

## Chapter 131: Dawn of the Revolution

Lysette and Mirae stood atop the roof of the Academy dormitories as the sun set on the city of Domaria. Though the stars were beginning their nightly vigil over the increasingly dark skies, the campus down below was far from quiet.

Lysette used the opportunity before the meeting began to practice with her left eye. Nothing to test her absolute limits, but more to test the speed and efficiency with which she could adjust her vision in short order.

It did seem, on the surface, that the visual aspects of the scrying stone were more suited for reconnaissance and subterfuge than hand-to-hand combat. But Saffron's appearance had made one thing abundantly clear— Lysette knew she would no longer be able to brute-force her way through the challenges to come. Being able to utilize every ability in her arsenal and exploit every weakness she could uncover could be the difference between carrying out her mission and certain death.

And for that, intelligence was at a premium. Not just the sort of grand intelligence that governed overall mission strategy. But also, just as importantly, intelligence within each individual battle. Understanding how an opponent fought, how they reacted, feinted, adjusted in the midst of battle. And deciphering as much as was possible about the techniques they used— learning what, *exactly*, those abilities did was the first step to devising countermeasures.

For that, Lysette's new eye would be a potent boon. But only if she could use it to its fullest extent.

It didn't take long to realize that, with a few mental commands, Lysette could adjust her vision to look around solid objects. From her vantage point along the northern edge of the dorm

roof, it was easy enough to veer her vision around the library and dining hall. And beyond those two buildings, a pair of students were practicing their techniques in an informal sparring match.

Lysette watched the two men as they engaged in close-quarters brawling. For several seconds, neither of them used any techniques beyond basic bodily enhancement. Punches flew, met by equally quick jabs and counterstrikes for half a minute before the two disengaged and regrouped on opposite sides of the stone platform. Each of the two was breathing heavily, but neither seemed close to relenting.

But then a conflagration of Essence began to swirl about the man standing near the southwestern corner of the platform. He threw his hands backward, conjuring flaming spheres in each of them. But instead of throwing the fireballs as was Lysette's initial assumption, he cloaked his fists in flame, reminiscent of the technique that Serrena had used against her a month earlier.

He blitzed forward, and his opponent did as well. The man with fiery hands went on the offense, throwing punch after punch. And his opponent could only dodge, but dodge he did with impressive alacrity. Lysette watched the deft displays of footwork, augmented by some sort of afterimage technique.

First one image, then three, then seven in addition to the original. To Lysette, the images were as easy to identify as anything else. But they had their intended effect on their opponent, who was forced to fall back and assume a defensive posture.

He raised his fists, ready to counter. And as the images approached, he began punching through them with aplomb. But he made no progress. More and more punches loosed through afterimages which disappeared on contact, and his stamina was dropping far quicker than his opponent's.

In a last-ditch effort, the fire Cultivator flared his flames out, attempting to incinerate the entirety of the platform and force a victory by ring-out. But he was unsuccessful. His flames only reached a mere third of the platform, and even with the heat no doubt sweltering the area, his opponent was unfazed, evading the raging inferno until the flames petered out and the fire Cultivator dropped to his knees in exhaustion.

In the aftermath of the match, Lysette got an idea, and whispered to Mirae. “Love, do you want to help me test something?”

“If I can, I will.”

“I want to see if this eye can detect how you move while using your Ice Teleportation.”

“I can do that, love.”

Mirae created four patches of ice, one on each corner of the building, and stood atop the southeast patch, gripping their amulet tightly. They looked at Lysette, and Lysette gazed back at them. With just a nod, Mirae’s body disappeared.

But, as Lysette expected, there were subtle shifts in the flow of ambient Essence. It moved at a blur, faster than Lysette’s own ability to react, but not outside her ability to perceive. The shifting Essence looked as though a squirrel or rat was scurrying through an endless patch of leaves, completely invisible save for the rustle of leaves it left in its wake.

She turned around, meeting Mirae’s small beam of ice with a shadowy shield which deflected her love’s attack skyward. Mirae charged forward, and Lysette ran to meet them. But as Mirae wrapped their arms around Lysette, Lysette dissolved herself, reconstituting her physical form just behind Mirae. And then she wrapped her arms around her love from behind, nuzzling her cheek into their surprisingly firm back.

“You really could tell? Or maybe I just chose the obvious place to reappear.”

“You did. And I did. I saw some aspect of you pushing away the surrounding ambient Essence. I still don’t understand exactly what exactly you did, but it was like you were tunneling through spacetime, and I could see the ripples in three-dimensional physical space by the way jostled Essence about.”

