

## Chapter 147: Silver's Fate

Lysette spent a couple of hours with Chief Operative Thirteen, with Silver, and with some of the other Chief Operatives present on the premises. Discussions proved relatively fruitful on the whole. Of course, some of the members didn't take kindly to Lysette's abrupt infiltration and commandeering of the organization on short notice, but a combination of choice words and judicious use of her Aura of Intimidation were sufficient to suppress any attempts at counter-rebellion down to murmurs and half-formed thoughts.

Most of the discussions focused on the number and overall capabilities of the guild as a whole. Altogether, the guild was composed of about eighty operatives and another twenty chief operatives whose duties consisted predominantly of logistical and coordination work. They were also the ones who administered the Rites of Forgetting, as they dubbed the procedure. Though, as was explained, the Rites had a rather useful and mundane, if somewhat morally ambiguous purpose.

Yes, the Rites were used as a form of ostracization for those who had failed the guild or who were otherwise deemed to be at great risk of spilling information about guild procedures, missions, or other compromising information. But its far more common use was to help rid lingering thoughts and purge the worst memories and emotions that followed in the wake of particularly nasty assignments.

Part of Lysette recoiled in disgust at the practice. The first thing Zarielle had taught her upon becoming a Godslayer was to look the people she'd killed in the eye, to watch the life fade away, and to sear those thoughts and memories into her psyche for eternity. To so cavalierly prune away those memories felt like an affront, a disgrace to those whose lives they took in their actions.

But, another part of her understood that these people weren't warriors chosen by the gods to fight in a battle on two realms. They were ordinary people— ordinary *humans*— for whom the dirty business of killing wasn't a higher calling. It was just a job like any other, agents who were contracted to administer a certain type of retribution that the wronged couldn't carry out for themselves. And in that regard, Lysette couldn't completely condemn a technique which could make that job— gritty and ugly as it sometimes was— a little easier.

“Miss Barret,” Chief Operative Eleven said after Lysette laid out her plans. “I admit that a number of your plans and proposals do make sense, and yet, there's one thing that concerns me. I know you said you had allies, and I have no reason to disbelieve you on that front. But I am curious how you plan to protect so many people, even with your allies. It bears repeating numerous times that any sort of direct confrontation with the upper echelons of the nobility is a death sentence for all of us. Numbers alone simply cannot bridge the gap!”

Chief Operative Eleven nearly pounded their fist on the table. “I agree with your motives and I appreciate your help in trying to fix this problem that, by all rights, isn't yours to deal with. But I must again urge you to be cautious and mindful, and not overlook the trivial fact that none of us in the Guild, not even we Chief Operatives, is on the same level as you. If your plan doesn't reflect even such a simple and obvious truth, you might as well leave us to our fate and spare us all the time and false hope!”

Chief Operative Eleven had been making similar remarks throughout the evening. They— *she*, most likely, from their voice and figure, though Lysette didn't want to assume— were willful, stubborn, and most importantly, right far more often than not. They'd been almost impossible to subjugate with Lysette's Aura of Intimidation, and even then, the suppression was tenuous at best.

They were, in many respects, much like Serrena, even to the point where Lysette wondered if they had some sort of latent divinity within them as well. They were sometimes brusque with their words, but Lysette didn't mind. If anything, she respected the Chief Operative. The sort of blunt feedback they provided, even to one who thoroughly outclassed them in physical capability, was valuable. Valuable for the information they provided, yes, but more that they were willing to speak their mind even to people far above their abilities.

Lysette wondered if, when the immediate situation was resolved, if they would be interested in joining the Order of the Mirrored Flame. Such a person, one with knowledge of working in the shadows, a strong will, and resistance to mental compulsion was a potentially powerful ally. Though, that would be something for far later. And, probably after no small number of apologies and entreaties and maybe a little groveling as well.

