

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.