“That’s incredible, love.”

“Well, it is a deific-level artifact. I would hope it was worth what we had to do to get it. Though, changing the subject, I can see people are already gathering by the Sky Garden Tower. Shall we make our way over there as well?”

Mirae nodded, and the two first headed down the stairs and made their way to Lysette’s room. Lysette wanted to invite Danitha to join them, but she wasn’t there. And so, hand-in-hand, the couple descended the rest of the way down to the lobby and out onto the commons.

The walk itself was pleasant, relaxing even. A warm, southerly breeze filled the air as the blue hour commenced in full swing. It was still bright enough that even the unaided eye of a non-Cultivator could see most of their surroundings, and just dim enough that Lysette could walk alongside Mirae through the campus in relative anonymity. And, with her continued and growing prominence in matters both foreign and domestic, the respite of relative obscurity provided by the darkness was welcome indeed.

Lysette cloaked herself in shadow, blending into the surroundings as she and Mirae made their way through the gathered crowd. About a hundred students in all had amassed and stood in the light of a head-sized sphere floating about twenty feet overhead.

Kristil and Nicholas were discussing matters with a blonde woman Lysette didn’t recognize. Meanwhile, the other students were chatting amongst themselves. Some discussions centered on

their troubles with the nobles and their children. But a lot more was considerably more mundane. Some complaints about class assignments, some gossip which, surprisingly enough, didn't center on Lysette.

And several discussions about crushes and romantic interest. Lysette found herself the focal point of that topic more than a few times. But, fortunately for her and to the lament of her would-be suitors, any discussion of attempting to woo her was met with a strong rebuke that it would certainly not go over that well.

*“Are you about ready to begin?”* Lysette projected to Kristil. *“Mirae and I are both here. I don't know about Serrena, but I figure she'll show up when she's good and ready to.”*

*“Understood. If I may say a few words first?”*

Lysette gave a quiet sound of assent, and Kristil took the cue to stand up atop the bottom step of the floating staircase and call the group to order. The individual conversations died out, and after ten seconds, she began.

“My friends, my fellow students, young Cultivators here at the Academy. Thank you all for being here today.

“When my brother and I started this group, we did so with the lowest of expectations. We had hoped, in our more delirious moments, that we could effect real change by working together. That many voices, united as one, could purge through millennia of law and custom designed to privilege nobility and their progeny. But, despite all of our efforts, I knew that our climb was uphill at best, and an unscalable cliff at worst.

“And yet, in recent days, for the first time since I arrived on campus some three years ago, I truly believe that the winds of change are beginning to blow.”

Nicholas took over for his sister. “All we have ever asked for was to be given fair and equal treatment. The same opportunities for resources to aid our Cultivation, the same chances to earn valuable independent instruction time with the professors here. Equal treatment in matters of discipline and opportunities after our graduation.

“For years now, we have attempted to reach out to the Academy administration and the palace, and our pleas have fallen on deaf ears. Some of us who were students when we started this group have graduated, taken up roles in the Royal Army, and tried to eke out a living for themselves. Some of them have done so. Some have already perished in the attempt. And, with war on the horizon, many more will follow, used as fodder for wars between kings and gods who care not for our plight.

“It has been all too easy to give in to despair. I have at times felt the temptations to give in, to give up, to simply acquiesce to my fate. But now, for the first time, I share my sister’s optimism. I truly believe that fortune has smiled upon us, and that our dawn approaches.”

“Lyse, if you would?” Kristil said.

Murmurs broke out. Some were dismissing her out of hand after the last time she was here, and a few even started to wander toward the back of the crowd, motioning to leave. Still others waited with bated breath, eager to hear about the heroine of the academy and what she had to say. Still others whispered among each other, and Lysette ignored their private conversations as she approached the sibling pair.

“Thank you, Nicholas. I want to start by telling everyone here that I’m sorry.” Upon those words, the crowd went dead silent. “When I was here last time, I was callous toward those of you here. I spoke of a future in which things would be better, and refused to do anything more than ask for nebulous faith that someday, it would be so.

“I still believe part of that. I still hold faith that, with all of us working together, we can create a future without callous gods, without heartless nobles, without arrogant young masters lording over us. And yet, I have been confronted with a valuable lesson. The now has value. It was wrong of me to ignore the plight that each of you faced today, faced yesterday, will face tomorrow. And again, I owe you my apology for not seeing what should have been obvious.

