

Chapter 80: The Five Million-Year Conflict

Lysette and Mirae approached the dais in the center of the shrine hand in hand. Upon reaching it, the soft glow underneath their feet intensified, filling the entire room with a golden-white aura. Although Lysette did not recognize the individual figures depicted, a common theme emerged. Bloodshed, conflict, warfare, and death. Figures rising to power, making names for themselves, and then being cast down and replaced by new figures, who again repeated the cycle in what seemed to stretch on for eternity.

“Um, might I ask who you are?” Mirae asked. “And also, how did you know that she was a Godslayer, and—”

“Human child who walks alongside the Godslayer, you must be patient. I will answer her questions, as well as your own, all in due time.”

“I admit, though, I don’t know who, or what you are,” Lysette said. “Nor do I know what I should call you.”

The voice paused for a moment. “I do not have a name. I am a being born from the deaths of the countless lives that were lost here. Though, I sense that, as a Godslayer who is only recently born, it would be easier for you if you had something by which to call me. In that case, you may call me Finis.”

“Countless lives lost here?” Mirae asked. “Do you mean the attack from a month ago?”

“No, human child. I am from a time far, far older than you and your civilization. In order to properly explain who and what I am, I must first tell you the history of this world you now know as Aimarion. Young Godslayer who serves the Goddess of Darkness, what did your creator tell you about the history of this world?”

Lysette bowed her head. “Not much; she seemed content to leave me in the dark. What she did say is that the gods engaged in conflict for most of the life of Aimarion. And that Godslayers were like gods in that they were divine in nature, but different in that they existed in our world, not the Celestial Realm.”

“And, do you know why the gods are unable to walk Aimarion?”

“Zarielle didn’t say much on that front. If I had to speculate, the gods themselves sealed Aimarion off from the Celestial Realm some time after its creation, to prevent their ability to interfere further and allow humans to shape their own societies.”

“That is correct, and yet, only a partial truth. I will tell you the history of this world from the very beginning. We shall begin five million years ago, to the time when the gods first descended from the Celestial Realm to create this mortal plane called Aimarion. Do you know why the gods created Aimarion?”

“Gods and mortals are interlinked,” Mirae said. “Just as she and I are. By forming a pact with me, she has bolstered my strength and growth far beyond what even many talented human Cultivators are capable of. And with her gaining ever more believers, she too is gaining great strength. Worthy of one day becoming a true goddess.”

“Correct. Gods are divine beings, but they subsist upon the belief of mortals. After the gods Created the world of Aimarion, they then populated it with mortals. Though, these mortals were not the humans who now inhabit this world. They were the first inhabitants of this world. The Aestori.”

“So, are you one of these Aestori?”

“I was created by the Aestori as a living memory of our legacy. To keep a record of what had happened before, and to observe the course of history for the creations who came after us. As,

sadly, none of our race has survived to the present day. Three million years ago, all of us were wiped out. By our very creators themselves.

“Five million years ago, when the gods created Aimarion, they created the Aestori as mortals upon whom they could subsist. We were a race not unlike your own in demeanor, appearance, or ability, except for one important distinction. All of us had the capacity to absorb the energy of the natural world that you know as Essence.”

“So, every one of your race was a Cultivator?” Mirae asked.

“That is correct, human child. The Aestori, like the gods, but unlike the humans who now inhabit Aimarion, were born with the ability to Cultivate the Essence of the natural world. In that regard, we were closer to the gods. We were also closer to the gods in the sense that they freely walked these lands back at that time five million years ago. But that was our undoing in the end.

“For a scant five hundred thousand years, Aimarion was at peace. We, working beside our creators, sought to create a civilization worthy of the gifts we had been given. And we were successful. We achieved levels of enlightenment far beyond those of today, both in terms of our inner Cultivation abilities as well as the society in which we lived. It was, by any objective account, a nearly ideal society.

“And yet, even in such a world, there were still those who craved more. And, there were gods who were willing to take advantage of the desires of our more... ambitious individuals, granting them new powers in exchange for servitude and fueling their own desires to wrest control of Aimarion from the other gods. And so, half a million years after Aimarion’s creation, the first of your kind was created. A blend of mortal and divine into a single being, one which possessed the power of the gods coupled with the potential of mortal kind. A Godslayer.”

Lysette lowered her head and clutched Mirae's hand a bit tighter. She had spoken highly of reforming and reshaping society, and yet, despite her intentions and goals, others who had come before her had done the same thing. And instead of utopia, they instead brought themselves only mutual destruction. *Is there a better way forward? One that doesn't lead to ruin?*

“Gods and Godslayers warred throughout the land over the next half million years. At times there were periods of peace. Some of those lasted many lifetimes, even for us with lifespans measuring upwards of a thousand years. But in the end, roughly a million and a half years after the first Godslayer's birth, a final, cataclysmic battle brought Aestori civilization to an end.

“The few remaining survivors could not survive the inhospitable world we had left in our wake, and so, rather than attempting to defy our now-inevitable fate, they banded together to create these relics, that we might one day guide the Godslayers who might one day follow us. And to beseech them not to take the same actions which lead to our annihilation.

