

## Chapter 121: Bargain

Lysette kept her head low and concentrated her aurasight. She focused on the subtle facial expressions in both the king and his two attendants, searching for any hint of what they might be thinking, or how they might respond to anything she might say. But all three of them remained stoic, unflinching, nearly staring at Lysette in anticipation of her response.

“Before I say anything regarding these incidents,” she started, “I would like to know exactly what it is that I am accused of, that I might properly defend myself.”

“You will answer the questions His Majesty asks of you and keep quiet otherwise!” the man behind King Stewart said.

“High Magister Manheist, that is enough!” King Stewart said. “The accused has every right to know of the charges levied against her.”

“Now then, Lyse Barret,” he continued. “You have been accused of the following: Fomenting Rebellion against the state. Petty Treason against a noble person. Battery against a noble person. Blasphemy against the gods. Disturbing the peace.”

“Regarding the charge of Blasphemy against the gods,” Lysette said. “I will state upfront that I am guilty of this charge, unrepentant, and intend to continue blaspheming against them for as long as I should live. The gods, far from being paragons of justice, are, with few exceptions, monstrous beings, bent on using humanity as fodder for their consumption.”

“A blasphemous charge indeed,” the king said. “What proof do you present for such claims?”

“Your Majesty, forgive me for my presumptuousness, but I trust you are familiar with the village of Osstia? A small farming village along the western border, not far from Elithria. From Marol and Kattor, for that matter.”

The king and his magister conferred in a whisper before the former answered in the affirmative.

Lysette continued. “That village, my hometown, no longer exists. Forty-seven days ago, it was annihilated. By good fortune, I survived, but I was the only one. Inquisitors serving the Church of Asterion ruthlessly massacred everyone else. My mother. My father. My sister. Every family friend. And even the ones who weren’t friends, still ought not to have been killed so heartlessly, so mercilessly.”

“That is a serious accusation. Do you have any proof?”

“The man who led the attack on Osstia was an Inquisitor named Lacos. He also was an officer who participated in the attack on the Academy eighteen days ago. I engaged him in combat, and, with some help from the other students, was able to overpower and defeat him.”

“If what you are saying is true, then we are not just engaged in a war between nations, but a war amongst the gods themselves.”

“Permission to speculate, Your Majesty?” Lysette said.

“Make it so.”

“I believe Asterion is attempting to recreate the world. And he means to do so with the Final Artifact. The Mantle of Creation. But at this point, he lacks the strength to use it, and is therefore taking actions on Aimarion to bolster his power to do so.”

“Those are serious accusations, and on their face, they would confirm the charges of blasphemy levied against you. You do realize that?”

“I will speak my truth as best I understand it. Of course, I would like to stop that from happening, and claim revenge against the church that slew my family.”

King Stewart nodded. “In order to forestall religious conflict among the peoples of our kingdom, we have long taken a pluralistic approach to faith, allowing all to practice freely. So long as they do not infringe upon the rights of our state or others’ rights to worship the gods of their choosing, of course. Your accusations, if founded, would necessitate an end to this millennia-long foundation of our national customs.

“And, though we are loath to admit it, the fact that the attack occurred on the night of the blood moon, does lend credence to your accusation. Proof sufficient to take such drastic actions, it is not. But we will need to redouble our efforts to ascertain the truth behind these unprovoked attacks and ensure countermeasures are in place should the Church of Asterion or any other body attempt to attack our homeland.

“Now then, Miss Barret. How do you answer the other charges against you?”

“Regarding the charges of battery against a noble person. In both cases, I was provoked into doing so by the individuals in question, and in either case, said allegations were resolved within the confines of a sanctioned duel. Considering those circumstances, I plead innocent of said charges on account of my victories, as can be attested by Professor Anice.”

“Regarding the charge of petty treason against a noble person, I presume this refers to my altercation with Lord Dozel about four weeks ago. I admit to my disrespect against his person and position, with the consequence to be a duel against him upon the completion of my time at the Academy.”

King Stewart smiled. “That you would accept the consequences and not try to weasel out of them speaks to your character. Moreover, your statements are in line with our previous reports and testimonies. As such, we accept both pleas. Continue.”

“Regarding the charges of fomenting rebellion and disturbing the peace, since I believe the two are related. I have, over the course of my time at the Academy, worked alongside a number of my fellow students, helping their Cultivation efforts. And, while doing so, a number of students have expressed concerns about feeling mistreated on campus.

“These concerns, which I believe to be well-founded, suggest that a number of the scions of noble families have been abusing their position and status to force students of commoner background into compromising and humiliating acts. Among them, I heard students testifying that some of these noble children have been branding other students like cattle and forcing them into wearing servant garb and serving as living furniture. And, should any student refuse these demands, they would be forced into a duel and the same accusations of treason against nobility that I have found myself facing here today.”

“And you are certain of this?” King Stewart asked.

