still swarmed around him, so he would be fine. Another attack by Orvan impacted the titan, slamming into its skin with waves of power that washed over me, blowing my hair back. But even then, wordlessly, soundlessly, the monster rose again.

Black flamed crackled, even as I stabbed it again. Fire gushed from the wound, singing my face with the heat as I dodged away. What we were inflicting were *surface wounds* at best. We needed more. Something - an opportunity for Orvan to blast it to bits.

Another horrible crack sent my ears ringing, the world shaking around me. Orvan countered the attack with blindingly bright starlight. We needed to act. To give us a chance. I couldn't do it on my own, though. But I didn't need to.

I locked eyes with the leyburn, and asked it for a favour, a moment granted.

"Please," I mouthed at it, and it understood. The creature that had once left me broken, now turned to an ally, and retreated a few steps to gather momentum for a charge.

Despite being the size of a house, it was easily dwarfed by the titanic monster we were facing now. But it wasn't an insurmountable wall, anymore. It wasn't unbreakable. I saw it, glimpsed it through its wounds.

Inside the thing there were stars, too. A whole damn firmament. And it made me wanna pluck it from the sky.

With a savage grin, I took a few steps back, too, allowing Orvan to hit the giant with a wave of exploding stars, each one louder than the last, making my ears ring even more. I felt blood trickle from my eyes faintly as the crashing waves of power sent me off balance.

Gritting my teeth I bore with it. We needed firepower. Everything we could get. Everything. I needed Ann, right here, with us. So, I charged my voice with Qi, and called for her, the magic carrying it all the way to the walls, all the way to her ears. "Ann. I need you to blow it up."

Magically, the reply came within moments. "I thought you'd never ask. Be right there, love."

A smile wormed its way on my face at that. The leyburn was ready. I looked to Matt, his robes scorched, his hair singed, one of his arms terribly bruised. His sword made from broken fragment.

I looked at the savage light in his eyes and knew he was ready.

Emilia knew me, and retreated. Liam followed, and so did Chris, all of the shells. We gathered again, as another horrible crash split the sky in bright and dark fire. An agonizing second passed, and then another, until Ann appeared by our sides.

Divine radiance, a terrific blessing imparted by Reya, glowed within her. Her Mana was already gathering, torrent of power ready to spill out. We needed only a little bit of a chance. A destabilization.

"Chris, Emilia. Make the ground under its feet falter. Liam, you and the Leyburn will knock it to the ground. Pull it with its shadow. Matt and I will help by attacking when it's off balance. Ann, I need you to finish it off - use your crown. Crush it under its own weight."

Nods followed. If we were facing a mountain, we'd just make it crumble.

We split. Again. Moments passed. The giant paid us no mind. As if we were insignificant. Less than bugs. We'd show it that we packed a pretty bad sting.

I viscerally felt the shift when our attack was ready. "Go," I whispered, the word reaching everyone's ears, and I channelled my energy.

The ground shifted. One foot of the giant suddenly crashed downward, the very earth splitting. It plunged in for half a dozen meters, its whole weight coming down enough to make the ground shake.

For a second, it looked almost startled, but I discounted the look as I charged more power. More and more golden energy poured into my spear, into my veins, into my body.

While the world still shook, I heard thunder. The leyburn was charging. With a rumbled, it approached, inky smears of oil streaking by at the sides of its body. Its motion left the air almost undisturbed, and despite its size it looked almost graceful. As if it was ice skating...

Then it crashed into the giant's still standing leg. With all the force of a siege tower, it slammed into the usurper's flesh, monstrous energies crashing into the monster. Its flesh ruptured, scattered, and there was a horrible snapping and cracking sound, followed by the hissing of its blood against the trees.

Its shadow stirred. A hundred chains, spiked with wicked barbs that caught on any imperfection lodged onto the monster. Hooked into crevices and pulled downwards, with Liam, himself clad in the embrace of darkness pulling with all he had.

For the first time, the giant buckled. It stirred, beginning to fall, and alarm bells rang in my head. My own voice called out to me. "Go higher. Take Matt."

Thankfully, I did not hesitate. Within an instant, I had grabbed my friend, and ascended only a few steps higher, when black flames passed through where we had just been. One of my figments was extinguished, the essence scattered. Three left.

But with its wild flailing, the giant was even less stable. Slowly, it was beginning to crumble under the assault. I nodded at Matt.

With a burst of willpower, I pushed even more power into myself. A flood of Qi entered me, almost making me choke on the power. It leaked through my skin, golden and mirror energy dissipating into the air like a heat haze.

I smelled plums, and felt a brush of wind. Matt had turned into a tornado. We were ready.

Not even needing to speak, we charged, at the same time. The buckling giant saw us coming and stirred, but it was too slow. A moment before its other arm moved, we slammed into it.

Next to me, a torrent of pink slammed into the monster. The smell of plum was overbearing, and Matt's sword pierced into its chest. Then he slammed his whole body weight into it, too, using himself like a cannonball and a storm all at once.

Astraeus, too, hit the giant full force, with my own golden body barreling against it. I summoned more platforms behind my feet and pushed with every muscle in my body. And it moved.

Off balance, the giant finally got past the point of recovery. Its body tilted, its legs, one buried, the other cracked or broken... it began falling. I quickly stepped back, Liam vanishing into the shadows, and Matt in a flurry of pink.

And then, a faint purple haze manifested around the usurper.

Ann floated in the air, her hair whipping about in the storm of mana she created. An amount I'd only ever seen archmages match coursed through her, into the diadem, and then crushed into the monster. It's slow descent accelerated.

The giant, once standing tall as a mighty castle... fell.

With crushing gravity and enormous power, reinforced by Reya and our own effort, Ann brought the monster to heel. Her magic coursed out in droves, to the point where her circlet started glowing hot from using the power. Her skin blistered faintly, but she didn't even seem to notice, *increasing* her output.

Purple gravity didn't just push the giant down, it slammed it into the ground, causing another violent shudder of the earth, and a faint crater to form around it. Then it sank deeper, and deeper again.

I felt a shudder run over my back, when I felt the Mana gathering in the air. Orvan, too, floated. His hands were enveloped by sigils, the stars within him stirring as the giant's seemed to dim ever so faintly.

His voice coursed through the air, sending another shudder through me. "Meteor."

That's all he said - and like a promise with the magic, it came true. An enormous mass of stone appeared from high in the sky. A tiny pinprick soon turned enormous. It was as big as the giant, and made mostly from glowing hot *metal*. Denser even than pure rocks.

Ann faltered, her magic finally cutting out, but the deed was done. The giant laid on the ground, the burning sockets of its eyes staring at its impending doom.

When the meteor slammed down, my whole world went white. I saw nothing for a few moments. The noise was the loudest I had ever heard, and my eardrums only survived the shockwave because I reinforced them with a gross amount of Qi.

All the world knew was destruction.

This was the power of an archmage. Focused only on destruction, brought to bear in full force. Some of the city walls had shaken from the impact, bits of brick falling down. But it stood, because it was not the impact site, because a hundred mages had erected barriers, because it was defended.

Irrithuriel had shielded us, too, even from the fallout.

Eventually, colour returned to the world. I saw again, the blind spots in my eyes disappearing. I saw our handiwork. Our bloody spoils.

Broken laid the giant.

Its deer skull was cracked, black flames flickering out. Its chest was ravaged, an open cavity of broken bones and torn flesh. Its legs had been blown off entirely.

"We won," I whispered.

"Ah, but we can't have that, can we?" someone asked.

The voice was familiar. I looked closer, and there it was. In the middle of the giant's corpse, it stood. A tiny figure, demonic, with a frog-like head and red skin. It held a tiny piece of obsidian in its hands.

"No, no. We can't have that at all," it said. Then it placed the piece of obsidian on the giant's broken chest, and the flesh squirmed.

A moment later a torrent of fire washed over the figure, but it was already gone with a dark chuckle. "See youse."

The giant stirred.

Chapter 115: Ruination

The fight had been over, the giant broken and dead, yet now it moved once more.

Flesh writhed, then dissolved as it was shedded. Black flames flickered forth from the corpse, surrounding a perfectly polished abyssal sphere. It called out to me, as if screaming for help - gateways. Corrupted and twisted, their fragments broken and melded together again, into this.

"Back," my own voice whispered in my ear.

Stunned, I still obeyed, and my allies followed a moment later. As we should, because the giant *exploded*.

Its deer skull shattered into a million bone fragments. Shards that dug into my skin despite its enhanced toughness. Where we had just been was now consumed in a raging inferno of darkness.

A moment of silence passed, when the flames collapsed inwards, around the orb. The figure that stood was imposing, as tall as the leyburn, though smaller than the original giant. It was also entirely carved from black flame, contained within a thin layer of obsidian glass.

Almost confused, it looked at its own hands, moving them. They had five fingers each, almost human like. Then, the fire within its head spun and twisted. It took me a moment to get it, but then it clicked. The monster was *smiling*. A sinister, horrible smile.

It vanished.

Charged with what I could only assume was mountains of power from the demon, the usurper moved with blinding speed. It slammed into the leyburn, still nearby on the ground, and bashed it aside with contemptuous ease, sending the creature's body flying.

The crack of the sound barrier being broken reached my ears only after it had long since stopped.

Disgusting. It was disgustingly powerful. The demon that had brought it back... why did it not just fight? Could it not stay longer?

The thought was beaten out of my head when the monster moved again. Irrithuriel, having just been next to me in the air, was suddenly swatted from the sky like a fly. One moment he was there, the next moment a dark figure of obsidian stood, and I saw his body crash into the ground.

Fear crept in. Terror. The creature turned to me, the flame twisting with sadistic glee. We'd killed it. Almost. So close. In fact, [Transference] had begun sending its body over... yet here it was. Alive. Standing in front of me.

It took joy in that. The despair.

When it reached for me, my figments were silent, yet I saw death come. Was there no way to live? Was there-

"Fio!" Ann called.

Instantly, my eyes steeled. I refused to give up. Gripping Astraeus until my knuckles went white, I drove the spear forward. It slammed into the volcanic glass, chipping a piece of it.

And the usurper stopped. It placed its hands on the wound, the tiny chip in its exterior with surprise. Was it... fragile?

My thoughts were blown aside by a burst of magic from Orvan. His attack had landed cleanly on the distracted monster, stardust and fire slamming into it, sending it sprawling away from me.

“Get it together! The city cannot fall!” Orvan called.

So, we made the decision to fight. Because it was... the right thing to do, right? Yeah. The right thing.

The usurper faced Orvan. I saw its malice. Its contempt for us. For this world, so unsuited for them. The want to be more, to have more, to own. I clutched my spear, holding it out defensively.

And we clashed.

A single strike impacted me, and I barely turned Astraeus to block as Cass told me to. The obsidian hand impacted my spear, and I felt the shaft bend. My footing was torn off the platforms I stood on, the blow knocking the wind out of my lungs, and I crashed into the floor.

My world went white again with pain. Then I got the fuck back up.

I saw devastation. In the moment I had been gone, Liam had been knocked aside, and Matt’s storm of blossoms seemed to be *burning*, the plum petals melting into slag.

Then Liam got up. And Matt fanned his storm out wide until the fire was gone, before drawing it back in. They were determined.

Emilia stood. A blow impacted her, but she simply *remained standing*. I saw the stars in her chest coalesce and burn brightly, and a new one spawned. A talent? A technique? She had grown again.

Ann glowed with divine radiance, a crown of red hot metal on her head, leaving her skin untouched now. Rainbow fire flared to life on her skin. It shot forward in thin spikes, sending more cracks through the fragile monster.

A moment later, it blurred. Dozens of magical barriers in front of Ann shattered, and she was blown aside. Chris was next, all three of their shells attacking at once, only buying a moment each even as they moved in perfect synchronicity. Soon, they were blown aside, too.

But with each exchange it grew more violent. Faster, more brutal. The stars within that darkness shimmered, a night sky of flickering flame. It vanished again, and I heard my own voice whisper in my ear. “Turn to the side.”

I turned - and felt a brief touch of air at my side. Then, blood spurted from my arm, a horrendous set of gashes having carved into my biceps.

My golden skin was torn, and crimson streamed out of me, burning hot waves of pain wracking my body. A little later, and I would have lost the arm entirely. Now, it was just horribly mangled.

My eyes narrowed in pain at the wound, but then I shoved it aside and focused again. Fury ran ice cold in my veins. Murder. I wanted murder.

Apparently so did Orvan, because he cast spells again. And instead of his usual, charging, sluggish magic, the spells poured like rainfall. Drops of silver starlight that slammed into the creature like iron balls, constraining it. Dozens of tiny explosions fired off. The bright light formed into wispy strands when the raindrops dissipated, holding the thing down like chains.

It blurred again, and I felt no warning. Emilia received the blow, being sent skyward. Likewise, Matt was thrown to the side again. I felt warmth spread through me, as Irrithuriel and Reya channelled Divinity into my wounds.

We fought. Move, by move, we bought time as the city was evacuated. Qi, Mana and Divinity flowed in droves. Crater after crater appeared, wound after wound as we chipped away at the glass.

But the damn bastard just kept getting *faster*.

Exchange after exchange, we kept it at bay. Astraeus and Cass used my talents to guide me to move before it did. I predicted far enough ahead to where it felt like I almost saw the future. A tiny movement told me all I needed to know.

Still, it wasn't enough.

Orvan cast spell after spell, his hands blurring as the seconds ticked by, flashing through sigils. His lips remained chanting relentlessly, to the point where he hardly seemed to breathe at all.

A thousand chains of light entrapped the thing again, but this time, something finally changed. The bright starlight dug into the obsidian, cracking it, breaking off more shards. Dark fire frothed on the inside, burning with ever greater fury. Pressure building in an unstable container.

And then there was a crack.

A horrendous sound of glass splitting. The monster moved again, fire spilling in its wake now, leaving its insides.

But when it blurred the movement was too fast. That sound of shattering happened over and over again. Power rushed out of the usurper in droves, terrifying amounts of it, and the stars within began collapsing as supernovae.

Its night sky lit up with bright light, and crimson blood.

“Oh, fuck me,” Orvan whispered, looking at the hand, stuck through his stomach and exiting out his back. “That shit hurts.”

I blinked. The situation felt unreal.

Malice washed over the battlefield. Dark flames sprouted on Orvan’s robes and skin. Fire, consuming him, eating away at him. The usurper withdrew its hand, slashing it through the air, splattering Orvan’s blood on the ground.

Iryel gasped in horror. His reaction was the first. “No!” he screamed, rushing towards the old man.

Then, Orvan laughed. Blood stained his beard, streaming down his face from his mouth, his robes red and black with ash and blood. He was on fire. With a hole through his body, and he *laughed*.

For just a second, then he stopped. Mana appeared, and I saw Orvan’s stars move. They burnt up. His fading firmament lit up with bright light. “Don’t waste your breath, angel,” he said, calmly, quietly. “Let an old man make a last stand.”

A moment later, his voice lost all that quiet. Instead, carried by mana, it boomed over the battlefield. ***“My name is Orvan Dreyfa! Archmage of Eden. Starseeker. Bringer of Ruin. The greatest damned mage this world has ever seen! And I refuse to go out like a fucking chump!”***

He grinned. A manic smile on his face. ***“Edians, Divines, Outworlders. Look closely. Witness Destruction. Witness my legacy.”***

My mind went blank, then. It was hard to think. My ears rang. All I could do was stare.

Reality twisted.

Orvan was finally, in his last moments, pouring out all the magic he had. An amount of mana that was stunning. A kingdom’s worth, enough to make the whole world suffocating.

A firmament of blinding stars appeared in the sky. Nebulae and suns, thousands of glittering bits of dust, infinitely far and grand pinpricks. Orvan grinned. And suddenly, I felt safe.

It was a strange feeling. He was dying, his own galaxy within himself exploding, projected outward, and yet in that moment he was *still* birthing new stars. He had just figured out selective magic. And I knew his spells would leave me untouched.

“See a dying man’s fury!”

The sky fell.

I do not know how else to describe it, but the sky fell down.

A thousand stars, suns, meteors, radiant blindness and astral spectacle came down. Colours I had never before seen seared themselves into my iris. It was beautiful.

Tears evaporated from my eyes.

A firmament came crashing down on the usurper. Glass shattered. Black flames broke. Scattered. Washed away in the tides of the night sky.

And then, all at once, the sky was empty. Every celestial body had fallen. Moons and meteors and stars and dust and everything in between. It had all crashed down, into an enormous crater. The city stood, entirely unharmed. But there was no more forest. It was all blown away into a dusty wasteland, an incomparable crater in the landscape.

Orvan coughed up blood, a single last star burning in his chest. A single bit of light still in his eyes. He fell from the sky, with that bit of light still in him, crashing onto the dusty ground he had just evaporated.

The impact was a dull, quiet thud.

