

## Chapter 129: Saffron's Lament

Saffron sat behind the king's desk while Lysette and Mirae knelt a few paces in front of it. King Stewart and High Magister Manheist were nowhere to be seen, and Lysette thought better than to ask about them. Other than their absence and Mirae's presence, little had changed in the previous day, although Lysette had taken a few odd moments to gaze upon the bookshelves.

Most of them related to various records, and of those, the vast majority seemed related to tax and trade policies. Tariff rates, records of crop yields, Essence crystal harvests over the previous century. And entire shelves filled with tables of assessed property values, real and personal alike. Lysette did wonder why so many records would be stored here, in the king's audience chamber, rather than stored with administrative personnel. And that led her briefly down a path of questioning the structure of the administrative apparatus of Domaria, before Saffron's harrumph snapped her back to attention.

"So, to ensure I've understood correctly," Saffron said. "You were enjoying a peaceful morning at the Academy when a mysterious individual attempted to assassinate the two of you with poisoned needles. You then proceeded to give chase, and after finding the individual in question, decided to bring them to me. Did I miss anything?"

"Only that we found more of those liquid-coated needles on their person," Lysette said. "And, not trusting the legal channels to properly investigate this incident, we made the decision to report directly to you. I apologize for disturbing your other business in doing so, Lady Saffron."

"This is troubling, both that someone would send an assassin like this, and that they would attack so brazenly, on campus, in the middle of the day, with no small number of students present. Beyond the fact that they would so willingly violate our laws and customs by attacking

students, they do so seemingly without regard for the collateral damage such a scheme would cause.”

Saffron nearly pounded her hand through the desk, only stopping herself two inches above. “How dare they go against the compromise I worked so hard to achieve! Damn them!”

“Forgive my presumptuousness, Lady Ateni,” Mirae said. “May I assume that the compromise you refer to is the set of reforms issued by the royal palace some two centuries ago? The ones which, among others, opened the Academy and Royal Officer Corps to commoners by birth?”

“That is correct, Mirae. About three hundred years ago, I began noticing that there were precipitous declines in the quality of new students seeking training in the art of Cultivation. At the time, I had pushed for broader reforms, not dissimilar from the ones Lyse has been championing in recent weeks.”

“I knew, of course, that complete abolition of the nobility was a nonstarter. Even if I had the capability to dispatch every noble in combat, that would only serve to the benefit of Domaria’s enemies. They would have taken advantage of the chaos and struck while we were in the midst of a civil war and surely either eradicated our nation or subjugated it, completely reducing it to a protectorate.

“To me, Godslayer of Domar, Demigoddess of Stability, maintaining my patron’s greatest achievement, and the peace he dedicated his life and divinity to maintaining, was my prime imperative. As such, I had to make a compromise, one which left no one happy but still served to everyone’s mutual benefit.

“The Academy would begin accepting students, but no commoner would be promoted above the rank of Captain in the Royal Army unless a sufficient number of nobles assented to the

individual's induction into the peerage of Domaria. Similarly, I had to agree to giving priority access to the scions of the major noble family, both in terms of admissions and other disciplinary policies. And finally, in order to ensure that the children of the nobles are poised to inherit their families' legacies, I had to assent to diverting a portion of our nation's production of Essence crystals to the nobility."

Lysette listened and nodded throughout the whole story. Everything Saffron said synced up with what she'd researched prior. And it turned out that both the story Kristil had told, as well as the history books, were both half-truths. She did wonder from that, exactly what steps Saffron had taken over the centuries to keep her name out of the history books. And just how doctored that and other history texts might be.

Mirae's voice snapped Lysette's focus back to the conversation at hand.

"Even knowing the problems which have arisen as a result?" Mirae asked.

"Even so." Saffron took a deep breath. "You two were both human not so long ago, and so, your perspective is colored accordingly. But over the centuries, I have come to understand one thing about my Domain. The now has value.

"We could speak of hypotheticals and contingencies and wide-eyed utopian ideals for the next century if you two wished. But ultimately, how many people must suffer and die today, in order to carve the mere possibility of a better future? And, could you impose that decision upon those unwilling?

"Think about it, both of you. But especially you, Lyse. Could you, the manifestation of Aimarion's Reciprocity, knowingly and willingly take the life of a person living today in the hope that someone in the future might be made better off? A someone who might never be born, or who, independently of any action you might take, might have their life cut short? Plague, war,

famine, or simple accident all snuff out many innocent Sparks, nearly all far sooner than deserved.”

“I– I don’t think I could. If they were directly involved in the oppression and murder of people here and now, I would. And if they were directly threatening my friends, my partner? I would be compelled to. But– I don’t know for sure.”

“Then you understand my predicament. It is good to think toward the future, but as someone who has been a divine being for far longer than either of you, be aware that it is all too easy to lose touch with humanity over countless centuries. Your friends, your lovers, your families. In time, they all wither away. Gifted human Cultivators might fight the tide for a century or three, but even they too will eventually succumb.”