“After a million years for Aimarion to recover and again become hospitable to life, the gods themselves repopulated it with the human race, as well as the other plants and animals that now exist upon it. But this time, they forged a new covenant with their creation. By implementing the Aestori Ban, the gods all but sealed themselves off from Aimarion, trusting instead to allow humans dominion over the land.

“Though, Godslayers are a notable exception to this Ban, as you yourself are well aware. With your emergence, other gods will surely create their own Godslayers to oppose you, if they have not already done so. The road ahead will be perilous, fraught with still more death and pain. And so I ask, Young Godslayer. Knowing now what you do, what path will you choose?”

“Finis,” Lysette said. “I agree that annihilation is an outcome to be avoided. But I do not believe that I can accomplish that end by remaining on the sidelines and letting Asterion's or

anyone else's plans come to fruition. If you are keeping records of the present, then you know what happened to my village barely a month ago. And that what happened there is happening elsewhere. Indeed, the world itself may be destroyed by the actions of Asterion and those who serve him."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. Do you know what it is that he seeks, Young Godslayer?"

"I cannot speak with certainty. But I believe that, based on what little evidence I have, he seeks to use an artifact known as the Mantle of Creation to recreate the entirety of this world."

"Then the fate of Aimarion is truly dire."

"What is this Mantle of Creation?" Mirae asked.

"It is the ultimate artifact. Ultimate in the sense of 'final'. An artifact that congeals all the Essence of Aimarion and the Celestial Realm together and annihilates this world in order to create a new one."

"So, Aimarion wants to annihilate the world?" Mirae said. They lowered their head and turned to Lysette.

"It would make sense," Lysette said. "Zarielle told me that she was attacked and some of her Essence was drained by Asterion in an ambush some four months ago. And, as a result of his treachery, she granted me new powers as a Godslayer so that I might inflict our shared revenge for his actions. I don't think he would willingly attack the gods themselves unless he truly desired such an outcome."

"Tell me, Young Godslayer. Here, where no gods may interfere, I wish you to tell me what lies in your heart. What vision do you hold for this world?"

"Asterion and his supporters must be made to pay for their crimes," Lysette said. "This much is non negotiable. Beyond that, however, I want to create a new society in place of the current

one. A world in which the gods treat mortals like cattle, where Cultivators live in a city in the sky and treat those without such talents like dirt. The society that is now, is anathema to me.

“It needs to be reformed, reshaped. In that sense, I admit I am little different than Asterion, or perhaps any of the other gods. But I want people to never again have to fear the wrath of their creators. I want to forge a new nation, and later a new world, founded on the principles of Reciprocity and mutual benefit, where Cultivators and non-Cultivators alike can exist in cooperation, each working to better the other, just as gods and mortals do to each other at their best.”

“Those seem like the words of a naive idealist, Young Godslayer,” Finis said.

“I know. And I have no delusions that it will be easy. There are a great many people who are quite content with the world as it is now, and who would stop at nothing to keep it that way. I know that the path ahead will involve no shortage of strife, and I know that I will have to take many more lives along the way. But if I don’t, many lives more will be lost either way. Your story has told me one thing, Finis. If the gods have brought Aimarion to the brink of annihilation once before, they certainly will do so again. They must be stopped. And who better to stop them than a Godslayer?”

“You would seek not to serve your creator?”

“I am forever grateful to Zarielle for granting me a new lease on life. And for giving me the power to shape my fate. But I don’t for a second believe she has humanity’s— or my— best interest at heart, and I feel that I’ll be disposed of at some point when I’ve outlived my usefulness to her. Given the option, I would rather forge my own path and create a new world for humans rather than continuing this seemingly endless war between the gods.”

“You understand what you’re saying, correct?”

“I war, so that those who come after me can know peace. I fight, so others don’t have to. I want to be a goddess who can uplift and defend others, and be supported by them in return. I, who assume the title of Aimarion’s Demigoddess of Reciprocity, seek to build a society forged upon that society, and to build it hand-in-hand with those who would seek to live in the same. To give others the chance that I, by the whims of the gods, was given before. That is the Reciprocity I wish to provide.”

“Speak your name, Young Godslayer.”

“Lyse Barret, human name Lysette Barenete. Godslayer of Zarielle, Aimarion’s nascent Demigoddess of Reciprocity, and she who would seek to end this everlasting conflict with all that I am. Or perish in the attempt..”

“And you, human child?”

“Mirae Trosst. Attendant, companion, disciple, and partner to my goddess. I pledge myself fully to the world she seeks to build. To fight alongside her, to share in her grief and sorrow, as well as her joy and many victories to come.”

“Mirae Trosst. Lyse Barret. Ascend now into the upper chamber. Cultivate there together, learn of the pain we had suffered due to our folly, and embrace the legacy we Aestori have left you. And then, understand yourselves and each other fully, as well as the challenges which lie ahead. As long as you two are sincere in your desire to end this conflict that has dragged on for too many millions of years, you will always have allies. Remember this.”