

Chapter 110: The Art of Cultivation

Maxwell heaved a massive sigh as he looked at Lysette, then up at Mirae, then back to his fellow representatives, muttering something about being ‘too old’ to deal with literal deities walking into town. That comment earned him a playful jab on the shoulder from Joseph, who pointed out that he was already an adult while Maxwell was still in diapers, which elicited a few chuckles from Evelyn and the others. Even Mirae cracked a small smile at listening to the exchange before everyone involved returned to focus and the discussion continued.

“A goddess?” Theo asked. “Well, having seen what you’re capable of, I can’t disbelieve you. Although it is a little difficult to fathom.”

“Will you be taking over the village?” Maxwell asked.

“No,” Lysette said. “The village will remain as it is, governed by whatever systems are already in place. After discussing things with Mirae earlier, I agree with them that it would be best that I not assume any role beyond a protector. They have expressed concern that having me, an immortal, ruling over a human settlement, however benevolent I might try to be, might cause some strife that I would prefer not to place upon you.”

“That’s very generous of you,” Lyon said. “Would we be able to count on your assistance with other tasks? Considering what I’ve heard of your abilities, you would be a great help with tasks such as tending to the fields, building homes, and so forth. I’ve even heard that you have capabilities as a healer.”

Lysette’s eyes beamed at hearing the words ‘tending to the fields’. “I would love to,” she said. “But I think there are more pressing concerns, and I will have to leave tomorrow morning. When I have more time to do so, I would absolutely love to help with everything that has to do with foraging, farming, herbalism, and anything else along those lines.”

“When will you come back?”

“In a week. Perhaps a bit sooner. However, I want to stay here tonight, to teach Theo the basics of Cultivation. That way, your village will not be completely defenseless if you are attacked while I am away.”

“Can you do that?” Theo asked.

“Do you believe in me?”

“Well, I can’t exactly disbelieve the words of a goddess. Not when she speaks so resolutely with words which I know to be true deep within my soul.”

“Then I shall do all in my ability to assist you on your new journey as a Cultivator.” Lysette turned to Maxwell and the others. “Do any of you object if the three of us leave town for a few hours? We will return before sundown, and make sure to keep an eye and ear on the village if anything tries to attack.”

“As long as you three don’t stray too far, I see no reason to object,” Maxwell said. “If we may take our leave to assist in preparing the funeral rites for tonight.”

“Funeral rites?” Mirae asked. “For the soldiers who attacked you?”

“It is one of the cultural practices passed down through the generations,” Joseph said. “All who perish in the village, be they friend or foe, are given a proper funeral and sending. It is a custom designed to soothe the souls of the departed and ensure that they do not rise as undead.”

Lysette pondered the words and the irony that she had absorbed their Sparks during the battle, but said nothing about it. Even without the threat of their restless spirits turning into undead— something she wasn’t certain was even possible— it was a time-honored tradition for these people. And she had agreed to not infringe upon the people’s governance or custom, outside of emergency situations or military matters.

“Well then, shall we be off?” Theo asked.

Lysette nodded, taking Mirae’s hand as the two followed Theo out of the hall and out into a small clearing just to the north of town. There were a few rocky cliffs along with a small creek a short distance away, but the most notable feature was the handful of ravaged trees carved with no small number of wounds, gashes, splinters, and other signs of being used as targets for swordplay practice. Some of them clung to life against all odds, while others were long dead, reduced to hunks of wood. Lysette closed her eyes and stood silently, offering her blessing to the sacrificed plant life before proceeding with her task.

“Theo, what do you know about Cultivation?”

“Not much, Miss Lyse. I know only that those who practice those arts are capable of superhuman feats and powers which might be considered magical.”

Lysette nodded and walked over to a tall, dead stump, standing about twice her height, and rubbed her hand along it. “Would you start by striking this log with your sword? As hard as you can.”

“Alright,” Theo said. “Let me show you just what I can do!”

He pulled his sword out and assumed a fighting stance. It wasn’t a perfect one, but his swordplay and footwork as he charged the stump were informed by years of practice and training. He launched his strike, abandoning all notions of defense as he wound up and twisted his side to accelerate the attack, ultimately driving his weapon about two inches into the eighteen-inch thick stump.

“Not bad at all,” Lysette said. “May I?”

Theo handed her the weapon, and, in a single swift stroke, Lysette sliced the stump in two, sending the top half tumbling to the ground. As the log fell, Lysette raised her left arm and

caught it, balancing it slightly before chucking the mass of wood a few yards away near where Mirae was standing.

“Cultivation, at its core,” Lysette started, “involves a type of natural energy throughout Aimarion called Essence. By opening yourself up to this energy and tethering it to your soul, you can move like I just did.”

