

Chapter 138: Kiarra's Plea

Lysette spent most of the evening and following morning deciding upon and later Cultivating the exactitudes of her new technique. It proved more difficult than expected for a few reasons. First, the technique was a combination of not two, but three different abilities she had. She had combined two techniques before— her Regenerative aura, for instance, was her regeneration folded into her aura. But doing so with three proved to be more of a challenge than she'd expected. And the other two challenges only made this first problem first.

Second, the technique was not unlike her Reciprocity Dominion, in that it was one derived from her own Domain. Most of her other techniques either derived from Zarielle's, or were more base techniques generally available to any Cultivator who pursued them. She'd had more practice Cultivating and enhancing those abilities, able to do so with little more than accumulated Essence and a thought by now. But this technique still felt unformed in her mind, needing to be precisely identified and only then manipulated.

And finally, and most importantly, the ability would also take after portions of two of her own inherent Godslayer powers, ones not tied to either Domain. The power to steal the Essence of foes she vanquished, and the power to manipulate the Sparks of her believers. And the former of those was an ability that she didn't even realize was tied to Godslayers until Serrena and later Mirae confirmed that they could do no such thing, even after their ascensions. Something she would need to ask Saffron about at their next meeting, in two days.

But around noon, Lysette finally had a breakthrough. She floated up to her Star high above and grabbed a small portion of its radiant mass. And from that, she formed a new branch of her Tree, which glowed in an equally golden radiance before assuming the same shape and color as the others after a few moments.

The technique, however, still seemed distant. Present, but inaccessible. As though she could use it, but only on herself, which would have no effect. To reach out and touch another's Spark, in order to manipulate it directly, required something more. Something which her adherents had willingly given. But also which couldn't be taken by any amount of force, or so it seemed.

She spent more time reflecting upon the technique over the course of the afternoon, and as dinnertime approached, she finished the first portion of her ability. It would be limited in scope to those who already had a belief in her, but that would still be of use outside of combat. It would be the perfect technique to corral Kiarra, for one, if she was insincere in her remorse.

One thing she did consider was the definition of belief. If it could be suitably stretched to encompass broader concepts beyond worship and praise, then perhaps that would be an avenue for combat. Mere belief in her divinity, or her strength, or some other suitable mechanism. Nothing immediately came to mind, and with another group Cultivation session on the commons approaching, Lysette shelved the matter for later.

She chose a light meal consisting of a modest portion of Mirae's favorite spicy chicken salad and a single custard for herself. The chitchat in the dining hall was mostly mundane smalltalk, with one notable exception. Three female students were having a conversation on the far side of the room, and Lysette listened in.

"I'm worried, you know," the short redhead said. "The Academy was attacked during that creepy red moon last month. Who's to say it won't happen again?"

"What can we do about it?" the blonde asked. "I'm barely passing my classes. I doubt I'll be of much use on the battlefield."

"Well, we gotta do something!" the brunette responded. "I know you two didn't lose anyone, but my younger brother died in the attack. Died saving me."

“I know, Tiffani,” the redhead said. “I just don’t want her sacrifice to be in vain because we go rushing out for vengeance and end up in the grave as a result.”

“Still, I want to do something,” Tiffani responded. “Feels like I’ve gotta work extra hard to make sure I live the life Zach didn’t get. Don’t you two feel the same way?”

“Well, this is just a rumor,” the blonde said. “But apparently there’s a group that meets out on the commons twice a week in the evening. And a bunch of them are growing in their Cultivation seemingly out of nowhere.”

“You mean that anti-nobilist group, Traci?” Tiffani said.

“I mean, I guess? I said it was just a rumor. Have you heard anything, Amanda?”

The redhead shrugged. “I figured I wasn’t welcome there. My dad’s a baron, remember?”

“Well, I’m gonna go,” Tiffani said. “At the very least, it beats moping around here.”

Lysette smiled and briefly considered introducing herself to the three, but decided it was better if they didn’t know her exact role within the group. In any case, they’d hopefully show up soon enough, and Lysette still needed to rendezvous with Kiarra first. It was only half an hour before the meeting was scheduled to begin, but she figured it could cause some problems if the daughter of Marquess Dozel showed up unannounced. Discomfort on Kiarra’s part was fine, but active hostilities were something to be avoided.

Lysette finished her meal in short order and, upon leaving the cafeteria, leapt into the air and floated just above the building. For several minutes as the sun dipped below the horizon, she looked around, expecting to find Kiarra. And she didn’t until just before the meeting began, when a frazzled Kiarra barreled through the north gate of campus and rushed toward the commons. And as she neared, somewhat short on breath, Lysette dropped to the ground and greeted her with a polite wave.

“Oh, good,” Kiarra said. “I was worried you were going to leave me here to fend for myself. That was going to be an absolute disaster.”

“I thought about doing just that. But I didn’t want your big opportunity to start making amends to end up in a fistfight. Though, I should warn you. It’s going to be embarrassing, it’s going to make you feel like shit, and a lot of people are going to jeer and heckle you. And if you are sincere about wanting to be better, you’re going to have to accept that and work to earn their forgiveness.”

“You said that the other day. Now, can we hurry before I get cold feet?”

Lysette smiled and the two made their way into the group of students before them. As expected, there was no small amount of jeering and raised noses, but, contrary to expectations, Kiarra was playing off all the insults. Even when a couple of first-year students started calling her various rude and hateful slurs, she only lowered her head in quiet resignation.

