

## Chapter 136: Contrition

Lysette closed her eyes and enjoyed the smell of morning dew wafting toward her as Danitha led her down to the cafeteria. It was still early enough that the full blue of daytime sky had not yet taken root along the far western horizon, and yet far enough into the morning that the campus was alive with the bustle of students preparing for a new day.

There would be time to meditate, time to Cultivate, time to prepare physically and mentally and otherwise for her battle with the Chancellor soon enough. But for the time being, for a scant hour or two, Lysette was going to sit down, gorge herself on custard delights, and enjoy the simple pleasures of human life. Enjoy them with her human roommate, surrounded by the company of hundreds more humans making the best of the lives they'd been given, doing the best with the limited time they yet had.

Two custards found their way onto Lysette's plate, as did a generous helping of shrimp-stuffed portobellos. And so too did a scoop of scrambled eggs and breakfast sausage. The latter had never been a favorite in her human life, but the smell was mouth-watering and considering the overall quality of food being served, she decided to try it. After grabbing a glass of water, she made her way over to a small table near the middle of the dining area. Danitha sat across from her and the two began to eat.

It was every bit as delicious as she remembered, and the sausage and eggs even more so. They were perfectly cooked, the grease of the sausage perfectly complementing the slight runniness left in the eggs. They were seasoned with peppers of some exotic variety, a flavor which even she didn't recognize. Possibly even one not native to Kraciell, imported from one of the outer continents.

"So, are your classes going well?" Lysette asked, not quite sure how to ask.

“For the most part. The instructors have basically stopped asking about you by now. I suppose with all the rumors going around, they’ve figured you’ve either gotten some secret apprenticeship or found some secret font of Essence to empower yourself beyond the point of reason.”

“That second one is actually pretty accurate.” Lysette chuckled. “You didn’t tell them about me, did you?”

“Of course not, Lyse. Just because I got worried about you and wanted to talk earlier doesn’t mean I was going to start revealing all your secrets.”

“Thanks. And sorry if I implied that you were. Just with the…” “*The spying,*” Lysette messaged. “I’ve been trying to be more cautious, just in case someone decides to listen in.”

“Listens in?” a shrill voice asks. “Nothing you’d like to share with the rest of us? No, sorry. Old habits and all. May I?”

Lysette looked up and saw a tall blonde woman with a scowl more familiar than she would have liked. “Oh, Kiarra. To what do I owe the displeasure of seeing you here today?”

“That’s a fine how-do-you-do,” she said.

“I could say the same,” Lysette said. “Though, it’s better than threatening violence against me, so I’ll take the small improvement. Anyway, I was just talking with my friend and enjoying breakfast. On my own terms, eating what I wish.”

“I still don’t get you and those custards, you know. They’re desserts, and yet you seem to eat them every meal without the slightest regard for your health or physique!”

“My partner is quite happy with my body, if that’s what you mean. However, as much fun as verbally sparring with you is, Lady Dozel, unless you’re here to tell me that, I dunno, I have to

duel your father, or an uncle, or maybe your daughter wants a swing at me? Can you please just leave me be?"

"I do *not* have a daughter, thank you very much!"

Lysette chuckled. "Not for Francis's lack of trying, I'm sure."

Kiarra's face turned crimson. Her fist clenched, her teeth gritted, and she nearly pounded the table in anger, but instead, she unexpectedly sighed and set her plate down next to Lysette's own.

"That's fair. I have caused you no small amount of trouble, after all. Is there anything else you need to get out of your system?"

"I want a proper apology," Danitha said. "Not one forced through gritted teeth. Not one made because you had to on account of losing in a duel. Apologize properly to Lyse and to me, and then we'll decide what to do from there."

"And then we'll decide?" Kiarra asked.

"That's right," Lysette said. "Whenever you do wrong by others, it is never their responsibility to forgive. They may choose to forgive, whether for your sake or theirs, but never are the aggrieved required to accept the apologies of another."

"That's quite the impressive speech, Lyse," Kiarra said. "Rehearsed it for situations like these?"

"I spend a lot of time thinking about things like forgiveness and proper recompense. That's probably a bit unusual, but I don't think I have a reputation as being 'the usual.'"

Kiarra laughed. "Yes, that much I agree with." She sighed, exaggerating both its volume and length for emphasis. "Now then, Danitha, I apologize for slapping you a month and a half ago. I had no right to do so, and even if I did have a legitimate grievance against you, it wasn't appropriate of me to take it out on you via summary infliction of physical violence."

“And Lyse,” she says with another sigh. “I apologize for... well, where do I start? Insulting your choice of meal, picking fights with you, a general air of disrespect toward you, then, after dueling you and losing, siccing both my ex-boyfriend and my great-great grandfather on you. All for? For eating custard and more associated food than is probably completely healthy for you.”