Slowly, the dust settled. I could breathe again. When my vision cleared... There was a broken shell of obsidian. Volcanic glass scattered and forever incomplete. Dark flames hovered around a thin, cracked sphere. It was this close to shattering, yet still held on.

Our nemesis, the giant, was now small. Smaller even than me. Yet, despite it all, despite the sky coming down on it, it stood.

Two people, destined to die in moments, yet still holding on just barely.

But then it looked at me. And I heard my own voice. “Step back.”

So I did. Mechanically, almost by myself, I took that step backwards, and the creature stood where I had just been. My companions stirred, many hurt and far away. Ann was the one who moved towards me. A barrier formed over my spear, letting me block the second hit more easily.

Still, it hurt. Bones in my arm cracked, from that single strike. A desperate last stand by the monster. How many more hits did I need to take?

A strike came from my left, and I moved Astraeus to block - my arms held, but a crack went through my spear, and I heard the spirit inside it howl.

Despair struck a chord in me. What the fuck was I supposed to do? Have my spirit die? No longer defend?

No, Astraeus deserved better. I placed him back into the unsummoned space. But I still felt him. I was a spearwoman. My eyes glowed. I grew. [Stargazer] and [Mirror Mind] burnt. I knew I could wield a spear. One from wood or metal or Qi... who cared? So what if I wielded a spear of just my will? Wasn't that fucking something?!

A flicker of enlightenment blossomed into a flame in my mind.

[Spear Technique - Fundamentals has reached (Inevitability).]

I had mirrors. Reflections. I knew what I was about, I *knew*. Did I need a real spear? Fuck it.

[Class Ascension forcibly unlocked. Path: Unification. Combining [Spearwoman] with [Gateway]. Combining [Voyage through the Golden Depths] with [Imprint upon Infinite Self-Similarity]. Congratulations.]

[You have acquired the Class **[Superimposed Paragon]** at level 20.]

[You have acquired the Path **[Stride beyond inflicted Skies]** at Wellspring Realm, 7th Step.]

When the blow came, it stopped in the empty air between my arms. A formless spear. There *was nothing there at all*, yet Astraeus was within it anyway.

Another block, another parry and backstep, as the flames sputtered and died and then... it blurred.

Ann was by my side. My lovely, too-kind, Ann. There to save me. She stood behind me, ready to cover my back- and then her blood splattered against me. I had been out of figments. Out of little glimpses of the future. Out of *lives to save*.

Ann looked at me. Glassy eyed. "Hey, Fio?" she asked, a whisper. "Please, will you remember me?" I reached out to touch her hand - then the usurper flung her back, out of reach, dead.

[Annabelle Belleflamme has been removed from your [Transference] network.]

My hand, that had been reaching for Ann, clenched around emptiness, around formlessness, and my spear slammed into the usurper's core, finally breaking it apart.

I remained standing, running to Ann, touching her, hoping to send her to Neamhan but... no. She was dead. Cold. This body. Tears streamed down my face, but there was a whisper behind me.

"Fio," Orvan croaked.

Fuck. He couldn't even die properly, couldn't let me grieve-

"Fio," he called again. "Come. Please. Grant a dying man's wish."

Mechanically, I stood up. Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine.

My [Iron Will] clamped down on the sorrow. Another version of me [Superimposed] on me. I breathed in through my nose. "Yes, Orvan."

I kneeled next to the old man as I spoke, blood trickling into the dry soil, staining it red. My companions were rising slowly, the ones still living, anyway. What was the point in that, though? I hoped they-

Orvan called my attention back to him when the last star within his chest wavered. I could already feel the hole Ann's [Genius] left behind, though a flicker of it remained within me. A tiny spark. A reminder-

"She has a body on Neamhan."

My eyes lit up. I whispered. "Oh."

The old man placed a hand on the top of my head. "Yes. I do not, Fio. These are my last moments. Are you willing to hear me out now?" he chuckled, interrupted by red blood spilling onto his beard again.

"Yes," I said numbly.

"I'll make it quick. You're like me. Wild. Strong. I want to place my trust in you, if you'll have it?" he asked, faintly.

“Why me?” I whispered.

“You’ve been dealt a shit lot and tried your best. That’s all.” He shrugged, almost imperceptibly. “C’mon. My mana’s leaking. Will you take my damn inheritance or not?”

“...”

I didn’t want to answer. I didn’t... but my mind moved. I needed power. Get back to Neamhan. Enough contributions to give Ann her memories back. “Yes. I will.”

A prick of mana touched my body, infinitely complex and magical. It was a solid crystal of it with a horrendous amount of density and inscriptions and-

“Fio. You saw the stars, right? I did everything I could. Gave it my best shot. You... you can be a little more selfish.” His hand laid onto my cheek. “You can look out for yourself a little more. Take a little more time. Stay bullheaded. Stay stubborn. Stay fair - but stay kind to yourself.”

He smiled. And then, finally, his hand fell.

[Orvan Dreyfa has been removed from your [Transference] network.]

I closed his eyes. Then walked over, and did the same for Ann.

There, at the end of the world, I stood. With Matt, Emilia, Reya, Chris, and Liam. Olivia and Iryel, too, I suppose, though they stood next to Orvan rather than Ann.

No one spoke. We dug graves. Did what we needed to do, silently. Then went to the city we’d saved. There. We could talk there.

Chapter 116: Heaviness

My hands were shaking for the entire duration of the journey. There were no more usurpers. The giant of black fire was dead. I had absorbed the shards of its gateway, and the rest of that fire had been absorbed by [Transference], and crafted into some kind of magic item.

But I ignored the pull of the Gift. I felt entirely too numb to interact with it. My heart thumped in my chest, beating on cruelly as Ann’s *laid still*.

Thoughts flowed slow as molasses and I could hardly think. It took all my effort to just keep my legs moving. I felt so damned heavy. Every movement was a chore. I wanted to simply lay down, but I stayed upright.

No one touched me. I was aware enough to see Matt think about it, about laying a hand on my shoulder and speaking, but he never went through with it. I was glad. I didn't wanna speak.

While my legs felt like cinder blocks, my tongue felt like a horrible piece of lead tied to the bottom of my mouth. I could barely breathe without choking. For most of the walk I held my breath. I only needed to draw in air every dozen minutes with my inhuman constitution, after all.

Eventually, we were upon the barrack building assigned to us. I didn't even have the strength to open the door. Emilia did so, and it took my best effort to walk inside, then sit on the side of the bed.

I let my face fall into my empty palms. Simply holding my head upright was taking more strength than I felt. Everything was so heavy. I held my breath again.

No one spoke. I heard some footsteps, some creaking, but it all was tuned out, melding into a background cacophony of noise that I only barely perceived. Minutes ticked by.

Eventually, I let out a shaky breath. My lungs felt so unsteady. I almost choked as I breathed back in, but I managed. Then I breathed back out again.

After a few more repetitions, I lifted my head. I clamped down on the despair with an iron will, looking up to see my friends. The people I cared about more than my family. Reya, next to Liam, each with an arm around each other. Liam wore a new mask, his previous one having been burnt away by fire. His hair was singed.

Matt, his sword sheathed by his side, and the scent of plums dull. His face was blank and expressionless. He turned to look at me, and simply nodded, in empathy. I felt numb, but I nodded back anyway. He'd get it.

Emilia sat across the room from me, a table between us. She was the most covered in blood. One of her arms was broken, but she didn't make a peep about it. Despite being so wounded, she seemed the most stable.

Her eyes blazed with that same stoney determination that I was used to from her. She was shaken, grieving, angry, but she was still somehow ready to fight. I wish I could have been like her.

Chris was inside with their human shell. Their face was flat like a soda, left open in the sun for too long. They were barely puppeteering the body right now, but they lived.

Olivia sat. I saw the stars move within her. I- I realized then that I still saw the stars. She seemed upset. Was that... empathy blooming within her? Care? The thought almost brought a smile to my face, but the expression crumbled before it grew.

Finally, Iryel still had his eyes closed. He looked so tired. More like a husk than even Chris' unmoving body. But still, he had not given up.

Had I given up?

The question buzzed around in my head for a few dozen seconds, until I silenced it. I took another breath, steadying myself. "I-" my voice cracked, instantly. Breaking the moment I tried to speak.

No one batted an eye, just waited. I breathed again, steadying myself, focussing. It took all my effort to speak, even somewhat steadily. "What... do we do now?"

"We grieve," Iryel said. "The loss of two incredible people. And then we fight again."

Olivia gripped the wood of her bedframe hard enough to splinter it. "Yeah, alright," she ground out. "I was looking to kill more."

It wasn't selfish or sadistic. She wanted to avenge Orvan, I knew that much. How strange. I looked at her for a long moment, and she returned the gaze, fiery as always. "What? Do you not want revenge?!"

"No." The words surprised myself, coming out hoarse and raw. "I killed it."

"The eclipse is still happening," Matt said. Somehow, even in this situation, his voice sounded melodic. The rat. "We should still fight."

Liam, absently carving lines into the wooden table with his daggers, spoke. "The frog is still alive."

Distantly, somewhere within myself, a spark of anger flitted before being doused by apathy. "Yeah," I said.

Emilia got up. With a single pull from her healthy arm, she ripped off the broken remains of her armor, crumpling the busted and torn metal in the process. She stomped over to me, heavily, her stone prosthesis scraping against the wooden floor. Then she pulled me into a hug.

She squeezed hard, enough with just one arm. Wordlessly, slowly, I felt myself raise an arm as well. I dug into her shirt, gripping the fabric hard. My throat closed up again, and I choked on sorrow.

"It fucking sucks," Emilia said. Her voice was so warm. "It hurts. Worse than any wound. Fio, take as much time off from fighting as you need. No one will hold a grudge."

I wanted to answer, to say anything, but the words wouldn't come out. All I managed was a pathetic squeak and a ragged breath.

Emilia squeezed me again. "Ann is out there, on Neamhan. I know you can't go."

Those words slammed into my body like a sledgehammer. It hurt to hear them, so very badly, but she was right. Despite it all, despite everything, despite killing the giant, there was still that abominable number.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **45]**

It had risen. Of course it had risen. But it wasn't enough, it *still* wasn't enough. Ann was out there, on Neamhan, all alone. With nothing but a few days of memories and a fucking lifetime of confusing emotions to her name.

And I couldn't go to her.

"So we'll get her," Emilia said. Tears dripped down from her onto the top of my head. "We'll go, keep her safe, Fio. It's okay. We'll take care of it. We'll hunt down more of the gateway holders, bring the shards to you."

The words stunned me into silence.

Emilia didn't say any more, but Matt did. "Yeah," he said. "I'll stay in Eden. I- Finding Ann on Neamhan is not what I'd be good at. But I can kill things for you. I can kill as many as it takes."

"Wherever you need us," Liam said. "Wherever Ann needs us."

At that, I finally started sobbing.

- - -

For the first time in forever I slept. Like, not just for a few hours, but really *slept*. I remember that at some point I'd laid down and cried, and then stopped, and then spent an hour staring blankly at the ceiling, and eventually, I must've fallen asleep.

It was a deep, dreamless kind of sleep. Chris sat next to my bedside when I awoke. They didn't instantly speak when I stirred, though. I could feel the open invite to just turn on my side, and sleep some more.

With a lot of willpower, I decided not to. "How long have I been out?" I asked, my voice raspy and dry.

"Twenty hours," came the reply.

Oh, shit. "That's a while."

They shrugged. "So is everything. What use is time if you cannot spend it on what you need?"

I stared back at those deep, dark eyes, and sighed, deciding not to argue. I felt less... bone-tired, but the exhaustion still weighed heavily on me. "Sure," I agreed. "I- what now?"

Chris pulled me into a hug. Their skin, stolen and puppeteered, felt warm and soft. "Now you wait. You be selfish. Maybe visit the altars eventually, but do not worry about it. The divines can wait."

"... And Ann?"

"Emilia and Liam are back on the other side. They'll find her."

"How will we know?" I asked. I moved, pushing myself out of the hug, instead sitting up and drawing my knees to my chest. "Can they talk to us?"

The triz-adu nodded faintly. "Yes. Transference is stronger than ever. It affords them a tiny bit of Qi even over there. With it, they can send off short messages occasionally."

"Oh," I said, blankly. I hadn't known that. I... frankly hadn't explored my new abilities all that much, anyway.

[I can give you a short version if it helps,] Cass suggested.

Hearing her voice in my head was both strangely alien and comforting. Now that I focused, I heard Astraeus humming within my chest, too. While Cass' voice seemed to come directly into my mind, his originated from my heart, vibrating through my bones before reaching my ears.

Knowing I had enough Qi to support it, I sent Cass a short invite to actually appear next to me. Almost instantly, her ghostly avatar wove itself from a thin thread of power, taking shape. Then she threw herself around my neck.

She weighed nothing, and her touch barely registered except a feeling of slight cold, but I still felt it, vividly. I remained stunned for a few moments.

"Bell, I'm so sorry," she said, voice cracking. "I'm so sorry I didn't- I should have- I-!"

Gently, carefully, I placed a hand on her head. "Hey," I whispered. "It's not your fault."

She sobbed, convulsing quietly for a few moments, and it left me thinking. Was this fair? Cass shouldn't blame herself. Was it hypocritical of me to think that? Here I was, feeling like trash... Ah, who cares. I still wanted to feel a little more like trash.

But she didn't deserve it.

"We got unlucky," I told her, running my fingers over her head in something I hoped was a calming gesture. "I got cocky and too comfortable risking our lives. Now we live with the consequences."

Orvan's permanent death. Ann's memories. I just hoped she was safe, hoped she found the others that she didn't-

I interrupted myself before finishing that thought. Drawing another shaky breath. Cass squeezed me tighter. "Okay," she said, voice barely above a whisper. "I... I'll try. To be kind. To do better."

"We all try. It's okay not to always succeed," Chris said. I looked at them, turning to see their usually blank face set with a heavy expression.

Once more, I was reminded that their reason for travelling with us, for finding power, was primarily one of loss. Another shell, another life, taken from them, unable to be laid to rest.

I breathed in deeply through my nose, and out through my mouth. "It sometimes doesn't feel like it," I said. The weight of Orvan's inheritance laid heavily in my chest. A revolving knot of magic. "But what can we do, except try our best?"

At that, Chris smiled. "Sometimes, just trying is enough. You don't need to give your all. Sometimes, the amount you can give is small, and that is fine, too." They paused. "To always try your hardest is to run yourself ragged."

Their words sounded hollow, but I forced myself to consider them honestly. They seemed to resonate with Cass, at least, assuaging her a little. Objectively, I could see how they were right. But personally... It was so frustrating. I didn't want that to be the truth.

Breathing in through my nose, and out through my mouth, I decided to let the thoughts go. "Okay. Let's take it from the top, then. Cass, what changed about my abilities?"

She drew in a shaky breath, too, finally releasing me from a clingy hug, and I let my arms drop again as well, no longer holding her. They felt heavy again. But it didn't matter. I just needed to listen.

"Yeah. Okay," Cass said, psyching herself up for the talk. It felt like she was trying to drop the guilt like a physical burden. "So. You have changed class, fusing both of your previous ones. Now, you are a Superimposed Paragon."

"Right," I nodded. Clear so far.

"This means that some of your abilities will have fused into new ones. Your status will be shorter. This does not mean you lost any ability; they were simply unified into a single larger framework, giving you more freedom in how you use them. Pull up your status for me?"

I smiled at the request being made so casually. Cass sounded a little like herself again. I hoped it was the last terrible moment she had to go through with me, fingers trailing through the air.

Casting off the shell of comfortable inaction, I accessed my Gift, and decided to see how the world would find me wanting.

