

Chapter 147: Divine Right

I found myself standing in a world of pure white. The ground was covered in a thin sheen of milky water, and the sky was just as pale as the ground, too. There was a grayscale reflection of myself that distorted as my feet moved.

There were two other people. Reya, our Saintess, a web of golden lines across her, being held in someone else's arm. The person cradling her was a beautiful woman with golden hair, and vibrant, emerald eyes. She wore a circlet, as well as a white, long robe.

Lurelia.

Streaks of gold trailed through the air between the two. I could hear Reya's heart beat like a hummingbird's wings, rapid and frail. Lurelia breathed in, golden mist seeping through her nose. She hummed a patient lullaby, somehow cradling Reya with kindness as she sucked the life out of her.

I felt furious.

In my rage, I stepped forward. Astraeus appeared in my hand and Cass' avatar manifested just above my shoulder. My feet hit the water, sending out ripples that brushed against the goddess' feet. She looked up, and her beautiful lips curled into an even more beautiful frown.

"What brings you here, my child?" she asked. Her words shook the world, and I felt them vibrate in my chest. There was a desire to tell her everything, to spill all my secrets and worries and cry and be safe. She would hold me, if I just asked.

But I didn't. Never.

The iron of my will manifested, and golden Qi covered my skin. "What are you doing to our healer?" I asked.

Lurelia gave me a sad smile, the kind you might give to a child who doesn't understand something. It was condescending. I hated it. **"She is my priestess. It is only right that I collect my due."**

I felt my teeth grinding against one another. "Fuck that," I said. "Fuck that, and fuck you."

Defiance laid at my very core. My path was endless freedom. The kind that could not be taken away. The kind that extended to my friends. Not the kind that divines just got to steal when they think it's their right.

My maelstrom roared with defiance. I felt the danger as the goddess tilted her head. My ruinous wings flared behind my back, and my talents screamed.

[Golden Glass Maelstrom advanced to **2nd Step**.]

Lurelia sighed, seeming almost sad at the situation. "**Is this how it will be, child?**"

"I'm not a child," I said, slamming the back of Astraeus on the floor, sending splashes of brackish water flying. "Especially not one of yours."

At that, the goddess had the gall to look offended. "**Then you shall be taught a lesson.**" She gently laid Reya down, and then took a step towards me. The golden web still wrapped around our priestess, but at least her essence wasn't being drained anymore. I heard her heartbeat slow down, and pointed my spear at the goddess.

A moment ago, Lurelia had been standing in the distance. A heartbeat later, she was already within striking distance. She was so fast, I could barely see her move. Her hand struck me - a simple blow. A slap. It made my head snap to the side, leaving a red imprint on my cheek. But it was nothing less than indignation.

Ruin flared behind my back. She had the audacity to hit me. This fucking *bitch*. The constellation in my chest lit up like lines of fire in the night sky, each and every talent in my network flaring. I was not enough to beat the goddess, that much was clear, but I did not need to be.

"**That was a warning,**" Lurelia said. Then, there was an echo of my death. My own voice ringing in my ears. I ducked. A blow so fast it would have easily taken my head off carved through reality just above me. "**That was a promise,**" she said.

Fine then.

A second version of myself clawed her way out of my chest. Astraeus hummed, stabbing forward, as my maelstrom activated. At that, Lurelia seemed surprised, for a moment, then angry. "**You steal from me!**" she yelled, rushing at me, only to be intercepted by Ion.

I swap places with another reality where I had been running since the fight started, appearing far, far away. Ion dies a second later, re-emerging from me. "Nasty fight," she said. "Let's fuck her up."

All around me, the realm warps. I don't know where I am, but I do notice Qi pouring into me in droves. Power is being usurped, in a way that probably should not have been possible. How did I make it here?

Lurelia appeared in front of me. "**Leave my sanctum!**" she roared, now livid. Another teleportation took me further away, the stream of Qi letting me move far more than I should be able to. When she tried to come closer, I noticed Cass move.

My little keeper floated out in front of me, and pulled at the air. "Leave us alone!" she said, and half-translucent barriers wove from nothing in front of me. There was some change to my maelstrom - an infinitesimal amount of power being lost. Some kind of energy that I could barely interact with, but that was being eaten up by my gateway, strengthening the network, now being redirected to defense.

When the goddess tried to kill me again, she slammed into the barrier... and bounced off.

She screeched like a fury, but Cass and I were in sync. Already, she had wrapped the tip of Astraeus in the strange, glass-like substance, and I stabbed forward. This time, the goddess had to retreat, for long enough that Ion also started draining this place, pouring more Qi into my maelstrom, to the point where it felt like it was bursting.

I had to get rid of the energy before it burned through me, I realized, and so I poured it into the air, creating dozens, hundreds of golden spears. Each shard of my wing became a weapon, flaring behind me. A second pair sprouted, powered by a world of Qi, pouring into them faster and faster as that whirlpool in my soul spun.

"You do not know what you are doing!"

"Maybe you shouldn't be antagonizing us!" I replied, angrily. Lurelia dashed at me again, and I felt an invasive presence in my mind. It made me wanna give up. Wrap her in a hug, and let her ruffle my hair. It met the iron wall of my will. I would not let her cut my head off.