“No. Ultimately, while I did see some of the burns in question, I have little to go off but hearsay.”

“Miss Barret, I implore you,” Magister Manheist said. “Please limit your testimony to the charges brought forth.”

“It was necessary context, Your Majesty. By working in tandem with these students, we have all managed to improve our capabilities as Cultivators markedly in the past month. And, as a result, those students have begun asking important questions. Why are the children of nobles given such latitude and privilege?

“Because they are given more resources to jumpstart their Cultivation from a young age, along with tutelage on how to do so more efficiently? Because they can turn to their parents and use the threat of a duel—possibly to the death—to force others to submit? Or even just using

the carrot of opportunity— a chance to work under one of the elite houses, to get opportunities beyond an honorable but otherwise forgettable career in the Royal Army.

“For all of the reforms that Domaria and its Cultivation Academy have undergone over the previous two centuries, the end results of those reforms have not reached the idealistic and laudable results that your forefathers have set forth in their declarations. And so, yes, I have been encouraging students to band together, compile grievances, and put forth various proposals to formally petition Chancellor Vanniere, and by extension, Your Majesty, for further reforms. I don’t know if my actions formally rise to the definition of either ‘disturbing the peace’ or ‘fomenting rebellion,’ but I will not distance myself from my ideals or goals either.”

The chamber went silent. Lysette hardly moved a muscle as the king and his two attendants looked at one another. Seconds passed with nary a sound. Lysette’s heart raced and her muscles nearly defied her conscious desire to remain motionless. She cursed herself— she had tried to remain measured, but toward the end, her Reciprocity, her pressing *need* to stamp out anathema, was leading her into a precarious position. The king mouthed something to his bodyguard which Lysette couldn’t make out, and a moment later, he spoke.

“Miss Barret. You mentioned during your testimony that you were working alongside a number of other students to bolster their Cultivation. Is that correct?”

“Yes, Sire. And their strength was instrumental in helping to repel the invaders from Asterion’s Inquisition. I would not have succeeded without their help.”

“Could you use that power to bolster the Cultivation of others?”

Lysette held back a smirk, and kept her head low. “There are restrictions about who and how I can use this technique on. And I do not know to what extent it will work on someone significantly stronger than I am. But yes, I could do so. Did you have someone in mind?”

Magister Manheist turned to King Stewart and whispered, quietly enough that Lysette didn't suspect he knew she could hear her. "Your Majesty, I must beg your reconsideration. She is *dangerous*, I tell you."

King Stewart responded with a mouthed comment Lysette couldn't make out. There was a small bit of Essence infused in the whisper, one which occluded her ability to read his lips, even with her aurasight. It wasn't a technique that she was personally familiar with, nor one that, in retrospect, she was surprised a monarch would employ. He turned to his bodyguard and then whispered something else to her.

"Miss Barret, we would like to propose a bargain of sorts. Having heard your testimony, we believe there is little doubt that you have committed actions which constitute rebellion and treason against our person and our kingdom. And there is equally little doubt that you have done great service, protecting and defending the same.

"Furthermore, everything you have told us matches up, more or less, with our own investigations. In doing so, you have proven yourself worthy of a position of great trust. If, as you have reported, we are on the verge of a Holy War with Elithria, then, difficult decisions must be made. Specifically, and despite the protestations and egos of some in the peerage, we cannot afford to be without a potentially conflict-changing military resource at such a pivotal moment."

"What specifically would you request of me, Sire?" Lysette asked.

"We do not know what courses, if any, you have taken in the areas of grand strategy and military tactics, but the number of Cultivators who have reached the absolute pinnacle of strength anywhere on Aimarion is miniscule. A dozen or two here in Domaria. Similar numbers in Elithria, Terea, and Valdora, based on information from our intelligence.

“These individuals are capable of turning the tide of entire campaigns on their own, but compared with the might of tens of thousands of well-trained soldiers, even they will falter. That is how we have managed to remain a free people despite being at such a geographical disadvantage. This, despite the fact we have had to deal with occasional hostilities from all directions and the ever-present threat of opportunistic banditry and land grabs from even nominally neutral nations.

“Not many people have the drive, the talent, and the access to resources necessary to reach that level. And fewer still among those would willingly step onto the field of battle. But, if what you are suggesting is correct, then we will need every boon at our disposal.”

“If I understand correctly, Your Majesty, you wish for me to use this power of mine to help your soldiers advance, with an overall war strategy of having superior forces among the rank-and-file soldiers. Again, I cannot ensure that it is possible, but I would be willing to at least assist when and where I can.”

“We are relieved to hear that. Lady Ateni, you wished to speak privately with Miss Barret?”

The woman nodded slightly and took a half step forward. “Yes, Your Majesty.” Her words were soft-spoken, but carried a weighty, imposing timbre, a confidence and sturdiness belying the air of nonchalance and ephemerality she projected on the surface.

“Then I shall leave Miss Barret to you. This audience is now concluded.”