“Thank you, Saffron,” Lysette said. “That’s a lot of things you’ve given me to think about. If I may request your leave, I had some people I was planning to meet for lunch.”

“So granted. And thank you for bringing this to my attention. Be on your guard out there and keep me informed if you stumble upon something. And meanwhile, I’ll do some investigations of my own over the next week before our next meeting. I wouldn’t be surprised if I find a rat or two hiding in high places as well.”

Mirae stood and bowed. “Thank you, Lady Ateni.”

“Please, Mirae, call me Saffron. Or Miss Saffron if you would prefer to be more formal.”

“Understood, Miss Saffron.” Mirae’s expression conveyed the sentiment that they were as far from enthused as possible with the forced informality, but aware of who they were speaking to.

The walk back to the Academy proved uneventful and, for the first time in a full day cycle, that nagging sensation eating away at Lysette was completely gone. There was still no solid lead

of who was behind the assassination attempt— Baron Albine was at the top of the list, with plots by the Chancellor not far behind. But now there was at least one more powerful individual who would be assisting on that end.

The sun was atop the celestial zenith when Lysette and Mirae arrived back on campus. Apart from a few groundskeepers cordoning off the area where they'd been attacked earlier, nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Students were going about their daily routines, and while a plurality were heading in the general direction of either the dorms or the dining hall, many others were heading to lunchtime classes or recreating on the grassy commons.

Lysette made her way toward the cafeteria, engaging in brief pleasantries with a few students along the way. And as soon as she entered the building, she took full account of the full array of pungent and delicious scents wafting through the air. Her mouth salivated, her right eye lit up, and she broke into a full grin as she made her way through the line and grabbed not one, but two of her favorite lemon custards. She then grabbed two spoonfuls of shrimp-and-cheese stuffed portobellos before making her way to the tables in the back. Mirae joined her about a minute later with their usual plate of chicken salad, and together, the two took a nondescript booth against the back wall.

Lysette looked around, wondering if Kristil or Nicholas were around, but she saw no signs of either. She did briefly wonder if something nefarious had happened to one or both of them. For several reasons, that seemed unlikely, though the feeling did vaguely persist until she saw Kristil walking in a few minutes later.

*“Kristil, can you hear me?”* Lysette messaged as Kristil finished gathering their meal.

*“Lyse? Is that you?”* Kristil turned around, looking on either side. *“I hear you, but I don’t see you.”*

*“Against the back wall.”*

Kristil looked up, waved at Lysette, and started walking over. *“You can use telepathy at that distance?”*

*“Oh, uh, that was actually one of the things I wanted to ask you about. But I think my questions about telepathy can wait until you get seated and have a chance to catch your breath.”*

*“Thank you.”*

Mirae moved around to Lysette's side of the booth, scooting up against her as Kristil took the now vacated seat. As they did, Lysette wrapped her arm around them, while Mirae grinned and Kristil looked upon the couple with a bemused head tilt.

“New Mirae, or new boyfriend?” Kristil asked.

“The former,” Lysette said. “They wanted to make some bodily changes, and I’m certainly not going to stop them.”

“I see. I will continue to hope for happiness for you two as a couple.” Kristil took a bite of spinach tortellini and seamlessly switched to telepathy. *“In more private matters, I have a couple of things to report, but it sounded like you had something you wanted to ask me about.”*

*“Before I get to that, is Nicholas okay?”*

*“Oh, yes. He and some friends were up late last night working on a project for one of his classes. So he’s fine, just resting.”*

*“That’s a relief. As for my question, it’s about telepathy. I wanted to know the theoretical and practical limitations of telepathic communication, as best you understand them. Would it be possible to use telepathy for cross-continental communication?”*

*“I’m guessing this isn’t just idle curiosity, and possibly related to whatever had you away from campus for the past week?”*

Lysette nodded.

*“From what I’ve learned in class, there’s no limit on teleportation in theory. In practice, however, there are three things that will reduce it. First, you need to unambiguously know who you’re trying to communicate with. That can be something like ‘that girl over there with the red shirt on’ or ‘Lyse Barret, Co-Leader of the Order of the Mirrored Flame’*

*“Second, you need to know where they are. The technique does have some leniency built into it, but it becomes harder to establish a connection the further away your target is. If I know exactly where my brother is, I could talk to him across the city. If I didn’t have a clue, I could maybe reach him from across campus, but that’s about it.*

*“And lastly, there’s a stamina drain on the technique, proportional to the distance between the two people and the time spent with the link in place. I would say something to the effect of ‘to use telepathy across the continent, you’d need to have deific stamina, but that might give you in particular the wrong idea. Though, if you wanted to try it, I won’t stop you.’”*

Lysette smiled. *“All of this is consistent with what I’ve observed. Thank you for letting me know. Now then, I have some other things I need to tell you. Things that may be difficult for you to hear.”*

Kristil took a long drink of water before responding. *“Thank you for the warning. Now then, please continue.”*