Chapter 117: Real

[Name: Fiona Bellum

Class: **Superimposed Paragon (20)**

- Techniques
 - Spear Techniques

- Spear Technique - Fundamentals (**Inevitability**)
- Swift Spear (Intermediate)
- Momentum Shift (High)
- Qi Techniques
 - General
 - Aura Suppression (Intermediate) (Keeping your Qi contained inside your body allows you to appear perfectly ordinary)
 - Aura Sense (Basic) (Perceive your surroundings by being in touch with the energies suffusing them)
 - **Golden Glass**
 - Spear Spirit (**Intermediate**) (Your weapon - **Astraeus** - has resonated and fought with you. Now, it actively cooperates)
 - **Weapon Unification [New!]** (evolved **Weapon Resonance + Spear Qi**) (**Basic**) (You and your weapon are one. You need not hold it to wield it.)
 - **Inexplicable Reinforcement [New!]** (evolved **Golden Body + Reflection**) (**Intermediate**) (Your Qi makes your body incredibly tough, flexible, and fast. When in peril, you superimpose yourself over it.)
 - **True Mirror [New!]** (evolved **Gateway + Lost and Found + Keeper Manifestation**) (**High**) (You and your Keeper work together. Manifest them and your gateway where your will reaches.)
- Stats
 - General
 - Strength: Greater (**Lesser**)
 - Agility: Greater (**Lesser**)
 - Endurance: Greater (**Greater**)
 - Resilience: Greater (**Basic**)
 - Manipulation: Greater (**Intermediate**)
 - Capacity: Greater (**Basic**)
 - Absorption: Greater (**Basic**)
 - Qi
 - **Golden Glass**
 - Purity (**Perfect**)
 - Realm (Wellspring)

- Stage (**7th Step**)
- Path (**Stride beyond inflicted Skies**)
- Disposition
 - Covenant
 - Familiarity (~~Kind to the known, distrustful to the new.~~)
 - Trust (Your care comes in layers, always possible to rise or fall.)
 - Temperament
 - Impatient (Time ticks and you wish to be ahead of it.) (Wavering!)
 - Disciplined (Your command over yourself is admirable.)
 - Iron Will (Your tenacity is incredible, even among the outstanding.)
 - **Compassionate (You truly care. So you find joy, and you find suffering.)**
 - Talent
 - Slight Edge (Average is below your standards. Go above, even by a little.)
 - Single-Minded (Your focus is your strength. Once your mind is set, nothing will shake you out of it.)
 - **Superimposed Experience (evolved Mirror Mind) (You can place another's experience onto yourself. See the world from new perspectives.)**
 - **Precipitous Wings (evolved Precipice) (Growth lies wherever risk does. Find it, sprout wings, and soar through the sky.)**
 - **Budding Nova (You saw the stars, right? Stay kind to yourself.)**

Current Status: Agitated]

I took a long time to let my eyes trail over all the emboldened text.

My abilities had changed. My classes fused into one, and evolved. All their old functionality was still there, but new bits and pieces had been added to almost everything I could do. I felt them at the edge of my awareness, in the same way that new abilities usually came with a switch.

But my control over Qi was different now. I couldn't just feel the lever - I could interpret what it meant, and activate it manually. The training wheels that the Gift offered were not required in this instance.

I was surprised at the volume of change in my main powerset. I was *shocked* at the change to my covenant, but then it did make sense. Recently, new people had entered my life, and

all of them had earned my trust rapidly. Chris, Orvan, Saif, Reya and even Eric. They had all become familiar fast.

My experiences changed me. My impatience was wavering. Was I getting better at being patient? I smirked at the thought. But, perhaps, I had gotten a little better about giving people a chance.

Amusingly, this removed the whole... "family" business out of my status fully. Familiarity had always reminded me of my parents. Now, it was trust. Bonds forged entirely based on people's own merits. I kind of liked that.

Then, when I saw my talents, I cried a little again. My new talent, [Budding Nova], had Orvan's last words in it. Damn.

It took me a little to finally read my current status, and when I did, I sniffled, scoffed and snorted with laughter all at the same time. *Agitated?* Yeah, I sure felt agitated. In just about every single way that word could mean.

Damn Gift. Daring to summarize my grief and change and my best attempts to keep myself going and my growth all at once... It made me wanna punch it, almost. But I didn't.

Instead, I took a deep breath. Fine, then. This was the main window dealt with. I was changed. But not negatively. The world hadn't seen to cast me away.

There were stories of that. When a loss broke someone so utterly it whittled away their disposition. Their talents. And I was changed. I had learnt my lesson on hasty decisions, or so I hoped. Not quite, it seemed, given that [Impatient] still hung there.

But my grief was judged enough to make me [Compassionate]. Bastard. I sniffled again.

Slowly, I let out the held breath. My talents had grown. Despite it all, despite the loss and the grief, I could feel that. The power buzzing within my now singular wellspring. Both my capacities had combined into one, my Qi reserves increased, the glass beneath my skin having shifted to being golden.

I took a moment to feel it - genuinely feel it.

Taking a deep breath, the shakiness that filled my body abated briefly. The power coursing through me felt like a raging bonfire, hidden behind a thin gossamer curtain. I pulled the veil between me and my strength apart, and let it course through me for once.

The world changed. My perspective drifted. Lines blurred, stars blossomed, another reality superimposing it on the one I was in. I *felt* the connection to that reality. Trilled my hand through the air, saw it shift and morph as if I was seeing double, yet it clearly parsed in my mind.

Simply put, there were two realities now. I could almost pick and choose which one to interact with, and the one I superimposed onto the one I had been in until now was under my control, somewhat.

When I wanted the air to shift, it shifted. If I wanted to shift my hand *only there*, I could. And if I wanted to, I could displace myself into this new reality immediately.

Blinking, I controlled the ability. My other self, that ethereal copy of me that was so me and yet remained in my field of vision, got up. From the bed. Walked over to the table in the middle of the room, and stepped on top of it. Then, another step, onto a platform of Qi, standing in the middle of the air.

And then I let myself sync with her - with me?

There was a snapping, lurching sensation, and both worlds collapsed into one another. The table shifted slightly from where I had put my weight on it. And I stood in the air, having walked there and yet not taken a single step at all.

"What the fuck."

Cass materialized her avatar on the bed, now carrying a thin metallic sheen on her skin. "Trippy," she said.

I nodded, staring at my hands. Already, they were blurred again, a second reality at my fingertips if I so chose. Briefly, I wondered if there was another reality where I wasn't as fucking sad.

There was.

Faintly, resonating across that boundary, I felt a reality in which I was uncaring. Where what happened to Ann, what happened to Orvan *hadn't touched me*. For a moment, that other version of myself and me communicated, a song of loss.

Almost as if she had reached out, asking if there were some version of *her* that was sad.

I recoiled in surprise and a bit of disgust, and that version of myself disconnected, snapping away, lost. My stomach turned. The memories of carelessness mixed with the ones of grief in a dizzying cacophony.

Feeling my stomach churn, my concentration on my martial arts wavered, which made the Qi under my feet vanish. With the platform gone, I lost balance, stumbling through the air. I crashed against the small table, knocking it over, and then my bed slammed into the bedframe.

My skull left a dent in the wood.

Briefly, I started getting up, but then it all crashed back into me. The heaviness, the disdain for my inaction, the revolt at my uncaring self. I felt disgusting. My arms froze in the air, and dropped low like lead weights.

I let my head sink back into the end in the wood, slowly sliding until it fell into the floor. It didn't even hurt, my physical stats far too high. My skin was too tough to get a splinter, now. I kinda wished I got one,

Was that self harm?

"Bell?"

My eyes were closed, but I recognized Cass' soft voice. I felt Astraeus hum within my wellspring as well, expressing... comfort. The two of them cared so much. I wish they didn't.

Gathering my willpower, I cracked open my eyes. The world was slightly blurry, as if my eyes couldn't be bothered to put in the work to focus. I blinked the blur away. Cass stood over me, skin metallic and solid.

Her featureless face seemed scrunched up with concern for me. I reached out, almost mechanically, my hand reaching her cheek - and encountering resistance. I flinched back for a moment, not expecting the cool, smooth feel of her skin.

But then, her fingers came against mine. Her hand was smaller, almost fully spread while mine was barely open. I felt her fingertips. My eyes opened wide. Cass froze, shocked.

I wrapped my hand around her tiny one. Squeezing it. "Cass," I said, breathless, sitting up. "Cass! You're- you're real! You're physical! Oh, divines!"

She stared at me, head slowly trailing back and forth from where I grasped her fingers, to my face, then to her hand again. Slowly, with a gentle force, she squeezed my hand back. "Oh," she said. Her voice cracked. "O-oh."

Suddenly, as if the spell broke, Cass leapt at me, wrapping her arms around my neck. I felt her, like a weighty doll - different from a human in the way that her weight seemed to be distributed strangely. Her skin was more solid than most living things, taking significant force to bend-

A thousand thoughts ran through my head, but all I did was wrap my arms around her as well.

"I can hug you," she said, voice cracking. She would have cried, had she had eyes. "I- I can hug you. You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that."

Squeezing back, the thinnest, smallest smile I could conceive crept onto my lips. "Actually," I said, "I think I have a pretty good idea."

Cass broke out into pearly laughter. She kept giggling on and on, as if I had told her the funniest joke I had ever told, resting her head against my shoulder. "Bell. Thank you. So much. For giving me... everything."

And that, finally, made me cry again, too. My arms dropped, slowly sliding down to my sides. I couldn't bear to hold her anymore. "No, Cass," I said. "I didn't do anything. I- I... it's my fault you didn't have anything in the first place."

"What?" she asked, aghast. "No. Bell, please, no. C'mon. I- Without you, I wouldn't be alive. No mind to think. No body to live."

"And you would have never been *locked up*!" I cried.

At that, she stared at me aghast. One of her hands lifted from my back, and she touched my cheek, softly, with that cold, metallic skin of hers. "You're so fucking stupid sometimes, you know that?" she said, angrily.

"What...?"

"Bell. Look at me. *Look at me!!*" she demanded.

Bringing myself to do the effort, I opened my eyes again. I hadn't noticed that they closed. I saw Cass, my partner, my friend, my safekeeper, and she was furious with me. Shaking, literally. My breath hitched.

She brought her other hand to my other cheek, squeezing my face slightly. “What does this look like to you, Bell? I have a *body*. I can do things. Everything is incredible right now! But it’s not new, you know why? Because of *you*. You showed me before. What it’s like to live.”

Shaking her head she continued talking. “Things are better now. I am happier with this. But being freer now doesn’t mean I was locked up, you idiot. I have never once hated my way of living. Do I want more? Of course I do! But who doesn’t, Bell?! Who doesn’t want anymore?!”

By now, she was eyelessly crying again. “I’m not always happy! I can’t be! Happiness means improvement, it’s something to constantly work towards. So don’t. Don’t act as if I was trapped, don’t act as if my life had just begun. Because it *hasn’t*. I’ve been with you for a while now, so don’t you dare reduce all to that down to me suffering. I’ve laughed. I’ve cried. I’ve fucking *lived*!!”

She breathed. “And I intend to do more of that,” she added, quietly, breathlessly. “So much more. So don’t you dare blame yourself, or be angry. I’m happy right now. Please, let yourself share in that, just a little.”

For a long moment, I was quiet. Cass moved to hug me again, and I hugged her back.

“Okay,” I eventually squeezed out. “Sorry.”

“Apology accepted. I love you, Bell. You’re like the crossover between a mom and a best friend.”

A thin smile made its way onto my lips. “I love you too, Cass.”

Chapter 118: Resolution

Eventually, after an amount of time I didn’t really keep track of, Cass let go of me. We split apart. I was left leaning against the bed frame, sitting on the floor.

There were more aspects of my growth to change, but as I looked at Cass, something in my vision sputtered. As I focused again, the [Budding Nova] of my talent reignited, and I saw it bloom within her.

A star.

I smiled faintly at that, too. Not that I needed to tell her, she could see it through my eyes. That was lovely, though. A future. Potential for growth, all on her own. With that, even just a single star, it meant Cass was her own person.

Perhaps, some day, she could dig her own wellspring, make her own body. Not need me anymore. Then she'd have the freedom to choose to be with me. I had the responsibility to make sure she wanted to, then.

Letting that thought linger for a moment, I eventually let it fade. I took a long breath in, then out, and focused on the inheritance Orvan had left me.

Within my wellspring - however he'd gotten it there - sat a small puck of mana, a little bigger than an average coin. It was absolutely packed with mana, runes and enchantments. A tiny little masterwork, documenting an entire lifetime of experience and practice and success.

Orvan had not left me magical items. He had not left me grand libraries, towers, or anything like that. What he *had* left me was techniques. Ideas and knowledge on how to forge oneself.

How to make new talents appear from nothing. The most effective ways to manipulate mana. Growing your wellspring faster, making it output more power. Turning it into a churning vortex to draw in more power, having it constantly course through you at all hours to get your meridians accustomed to vast power flowing through them.

A whole library of brutal shaping exercises to practice fine control and raw output. It was a treasure trove of insights and knowledge, and philosophy, too. A structured guide to ascending from the very bottom rungs of the ladder all the way to the top.

And finally, beneath all that knowledge was the compressed mana. A token made to assist in breakthroughs. I was on the seventh step of the wellspring realm. My next increase would take me to a higher realm, beyond wellspring. The fifth step on a seven step journey to ascension.

By now, I was genuinely unsure whether the divines were in the sixth or seventh realm. Orvan had been in the fifth, and I was rather sure that my master had been in that one, too. Well. Nothing to it but get there myself... and find out, no?

Then I let out a long suffering sigh. I got up from the dent I left in someone else's bedframe, and dragged myself back to my own. I sat down. "Hey, Cass. You ever felt what a bed is like?"

“Not with my own skin, no.”

I smiled, and patted the coverings next to me. “Well. This one’s kinda crap, but I’m not exactly using it right now, so…”

In an instant, she threw herself onto the sheets. She had to shuffle a little until I’d pulled the blanket out from under her, and covered her with it. “Cozy?” I asked.

“Yes, Bell.”

“That’s good,” I nodded, smiling. Then there was a silence. I reached out, patting Cass’ head, fighting to keep the faint smile on my lips. It fought back just as hard.

Of course, it was a losing fight, and eventually, my smile faded, and my face sunk into neutrality. Despite that, I remained seated on the bed with Cass, letting my hand rest on her head. Her eyes were closed. That didn’t exactly mean much, since she could see through my eyes still, but well. The gesture is what mattered.

Staring at the wooden ceiling I found myself with a simple thought. I kinda really wanted to go home. Really, really... home.

Then the door to the barracks opened and Matt walked in. Covered in blood.

He was more filthy than I had ever seen him. Red stained his robes, his hair gummed up with it, too. He smelled of plums and iron. A few seconds passed before he turned to face me and for a second I shivered.

There was a brief moment when Matt had that look he had during a fight, but it was even more intense, even sharper now. His killing intent had been sharpened into a blade. There was a fire in his eyes that told of steel and flashes of metal and brutal butchery-

And like a fleeting springtime memory, all of that vanished. Matt’s eyes lightened and he threw me a smile. “Heya Fio. You’re up again, I’m glad to see that.”

“Matt,” I nodded at him. “Chris filled me in. I’m... glad you’re around.”

He grinned, more genuinely than his smile, and patted my shoulder. “Wouldn’t leave you alone. You need the company, and deserve it, too.”

“Who’s all still on this side?” I asked, quietly.

“Well, Chris, of course. They can’t exactly go to the other side, after all. Then, Reya. She considered going with Liam, but decided to stay here. In fact...” he paused and stepped aside to let the mute healer walk in from behind him.

She, too, was covered in blood. Despite the grizzly state she was in, she carelessly rolled her eyes at Matt, as if calling him out for having made her wait outside for so long. Chris, who had left to work on their shells while I was checking my Gift, was called in to use some water and rinse the blood off her.

Still dripping wet, she flopped onto her sheets, closing her eyes, and breathing slowly.

Finally, Matt continued. “Me as well, of course. And you. That’s all.”

I nodded, silently.

“Marie is on the other side,” he explained, more to keep talking so I had something to focus on. “She should have gotten some texts about the whole situation and be on her way to help by now. Emilia and Liam, of course, who went back to deal with stuff. And then there’s Eric. I think they told him by now. No way to really know.”

He shrugged slightly, laying his sword on his shoulder. He hadn’t sheathed or drawn it. I just hadn’t noticed it in his hand until now. How strange.

“What’s our next move?” I asked, quietly.

Matt smirked. “What? I’m not your boss, Fio,” he said, casually. “I know what I’ll do. I’ll catch two hours or so of sleep... then I’ll go out there and fight some more. In fact, I’m in quite a mind to go hunting for some gateway holders. Catch,” he said.

A moment later, a sphere of white impacted me and sunk into my flesh, and I felt my fragments tick up by just one. It reminded me to check my system tab for my gateway, too.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **46**
- Fragments: **50**
- Figments: **6**]

Four points. Four measly points of strength, that was what separated me from Ann. I would take hold of them. My fragments had exceeded fifty with Matt’s latest gift, and I *felt* the change. A threshold being crossed.

Something about my gateway had changed profoundly, and it was simply no longer the same as before. It was more solidly established in the astral, with a stronger connection. I could now bring twenty-five people into my transference network, but I didn't even know where to get that many people from.

Perhaps Saith? Something to consider. I breathed out through my nose, enjoying the new sensation.

Then, I tried to feel how this power worked, and realized I saw an additional depth to reflective surfaces. Reaching out, I noticed I no longer would just step *through* reflections, but could now step *into* them.

I had lost the dependency on a physical body entirely, now being able to exist solely inside a mirror. And, if I walked in that other world, I could step back out through another mirror. A mirror dimension? Was that my new power?

How neat.

Still, I focused on that one number I still needed to increase. "Four more," I said, looking up at my friends. At Reya, Chris and Matt. "Four more bits of power, and I'll go to the other side again."

Matt nodded. "Cool. Give me two hours to crash, and I'll get 'em for you."

"Not if I do so first," Chris said, stretching their shell. "I feel rather ready to take the field."

"Damn staggered times," Matt frowned, but nodded anyway. "Where's Iryel, anyway?"

