

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.

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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 Dreyfus 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.