

Chapter 133: A Battle of Wit and Words

“Who are you?” Lysette asked. “And why won’t you speak to me in person?”

Lysette clenched her fist and drew shadows all around her. Her aura flared out, and her eyes darted in every direction. She activated Reciprocity Dominion and moved as close to Mirae as possible, taking their hand, anticipating and preparing countermeasures for whoever and whatever might be lurking.

“I will speak with you in person, if that is your wish. I do, of course, require a condition. Do you promise not to try to kill me? I only mean to talk.”

“Talk? Right, and I should believe you why?” Lysette didn’t sense hostility in the voice, but whoever it was, clearly wasn’t an ally. The voice was now vaguely familiar, but she couldn’t quite pinpoint it— it was warbled and distorted.

“You shouldn’t, just as I don’t believe you. It appears that, despite my earlier attempt to convince you otherwise, you have continued upon your path unabated. And thus, further conflict remains inevitable. At the same time, I don’t believe either of us wishes for a battle here and now. You don’t want to risk your friends being caught in the crossfire, and I do not wish for yet more fighting to take place on campus. But if you wish to parley in person, so be it.”

“Wait, I know that voice now. Show yourself, Chancellor! It’s about time we had a talk.”

“Look up, on the Central Administration Building’s roof.”

Lysette did so, not letting her aura’s perception waver from Mirae for an instant. And sure enough, the Chancellor stood there, looking down upon Lysette both literally and metaphorically. He nodded as the two made eye contact, and a half-second later, dissolved his body into light and reappeared a few feet away from Lysette and Mirae.

“Chancellor?” Mirae asked.

“Stay on your guard,” Lysette said.

“It’s been awhile, Miss Barret. Or, should I say, Godslayer Lysette?”

Lysette was shocked for the briefest of moments at hearing that particular epithet, but suppressed all physiological responses. Instead, she focused her mental responses analyzing the Chancellor’s words, any facial tells, and anything else she could use to glean information. And steeled herself, knowing he would be doing the same with her.

“It has, Chancellor. Over a month, if I recall. It seems you are doing remarkably well.”

Lysette immediately recognized another reason why the Chancellor was unkeen on fighting. Judging by the amount of Essence she could sense within him, Lysette was slightly stronger than he, in terms of raw power. Though, it was uncomfortably close, and well within his capabilities to make up that difference with technique and experience.

And then there was Mirae. Lysette didn’t think even for an instant that the Chancellor wouldn’t go after Mirae if the parley turned into hostilities. Lysette stared at the Chancellor, and the Chancellor stood back. Neither trusted the other, but both calculated that the battle would be purely of hearts and minds, wit and words. At least, for tonight.

“You don’t get to be my age without picking up on how to extricate yourself from... sticky situations.”

“Just like the attack on the Academy. Or at least, I don’t remember seeing you defending the campus from the invading soldiers.”

“I was at my family’s estate that night. It was my great-granddaughter’s thirteenth birthday and both she and her mother requested my presence.”

A real convenient excuse. Especially given that it’s both plausible and hard to verify.

“It must be nice,” Lysette said. “Having a family. Living relatives, that is.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. My heart goes out to you for those you lost.”

He was certainly a skilled actor. If he knew the name ‘Lysette’, there were three possibilities. First, that he’d gleaned it from one of the few times Mirae had spoken it aloud, using his scrying technique. Second, that he could read some information within her mind. Probably not now, but back then, when she was weaker, when her perceptive abilities were worse? It’s entirely possible he did so undetected. And third, that he was getting intelligence from a third party. Of the three, that seemed the most plausible.

“Thank you, Chancellor. Now then, we should discuss why you started this conversation by insinuating that I would ‘try to kill you.’”

“You are denying such an obvious truth?”

“Whether or not that’s the truth will depend on how this conversation progresses.”

“So be it. Then, question for question, answer for answer? I believe you are familiar?”

Another mistake. Lysette recalled that conversation with Mirae and their friends all too well. He revealed that he’d been spying on her, and for a lot longer than she’d previously expected. Two questions remained: Why give up such information? And what was he deflecting from?

“But of course, Chancellor. I’ll give you the first question.”

“How magnanimous. My first question: Why do you persist in your involvement? I could hazard a few guesses, but I’d rather hear it from your mouth.”

“He’s—” Mirae started.

“It’s fine, Mirae,” Lysette said. “We can’t trust him, of course. And anything he says could be a lie. But lies belie truths as well. And when we communicated telepathically, we agreed that this was just parley— no weapons, no fighting.”

“Indeed. And quite astute for one so young,” the Chancellor said. “Your answer?”

“I wasn’t the one who decided to get involved. I was dragged in. But I will be the one to end this conflict. One way or another.

“My question now,” Lysette said. “What do you hope to gain by speaking here tonight?”

“I wish to protect my students, as is my responsibility as Chancellor. That is all I have ever wanted.

“And now my question: What is it that you truly want?”

“I would have thought you already knew the answer to this question from your earlier statement. But no matter. I wish to slay Asterion. To ensure that he receives comeuppance for his crimes against me and countless others.”

“How naive of you. Do you really think such a thing is possible?”