She remembered what Mirae said the first time she used the technique. That it was a technique that made others feel like nothing, malleable, pliable, eager to prostrate and please and obey Lysette's will. It wasn't a pleasant thing to think about, but it was a better outcome than simply carving a path through people who didn't deserve to die. And even if some of these assassins did deserve that fate, they deserved something more than summary execution by Lysette's shadows.

But there wasn't time to come up with a better strategy. And Lysette, for all her strength, still wasn't at the level of Saffron or Philidor Dozel or presumably the other dukes and marquesses of Domaria. She cursed her powerlessness once more and hoped she could continue to find more merciful and less blunt ways of effecting change as she continued to grow as a Cultivator.

"You're right, Chief Operative Eleven," Lysette finally said. "As usual. However, I'm not certain there's a better plan than hoping this one works. And though there might be one, we've

already spent three hours coming up with this one and there is something to be said about spending too much time planning and not enough time taking action. You have my word that I will do all in my power to see my role fulfilled. I think we should disband and rest for the evening, so that we might be at full strength over the coming days.”

“A— As you will, Miss Barret,” they said.

One by one, the gathered mix of Operatives and Chief Operatives, about fifteen in total, departed the meeting hall. Only Chief Operatives Eleven and Thirteen remained, along with Lysette and Silver.

“Before I leave, I want to know what the fate of...” Lysette paused, nearly saying ‘Silver’ before catching herself. “Of Operative Eighty-Five will be. I understand that ‘decommissioning,’ as you euphemistically call it, is standard procedure for an operative following a failed mission. But considering the circumstances, I want to know if there is another way. Especially because we’ll need everyone we can get in the coming days.”

“Operative Eighty-Five cannot be allowed to remain in the good graces of the guild going forward,” Chief Operative Eleven said. “Changing our procedures on a whim would only alert more people as to the plans we’d devised and throw our entire operation in jeopardy.”

“Then, would they be allowed to come with me? I would rather they didn’t have to face whatever awaits them after their so-called ‘decommissioning.’” Lysette seethed under her breath at the word and its unfeeling, mechanical connotations. “*If you would like, of course,*” Lysette continued telepathically to Silver.

*“You’ve at least given me a chance to live my life when by all accounts it should have been forfeit, whether by your hand or theirs. If you would like me to join you, I have no objections.”*

“As long as none see Operative Eighty-Five’s departure, I have no objections,” Chief Operative Eleven said.

“Nor I,” Chief Operative Thirteen added.”

“Then we shall take our leave,” Lysette said. “I shall return tomorrow evening as agreed upon. Until then, may fortune grace us all.”

The two Chief Operatives nodded and left the room, leaving Lysette alone with Silver. Once they had left and closed the door behind them, she turned to her former would-be assassin and held her hand toward them.

“I can’t promise that this will be painless. In fact, I expect it to be rather painful. But it won’t be lethal, and I’ll do what I can to heal the damage.”

Silver sighed. “I suppose that’s small comfort compared with some of the things you were threatening me with earlier. Though, I have to admit, after seeing how easily you dispatched the three of us, I’d much rather be fighting alongside you going forward instead of against you.” They chuckled.

“I feel the same way.”

Lysette nodded and assumed her shadow form in the now-darkened room, shrouding Silver within herself like a cloak as she made mental calculations for her teleport. She did curse her ill-fortune for a moment as she channeled Essence into the glyph on her thigh. It was going to devour the bulk of the Essence she’d accumulated over the last day and injure her new acquaintance for that cost, but at least the benefit was their life. And that was more than worth it if it meant their and others’ lives could be saved in the process.

The two emerged on top of Sky Garden Tower half a second later. Lysette was already at work returning to corporeality and pulsing her healing aura through Silver, who was clutching

their chest while breathing shallowly. Grimaces and tears of pain followed suit as they rolled to the ground in the fetal position, mostly fighting off the urge to scream out as Lysette continued healing them.

It took about a minute before Silver's breathing began to deepen and another two before they were able to move about, crawling up to a nearby dueling platform and sitting atop the edge. They turned to Lysette and removed their mask, revealing an androgynous person with pale skin, smooth features, neck-length silver hair. *A befitting name they chose for themselves. If they did choose it at all.*

"You weren't kidding when you said it'll hurt," Silver said. They chuckled.