“Incredible,” Theo said. “I couldn’t even see you move. At first you were standing still, and next thing I noticed, half that old log was falling to the ground.”

“It’s not just physical might.” Lysette sprouted her wings and hovered in midair for a few seconds before returning to the ground. “Mirae and I can fly, in addition to moving far faster than even the fastest untrained humans. Furthermore, Cultivation will improve your mental acuity, sensory perception, and, depending on your capacity for it, potentially grant other abilities as well.”

“So how do I obtain this Essence?”

“Essence exists all around us. Thanks to our own Cultivation paths, Mirae and I can see it floating around us like a thin, wispy haze. But that isn’t necessary to Cultivate. Instead, you are going to sit here and meditate.”

“And what specifically do I need to do?”

“Let all of your errant thoughts slip away, along with all sensations of the outside world. Look within yourself, envision the very core of your being, your soul. And when you do that, you should enter a realm of your subconscious, one that represents the metaphysical link between your mind, your body, and your soul.”

“What will that look like?”

“It depends on whose realm. Mine looks like a garden, while Mirae’s looks more like a castle made entirely of ice. I know of others as well. But when you get there, you will know what to do.”

“Are you sure I can do it? Cultivate, that is.”

“Essence exists within every person, and permeates throughout the entire world. Everyone, I think, has at least some capacity to do so. Not everyone has the same capacity— some are more gifted than others. But yes, I think you should be able to do so.” Lysette did recall reading about hypotheses that this wasn’t true, but chose not to mention it right before Theo got started.

“You *think*? That hardly sounds reassuring. Also, isn’t it your job as a goddess to know these sorts of things?”

Lysette blushed. “I have a vague sense that what I’m saying is true, but no, I don’t know anything more than what I’ve been able to learn and study on my own. And I’m actually younger than you, if I had to guess.”

“No shit? Well, I suppose I better stop with the excuses and give it an honest attempt.”

“If I may give one piece of advice before you begin?” Mirae said. “Just relax, look inward, and accept yourself. That was how I was able to access my Cultivation realm.”

“Thank you.”

Theo sat down with crossed legs, closed his eyes, and shortly after, his breathing and heartbeat grew increasingly slow and rhythmic. As his body first tensed, then gradually relaxed, Mirae turned to Lysette and wrapped an arm around her.

“Will you be assisting him?”

“Tonight, while he sleeps. I will give him the Essence I absorbed from the soldiers who attacked Ciricu. But right now, I want him to focus on being able to find and access his Cultivation realm. If he can’t do that much, I’d rather find someone who can.”

“Do you think you’ll find someone else?”

“I don’t think I’ll need to. But I want to make sure he can get this far on his own before I assist him. Maybe it’s the sliver of Serrena’s divinity within me, but I want to help those willing to push forward and challenge themselves first.”

Mirae leaned in and rested their head on Lysette’s shoulder, and Lysette closed her eyes and wrapped an arm around them. For four hours, the two stood silently, watching Theo while keeping an ear out for any sounds of distress from the village. Mirae would steal an occasional kiss, while Lysette merely watched Theo and waited from a short distance away.

For the first three hours, little happened. Theo sat silently throughout it all, the only motion he made being that of the occasional finger twitch or nasal scrunch, but in the final hour, his body went completely still, and the haze of Essence about him shifted. It was a trickle at first, but the air about him slowly cleared as the Essence first swirled about like water spiraling down a drain, and then perfused within his body. Mirae clutched onto Lysette’s arm a bit tighter, while Lysette simply looked on with bated breath as the sun continued its descent, nearing the western horizon before Theo finally roused.

“How was it?” Lysette asked.

“It was unlike everything I’ve ever experienced before. For a while, nothing happened, but then all of my sensations of the outside world just disappeared. I couldn’t see, I couldn’t hear, nothing. And then I— I don’t really know how to explain. It was like I was in a new world. Empty, hollow, nothing there. But somehow, I knew that I could do something there. I didn’t

know exactly what, but I knew it was a world that was made for me, and that I had to go out and create that world with my own hands.”

“It reminds me of the first time I accessed my Cultivation realm,” Mirae said. “It was just like you said— an empty world inside my being. And over time, I learned how to use my Essence to build up my soul and start creating my Cultivation foundation. And from then on, I’ve continued to take steps along the path, a path that has led me through daunting challenges and a greater sense of purpose than I’ve ever before known. And perhaps most importantly, it’s led me to the love of my life.”

“So you two are?”

“Mirae is my partner, my disciple, my attendant, my companion, and my lover,” Lysette said. “Among other things. But I think it’s about time to head back to town now. I can hear that things are just about ready for our return, and I can smell some food being prepared.”

Theo’s stomach growled. “Now that you mention it, I didn’t eat lunch today.” He chuckled.

“Nor did I,” Mirae said. “Shall we be off, then?”