Lysette grinned. Another mistake, giving Lysette two questions in a row. “Yes, I think such a thing is possible. The moniker of Godslayer would not exist if the gods did not fear us enough to bestow such an honor upon us.” *Besides, it’s been done before.*

“Anyway,” Lysette said, “I believe it’s my turn for a question. Why didn’t you kill me back then when you had the chance? And don’t tell me that it was because you didn’t know what I was at the time. Most of the students knew *something* was off about me, and I see no reason why you would be any different, *Chancellor.*”

“I told you back then. I wanted you not to be involved. I had hoped that, if I could dissuade you from your foolhardy quest, you might change course, become a productive Cultivator, maybe change the world for the better. It seems in that regard, I have failed.

“And now my question for you: Why are you so bent on slaying Asterion that you would sacrifice everything you have, including your life potentially?”

“Because I know the pain of losing everything,” Lysette said. “Of losing everyone I’ve ever known. The pain you seem so keen on avoiding. I want to try to avoid having others experience that pain.

“In order for that to happen, though, those who commit atrocities must not be above facing atonement for their misdeeds. The gods of Aimarion think themselves above retribution. I intend to correct that misgiving.

“My question is an extension of yours: Why do you cling to your god, knowing that he has orchestrated such atrocities? You’ve said yourself that you don’t want to get involved, that you didn’t want to get me involved, and yet, here you are.”

“And you haven’t?”

“Answer the question, Chancellor. You’ll have your chance to ask one next.”

“It was rhetorical. That is the nature of power. Those with power wield it, and those without either cling to those who do, or perish. I understand that, and I choose to maintain the good graces of the one who will reshape the world, to protect those who I care about.”

Interesting. Lysette considered those words. He seemed a little *too* certain at that. As though he knew more about the war of the gods than he let on.

“Now then,” the Chancellor continued. “Answer my question.”

“I have. Three people back home. Forty soldiers I slew during the attack on the Academy. Seven soldiers sent to assassinate me. Their captain who authorized the operation, and a guard unfortunate enough to get swept up in it. And twenty soldiers who terrorized a town simply seeking peace and justice. Possibly a couple others I’ve overlooked. Round it up to a hundred if you like, but the truth remains the same. Even if I killed tenfold over the next year, it’d still be fewer than Asterion’s Inquisitorius slew during a single night.

“That’s the difference between Asterion and me. He fights for power for himself. I’ve only ever fought to stop him, or to defend the people I care about.”

“Sanctimonious and foolish indeed. Then humor me. If you hate the idea of an untouchable tyrant so much, why do you strive to become one?”

“You stupid, naive fool. I never said anything about becoming an untouchable tyrant. If my plans come to fruition, there won’t be any. Neither gods nor kings nor any other strongmen towering over the people. It will be the people themselves, collectively, who govern. The only fair system. Or at the very least, the only possible system which has a chance of being fair.”

“Fair? Without a ruler to keep the people’s base impulses in check, what you have will not be fair or just, it will be chaos, a complete unraveling of the order that has been built and maintained for millennia.”

“Care to explain? That is my question, to be clear.”

“Do you know the origins of this country?” the Chancellor asked.

“I’ve learned bits and pieces of it. But I’d still like to hear it from your mouth, so I can check with what I’ve learned.”

The Chancellor did explain the story, more or less as Saffron had, but with a small but noticeable difference. In the Chancellor’s story, Domar appointed the royal family to serve as his stewards, rather than exerting his influence through a sequence of Godslayers. It did lead Lysette to believe that he didn’t know of Saffron’s true role. Though, it could have just as easily been a cover story fabricated to hide that detail.

“I suppose I will take my last question. You’ve caused quite a commotion among some of the influential families here. What will you do to stop their ire?”

“Nothing. If I’m not going to let the anger of the gods themselves stop me, why would I care about the egos of a few petty human nobles? As long as they stew away in their little palaces, who gives a damn? And if they come after me, my friends, my love, or any who live under my protection, then they will learn firsthand exactly why that’s a terrible idea.

“And now, my question. Given that neither one of us is going to relent and also that both of us have expressed interest in not seeing the people of the Academy come to harm, where would you like for us to resolve our disputes? As long as you promise not to take action against me or my friends until our battle in seven days, I will grant you and yours the same courtesy.”

“There’s a shrine to my god not far from the eastern edge of campus. And there’s a clearing just to the north. I will wait for you then. Come alone, and don’t try any funny business.”

Lysette smiled. “Oh, and one final question. You asked two consecutively at the beginning, so it’s only fair I get to ask two in a row now.”

“You... you...” The barest hint of a crack in the Chancellor’s calm demeanor showed for a fraction of a second before he recomposed himself. “Very well. Ask away.”

“In your story, you said that Domar chooses a royal family to act as his representative and governing regent. Given that the gods are very limited in what they can do on Aimarion, who do you think serves as his intermediary? Or rather, how do you think Domar would prevent the royal family from acting against his interests? Or any of the other nobles who were causing problems for the kingdom he established?”

“I– I don’t know.”

Lysette smiled. “I’ll see you on the night of the full moon. Good night, Chancellor.”