“You just...” Kiarra muttered under her breath.

“This is how they used to feel. Powerless, unable to say or do anything without repercussion. And part of the process of seeking forgiveness is understanding exactly how the other party felt and why your actions were wrong. If anyone tries to escalate to physical violence, I’ll step in.”

As Lysette finished messaging Kiarra, Kristil sent a message to her.

“I know you mentioned she was going to show up. But I am a bit surprised to see her actually doing so, and taking it all in stride.”

“Well, she wants my help with her Cultivation. And I’m trying to be better about giving people an opportunity for absolution that doesn’t end at the end of my fist. Consider this a trial run. If she does anything you or Nicholas don’t approve of, let me know and I’ll handle it.”

“Well, in that case, we have nothing to fear, Lyse.” Without skipping a beat, Kristil approached the crowd of students and started speaking.

“Alright everyone, we’ll be getting started here in just a moment, but before we get started with our Cultivation session this evening, I believe someone has a few words to say to everyone here. If you would.”

The crowd looked at Lysette with anticipation, but she only gestured toward Kiarra, who walked toward Kristil with head held low. The crowd erupted into murmurs, and some booing and heckling soon followed. A few students even conjured bits of rock and dirt and began throwing them toward Kiarra, but Lysette batted them aside with preternatural quickness.

“I understand your frustrations,” Lysette said. “And I admit my skepticism as well. But this group started because everyone here wanted to see a Domaria without the divide between nobles and commoners. To that end, we must act with grace and humility toward someone from the other side of that divide, who has, with humility and grace, sought to bridge that gap of her own volition. Not to do so would be to undermine our greater goals for the sake of the petty vengeance of the moment.”

“Kiarra must pay!” a man’s voice echoed through the crowd.

“Brand her like her boyfriend did to me!” a woman retorted.

Kiarra opened her mouth, but Lysette cut everyone off.

“You will have time to tell your stories. And Kiarra will listen as part of the reconciliation process. But I will only use my power to assist those who want to use my strength to end conflicts rather than to escalate them yet further. If you have joined with bloodthirst and retribution in your hearts, then I ask you to set them aside. Not for Kiarra’s sake, but for your

own. So that you do not find yourself walking down a bloodsoaked path of death and annihilation.”

“Easy for you to say!” a man shouted.

“You’re right!” Lysette said, her tone exasperated. “It is easy. Every day, I walk around, knowing how easy it would be to kill anyone on campus who gets in my way. Too easy to ever feel comfortable. And sometimes, when my friends and partner are hurt, it’s more tempting than you could imagine.”

“But the thing is? I like having friends. I love my partner. I like this world. For the most part, anyway. There are some things I don’t like about it. And a very few people and gods who remain unrepentant and deserve only extirpation. But, if someone is truly contrite and sincere about their desire to change, I want to meet her partway.

“If you can’t bring yourself to do so, I won’t force you to stay. But I will ask you to at least consider my words before leaving.”

Despite her concerns of a mass walkout, only two or three students started leaving the gathering. Kiarra turned to Lysette, nodded softly, then turned to the crowd and spoke.

“I want to start by apologizing to everyone, although I know an apology is only the first step to earning your forgiveness. I am truly sorry.

“I– I don’t want to excuse my past behavior. I was wrong, I wronged many of you, and those I didn’t wrong myself, the students I considered my peers, my friends, those with whom I grew up, did.

“From a very young age, I was taught that I was better than you. That being a great Cultivator, one who would reign in the highest parts of Domarian society, was my birthright. That I, being a noble, could order my lessers around as I saw fit. That it was my right to do so,

and that it was the commoners' responsibility and privilege to serve us. And I, being the damned fool I was, believed all of it.

Kiarra laughed. "After getting thoroughly thrashed by Lyse, I was forced to reconsider my supposed 'superiority'. Of course, in my anger, my humiliation, and my denial, I lashed out at first. I sent my ex after her. Then I even got my great-great-grandfather involved. All to settle a petty dispute because, and pardon my ignoble language, my head was so far up my ass I couldn't see or smell anything but shit."

The crowd chuckled at those words, and even the handful of students wandering off turned around and began listening to Kiarra.

"But after the attack on the Academy some three weeks ago, I had to accept harsh truths. Despite my hatred for her, I had to acknowledge that Lyse was a hero. While I was cowering away with my family, she was on the front lines, leading the defense of the Academy. She was saving her compatriots, and I couldn't even save myself.

"And that forced me to confront another uncomfortable truth. When she defeated me in our duel, do you know what she demanded of me?" She paused for a moment. "That I apologize to her and her friend, and admit that I lost to her. That's it. She could have demanded any of the many unreasonable things I have demanded of you. But she didn't.

"She showed the grace, the magnanimity, the *nobility* that I never did. And whether for that reason or some others, the gods have seen fit to smile upon her with Cultivation potential far beyond anyone I've ever seen before. The disparity ate at me. I hated it. But when I finally did pull my head out of my ass, I started to think: if I was taught wrong about my superiority as a Cultivator, then what else was I wrong about? I wasn't a superior Cultivator. I'm not a superior

person. My parents and grandparents might have done great things for our country, but I haven't contributed anything useful whatsoever.

“And so, I want to change. To do better. To be better. As a Cultivator, and as a person. Please, help me. I fear I can't do so alone.”