"Administrative work," Cass supplied, eyes still closed. "An archmage died. A new one has to be decided to take his place, and there aren't exactly any stellar candidates. This is also a large loss for the divines, so they are scrambling to anoint new champions."

Reya's hands flitted through a few half hearted sigils. None of us knew sign language-

"She's saying that the damn divines are making us clean up while they're distracted again," Chris translated. I looked at the triz-adu. When did they have time to learn sign language?

Noticing my stare, they smiled that unsettling smile. "Triz-adu are quite adept at picking up new things. It comes with the switching of shells."

"Right," I nodded along. I felt the apathy slowly reach into my heart again and grimaced.

"Hey, Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"Wake me in two hours. I think I wanna fight, too."

My eyes were already closed but I swear I could see a wolfish grin on his face. "Right, let's fuck them up, right? Won't even know what hit 'em."

"Sure, yea. Let's... let's do that."

- - - - -

Annabelle Belleflamme stumbled out of a mirror, and instantly fell to her knees and threw up. Horrid bile burned its way up her throat and emptied itself all over the abandoned, cracked tiles. The mirror behind her promptly shattered, showering her in broken glass, and leaving a few tiny cuts.

Then she doubled over again, clutching at her heart. It was beating so fast it *hurt*. Everything hurt. Her heart burned, her chest burned, her lungs burned, she felt like her entire being was lit up. A thousand ants crawling over every inch of her skin.

It was like being stabbed and set of fire and having one's heart broken all at once - and it took her a few minutes of steady breathing until her racing heart calmed down.

When she tried to, for the first time since waking up, take a deep breath, her lungs were filled with acrid, horrible air and she launched into a coughing fit. What the fuck was wrong with the air...? It was barely breathable. Full of horrid smog, smelling of long burnt fires and soot.

Was the air always this horrible?

Ann looked at the floor she kneeled on. Cracked tile. The walls of the building she found herself in were old and chipped, run down and broken. She- she knew where she was. She'd been here before, when she...

A splitting headache took root in her head, and she retched again, curling into a ball on the filthy floor. The hurt came crashing back in, waves upon waves of unfamiliar emotions. Broken bits of feeling, of hurt. She remembered, she forgot, she-

She forgot.

One breath, she remembered it all, and the next, all those memories were *ripped* out of her head, as if by a brutal hand. Now, they had been gone before. Who took them? Flashes of white passed in front of her eyes when she tried to recall that.

Who was she? Ann? That was- that was what they had called her. The ones she remembered.

There was so little. How had she *lived* like this?! Disgust rolled in her stomach as more feelings assaulted her.

Ann remembered just about three or four days of her life. Bright, vivid, gorgeous memories. Of stepping out of that mirror in this stinking, disgusting, broken down hovel. Of pulling a phone out of her pocket, fiddling with unfamiliar buttons. Of finding a message, from those people.

The people she remembered.

There were seven of them. Reya and Eric. Liam and Emilia. Matt and Marie. And then... Fio.

She remembered them. For the four days of her life, those people had been her entire world.

She slammed her hand into the decaying tile, cracking it further, shards of glass digging painfully into her fists. Waves of emotions crashed into her again, unfamiliar, sourceless emotions flooded her.

Three days. That was how long she had apparently known these people, yet they were all so familiar. Like years spent with them, just out of reach, just at her fingertips - and when she went digging for it there was nothing. Blank space, white flashes in her eyes and searing pain in her head.

Ann curled up into a ball, next to shards of glass and stomach bile and sobbed. She sobbed and sobbed for hours. She remembered it all so clearly. The laugh, the smiles, the hugs, and the fear. She was afraid of her secret getting out and now she didn't even remember the secret!

Instead she was back, all alone, in this broken, disgusting hovel. She screamed in rage and pain and frustration and fear. With desperation as her whole world slipped away from her, sliding like sand through the gaps in her fingers. She screamed until her throat was hoarse from the smog.

No one heard.

The floor was cold and uncaring. The last vestiges of winter were long gone, but in a palace like this? The cold stuck around ruthlessly. It dug into her open wounds, red dripping onto the cold tile.

And eventually, Ann's tears ran dry. She was drained of everything. All that was left was a horrid desire, a vast emptiness begging to be filled. She dug her fingernails into the floor, pushing herself up, mirror dust trickling from her clothes.

Behind her, the mirror had broken. The glass exploded away, leaving shards of it lodged in the frame, and a wooden backdrop. She touched her fingertips against that wood, ran it over the edges of the glass, cutting them and letting more crimson drizzle down the glass, covering her miserable visage.

Then she smashed a hole into the wood, too.

Ann screamed again. Of loss and misery and all the things she knew she loved that were now *gone*.

She screamed because she was alone, because she was lost and because she knew there was something she once had. Everything in the world she cared about suddenly gone except for those three days, so much care for these people she could hardly remember.

And Fio. Her *girlfriend*. She had come here to date her, come into this disgusting place of horrid stench and creeping cold to meet her beloved. She remembered their days together, her smell, her warmth, all the love she felt at her sight. The way she got lost in her eyes, how she loved playing with her hair, how she laughed, how she smiled-

Then, stinging white hot pain behind her eyelids.

Ann's knees buckled and she fell to the floor again, scraping her jeans open on the glass. Misery. There should have been a hundred more memories, of kisses, of touch, and of love, and yet she was *robbed* of them. Who the fuck took them?

Her feeling roiled, fear and despair and rage all into one big ball of loss and hurt. She wanted more. She wanted it all back. Ann clawed at the wooden backside of the mirror until her fingertips began bleeding more. She smeared streaks of red against the wood.

"Come on," she whispered. "Come on. Please. Give it back. *Give it back! Give it back!!*"

Feebly, she clawed at the wood, until eventually, surrounded by bile and dirt and broken dreams and shattered memories, she fell asleep. On an uncaring, cold floor.

It was, without a doubt, the worst day of her life. Ann held that thought brutally in her mind.

Because this one was the worst, tomorrow would be better.

Then, darkness replaced white pain, and the world faded briefly.

Chapter 119: Muscle - Memory

As every night before, Ann eventually woke up. She felt like absolute garbage. Each bone in her body ached from the hard floor, and somehow, that sensation felt strange. Like sleeping on a hard surface shouldn't bother her.

That, then, marked her first cohesive thought of the day, and it was instantly one dealing with her missing memories. Wrenching her tired eyes open, Ann pushed herself off the floor. She left behind some bloodstains from where the glass shards had cut her, but paid that no mind.

She took a deep breath - only to regret it instantly, coughing at the horrible air. She retched for a few moments, then shook her head, running her filthy hands through her hair. The red from the cuts wasn't as noticeable against the fiery red upon her head.

Summoning discipline she hardly knew she had, she forced herself to focus. Not on what she knew she'd lost, not on the pieces that were missing from her as a person, but on what she still knew.

First, she knew this place was a shithole. That memory was there. She'd picked it *because* it was abandoned and saw no humans visiting it, after all. Why had she needed a place like that she didn't remember.

Biting her lips, Ann forced her mind back on track. Almost robotically, she turned towards the exit to the disgusting hovel, a wooden door covered in dust and grime that had opened exactly twice in the last decade.

She pushed on the rusty handle, and nothing happened. Frowning, she channelled some of that pent up rage at her own incompleteness, and kicked the door.

That seemed to have an effect, sending the fragile wood swinging outwards with a crack and a groan. She'd probably damaged some of the hinges, but who gave a fuck at this point? Ann narrowed her eyes at the sky, expecting to see a sun and not finding it.

Only smog. A thick line of white and grey smoke and clouds blanketed the whole firmament, and rays of light only came down on the paved roads and towering buildings after filtering through the miasma.

Ann coughed again, feeling miserable. She still felt disoriented, and the horrendous air was not exactly improving that. Still, she focused, trying to remember. The streets were empty

just as she remembered them being. She had walked on them twice before, each time with equal parts trepidation and excitement.

What had she kept so secret? Just what-

Blinding pain rushed through her head, forcing her to drop the thought. Ann grimaced at the agony, then shook herself. She had goosebumps all over her body, and felt like shit. What memories did she have? There had to be something of use in there.

Going through what she knew, even just those few days, proved harder than she thought. Her mind felt fuzzy, like the memories she did have weren't properly rooted in there. She remembered having dropped off some of her stuff with some company, but she didn't remember where.

It was a fleeting moment, one done almost on autopilot. She had given them her suitcase, filled with all the clothes she had bought with Fio, as well as a plastic card that she'd used as money and her phone.

How strange. She didn't think that was normal. Most people kept their phones with them at all times. Why had she returned that? Or her money for that matter?

But those memories, the reasons for her actions, never came. Whenever she did something for seemingly no reason, when she remembered feeling something for no reason, she only grasped at empty air. There was nothing there. Bits and pieces of herself that were gone.

Again, it made her angry and frustrated and hurt and miserable, but Ann still focused. She didn't want to just sit down and sob. Not without something at least moderately comfortable. So, she combed through what she did remember.

And found something.

The address, the place she had spent some of her happiest times at, the place where her apparent girlfriend had lived. That place she had felt at home, felt wanted and loved and the place she had gone to with such trepidation.

She remembered where it was.

Like a lifeline, Ann clung to that memory. She knew where to go now. Where Fio lived. Maybe she could shed more light on the situation?

Before I went to fight again, I donned a mantle. It hadn't been there before, but now it was. It was translucent, and the fabric was soft but firm, like made from tiny strands of liquid glass. My last bit of growth from the fight against the giant, it had dropped an item.

[Treasure: Ephemeral Raiment

Owner: Fiona Bellum

Description: This cloak was woven by a man who disliked the order of the world. It was made with hatred for those who would suppress him. The Ephemeral Raiment bristles when struck with force, moving at its own pace only. The harder it is hit, the more it resists the blow. It twists light, capturing and mirroring it. Finally, deep within the cloak, power burns. The closer the wielder is to death, the more power it bestows upon them.]

I donned the treasure, and felt that it was made for me, laying itself onto my shoulders gently, the translucent fabric drifting lazily in the air. It was unbothered, but when Matt tried to poke it with his sword, the cape suddenly froze in mid air, not letting his sword through at all.

And, strangely, I didn't even feel any pressure from it. The force wasn't dispersed, it was simply resisted solely by itself, maybe shunted into another reality? The part of the cloak he stabbed glowed faintly with some strands of light, and I could feel it at my fingertips, ready to be turned into illusions or flashes of brightness to blind someone.

In short, the cloak suited me rather well.

Breathing deeply, I stretched out my hand and called Astraeus into it. The spear had mended, mostly, since I'd pushed all the Qi my wellspring generated into it for a few hours now. I still reinforced the damaged area specifically, but he would hold.

The spirit inside hummed as I held onto the weapon, seemingly eager to see me back on my feet again. "Missed you too, buddy," I said, and Astraeus chirped in response. I would fight, and then I would visit the divines, see about including more people into [Transference], and then I'd head to Neamhan for Ann.

Reya offered me a hand, and I gratefully took it, pulling myself up from the bed I was still seated on. She smiled and I nodded back at her, then the two of us went outside.

Matt and Chris were already there, preparing their weapons. Even the leyburn laid there. It gave me a long look, then huffed as if to tell me it was about dang time I got up again. I held back a snort in reply, but the joy died down quickly.

Everything still felt so damn numb. It was the best I could do to just stand and hold my weapon. But I would do it anyway.

Matt laid a hand on my shoulder softly. "Hey. You ready?" he asked.

I shakily nodded, but he responded with a bright smile. "Let's head out then."

This time, we weren't headed for the walls. Instead, we would be listening to [True Mirror], the ability that [Lost and Found] had been subsumed into. It resonated faintly, telling me the locations of other shards more accurately than the other technique ever did - and letting Cass access it, too.

[Marking it for you. Visual modification in progress.]

With my new skills, and some testing, she'd found out that she could alter what I saw a little. So, Cass had done me the favour of installing a minimap in the corner of my vision for when I tried to focus on it. Absolutely wild.

On that map, she now had a few dots show up, indicating the usurpers holding gateway fragments. They were much, much less plentiful now, with many of the other shard holders retreating to build nests or feed rifts.

The shards were necessary for those to some degree that was not quite fully transparent to me, but I didn't need to understand entirely. Luckily, the waves running against the city had finally abated a little.

It seemed as if the giant had been a rather substantial commander of the enemy force, so taking it out was a big blow and let the Edians evacuate much more freely. By now, the entire city was almost deserted, turned into an outpost for fighters with only the bare minimum manpower to sustain it.

A few people had stayed to prepare meals, and repair gear, but nothing much else. I discarded all of that, though, and stepped forward. Slowly, one foot in front of the other, we made our way through the winding streets.

They hadn't taken too much damage. That was what we had fought for, after all. I breathed in deep of the air, filled to the brim with energy. It all broke down and got absorbed into my own Qi.

My actions resonated with my path. Stride beyond inflicted Skies was about that, after all. Walking right at those who would try to keep you down, then smashing past them.

I clenched Astraeus, feeling nervous. Almost apprehensive. But I would fight, anyway, and soon we found our way to the city walls. At our arrival, we were celebrated as heroes. The ones who fought on par with the archmage, they called us. Despite the losses, the people felt like victory was at hand.

How strange it was, seeing their moods contrasted to mine.

There was one person upon that wall, though, who mourned just as heavily as me. Archmage Saif Zolycc sat in her wheelchair with a blanket over her legs, leaning back and watching the battles underneath unfold.

I walked up to her.

A long moment passed before she turned. "Ah, Fio." She sounded older now, sadder. Mourning. Grieving. "I am glad you're alive."

Her words rang true, despite it all. She did not blame us for the loss of her friend. It had been selfish of me to leave her like this for the last while, but... I thought it was okay to be a little selfish. Orvan had even asked me to.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I told her.

"Our loss, Fio," Saif told me with a sad smile. "You may have not known him for as long, but you knew him well. In all his facets. When he was caring, when he was happy, when he was angry. You got to see him die. How were those last moments?"

"If I remembered right, he said he 'refused to go out like a fucking chump', then cast the biggest meteor I'd ever seen, and learned how to keep his spells entirely harmless to allies at the same time," I told her.

Saif laughed. Her head tilted back, she barked out laughter towards the skies. "Bahahahaha! The fucking monster," she laughed. "What after? Was that the last thing he said?"

"No," I shook my head. "He survived for a little while longer. Until the threat was well and truly dealt with. He said-" I choked, feeling wetness on my cheeks. "He made me his inheritor. Told me I was like him. Told me to take my time, to stay headstrong, and to be kind to myself."

"Yeah," Saif said. "That's like him, alright." She reached up to her cheeks, wiping away some tears with each of her right arms. Then she barked out a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob. "Old fool. Thank you for telling me, Fio. I think he chose a good person to give his inheritance to."

I didn't know how to reply to that, so I just didn't.

For a few moments, the world was quiet, only a faint sound of wind accompanying us. Then, Saif raised both her right arms, pointing them at the crowd of usurpers below, and releasing an absolute torrent of mana, power, and wind.

Her storm magic crashed into the horde like a hurricane, sending bodies sprawling and breaking. The old archmage took a deep breath, then smiled at me. "This has given me some closure. I'll grieve Orvan for years to come, and there won't ever be a mage quite like him again. But that is the nature of death, isn't it."

"Yeah."

"I heard what happened with Ann," she then said.

My world broke a little, all over again. There was another version of me, at my fingertips, on her knees, sobbing atop that wall at the reminder. I could be that me, with just a single use of my new shifting ability, but I remained standing, tears gathering in my eyes. "So you did," I eventually got the words out.

"Ann used to be my primary communication with the divines, you know that? Back when there were still seven of them. This is the second time I've seen her die, now," she said, then sighed for a long moment. "Fio. Have some faith in her. She's strong. Fight for her, try to get her back, and know she'll meet you halfway there."

Unable to get out a single word in response, I just nodded.

Saif gave me an empathetic smile, and rolled a little closer to me, just so she could lay her cool hands onto my arm. "Take as long as you need, Fio. Fight when you feel ready. I'll watch over you."

Again I nodded. A long moment of silence elapsed, as I slowly worked through the thought and the numbness and the unending desire to just lay down and give up. Eventually, after a few minutes, the feelings abated somehow.

"Thank you, Saif," I said, simply.

"Go get 'em, Fio," she replied, still smiling.

Nodding, I jumped down into the horde of monsters. There was a ping close to the walls. My new essence roared through my veins as liquid gold, and feeding my sash, the Wanderer's Key, with that power, I stepped forward.

Instantly, the world bent and warped around me. The ability of my item magnified by the inherent property of my Qi, made for twisting reality, and travelling between them. It was as though I'd swapped with a version of myself that had started walking far earlier.

Matt, Reya, Chris and the leyburn were fighting, too, but I wanted to do this on my own. The usurper I faced in challenge for another bit of gateway strength was a twisted abomination standing twice as tall as me. It was made of a dozen razor sharp wings, connected by strands of crackling lightning.