"I'm glad that you're feeling well enough to laugh. And we should have a couple more people joining us soon enough."

"Friends of yours, I hope. At the very least, I'm hoping some other group doesn't send even more assassins after you."

"I feel the same way. Thrice in a month is twice too often for my tastes."

"Wait... three times? You've survived three attempts on your life?"

"Oh, that's just assassins trying to kill me unaware. If you count all the other attempts on my life, we're at somewhere between eight and twelve, depending on whether you call monster attacks and animated artifacts testing me to count as 'attempts on my life.' So don't feel bad about failing in that respect. You weren't the first to try and fail, and I certainly hope you won't be the last."

"Wait, Lyse. Did you just suggest that you hope there's more attempts on your life?"

“I mean, I’m apparently just about the most hateable person at the Academy, so I’m expecting there’ll be more people after my head in the coming months no matter what I do. Might as well make sure their attempts are as successful as yours.”

“That many, huh?”

“Well, my partner says I have quite a pretty head, so maybe everyone else is just coveting it that much.”

“The, uh... person you were kissing when I tried to eliminate you?”

“Yeah. They mean a lot to me.”

“They?”

“They, as in, neither man nor woman. Neither category fits them.”

Silver nodded. “I get that. I really do. In truth, I feel the same way, although I haven’t really had the words or the ideas to express that idea until you pointed it out.

“But it all makes sense, when you put it into such words. I don’t *feel* like a woman. Never really have. I’m not happy with being seen as a woman, and with all the expectations that come along with it. Just wish I could be... *them*.”

“If you want to talk with Mirae later, I’m sure they’d be willing to talk with you about that or anything else. Speaking of, it looks like they’re almost here.”

Mirae floated up from the surface, and Serrena followed a couple seconds behind. Mirae turned to Lysette with a befuddled expression, then back to Silver, then back to Lysette. Serrena, meanwhile, flicked an errant strand of crimson hair out of her face before crossing her arms and returning to her signature scowl.

“And who is *this*?” Serrena asked.

“This is Silver. Some things happened while you were gone, and, for the time being, they’ll be under my protection.”

“Under your protection, or remanded to your custody?” Serrena asked.

Silver and Lysette turned to each other and both demurred with a simultaneous shrug.

“Anyway, how did things go on your end?” Lysette asked.

“As well as could be, given the circumstances,” Mirae said. “Although it seems like things are in a maelstrom at the capital with the war about to start.” They paused. “Should I not have said that?”

“If you are worried about telling me something I shouldn’t know, I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” Silver said. “We’ve been discussing the upcoming attack and ensuing war for the last three hours now and—” They broke out into a yawn. “It’s getting rather late for me and I’d like to go somewhere to sleep.”

Serrena shook her head. “Fine. She—”

“They,” Lysette interjected.

“Apologies. They can stay in my room tonight. But we’ll have to come up with a more permanent arrangement after that.”

“Agreed,” Lysette said. “See you two tomorrow then?”

Silver stood up and turned to Mirae, giving them a small nod. “Can we talk sometime tomorrow? There’s something I wanted to ask you about.”

“Um, sure. Talk with you then, Silver,” Mirae said, giving them a slight wave as Serrena carried them down to the surface.

Once the two were gone, Lysette and Mirae stood silently atop Sky Garden Tower, looking out toward the Academy and the southern horizon beyond. Mirae's hand found its way into Lysette's, and Lysette's head made its way onto Mirae's shoulder.

“Love, it may be a little hypocritical of me to say this,” Lysette said as she moved Mirae's arms around her waist. “But after everything that's happened tonight, I just want to be kissed right now. Kissed and held and caressed and wanted— lusted after, even— until I can't think about anything but you and your everything for a couple of hours. Would you be willing to help?”

“I don't know if I can do all that,” Mirae said. “But that doesn't mean I won't try with everything I've got.”