“And yet, I know now even more than I did before that even with all my strength, the noble cause everyone here is gathered in support of will not be won through strength of arms. It will be won in the hearts and minds of the people, changed through sacrifices which each and everyone of you here, including myself, will have to make.”

“What do you mean, sacrifices?” a man in the back asked.

“The gods, the nobles, their children, sycophants who cling to them for scraps at their table, all have a vested interest in the world as it is. As we move forward, they will undoubtedly lash out at us. Maybe in terms of physical altercation, but most likely not. But they will undoubtedly prey on our and others’ fear of change.

“They will tell us that we need to remain unified in support of the powers that be because of the threat of oncoming war. They will tell us that they will ‘consider’ our changes, but that we must move slowly, judiciously, never truly upsetting the systems which currently exist. They will try to pit us against one another, break our solidarity, crush our spirits. They may try to deny us opportunities to earn money and therefore stifle our ability to grow as Cultivators. They may threaten us, doctor charges of petty treason. And, regrettable as it is, those of you here may be putting your lives in jeopardy.

“I do not say this to dissuade you, nor to threaten you in any way. I say this because I believe that each of you here must decide for yourself how much you are able and willing to contribute

to the cause before us. Each of us will have to sacrifice comfort and ease to shape the future we desire. And I believe each of you has the right to know that, and to decide for yourselves if you can commit to what you may have to sacrifice for this path.”

“How dare you!” a woman near the back asked. “We’ve already been through more than enough shit for you to come here as an invited guest and tell us that we’ve got to deal with even more!”

Mirae raised their hand and was about to speak, but Lysette stopped them with a telepathic impulse. But before Lysette could speak, Serrena’s voice echoed from behind the crowd, silencing everyone else.

“You know what, you’re absolutely right. Life isn’t fair. This world isn’t fair. You already know that, or you wouldn’t *be* here. And the thing is, there’s a whole lot of shitty people and even shittier gods out there who are working hard to keep it that way. They want you to think that it can’t be changed, to give into despair, to choose the easy path of submission.

“But I, for one, don’t plan to make it easy on them.” Serrena clenched her fist and let forth a massive plume of flame from it. “I plan to use every bit of the strength I’ve amassed and shape this world with my own hands. So the question you should be asking isn’t ‘Is this world fair’ or ‘Is Lyse being annoying by telling truths you don’t want to hear?’. Because the answers to those are ‘obviously not’ and ‘obviously so.’

“The questions that each and everyone has to ask themselves, right here, right now, are simple. “Do you want to continue to let a bunch of prissy nobles sitting around on their high horses continue to decide how this country is going to be run? Do you think that if you just sit around and hope and pray, that things are going to change on their own? Or do you want to actually get



off your lazy ass and work to make the future a little better for the people who will come after you?”

“What did you just say to me, Serrena?” The woman was apoplectically indignant in her tone.

“I know your hearing isn’t *that* bad, Elincia. If you just want to sit on your ass and commiserate about your situation, by all means. But I, for one, would like to actually *do* something to change it. And we’ll have a much better time of it if we work together rather than trying to go about it alone. A certain annoying woman standing right over there taught me that.” Serrena pointed to Lysette as she said that.

“Well, I’m in,” a man near the front of the crowd said. “I’ve got a sister about ten years younger than I am, and she might have some talent as a Cultivator. But even if she doesn’t, I’d like her to have more opportunities than I do.”

“A life of being trained as soldiers just to be thrown into stupid wars and sacrificed while the people in power live large?” another man said. “I’d like to see *them* have to sacrifice their kids instead of us for a change!” That engendered a laugh from the crowd.

A few students did leave, and neither Lysette nor Serrena nor anyone else made an attempt to stop them. But more and more of the gathered students stood up, sharing their own reasons to stick around. And each who spoke was met with cheers and applause.

They continued speaking for nearly two hours, and as the crowd slowly began to disperse and talk amongst themselves, Kristil turned to Lysette and put her hand on Lysette’s shoulder.

“Thank you. I really think things are going to start getting better around here.”

Lysette nodded. “But do remember: Dawn may be approaching, but it’s always darkest just beforehand.”

“I’m not worried,” Nicholas said. “Not with all of us working together.”

Mirae’s lips pressed against the back of Lysette’s neck as their hands wrapped around her waist. “I believe in you, love. And I have complete Devotion to your cause. We’ll succeed. All of us, together.”