I took a deep breath, grasping Astraeus tighter, and coursing my Qi through myself. I felt [Inexplicable Reinforcement] trigger in full force, power washing over me. The motions were familiar, and came easily, but I still tested myself.

Another version of me, after all, was currently applying different Qi shaping exercises to the Skill, courtesy of Orvan's inheritance. And whenever that Fio made some improvements, so would I.

The usurper didn't even know what was coming for it.

Channelling all my built up fury and frustration, I appeared before it, already leaning back, my spear held in one hand, and then I launched it, with all the power in my body, I tossed the weapon. Instantly, it shattered two of the creature's wings, bolts of lightning crackling in horrid screeches.

Then, I took hold of the empty air, as Astraeus came coursing back around, and fought the creature with a flying spear by my side and an invisible one in my hands. I would break it, thoroughly.

Chapter 120: Memento

The monster, a blur of electricity and razor sharp metal wings, was lightning fast. Each of its strikes brought about a gale of wind and lashed out at me with a thundercrack. It was like a dance. My Wanderer's Key warped the attacks faintly at a cost to my Qi, and I wove past them, avoiding the arcs of power by a tiny amount each time.

Whenever I dodged, Astraeus would fly forward and smash into a wing. If he didn't succeed or was parried, there would be an opening, too, and my mind spear would slam into it. I carved apart arcs of electricity with a weapon I was holding, dissecting the thing bit by bit.

Until it *exploded*.

Even that, though, I brushed aside. I pulled forward my Ephemeral Raiment, the cloak of liquid glass instantly absorbing all the electricity and fire. It gave off light, after all, so it was pulled into the glass, refracting a thousand times.

A moment later, I infused a little Qi into the cloak, and explosion was shot right back in a similar fashion to my [Reflection] ability. This was like an amplifier of that, though, and the blast that shot back out of my cloak was enough to take me off my feet, shattering dozens of metal wings.

Not that the blast bothered me. When my feet lived off the ground, I superimposed myself on the world. The parallel reality of me that had chosen to lunge at the monster after absorbing the blast swapped places with me, and suddenly I was right above the thing. I grabbed Astraeus out of the air, and brought both of my spears, the physical and the invisible ones, down on the monster.

More of its defenses faltered against me. Its limbs broke and shattered into useless scraps of metal and power. Dozens of wings twisted to meet me, but when they collided with my skin, [Inexplicable Reinforcement] shrugged off the blows.

The damage *happened*, but then I simply superimposed myself over it, forcing my flesh to become dozens of times tougher where it was struck. My body shone with liquid gold, and more Qi streamed out of me, my wellspring producing the torrents needed to sustain the effort.

With a scream, I charged all of it into Astraeus, wielding the weapon with both hands. The Qi passed through the spear, creating a blade that was much more physical than back when I used my golden core. Now, it transformed my spear into an enormous lance, which I brought down on the usurper.

Saying that it shattered wasn't enough. The creature was torn asunder right in front of me.

Each bolt of thunder was absorbed by my Qi expenditure, each bit of metal just short of liquified.

The usurper fell apart into bits.

I landed on the ground, standing on my feet, panting. It hadn't been that exhausting, really, at all. I still had plenty of Qi left, this battle had only taken about a third of my capacity. But I still panted, because of the adrenaline and the way the power coursing through me felt.

My Qi had always been tame. Not exactly easy to manipulate, but it was like drawing from a well. Now, it felt like a raging river.

With the way I existed in multiple realities, my Qi almost felt as though it was anticipating what I wanted it to do. A single thought with a bit of intent, and it would rush forward, barely restrained, fuelling abilities to do what they were meant to do - push me far beyond human limits.

It was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. Like the power could drag me along if I wasn't careful. The feeling was both one of control and cooperation as it was one of eagerness. Of course, by relying on my manipulation I could reign it in again, but this feeling was just... different from what I was used to.

Taking a few moments to compose myself, I kneeled down next to the mess of crackling slag and metal fragments, digging through it. The molten metal simply slid off my skin and I dug through it. The Qi inside it was mine, after all. It had trouble hurting me.

After some searching, and letting Astraeus take care of the few minor usurpers that tried to approach, I finally found the gateway fragment. I absorbed it, letting the power flow into me, and watched my gateway strength tick up again, increasing by one. It sat at 47, now. So very few points away from seeing Ann again.

I resumed the fight.

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Two more minor fragment holders died at our hands. I absorbed both, receiving only a single point in strength. 48.

Another day, maybe two, and I would be one with this. But I still had more to do today. After a quick, hour long sleep, I forced myself up again.

Of course, by then the misery had set in again. Without the adrenaline and muscle memory to take over, each movement was a terrible chore. My legs felt like someone had tied cinderblocks to them, but I moved anyway.

It was a slow trudge through the city. By now, it was almost deserted. The few faces that saw me smiled and waved, thinking of me as a hero. I sure didn't feel like one. Pulling up the hood of my glass cloak, it turned opaque, refracting the light to appear an unassuming brown.

With that measure in place, even the few friendly waves I got ceased. It was a quiet walk, letting me wallow a little. And then, I was at the temple.

By now, so many people had fled that the queues were short. The people who were still here had mostly received the Gift, though, so there were a reasonable amount of priests, healers, and praying soldiers about. Some were injured, too. It was the background noise of a field hospital mixed with the serenity of a temple.

Slowly, ever so carefully, I walked up to the altar, and placed a hand on the tombstone that I knew represented Hir.

‘Fio,’ they said, greeting me. ‘I am so sorry-’

At that, I flinched. ‘Save it, please,’ I managed to just about grind out. ‘I don’t- I can’t right now. I do not have the capacity for that. Please.’

The divine remained silent for a long moment. ‘Of course,’ the answer eventually came. Their voice was a little more formal. ‘Your achievements are commendable. Your class ascension has taken much of your contribution, though. Are you here to purchase anything?’

Gently, I shook my head. ‘No. I wish to make an offer.’

‘Oh?’ Hir asked, their curiosity piqued. ‘What kind?’

If someone had told me I would be negotiating with the divines just a year ago, I would have laughed at them. Yet, here I was. I had something to offer they would want. And I had earned their respect. So, I made my offer.

‘[Transference] has open slots. I can afford to integrate all your archmages into it. Maybe a few more people afterwards, too,’ I said.

Stunned silence. A dozen seconds passed, and I guessed Hir was in heavy debates with the other divines. Maybe already sending out requests for the archmages to gather here as quickly as possible.

‘To clarify,’ the words eventually came, ‘being part of your [Transference] means receiving a share of the talents of all other members, as well as the ability to get unique items made from the remains of monsters which are soulbound and can be traded?’

I nodded. ‘That’s about right. I don’t know about any future benefits yet, but those are the current ones.’

‘We will call the archmages over. How many people can your network accept?’ they asked.

That question was a little more complicated. I had, until now, viewed it in terms of slots, but that wasn't quite true. Some people held more conceptual weight than others. So, I wasn't quite clear how many more people I would be able to hold after the archmages. After all, if it were purely based on slots, I could simply have the divines join the network.

And that was impossible. They would be far too conceptually heavy for me to share their talents. The archmages though? That was possible now. 'Maybe a few more people after the archmages No more than five others. Even that is a guess at best.'

Hir gave me a hum of confirmation with their chorus of voices. Then another bit of silence. 'We have picked our candidates,' they said eventually. 'Each of the divines will pick an angel for you to integrate. They are weaker than the archmages, so this should be possible, yes?'

'Sure,' I shrugged, not really knowing. 'It'll probably work.'

'Good. My choice is Iryel. As he is the more near and has more than proven himself worthy of this boon. He will be here soon. So will the archmages. We ask that you stay in the temple until procedures are finished,' they said.

I nodded, 'Alright.'

With that, I removed my hand from the altar, strolled over to one of the benches in the temple and plonked down heavily. The weight was back, and it was crushing. I pulled Astraeus out of my inventory, running a finger along the side of the blade. I saw my own reflection in it.

The Fio in that reflection looked like a mess. I blinked, then gave a sad smile. Tapping into my new abilities, I manifested a second reality where I was currently taking a shower. By the time this was all done, I would be able to superimpose that Fio over me, and look a little less like I'd been dragged through a sewer.

I let out a sigh, holding my face in my hands. My hold on the ability trembled as I wondered why I even bothered. But I held on, because that was all I could do.

Eventually, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up.

Iryel stood there, tired as usual, but there was a thin smile on his lips. "I've been told you have a gift for me, Ms. Fio."

Seeing a smirk on his sunken face, even with the circles under his eyes, I couldn't help but brighten up a tiny bit, too. "Yeah, I do. Give me your hand. And a needle, I need some of your blood," I said.

“... Okay?”

“Ah, and a bit of your hair. I’ll need a handful, please,” I told him, deadpan.

Iryel now looked somewhat worried. “Uh, Ms. Fio, that sounds a little sinister...”

“You can drop the honorifics,” I told him. “We’ve been over this.”

“Right, right,” Iryel nodded. “Force of habit. But is this really necess-”

Before he could finish the question, I snatched up his hand, and integrated him into the network. Instantly, I felt another talent blossom in that not-space, impacting my perspective on the world. [Diligence], it was called. It allowed you to excel at your duties, even when exhausted, and you would improve faster the more dedicated you were.

Iryel’s experience, on the other hand, was having the collective talents of everyone in the network flood into him. Everyone else’s hard work. And, surprising me, a little bit of Orvan’s [Stargazer] seemed to flow into him, too.

The angel’s eyes widened. He stiffened for a moment, his pupils dilating. Then he stared at me, probably seeing the stars. He looked up, where the divines burnt like suns in the sky. A tear trickled down his cheek. Iryel smiled, and for a moment, all that tiredness seemed to vanish from his face.

“What a delightful gift,” he said, giving me the most genuine, sad smile I had ever seen on him. “Thank you.”

“You were close with Orvan, weren’t you?” I asked.

Iryel smiled. “I am older than I look. Yes, we were close. For a while, we had a thing, but for most our lives, we were good friends. Losing him has been painful. This...” He looked at himself, placing a hand on his chest. “What a wonderful memento.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder. “Sorry for your loss.”

His smile turned even sadder at that. “Ah, it was but a matter of time. Everyone will die someday. Orvan and I knew this day was coming. He’d actually asked I hold onto his inheritance when he died, until there was someone worthy. I suppose that wasn’t needed in the end.”

We let the silence hang in the air for a little while. After a bit, Iryel took a deep breath and wiped his cheeks. The thin streams of wetness vanished as though they’d never been there.

“For what it is worth, I’m sorry for your loss, too. I’ve been struggling to express that empathy, but it’s warranted.”

“I’ll get her back,” I told him, not believing the words.

“There’s no doubt about that,” Iryel said, much more sure than I was. “I fear for anyone in your way.”

Having nothing to answer, I just smiled and nodded. Iryel sat down on the bench next to me, not speaking either. He just sat there, quietly, patiently, and somehow, I appreciated his companionship.

Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes, before the next person I should deal with appeared. In fact, it was multiple all at once.

A rift in space tore open, and ten people walked out. Six archmages of Eden. Four angels of the divines. I took a deep breath, bracing myself to face them.

Ann made her way through the half-familiar streets. It was so strange. They were so dim, despite the sun in the sky. It was a gloomy, grey concrete jungle. Everywhere she looked, she saw more deserted buildings. Dozens of them stood empty, only a few of them having the lights on.

There was a constant humming in the background as what she remembered being air filters ran to clean the air in those houses. Occasionally, a car would drive by her. One, filled with boys, honked at her and slowed down, but she was quickly left alone when she dipped down a side alley. It took a few seconds of quiet before her fingers loosened around the brick she’d been holding onto.

Ann found herself jumping at almost every noise. The lack of memories made her feel even more on edge. It felt like being so *powerless* was unfamiliar - but she also didn’t understand how she could be stronger? She was just human, after all. Reasonably fit, sure.

White pain began building at the back of her head again, so Ann dropped the thought, focussing on placing one foot in front of the other as she walked down the streets. Only one more awkward moment followed, where she was almost run over when trying to cross the road at an intersection.

Then, after about an hour or two of walking, she found herself in front of the house she remembered.

Ann was cold. It was an early spring morning but the winter chill still hung in the air and her fingers were numb. She wore a thin shirt and a jeans jacket over it - not exactly clothing made for this.

Gently, she brought up her fingers and knocked on the door. No one answered. Of course no one did. Shaking her head, Ann turned to the doorbells. And she discovered that the symbols there were entirely unfamiliar.

That was... strange. She distinctly remembered being able to read. Yet, here she was. And everything there was unintelligible.

Slowly, she raised her hand, and simply picked one at random. Waited a few seconds. Nothing.

Ann tried again. Nothing.

On her fifth ring of a doorbell, someone picked up. "Hello?" came the voice through the speaker.

"Hello? I'm here to visit a friend," Ann said, unsurely.

"You musta gotten the wrong button," came the answer. "I didn't exactly invite anyone over."

"Ah! I'm a... foreigner," she said, and it felt true. "I can't... read."

The voice replied with a scoff. "You speak mighty fine for being unable to read."

Ann clenched her fists. "Please," she said. "Please. I'm... I just need to see her."

This time the pause was a lot longer. Then, came a bit of dull yelling, and when the speaker sounded again, Ann heard an old woman. "Sorry young Ms., my grandson is a bit of a donkey. Here, here, let me help you in."

Then came the telltale buzzing sound, and Ann pushed open the door. It clicked, and she gave a quick "thank you" to the old woman, who laughed her off. The door swung shut behind Ann.

She gave a quiet sigh, looking at the stairwell. It was both sterile and a little run down. Stark white, but the paint had chipped a little, tiny pieces of it crumbling onto the stairs themselves. Ann remembered it. Hesitantly, she set foot on the first stair.

Feelings she barely understood welled up within her. Hope, despair, fear, anxiety. The first time she'd ascended that staircase was so vivid in her memories, and the second time was even worse.

Ann felt her heart clench. It thrummed in her chest like an engine. By the end of the first flight, she had sped up. By the end of the second one, Ann was desperately sprinting up the stairs. She was out of breath, hungry, and dehydrated, but she still felt like she *needed* to run. *Needed* to know what was at the top of that staircase.

More steps disappeared underneath her feet, flight by flight - until she stopped dead.

She recognized the door. It was... no different than any of the others, but it had burned itself into her eye, because of who waited behind it. It was a little scuffed up, and had a little mat to clean your shoes in front of it, saying "let me be very queer".

Yes, that was just like her Fio, Ann thought with a smile. Then her heart skipped a beat. "Her" Fio? She barely knew this woman. Biting her lip in conflict, Ann walked up to the door.

She hesitated. Her heart beat so intensely she thought she might suffocate. She took a deep breath, and brought her knuckles against the wood, tapping it loudly thrice.

Then she flinched, remembering that there was a doorbell. Holding her breath, she waited. For a few seconds there was silence. Then shuffling. Her heart lightened.

More clicks, and then the door was open, and Ann felt incredible elation. For a brief moment, she thought the person behind that door might be Fio. All the features were in place... but things were wrong. Fio had shorter hair. Fewer wrinkles. Fio was taller, more fit. And... her eyes weren't green.

The person who was *not* Fio eyed Ann up and down with a frown, then clicked her tongue. She crossed her arms. "Hello, who are you?" Agatha asked.

Ann froze. The words were stuck in her throat. "Uh... is- this flat. It belongs to Fio- Fiona Bellum, right?"

No-Fio tilted her head. "You know my daughter, then?"

The breath caught in Ann's throat. "Y-yes. I, uh. I'm her girlfriend, I think?"

Agatha eyed her suspiciously. "You think, huh?" Then she seemed to catch herself, drawing in a hissing breath of air. She muttered something about dragons to herself, then gave the most crooked smile Ann had ever seen. "You uh... seem like you had a rough time. Would

you like to come in? I'm sure I can get you some water. Maybe some food from... somewhere."

And that is how Ann met her mother-in-law.

Chapter 121: Hope for Tomorrow

One after another, I looked at the archmages.

Saif Zolycc, war mage, a wind spirit in a wheelchair. Her hair floated behind her in the air, her eyes of radiant purple boring into me with kindness. She had two right arms, both her left ones missing. Her legs were covered by a blanket.

Erasmus Pulie, the seer, a human whose head was shaved bald and whose eyes were milky and dull. He wore plain white robes, but his old skin was dotted with pale scars.

Lyria Kiryel, space mage. Her clothing was purple and embroidered with gold and silver. Her hair was a dull black with threads of grey weaving into it, done up into long braids. She had piercing, intense eyes.

Finnyr Jun'pey, arcane mage, a triz-adu. Their shell that Fio would speak to was that of a beastblood, a tall, bat-like creature with long limbs and a small pair of wings folded around themselves. They wore simply, unadorned clothes, as though they had just thrown them over. Their eyes were a dull grey, scanning Fio already.