Instead, I ducked again, twirling Astraeus above my head. The goddess hissed, jumping back, letting Ion leap at her back, grabbing onto the robe and driving her spear into the divine's shoulder.

My other self paid for it by having her head ripped off, and a new version appeared from within my gateway. Cass hovered quietly, weaving more glossy barriers and weapons, coating some of my spear-wings. I flared them, lashing out at the goddess and shooting a barrage of glass coated feathers at her.

She screeched, leaping back half a world of distance. A moment later, she was before me again, and then I was gone, reappearing where an alternate version of myself had stood in a reality that never happened. Ion flung herself at the goddess without hesitation, and I quickly joined her, stabbing at her torso while my other self went for her shoulders.

Lurelia wreathed herself in a blanket of golden divinity, flaring out to wrap us in chains, only to be met by tiny blades of glass on our skin. Cass wove the power that I could barely perceive, and her mastery was skyrocketing, propelled by my own talent. She was, after all, a part of me.

Hissing in anger, the goddess retreated again. A few steps back, when Ion threw her spear. She dodged that easily, but in exchange, a chain of golden glass wrapped around her ankles. I'd stolen the design from Lurelia herself, brute forcing it with power.

A third pair of wings grew behind my back. The maelstrom in my soul drew in more Qi than I could spend. It was blazing through my skin. Lurelia stumbled for just a heartbeat, but it was enough to throw my spear, coated in that horrid power that Cass held. She twisted her body in a way no human could, avoiding a fatal wound, but it dug into her waist, tearing a hole that erupted with golden ichor.

"Gaaah!" she screamed, flinching backwards, scabbling on the floor. Fear lit up in her eyes. **"Stop! Stop!"** she called. **"Why are you doing this?!"**

I blinked. Was she... so afraid of pain? It occurred to me, then, that Lurelia was not a fighter. Her powers were based on healing, often even mental. The kind that made you recover faster, need less energy, that might shield you in a pinch. But she had probably not been in a fight, not been actually hurt, in decades.

Pathetic.

"How are you surprised that I'd be mad when my friend touches your altar, then screams in pain?" I ask, rage still boiling in my veins. More chains weave from my overflowing Qi. My wings grow larger, my silhouette wreathed in gold. "What were you thinking?!"

“She is my priestess! Her worshippers are mine, her Divinity is mine!” the goddess complained.

I scoffed. “Yours? When you have done *nothing* for those on Nemahan?” I demanded.

“Yes! Mine by divine right, *child*!”

Her face was so outraged, torn between fear and indignation, as if my question was somehow ridiculous or insulting. Maybe both. I recalled Astraeus, then threw him again, piercing through the wings of light behind her back and shattering one of them. She flinched in pain, and my spear reappeared in my hands.

“No. Not yours. You will leave Reya alone.”

“Even if I release her, anything gathered while under my banner is still-”

I shook my head, slowly. “That’s not what I said. I said you’ll leave her alone. You’re going to give her divinity when she asks. And you’re going to be taking none of the spoils of her efforts.”

“What?! You expect me to invest with no return?!” she asked, aghast.

It’s almost funny the way her facade of motherhood crumbled the moment she was asked to put up. “Yes,” I said, easily.

“Preposterous!”

More Qi pours into me, and I form it into wings and chains and spears, even as my mind burns. I manifest a thousand constructs, held in place by my novaic manipulation ability, and my equally powerful endurance. Lurelia crawled backwards a bit, and I took another step to remain close.

“It was not a question.”

“I refuse to negotiate until you stop draining my divine realm!” she said.

Ah. So that is what I was doing, then? Draining her divine realm... Well, I didn’t mind too much. She’d stolen from Reya, so I didn’t mind stealing from her in return. “No,” I replied, simply.

“No?” she asked, aghast.

“Nope,” I replied. More Qi poured into me, setting my mind on fire. I mentally poked Cass about it, who poured it across my gateway, across my network, and into the others. With Matt, Liam, Emilia, Rae and everyone else taking a part of the energy, it was a lot more manageable.

I breathed. “You have no leverage here. I don’t care.”

“But... if you ruin this realm, it will take decades to remake!” she complained.

Slowly, a smile spread across my lips. “I don’t care,” I said, easily. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

She gritted her teeth, final bits of resolve finally crumbling. **“Fine!”** she yelled. **“Fine! I agree. Just get... get out of here! Gah!”**

With a terrible shunt, I felt a force rejecting my presence. I could have stayed if I forced it, but, slowly, I relented.

Opening my eyes, I found myself back in the temple, my hand on top of Reya’s. By now, the priestess had stopped her shivers, and looked at me, with tears in her eyes. Then, she shot me a smile, and elbowed me.

I took a step back, and she nodded, closing her eyes again, still diving into the class selection. What a tough girl.

Matt’s eyes were closed, Qi swirling around him. Liam’s hand quickly squeezed my shoulder. “What happened?” he asked, full of worry.

“Oh, you know,” I said, calmly. “I fought the goddess. And won.”