

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.