Klein, life mage, and true beastblood. He stood in the body of a bear, massive paws, steel armor. The man looked like a living bulwark. His eyes were a crimson red, yet his posture was faintly hunched, as if trying to appear small. He looked uncaring.

Calio Calico, barrier mage, and undead. She was a lich, the skin wrapped tightly around her skeleton, all muscles long since replaced by magic. Her body was a grafted one, shaped by herself, standing far taller than any of the others and floating faintly. Her eyes were a dim green and looked at me with curiosity.

I took a deep breath, letting their presences settle. They were heavy. I could almost smell what they were like. One was wild, another afraid... excited, lazy, nervous, curious. The archmages. So unfathomably powerful, yet so human.

Within each of their chests blazed a galaxy. Not some paltry solar system, but dozens of radiant stars. Each of them had woven themselves a *legend*. Something to look up to, something that placed them close to the night sky.

Now, they were just an arm's reach away.

"Stop staring like that, girl," Calio spoke, without moving her jaw. Her voice was a long hum that remained in the air for a few seconds, like a chord on a harp. I got the distinct feeling that she was not actually upset.

Iryel stepped forward. "Archmages," he said. "This is Fio. Defender of Eden, gateway user, and inheritor of Archmage Orvan Dreyfa. She-

"Yes, yes," Finnyr waved. "Lovely. Can we get this over with?" they had a melodic voice, calming and soft.

The other angels shot them a glare, but the archmage didn't even seem to notice. That's when my gaze turned to the angels.

I smirked a little. They were just like the gods they embodied. Ru's angel wore armor and wielded a bloody mace, with her long hair and the furs draped over her shoulder she looked like a viking. Archiva's champion was a studious young man, wearing a pair of glasses and holding a book.

Lurelia's angel was smaller, with kinder eyes. They had shoulder length hair, and seemed a little fidgety at the budding conflict. Argus' angel was a man draped in flowers and vines, holding a watering can.

"Now, now," Lurelia's angel said with a squeaky voice. "If you don't interrupt, it'll go faster."

Finnyr clicked their tongue faintly, but didn't seem at all annoyed, really. They didn't need to move particularly much for a moment, which they seemed to enjoy, laying down in the air on a mattress they held afloat. "Fine then," they waved their hand a little. "Go on."

This time, rather than letting Iryel speak, I stepped forward myself. "I have an ability that allows me to let people access each others' talents to a degree. I will now include you in it, one by one. Who wants to go first?"

Erasmus stepped forward, with no hesitation. The blind man looked at me and gave me a faint smile. He'd known me for longer than the others, having been a friend of my master. "I shall begin, then, Fio."

With a quick nod, I grasped the old man's shoulder, and included him in [Transference].

Instantly, a new talent blossomed within my chest. This one seemed rather synergistic with my new abilities. It was called [Intuition], and generally let you predict what might happen a few seconds in the future based on data in your immediate vicinity. Could I use this with my parallel reality-

Before it even happened, I saw Saif roll forward. My eyes locked onto her, and she hesitated. Erasmus smiled. "It worked well, then," he said, stepping back. Saif looked between us and then grinned.

"Me next, Fio," she said, voice raspy. A few moments later, she, too, joined the network, and her talent fell unto me like a raging storm. [Unbroken], it said. Something to stop you from ever snapping, that made your willpower into a sword, that let you never back down or bow.

It was a demanding talent, and I felt a question of worthiness bud in between. But then, it was silenced. My [Iron Will] was more than enough.

Saif let out a wide grin and a laugh as she rolled back into line. "Incredible. What a strange world we live in."

The next person to come to me was Calio, the lich. Her curiosity was apparent as she stared at me, eyes wide and unblinking. "Go ahead," she said.

I included her in the network. [Researcher], her talent was called, and it allowed my perception to simulate experiments and analyze creatures. It was, in short, any scientist's dream, and I got the feeling she truly did treat magic as science.

As she floated back, she waved her own hand in front of her face, staring at it. "How strange," she muttered. "How curious." Already a pen floated beside her, scribbling notes into a journal.

Finnyr came next, though they asked me to step up to the mattress. This one went quick, their talent settling like a pillow in a corner, soft and unnoticed. [Sloth], it was called, a talent to store power and increase growth rate when resting or sleeping.

After that, there were only Klein and Lyria left, whose talents were [Sympathy] and [Gridwork] respectively. The first was a healer's dream, showing wounds and pains and aches whenever willed, and the second showed all the space in the world like a grid to be manipulated.

I smiled. These talents were *powerful*. An incredible edge to have even a single one of them, and although I could feel I wasn't getting their full effects, I didn't need to. Each of the archmages themselves seemed rather stunned at the effects, many of them smiling or investigating.

Checking my remaining space, the archmages had taken up quite a lot, but there should still be enough for the angles. Archiva's provided [Archive], a talent to help catalogue, compare and codify information. Ru's provided [Spirited], a talent that made passionate attacks faster and stronger.

Argus' chosen provided [Grace], letting one stride unobstructed by the terrain, and Lurelia's angel shared [Teardrop], which increased effectiveness of healing if the healer cared about you.

Finnyr looked at the world with their new perspective, waving a hand again, and flapping their wings once. The lazy triz-adu sat up on the mattress. "This was worth it," they said. "So convenient. [Adaptable] makes the bed feel softer."

Lyria rolled her eyes at them. "Come now. Back to fighting," she said.

"I'll have you know I already am," they countered. "My other bodies are still out there doing just that. Frankly, compared to you slackers, I'm a far harder worker," they said with a shrug. Then, they flopped back down on the bed. "Just kidding~"

The lich, Calio, flicked their head with a thin finger. "Intemperate child. Your words are to be kept inside."

Finnyr didn't even bother to reply, just showing her their middle finger. I blinked at that. How had they picked that up?

Klein let out a rumbling sigh at their antics. "Come now. There are people suffering. Let us go about our duties again." He looked at Lyria and gave her a nod.

The sorceress shrugged, then raised her hands, and I felt the world twist in front of her. Nine portals opened up, one for each archmage and angel except Iryel and Saif. She gave me another look. Then she smiled. "Thanks for the help, Fio. Fight well. Survive."

One after another, the most powerful defenders of Eden stepped back through the portals to go about their duties. Some reluctantly, some with more zeal. In the end, it was just me and Saif and Iryel still in the chamber.

“Well,” the older woman rasped. “Guess I’ll go kill some more things.” She smiled a crooked smile at me and for once, her age showed, Really showed. The wrinkles, the scars, the exhaustion on her face... And then it vanished, and in front of me was Saif Zolycc, archmage, unbroken and never bowing.

Slowly, she spun around, then gave me a wave, and a moment later her wheelchair was picked up by a gust of wind, and she was out. Leaving me and Hir’s angel alone.

Iryel looked at me. For a long moment, he just looked. Then he laid a hand on my shoulder, and smiled. It was the most honest, saddest smile I’d ever seen him give. “Your guild’s waiting out there for you, Fio. Go. Get those last shards. Make your way back to where you need to be.”

I returned the expression, shakily. I felt heavy, and with [Transference] so nearly filled up, it was like another weight in my chest. My heart beat steadily, fighting against the rising tide of morose gloom stuck to it like webs.

Very slowly, I breathed in, then out. A long string of breath passed through my lips and out into the world, forever changed with the new talents. I stood, leaning on Astraeus and holding the weapon so tight my knuckles turned white. Still, I nodded.

“Yeah. Time to put an end to this all.”

And I strode out of the temple, under the dark sky. There were bits of glass I needed to collect.

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Ann sat in a familiar kitchen she’d only once been in, at a familiar table she’d only once really sat at. Her hands were wrapped around a glass of water, shaking faintly.

Across from her sat Agatha. A woman she felt like she so intimately understood. Ann *knew* she was rude. That she had no respect of boundaries, that she was often cold, a know-it-all, stubborn, and a dozen other traits.

This not-Fio in front of her felt so distant yet so familiar. She didn’t know the woman. Yet she remembered all these details about her and none of the conversations those details came up in and if she *tried* to focus then there was the white hot pain and-

She took a deep breath. And a shaky sip of water. Physically, Ann felt like garbage. By now, the adrenaline had worn off, and the fact that she had slept on shards of broken glass was

setting in. She had dozens of tiny cuts. Her hands ached from hitting the floor. All of her bones ached.

Each sensation was stranger than the last. They felt so normal, so common, yet the pain was also something she could just place aside. Isolate and shove to the brink of her mind. Yet, somehow, she felt like she shouldn't get hurt from it. Like she had never been hurt by sleeping on the floor before. Why were her bones so fragile?

Agatha sighed faintly and muttered a few words, too quiet for Ann to hear, for the umpteenth time. Then she rose. "I will see about grabbing some bandages for you. And disinfectant. We can talk after."

Her words, as always, left no room for arguing, not that Ann particularly wanted to. In a second, Agatha was already up and out of the kitchen. She'd only sat with Ann for so long to make sure she wasn't a danger, either to herself or to anyone else.

So, Ann sat. Drinking water from a glass she carried in shaky hands, smelling the air of a place that was so familiar yet so distant. Full of emotions she could hardly parse or place. It was agony, a deep knot in her stomach that she couldn't ever touch.

Ann let her head rest against the wood of the table, giving a groan. She hated this, hated it all.

She heard footsteps approach the kitchen. "Alright, give me your hand," Agatha commanded.

Lethargically, Ann complied. The older woman sprayed something onto her cuts that burnt faintly. "Other one. I'll disinfect them now, then you can take a shower, then we'll disinfect them *again*, and I'll bandage you up." She paused for a moment, looking at the filthy clothes. "I'm guessing Fio won't mind if you borrow one of her shirts, either."

Ann nodded morosely. One by one, she got the spray into her wounds. Then, Agatha showed her the bathroom. Ann had showered there before, of course. She remembered everything. Where Fio kept the shampoo, how to use the unfamiliar metal handles, all of that.

Agatha had pressed a bundle of clothing into her hands, too, taking care not to come into contact with the filth she was currently wearing. Ann laid those aside for when she was done, then undressed.

The hot water hit her skin and burnt. She turned it cooler, but only faintly, still feeling the sting. It hurt when it hit the cuts. It hurt when it hit her skin, but the warmth felt familiar in a way she could not describe.

When she felt that heat it made her feel a little more complete. Like the bit that had been carved out of her could somewhat be substituted by this external bit of fire. Fire? What was she thinking. Hot water is all it was.

Breathing slowly, Ann went about scrubbing off the dirt. It felt familiar, like she had been covered in dust often. What kind of job did she work as? Some kind of archeologist? That seemed off but not... too off? Pain bloomed again and she dropped the thought.

She washed her hair, too. Clumps of blood and dirt sliding down the drain in a red-brown slough. It felt gross, but slowly, bit by bit, Ann felt better. The shower made it a little easier to think, the heat helped her clear her thoughts.

Eventually, when the hot water was running out, Ann sighed and left the shower. She dried herself off quickly, threw on Fio's clothes - and for a moment, enjoyed that they smelled a little like her - and then stepped back outside.

Agatha quickly rushed over, and regarded Ann's dripping hair with a scowl for a moment before wiping it off her face. "Come, come," she said, waving her over. "Let's get you bandaged. I don't wanna clean blood out of more clothes."

With a nod, Ann followed and they did just that. A good half hour was spent disinfecting, dressing, and bandaging her minor cuts. Most were on her palms and knuckles, but there were a few around her neck and forearms and ankles. She was a tattered mess, in more ways than one.

But, despite her snide remarks and snippy attitude, Agatha did bandage her up. Though there was more than one time Ann considered that just jumping out the window and sleeping on the street might be preferable to the comments.

In the end, it came down to one question. "What happened to you?" Agatha asked.

At that, Ann looked at her, and the dam broke. Tears welled up in her eyes, and her world turned blurry. She laughed a hoarse, hollow sob. Like the world wasn't already incomprehensible enough, now she couldn't even see it properly.

There were a long, endless few seconds where Ann just sobbed, holding her own face, wetness staining the clean clothes. Half a minute passed until Agatha finally moved and hugged her.

"It's okay," she said. Ann knew she didn't mean it. Her voice was strained. Agatha hated this. Hated needing to help, needing to be there for someone, not being in the fucking center. And she didn't know how she knew all of that but she *did* and Ann hated that so much more than anything else.

"It's okay," Fio's mom repeated. "Take your time."

Ann didn't feel like she had time. Felt like she was under pressure, like there was a weight suffocating her. What happened to her? She wished she knew!

She choked out another sob, burrowing her face in her hands. "I don't- I don't know," she eventually got out, voice hoarse and throat dry. "I don't remember. I just- I don't remember. It's all gone. All gone."

The young woman bit the inside of her lips hard enough to taste blood. It hurt, and she hated that, too, and she hated that she didn't understand anything. Fuck. It all hurt so bad.

"That's okay," Agatha said, her voice shaking faintly. She was so out of her element it made Ann wanna laugh, but it turned into a rueful choking sob again.

"I- uh," the older woman paused, letting go of Ann. "I made something to eat while you showered. You should- you should eat."

Fucking pathetic. Ann sobbed again, sniffing and wiping her face, only to have tears replaced by new ones. Agatha had cooked a chili. It was easy to make from canned food, after all. It tasted mediocre, and Ann's tears fell into it as she kept crying, but she ate. And she drank more water.

And by the end of it, Ann was so tired that she just collapsed into Fio's bed.

It still smelled like her. Like the girlfriend she remembered so little of. It smelled like love and like the best few days of her life and like loss and like fear and like secrets and like trust and like white hot pain blossoming in her chest and gripping her until she couldn't breathe anymore.

Ann screamed into the pillow. But she was so tired from crying that she still, even with all the grief and loathing and hurt... fell asleep. She hoped, hoped so dearly, that she might wake

up with her memories intact. That someone, *anyone*, would come and just give it all back. She hoped.

Chapter 122: It's finally over

I fought.

Y'know, it's a strange thought now. Back then, everything had been so difficult. It had taken every ounce of willpower I could muster to even drag my tired body out there to fight at all. Yet, now? Looking back at it, it doesn't seem that hard.

In a way, it wasn't really. After all those talents from the archmages? My world had shifted again. No one in the wellspring realm was a match for me. Maybe Matt, who had similar benefits, but that was it.

After all of the fighting, after all the moments I almost died, I was so close. Through [Transference] I'd established what was probably a group of the most talented individuals anyone had ever seen. Most people had one talent, maybe two. Someone like my brother, Ivan, had multiple.

Once in a century geniuses like Orvan or Matt often had very powerful talents, too. But in the end, their number was still a good indicator.

By now, I'd amassed *five*. Just by myself. [Slight Edge], [Single-Minded], [Superimposed Experience], [Precipitous Wings], [Budding Nova].

I'd acquired three of those through my own experiences, and two through lucky encounters and the grace of others. Still, five talents were enough to put me up there with the geniuses. The prodigies.

But I didn't just have five. With everyone in the network, I had over twenty. The six archmages, the five angels, and all the members of our party. Except Ann, and maybe Eric if he still counted.

Sure, they didn't work to their full efficacy. Being shared through [Transference] caused some losses, after all, but that was fine. I didn't need the full effects. Half of an archmage's talent was still worth two regular ones, to be quite honest.

So. Purely based on those numbers, I had set myself up for success. My growth sped up enormously, and I came out of that bloodbath a different person than I went in.

The usurpers hadn't just broken against me, the tides hadn't just been halted. They'd downright *shattered*.

Thinking back on it, it was kinda terrifying. Astraeus guided my swings, and sometimes I'd use that invisible spear made from my willpower. I had no blind spots. I could teleport if needed. Any attack that was unavoidable, I'd just reflect right back where it came from, and if through all that something still landed, the attack was just erased by [Inexplicable Reinforcement].

And then, I still had items of terrifying power. I didn't even need to try. Whenever I swung, even with just casual effort, the raw force of my weapon, willpower and Qi would cleave anything in my path.

Eventually, I even got a little lazy about it. There were usurpers in between me and the next fragment holder? I'd just extend my spear a dozenfold with Qi, liquid gold crystallizing into a solid, then carve through the masses.

Like a scythe through wheat.

With apathy, I cut through the usurpers. I was worn out, honestly. Short on compassion, now. So as ever more of the creatures crawled from the rifts, I cut them down.

Somewhere on the battlefields, my companions raged as well. Each member of our party had grown enormously, each one of them a force of nature in their own right. But I didn't look. Didn't need to.

Because it was easy for me, and so it was easy for them. Quite frankly, there was nothing on this battlefield that could have substantially hurt any of us anymore. Not that many of us were in Eden. Matt, Reya, Chris and me. That was all.

And we were all that was needed.

A day passed. Then another, and as I took the final shard, I heard the chime.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **50**
- Fragments: **61**
- Figments: **7**

- **Manifestations: 1]**

My gateway strength had finally crossed that threshold, creeping over the fifty mark.

Not daring to hope too soon, I turned to Cass. 'Run the calculations one more time, could you?'