Lysette raised an eyebrow. The apology, despite her lowly expectation, sounded genuine. It wasn't spoken with venom underlying the words. And it wasn't one of those half-hearted apologies where Kiarra dug in and tried to justify her actions while apologizing only for how those actions made Lysette and Danitha feel. It wasn't a perfect apology— it left some things out, for sure— but it was sincere enough that Lysette felt justified listening further.

“I'll acknowledge that you've made a reasonable effort, Miss Dozel.” She turned to Danitha. *“Do you object if I at least hear her out?”*

*“After our conversation this morning, I would object if you didn't.”*

“If you would like to be a bit more comfortable, you're welcome to sit down. We will listen to what you have to ask of us.”

“I don't remember asking you anything,” Kiarra said. “Although, yes, I did come here to ask something from you.”

“Then let's hear it,” Lysette said.

Kiarra paused again for a long time. Lysette didn't push her to speak— she wasn't in an immediate time crunch, and she knew that it was no small effort for Kiarra to give what at least sounded like a sincere apology.

“I want your help with Cultivation,” she finally said. “I don't know if the rumors are true or not, but you clearly have an exceptional talent for it, and I—”

“I am going to ask you one simple question,” Lysette said. “Why should I help you? Considering how, in every action until this morning, you have either attacked or threatened my friends and me, why would I want to give you more power to do exactly that?”

“I just—” Another sigh. “When you say it that way, I have absolutely nothing I can say that will make you want to help you other than appealing to your better nature. And I have done absolutely nothing that would warrant your trust.”

“That’s not quite true,” Lysette said. “You have been rather contrite thus far, and it hasn’t gone unnoticed. However, you are largely correct about the rest.

“With that said, at the behest of a friend, I’m trying to be better about accepting forgiveness from others when I am wronged, rather than addressing the issue with my fists. The question remains, however. What will you *do* to earn our forgiveness?”

“And not just our forgiveness, mind you. There are a lot of people who you and your friends have wronged during your time here. I’ve heard plenty of stories of you and other children of the nobility doing any number of things I dare not repeat so as to avoid upsetting Danitha.”

“You know, Lyse,” Danitha said. “That’s actually a good idea.”

“Huh?” Kiarra furrowed her brows.

“There’s a group of students who meets every few days to commiserate about the petty cruelties that you and your peers have inflicted upon them. It’s one thing to come to Lyse when you want something from her, swallow your pride, and beg for her forgiveness so she might help you. But I think it would do you some good to sit down and listen. Really listen. Hear their stories, have the grace and dignity to look them in the eye as they talk about exactly what you did to them.”

“I think that’s a pretty good idea, Dani,” Lysette said. “If you can do that, and convince those students that you deserve a chance at absolution, I would be willing to assist you with your Cultivation.”

“I– You’re going to make me humiliate myself like that?” Kiarra said.

“That’s right,” Lysette said. “It is only fair that you humble yourself after spending so much of the past three years, if not longer, doing the same to others. Honestly, if I had known the depths of depravity you and the other nobles had sunk to, belittling the commoner students for your own amusement, I would have requested you do this back then. Consider this my way of correcting my past mistakes.”

“So, I suppose I’ll... see you then.” Kiarra stood up, until Lysette beckoned her back.

“Do you mind if I ask one thing?” she asked.

“I guess I’ve already lowered myself this much. What’s one more question?”

*Not really helping your cause, Kiarra.* “Why are you asking for my help now?”

“Because– I’m supposed to be a great Cultivator. I was set up to be. Primed to be, given every advantage, trained from a young age. I was taught that I was great, that I would one day take my place as Marchioness Dozel when the title passed to me.”

*Not a great motivation, seeking power for its own sake.*

“But despite everything, I just... wasn’t making the progress I was supposed to be. That my parents and grandparents were expecting of me.”

*Now I see.*

“It was one thing when it was just that Raesh girl surpassing me by leaps and bounds. Sure, there are prodigies chosen by the gods every now and again. That happens. But when you

defeated me in your first week here, I— I lost it. You, with no training, no house of your own, a girl from the countryside who probably didn't even know how to Cultivate a year ago.

“And then, to add further insult, you're not the only person who seems to be growing by leaps and bounds. Her, for instance,” Kiarra said, pointing to Danitha. “And also your... girlfriend?”

“Partner.”

“Fine. Your partner, and now it seems like half the class is suddenly advancing at a pace that defies all sense of reason. I don't know how or why I know this, but I feel that a lot of these changes are tied to you. There's just something... about you. Something that draws others to you.”

“I've been told that before, actually.”

“I'm not surprised. But I want to know how I can improve my Cultivation. And I think that you can help me.”

“Kiarra, my previous condition is still in effect. But I'm not going to help you if all you're going to do is use my help to make nice with your parents and Lord Dozel. But, if you can convince me and the others that you're going to use your position to actually change society for the better. For everyone? Then I would be glad to support you in those endeavors.”

“I—” Kiarra paused for a long time. “You've given me a lot to think about, Lyse. If you don't mind, I'd like to do so. Alone.”

“Of course. And I hope you will take me up on my offer.”