[Running,] she said. And for a long, quiet moment, I waited for the answer. My Qi was heavy enough to crush any weakling usurpers who charged at me. I just stood there, and waited, eyes closed, feeling the wind on my skin, smelling the faint odor of iron.

[Confirmed. Fifty strength should keep up entirely intact while going back to Neamhan.]

I breathed out. A single tear streaked down my cheek. The wind tousled my hair.

The change had rippled through my entire being but I didn't dare listen to its whispers yet. A new tab had been added. Manifestations. I could tell, kind of, what they were, but I didn't care right now.

"I'm done," I whispered, turning my eyes towards the sky. And then, it happened.

A single ray of sunlight touched my cheek.

A faint, tiny hint of radiance and warmth against my closed eyelids.

I opened my eyes, looking, and it was true. The world lurched and shifted. The edges of the darkness receded. It felt a little more stable suddenly. A tiny ray of sunlight shone down.

Everything seemed to freeze. The world held its breath. I stared at it, silently, my mouth faintly open.

"It's over," I whispered.

My spear fell out of my hands, and I dropped to my knees in the filth. I held out my hands as if to catch the sunlight. I cried, bawling, wet drops streaking down my cheeks. "Ha. Hahaha. Hahahahaha!" I laughed. "It's over. It's over!"

Behind me, distantly, on the wall, the soldiers erupted into cheers. The usurpers seemed skittish, many of the creatures sniffing the air and looking at the sky, squinting. It was still dark, still dreary, but the faintest hint of sunlight had finally entered the world again. Things were gonna be alright. Things were gonna be alright.

- - -

A long, long moment passed like that. Then the soldiers got up to what they did best: fighting.

For the first time in weeks, no, *in months*, Eden pushed back the tide of usurpers. We fought for a little while longer, but Saif soon floated down and clapped me on the shoulder.

"I'll take it from here," she said. "You've done enough."

She did not have to tell me twice.

- - -

When I stood before the gateway, another version of me had showered. I was clean. I was ready. For the first time in days, I felt light. Ready.

Matt stood there, Reya and Chris right next to him. Olivia stood a little to the side, still eyeing me with some suspicion. I took a deep breath then faced all of them. "Thank you," I said. "I couldn't have done it without you."

Chris smiled, first. "You have my gratitude, as well," the triz-adu said, giving me a deep bow. "I may be unable to accompany you back, but I consider you a friend now. I look forward to your return to Eden." Then they smiled a somewhat sad yet confident expression. "Until then, I'll have buried my past ghosts. Literally."

"Good luck, friend," I replied.

Matt gave them a light pat on the back. "Go get 'em," the swordsman encouraged, then turned to me. "I'm looking forward to seeing you on Neamhan, then," he said with a grin. "Will take me a day or two to make it to your city, though. See if you can't spend a night with Ann until then. I'll book a hotel."

I snorted at that. He was being ridiculous. Still, I nodded. "Right, Matt. I'll be seeing you. Thanks, for being my friend."

"Of course, dummy. Always." He let the words linger for a moment, then turned around. "I'll be going ahead, yeah? See you soon."

"See you soon."

Reya turned to me next, signing. I recognized some of what she showed me. Was it... something about her brother. Ah. She would want to visit Eric.

“She’ll try to convince her idiot coward brother to come visit, too, she says,” Chris helpfully translated, and I gave a snort.

“Right. Go ahead, Reya. See you on the other side.”

In response, the mute girl gave me a smile, kissed her fingertip, and placed it on my cheek. Then she rushed off, soon catching up with Matt who was still strolling ahead. I smiled. She was rather sweet.

Finally, that left Olivia. I turned to the swordswoman, and she looked back at me, arms crossed. “So,” I said.

“So,” she said.

“What’s next?”

She looked at me for a long moment, then let out a long sigh. “These last weeks have been the longest of my life. But also the most changing. I’ll go back. I’ll... see about meeting you, but no guarantees. We’ll figure it out, somehow. Got a bit of communication in your network now, yeah?”

“Sure,” I said. “What’ll you do on Neamhan?”

“Get my worthless life back under grips,” she said. It was a serious tone, like she genuinely meant it. I heard remorse and willingness to change. “And bring those worthless Zinnic fucks down a peg,” she added with a snarl.

That sounded about right. I smiled faintly. “Alright,” I said.

“Alright? That’s it?” she raised an eyebrow.

“Yep,” I said. “I don’t trust you, Olivia. I don’t even think you’re a good person. But you’ve been trying. With Orvan, now with us.”

She flushed slightly, but then shrugged and looked away. “Well. Just thought it was worthwhile. Orvan seemed worth it, and, frankly, so do you.”

I knew that those words meant a lot, remembering her covenant. So I smiled, walked up to her, and hugged her. It was a brief motion, only lasting for a second, and she froze solid like a statue made from ice in my arms, but it was one I thought appropriate. I was a little overwhelmed at the time.

“Cool,” I told her, letting her go. “See you around, Olivia.”

“Yeah. See you around.”

Then, with a last wave to her and Chris, I stepped through the gateway.

Ann woke up to a knock at the door. She felt like shit. Her throat was raw from screaming. Her skin felt raw from heat. Her bones still ached, her cuts had settled into that dull pain that only days-old wounds can ever inflict.

She groaned, then tossed, burying her head into the pillow, tuning the world out. It didn't matter. Not yet. It could all wait, just a little.

The dull hum of the air filter was interrupted by yet another knock at the door. It wasn't her door, not the bedroom, but that of the flat in general. Grimacing, Ann dragged herself up. She didn't know if Agatha was awake yet.

By the time she was in the middle of putting on more presentable clothes, there was a third, louder set of knocking, and footsteps down the hall. Agatha's footsteps. They were very distinct, loud and quick and click-clacky.

When Ann was pulling her shirt over, she heard Agatha talk through the door. Then, she finally made her way into the hallway. The door to the flat was still closed, but there was a voice from behind it.

“Hello. Is this Fiona Bellum's flat?” it asked.

The voice was deep and devoid of emotion. Unfamiliar to Ann.

“No, it isn't,” Agatha said, clicking her tongue. “Go harass someone else.”

“I'm afraid I can't do that, ma'am,” the voice on the other end replied. The man spoke slow, measured words. “Please open the door.”

“Do you have a warrant?” Agatha asked.

A chuckle. “Heh. No, we're not with the police. Consider us an, eh, private firm,” he said.

“Leave, or I'll call emergency services,” Agatha hissed.

Someone else said something, too quiet to hear through the door. Ann did recognize the distinctive clicking sound of a lighter, though. There was a long pause, then, and the faint smell of tobacco leaked through the door. Were they smoking?

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the man said, voice raspy. "Please don't make this more troublesome than it needs to be."

Frustrated, Agatha pulled out her phone. Something within Ann tightened. She felt a blip of anxiety blossom in her heart. Something felt *very wrong*. Sinister.

While Fio's mom was still in the middle of typing on the phone screen, there was a sigh from the other side. It was long and drawn out. "Ma'am, I'll count to three. I recommend you either open the door or step away from it," the man said. "One."

"I'm calling-"

"Two."

Agatha blinked. Ann grabbed her, pulling the older woman back on instinct. Something was wrong. Something was-

"Three. You've been warned."

Reflexively, Ann hunkered down on the floor, dragging Agatha beneath her and shielding the older woman with her body. A moment later, there was a horrible cracking and twisting sound, the door splintering and being torn off its hinges in a single moment.

Heavy pieces and sharp wooden shrapnel slammed against Ann knocking her sprawling onto the floor and making her draw in a hissing breath of pain. It knocked the wind out of her, but a moment later Ann was back on her feet.

Somehow, she'd twisted into a *sommersault*. How did she know to move like that?? How-

The thought caused pain and she shoved them away. In front of her was a man in a dark suit, wearing a pair of sunglasses, taking a long, slow draw of his cigarette. His black hair was pulled back by gel and hair spray, giving him a sleek look, but the muscles were evident even beneath the suit.

He breathed out, blowing smoke into Ann's face. "Miss Belleflamme, am I assuming correctly?" he asked.

Ann just looked at him. There was a feeling there. A wisp of familiarity. Something radiated off of this man, a hint of power that she was familiar with, something supernatural, something special, something she wanted- no, *needed*.

"Yeah," she said. "What about it?"

Slowly, a smile spread across his lips. "I'm going to have to ask you to come with us."

"No," Ann said. "I'm going to have to ask you to die in a fucking fire."

Someone from behind whistled. "Feisty," the comment came.

Ann closed her eyes for a brief moment, feeling the thin haze of power radiate off this man. Something within her stirred, almost awakening. She drew her left foot back, turning her body slightly and reached out to the left. There was a spear on the wall - in her hands, now.

Suddenly, the guy was no longer smiling as brightly. "Ma'am. Put that down."

Viciously, Ann grinned. Her heart thumped. She felt alive. Behind her, Agatha slowly moved backwards, her phone screen cracked. "No," Ann said. "I don't think I will."

The guy frowned, then dropped the cigarette, stomping onto it, leaving a burn mark on the wooden floor. "This will be a lot less fun than you expect," he said, warning clear in his tone. "We- Aaaah!"

Ann interrupted him by stabbing the spear forward. He dodged to the side, but it still gouged a chunk out of his leg. It felt like she was trying to cut a tree. "What the fuck..." Ann muttered, shocked at the resistance human flesh should and shouldn't have posed. Her memories told her something different from her emotions, and she decided to trust the second.

There was a flicker of something in the air. Ann took a step back when she felt it fluctuate, and a lock of red hair slowly drifted to the ground. There was a faint cut on her nose, trickling red down her face. It *burnt* and stung.

"Get her," the man said with a grimace, clutching his leg with one hand, the other on a knife. From his side, another guy shuffled by, this one even more burly and looking a little more unkempt with a scraggly beard. He wore brass knuckles.

Again, Ann stabbed the spear with an almost familiar motion, putting the chain of her body into it, rotating her hips to get proper leverage. The guy grabbed the tip of the spear, snatching it out of the air. It dug deep into his hands, but he quickly shoved it aside, pressing the tip against the wall with one palm.

It didn't budge when Ann pulled, and a moment later, his fist came flying at her. She barely ducked underneath, dropping to the floor, propping herself up with one hand and trying to swipe his legs out from under him.

Her shin hooked into his calf. The muscle fibres felt tough as steel, but even that didn't help when Ann slammed into them with the weight of her whole body. The guy toppled to the side, head slamming into the wall with a grunt of pain. Ann pulled the spear back into her hands, scrambling back on the floor as one of the guys tried to grab her ankle.

A moment later she scrambled to her legs, only to have one of the guys give a sharp slam against her chest with the tip of a long wooden staff. It knocked her stumbling backwards, spear almost slipping out of her grasp. How many of these fuckers were there?!

She felt alive, though. There was something in the air, a power so familiar. But it wasn't *her* type of power. What was hers-

White pain. She stumbled back some more before she could be cut again. Agatha had fled somewhere after seeing the knife. Ann used the chance to hide in the kitchen, grabbing a chair with her free hand, and hurling it at the first guy coming her way.

The wood splintered as he brought up a hand to defend himself. Ann jammed the spear into his abdomen. The muscle fibres were, tough, only partially splitting as she didn't get to put her whole weight into it, so he was just hurt, not spilling his guts on the floor.

In response, the guy gave a roar. Ann swung the spear again, but it went wide and he brushed it aside with his shoulder. Their suits were tough, too. Maybe made to be slash resistant? The thought lasted a moment before Ann dodged to the side, bringing up her knee and slamming it between the guys legs.

He let out a squal of pain, doubling over. Ann picked up a chair with both hands and slammed it onto his head until he sprawled to the floor.

Someone grabbed her hair. "Fun's over." The voice was feminine this time, the woman slamming her head against the wall. The plaster broke underneath her, blood splattering as something in her face cracked.

Ann screamed in pain, pulling at the arm. It ripped out some of her hair, but she spun and placed a kick in the other woman's chest who stumbled back. Ann scrambled through the hallway into the living room. She didn't have the spear anymore, and the world swam.

Still, she got into position, fists out in front of her, body turned slightly. When the lanky guy who'd smoked came in, she kicked at him but he stepped back, grabbing her leg as she was too slow.

He pulled, and the world spun, Ann's head slamming into the floor. Everything spun.

A glint of silver. She scrambled backwards on the floor. The man had tried to slam the pommel of the knife into her temple, but now, the blade grazed her forehead instead. Blood pooled onto her eyebrow.

She scrambled to her feet. A drop of red fell into her eye, blinding her. The big guy with brass knuckles came at her next, and she dodged under his first swing, kicking him in the stomach, only for him to grunt, grab her, and toss her across the room.

Ann crashed into the TV, smashing it and knocking it off its stand. That hint of magic was in her nose, but it was overwhelmed by the scent of iron. The world swam. She tried to get up again, but a kick to her stomach sent her doubling in pain, and the small TV rack beneath her crumbled.

Blinded and in pain, Ann still kicked out. Then something heavy slammed into her head one more time, and she felt the world go dark.

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 assbat 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.

Chapter 124: "Eclipse" - Epilogue

My mother was safe, too.

Three days had passed since that event. Mom was slowly adjusting. She had been unconscious when I saved her, being a lot less hardy than Ann, so she simply woke up in my arms.

I had those memories now, too. The memories of that other "me", of my manifestation. She - I? - had done exactly as expected. We crushed Zinnic.

Those were the only words I had for it. Within five total minutes, we took out over two hundred trained operatives. Fifteen of them were dead now. Many more severely injured.

Some part of me had empathy with them... but that all faded when I ran my hand through Ann's hair and she flinched and I felt the scabs on her head. But she was getting better.

On the day after the attack, the others finally made it over. Reya healed Ann, of course. Being part of [Transference] meant that they, too, could access more of their true power than anyone else on Neamhan.

And, of course, Marie was with them.

She hugged me so tightly. I hugged her back. [Transference] did its thing and she clicked into place, aligning with her body from the other side and gaining a larger chunk of her powers back.

How strange was that? Since she'd almost died, and her body was in stasis within my gateway, she was closer to it than anyone else. So, her core blossomed faster, and the sanctions were lower on her.

We were back together.

That was what mattered.

Housing was a little complicated - well, not that complicated really. We bought a house. Put together, considering our contributions during the eclipse... well, we had more than enough money.

Of course, *that* was what actually broke mom's suspension of disbelief. She had been shocked by the agents, at being abducted. She'd believed me that I'd somehow gotten her out of there, even the vague details. But a work bonus that was large enough to afford me a house? That was the end of it.

I laughed. What a mundane thing to worry about, right? I'd been fighting monsters for so long... my mom getting confused about money was just too funny. In the end, it was kinda funny. I just told her that it was a secret.

Of course, it took some convincing that it wasn't illegal, but having Ivan and Ann and everyone else to vouch for me certainly helped. Of course, she pushed, but we all remained silent as the grave.

Ivan... my lovely brother. He also got a slot in [Transference]. His talents were rather amazing, after all. But other than a short meeting to introduce him to Ann, we hadn't done much.

Dad, on the other hand, was more complicated. Ivan had checked him into a clinic. He'd drank himself to unconsciousness. Again. Pulled some sort of dumb stunt at a party and broken his arm. So, he was on detox. With professional help.

Was it cheap? No. But my brother had apparently had a lot of success with a tech startup on air cleaning, and now here we were. Here we were.

Me and Dad on two sides of a glass pane.

"This feels like when I was in prison," he said. His tone was joking, but his expression? Miserable.

I stared at him, through the glass. "At least, you're getting help here."

"That's what they said there, too."

"Right," I muttered. Already, I was asking myself why I even bothered. Why I even bothered to visit. "Right."

Dad gave a long sigh at that. "Bear. I'm... sorry. I'm trying."

"You've been trying for a long while," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "I... fuck, I need better friends when I'm out of here."

"Sure," I nodded. "That's a start."

He looked at me. "And I need to apologize. To you, to Agatha-

Gently, I shook my head. "Not yet," I said. "I get that it sucks, but you're gonna do this. And then you're gonna ask for forgiveness. And then you're gonna see if anyone forgives you. If they don't - and I might not, dad - but if they don't, then that's that. You don't always get do-overs," I told him.

It was cold. He looked like a kicked puppy. Silence hang between us, thick as an inch of glass. He sniffed, then wiped a tear off his pale cheek with his big hand. I wanted to hug him, wanted to feel compassion, but I was tired of the back and forth. So all I did was sit there, and look at him.

He sniffled again. "Yeah," he said, voice shaky but not cracking. "I. I'll do this. No more hurt. No more pain."

I nodded. Sometimes, I liked to imagine what Eden would do to him. It had a weird effect on addictions. Your body was kept in stasis, but still healing. So, maybe some of those physical aspects of the addiction would fade?

With the rising Qi levels on Neamhan, maybe I'd find out someday. What a little bit of cultivation or magic would do to him. That thought almost made me chuckle, but I stifled it.

"So? Why'd you do it?" I asked instead. "I'm asking because I'm curious. This isn't an accusation." That was a little bit of a lie, but enough to make it more palatable for him. And I was curious.

He gave me a long, regretful look. "High school class gathering. Everyone else was, and people offered, and I declined, and they pushed. Then I accepted. And then... well, then my memory turns patchy."

For a moment, I considered barking out a laugh. My dad, always so brave and protective. Except, he just couldn't grow a spine. He ran a hand through his messy hair, waiting for my reaction. "I see," I said instead. "Sounds troublesome."

Dad sighed. "We both know it's on me. I fucked up. And I hope it'll be the last time I fuck up this way."

At that, I smiled, just a little. "Work hard, then, dad," I said.

"Hah," he said. "Haha. Yeah, alright. I'll... work hard. I can do that."

It was a phrase he'd liked to say to me. And he was a hard worker. The smile even lasted more than the paltry few seconds it usually did. I wanted to place my hand on the glass, but there was a "no touching" sticker on it. Cleaning staff got tired of dramatic farewells apparently.

Instead, I gave him a nod. We talked a little more about this and that until I got up. "It was good seeing you, dad," I said. "You don't got signal in here, do you?"

He shook his head. "Nah. But, you can swing by again? Maybe in a week?"

I chuckled. "Sure. I'll see what I can do. No promises, yeah? Focus on yourself."

"Okay," he said. "Yeah. Will do. See you, Bear."

"See you, dad."

I walked outside. Ann waited by the car. I took her hand in mine briefly and she gave me a smile.

Life was slow. Zinnic wanted to kill me, of course. But they were also fucking terrified, so we really didn't end up being bothered too much.

Mom went on her cruise with Jared. The others and I looked after Butterfly in the meantime. She took a liking to Matt and Liam, because of course she did, and treated Emilia and Marie like aunts. It was... fun, honestly.

Having a kid around for a few days was exhausting, of course, but she even picked up a little sign language from Reya. And with all of us - yes, even Eric - there to juggle her, it was doable.

Days on Neamhan turned into weeks. First one, then a second, then a month. Six weeks of peace and quiet. I visited dad. I fought with mom again. I went out to play with Beth. I kissed Ann.

Gosh, the memories with Ann. We watched so many movies together. Played video games. I ate popcorn for the first time with her. Showed her some of my favourite books. Matt smacked her with some practice swords. She threw a fireball at his face and ruined a shirt he hated anyway.

It was fun. Hilarious.

Marie told us a bit about the couple weeks she spent doing forest ranging. She'd spotted one wildfire and gone to extinguish it. Which was super cool, honestly. I admired that.

Most of us went back to visit our parents regularly, but honestly... what was meant to be a kind of temporary measure to get Ann adjusted turned into a much more permanent arrangement. My flat was trashed, anyway. I paid a rather generous amount to the landlady for that, then moved on with my life.

Much of my decoration went up in the new house. It was big, since we could afford it. And so, everyone stayed. Marie and Emilia were there permanently, basically, with Matt, Liam, Eric and Reya coming and going. It felt a little incomplete without Chris, though.

But that was fine. They were doing their own thing. We would meet again, I was sure.

And I had time, now. I picked up drawing again, practiced my spearwork... my old master, Rey, even got me to give calligraphy another shot. To his utter dismay, I was still terrible. Ingrid framed and hung up my drawing of a potted basil, though, which I found rather charming.

Of course, none of my pictures were ever good enough for my mom, but that was fine, too. She just didn't get to see very many of them. Ann loved each and every one, often modelling for me, too. It was nice.

For the first time, Neamhan felt like a home.

Spring came, and the world warmed up, bit by bit.

On a Spring day like any other, Ann and I were out for a walk. There was a warm wind in the concrete jungle. Not much greenery to see... but that was fine. We would live.

Some guy tried to rob us. I added another knife to my collection, and he scampered off. Things were good.

We sat in a greying park, the grass and trees having died. The view from the hill was still nice, though. Then there was a sound, a faint tremor of the Qi behind me. We looked, and there it was.

Miniscule. Tiny, weak, and easily shut with just the barest application of effort, but it had appeared.

A rift.

And so began the story of how I saved my second world.

Interlude: Chris

Chris stood in front of the empty gateway hall.

It was strange. Triz-adu were well used to goodbye's. Everytime Chris discarded an old shell and inhabited or crafted a new one, it was a piece of them that they said goodbye to, forever.

Farewells were brief in their culture. A simple wave would usually do. A handful of words. And if you never saw someone again, that was just that. Life was ephemeral, and people changed. In some ways, even a simple wave was a permanent goodbye, since that person might be different when you meet them again.

Chris wondered, then, why this one hurt a little more than they were used to. Had they really grown so close in those few months? They smiled faintly, making a fist over their chest. Where humans had their hearts.

Such strange organs those were. Chris felt a small amount of pain in their chest region. A heart-ache, it was called? How bizarre. Their other shells suffered no such ailments, of course. They shook their head, lightly, and turned around.

There was work to do. Even if walking through the empty city on their own was a strange experience. Usually there would be someone alongside them. Matt would joke, Reya would

check if they were okay, Fio would run ahead and leave them to follow, and Emilia would ask after them.

Humans truly were so bizarre. Chris had been sent to kill them, and the way they understood, that was a pretty significant occurrence in human culture, too. Yet, it had barely taken them a few days to break that ice and feel like part of the group.

Community. That was something hard to come by as a triz-adu. As people who were ever changing in shape and expression did not do particularly well when made to be static. Yet, they hadn't felt that way with this group.

New jokes, new questions, new experiences popped up at every corner. The humans were happy and sad and angry and they experienced it all so vividly. Chris wondered what that was like? To see the world in such strong shades.

They shook their head, discarding those thoughts - another very human habit they'd picked up, but one that felt surprisingly fun. They imagined thoughts like a kind of fog that stuck in their head, and shaking their head was like waving a hand through water vapour, dispelling it.

Hmm. That water vapour analogy felt like it might come from the shell they were currently inhabiting. Chris smiled faintly at that. They were rapidly becoming more in sync. That was good, because they would need it.

With the eclipse ending, Chris did not bother to stay in Inu. Archmage Zolycc was still in the city, and now, her might would easily be enough to hold it against the incoming hordes. Frankly, holding the horde here had been a surprisingly positive outcome.

They'd evacuated it, but by now, people were slowly coming back. Chris had good eyes, and from the temple they could see a lot of it. People were sharing food. Blankets being handed out, the guards who were off their shifts helped with rebuilding houses and clearing rubble.

Chris smiled. Then, lazily, they stepped away. Work was to be done.

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Three weeks. That was how long they walked for.

After all, there was no hurry anymore. Chris felt their heart thump slowly in their chest. It was steady, an eternal rhythm never changing. They did not exert more force than needed, and no less than appropriate.

Any threats were dispatched by their non-human shells. The leshi and rockhound were a terrifying combination, wielding the forces of the earth against whoever stood before them. Chris' enemies vanished without a trace, and the water-aspected fighter whose body they had made theirs walked through the forest unabated.

And into the desert unabated. And past the desert unabated, too.

Chris walked and walked and walked... to the spire. A massive formation of needle-like mountains, piercing eternally high. The clouds were thin and wispy, pierced by the rock formations. Shadows drifted among them. Wyverns battling birds of prey. Blood dripped down from there more often than water, dyeing the sand at the foot of the mountains red.

They looked up. Shadows and red raindrops fell, but none landed on Chris. Each drop of crimson was mostly water, after all, and they slid to the wet ground in a small sphere around them. Chris breathed.

The air was faintly damp. The sun had mostly returned from behind the cover of darkness, hanging low in the sky, and casting the red sand even redder in the hues of twilight. That was another habit they'd inherited from the group.

Deep, steady breaths.

Smiling, they took another one. It was time to lay their past demons to rest. The world looked so different now, they didn't imagine it would be much trouble. Mentally, they reached into their heart, and cast the doubts aside.

Another deep breath. It smelled of iron and sand and regret and heart demons. Hah. Heart demons. When was the last time cultivators had spoken of those? How old was Chris now, even?

They shook their head, discarding that thought, too. Then, they stepped toward the mountain, placing a foot on dull rock. Then again, and then once more.

Chris walked. The mountains were far too steep, but when Chris stepped on Qi, they could walk up a ninety degree wall, too, so it didn't matter all that much really. Heart steady, lips in a faint smile, and all three shells with them, Chris walked.

And walked, and walked some more.

By the time they broke through the layer of clouds, dawn had broken.

And Chris had, instead, broken dozens of bodies.

Carcasses of wyverns, drakes, giant birds, and even a handful of gryphons laid at the bottom of the mountain. Each had tried to take their pick of the triz-adu's flesh, and each had paid the eternal, great prize. Scarlet blood fell, broken bodies fell, and Chris ascended.

Step by step by step. Dawn broke, and the dark world turned red again and Chris walked. They smiled, even, as they headed further and further up.

To the top of the mountain.

Eventually, Chris crested the top of it. Up there, above the clouds, where the air was thin, a human, a leshi, and a rockhound climbed into a circular platform. The top of the spires was rather different from the bottom, being a network of platforms and interconnecting lines of rock bridges.

More walking followed after that. Chris hadn't picked the right mountain on their first try - how could they? There were dozens. So they walked. It was only a matter of time, after all.

Twilight came and went, and another dawn rose upon the world before Chris found their target. Atop a rocky platform was the scaly creature's enormous frame.

A dragon.

Yes. Chris' last shell had been that of a true, full dragon. It once looked majestic - aquamarine scales covering its tough hide, four glimmering horns spiralling down next to its majestic skull. The best was full of power and it was by far the best shell Chris had crafted until then.

And now it was a shell of its former self.

The flesh sloughed off its bones. The scales were broken and torn open. Its muscles revealed, and half its face a grimace of festering flesh and bones revealed to the world. All majesty was gone from the slumbering usurper - a flesh eating, parasitic fungus.

It had burrowed deep into the flesh of what once was a part of Chris. Had stripped away their autonomy, stripped away what made it *them*. Now, they puppeteered what remained of the dragon, mocking the world as a ruler of the spires. And today, they'd be buried.

With a steady breath, and a calm heart, Chris stepped forward.

The beast cracked open the one of its eyes that still had a lid and huffed, at first. A simple display of indignation. Some vestigial pride lingered within the bones of the dragon, and the fungus mimicked that, too. It didn't replace the original brain, after all.

Lazily, Chris withdrew some human weapons from their inventory. They hadn't brought much. Only what was necessary. Knives, suited for a butcher rather than a fighter.

Calmly, and without any malice, Chris spoke. "Come. Let me lay you to rest, old friend. Old self."

The dragon roared in reply. It was earth shatteringly loud, the stone cracking around them, and Chris' human ears popped. But their other shells were unshaken, and the battle began.

Water flew forth from the human shell. The leshi grew claws, and tossed seeds, which instantly popped open as vines spread over the plateau. The rock hound manipulated the earth, driving spikes against the dragon's thick hide.

This fully roused the creature from its sleep. Chris' past self spread its tattered wings - ones it would never be able to fly on, anymore - and roared again. Its massive tail smashed through the spikes, even though a few dug chunks out from its flesh.

Vines wrapped around it, and broke. Water slammed into its scales, peeling them off and breaking skin, but the furrow it carved was nothing but a flesh wound. A tiny mark, revealing streaks of mold and clouds of spores.

Chris stopped breathing, then. Their human shell was rather likely to get infected by the spores, after all. Not that it mattered, though. Chris smiled, still. So many talents. So much they could see and feel.

The life thumping through those vines. The way the rocks shifted to create divots in pressure. It was an open world to them. Barely a second had passed, and already Chris had learned so much, their techniques growing.

[Life Manipulation has reached (High)!]

In the span of a single breath, Chris improved by leaps and bounds. Right now, they were a [Prodigy] and a [Genius] and spreading their [Precipitous Wings]. They grinned, and water turned to ice at their back.

Glacial feathers sprouted from their shoulders, and with a flap of their wings, Chris' bodies escaped a dragon's breath.

Aquamarine. Scale colour often indicated a dragon's affiliated element. That of aquamarine was raw magic.

Mana, massive amounts of it, tore through the mountain. Rocks disintegrated into dust, then nothingness. Mountains shattered in the breath's path, and thousands of lower critters died. Only hundreds of meters later did the ray of pure, aquamarine mana finally end, having carved a smooth hole through the landscape.

The fungus infested corpse choked on its own breath, though, and more attacks landed on it. Foul skin and rotten flesh was carved away, peeled aside bit by bit. Every inch of flesh was taken apart, dissected.

Butcher's knives and wild claws tore into the thing. Water and wind, vines and rock slammed into the dragon's body. Its vestigial instincts made it fight, whipping its tail, slamming into Chris.

[Stoney Constitution has reached (High)!]

But they survived. Understood. Dissected the thing's moves, learnt from each and every thing that happened. They [Adapted]. As they always did. As they always would. Their past was the past, and it was time to lay it to rest.

Flying far away, Chris took a steadying breath. None of the fungus entered their lungs, of that they made sure. Then, once their human shell was ready again, they dove forward.

It felt symbolic, really. A beacon of their new life finally cutting the last remains of the old one down. Regrets chopped to bits in the face of the support of their new friends. Chris smiled.

Cleavers fell upon the dragon's skull, carving through its middle, smashing apart its jaw and making its breath unusable. A second strike blinded the usurper, and their other shells dove in, digging claws and teeth into its hide. Chris fought, and fought, and fought.

And they slaughtered their past.

At the end, that was what they were there for, and that was what they did. Their heart calmed, and they did what needed to be done.

The dragon fell when its brain was cut, and its tendons severed. There was nothing there for the fungus to puppeteer anymore. The muscles gave out, and no instincts remained. It was done.

Only then, did Chris breathe another deep breath - with a filter over their mouth, of course - and truly smile. It was done. Almost.

They grabbed the corpse, and all the bits of flesh that had been thrown aside during the fight, and they picked it up, and then walked down the mountain.

This time, with the dragon in tow, nothing attacked them.

Hours passed, until they were at the foot of the mountain, in the desert, and then, they opened their inventory again.

They pulled out a shovel.

It was a simple, steel tool, without much craftsmanship. But it was made by Chris themselves. Each burial deserved respect. Each past life lived deserved effort in the new one. Honor, even. So each burial meant making a new shovel.

Chris shovelled for a long while, another full day, before it was one. A giant hole in the sand that the skeletal remains of the dragon were laid into. Then they shovelled it closed.

A mound of sand was all that remained of that life. Chris put the shovel back inside their inventory. With their three shells, they stood before the grave. Chris took a deep breath, and remained silent for a little while. They mourned. They'd grieved, already, and now they mourned a little again.

And then, after a minute passed by, Chris moved.

They opened their inventory again, and prepared to open the biggest secret of the triz-adu.

Slowly, gingerly, Chris pulled out a creature. It was an unmoving boy, fiery red streaks of hair, blackened bones and dark armor, an enormous skeletal frame. It was grafted from darkness and fire.

The triz-adu weren't limited to possessing three bodies. They never had been. It wasn't impossible to control more shells. In fact, Chris could probably manage... maybe around a dozen, as they were now. Three was simply... appropriate. The most comfortable.

But laying a past life wasn't about comfort, it was about closure. Each triz-adu went through it. Crafting a *gravetender*.

A shell made to burn past ones. Chris breathed, and slipped into theirs.

Flames ignited, and the fiery hair waved in the air like strands of liquid magma. This was, by far, Chris' most powerful *current* shell. It was far beyond the dragon. The amount of power it needed was so much that they usually only used it for burials, but by now? They could most likely sustain it for longer than that.

But they didn't. It was a gravetender. And the ritual of closure mattered.

The shovel was tossed atop the mound of sand. It was to be buried with the dragon. Then, Chris stepped back as a human, and a leshi, and a rockhound. Chris stepped forward as a gravetender.

They raised their hand. Slowly, reverently. A long second passed.

Fire reigned.

It was a torrent of unbelievable, scorching heat. The flames were so bright they went beyond red and straight to white, incinerating every grain of sand, first to glass, and then evaporating, breaking down into atoms.

At the end, all that was left was a *crater*.

The corpse, a part of Chris', had been turned to less than ash, vaporized and forever disposed of. No more spores. No more regret. Chris, the gravetender, lowered their arm. Chris, the leshi, knelt in respect. Chris, the rockhound, whimpered silently. Chris, the human, cried.

Chris, the triz-adu... mourned, and grieved, and lived.

They left their gravetender shell, turning it back into a lifeless husk of basalt and skeletal darkness. Then, it went back into their inventory. The desert would cover the crater with sand again, soon enough.

Another deep, steadying breath. What a lovely lesson of Fio's that was.

Chris looked to the sun in the sky, and felt closure. For a few more long, long seconds, they basked in the sunlight.

Then, they turned around, and walked back towards Inu.