

## Chapter 78: Homecoming

The ride down to the surface was as cramped and unpleasant as it always was. So irksome it was becoming that Lysette did consider—strongly—the prospect of simply jumping down to the lower world. She could dissolve her body into the shadows underneath the sky island before hitting the ground to avoid the impact. And, upon closer analysis, she wasn't actually certain that the impact would be sufficient to damage her body in its current state. *Something to test out later.*

But Mirae was with her, and so she accepted the discomfort that came with taking the carriage ride down instead. Despite the lack of personal space that came with the short flight, Mirae's presence more than made up for the discomfort and humiliation she suffered each time she descended from the city in the sky. The too-slow ride did give her some time to ponder matters— who owned the carriages? And who was profiting from the manufactured inconvenience? Someone who deserved to have their pockets picked of their ill-gotten gains for sure.

Mirae gave her a knowing side-eye, seeming to understand with just a glance whenever Lysette was pondering targets to inflict her divine Reciprocity upon. *Mirae, can you hear my thoughts right now?* She waited with anticipation, but no response came.

Still, some sort of telepathy would be an all-too valuable skill to Cultivate as soon as possible. Not only was Lysette growing increasingly uneasy talking aloud about her plans for fear of being spied upon, but they were about to head into hostile territory. Being able to coordinate and discuss while being surveilled was but the least of the benefits, and heading down that path would hopefully give her resistance to mental probing as well.

Sadly, she had little Essence remaining to power that new technique and didn't feel like losing another technique to do so. Perhaps if a couple of monsters showed up? It would be a good opportunity for Mirae to get a little more experience in combat, as well as a little more confidence in their abilities— Lysette didn't get the feeling that her love was fully aware of just how strong they'd truly become in recent weeks. And, if she had anything to say on the matter, they would get much, much stronger still. They both would.

Her thoughts were cut short by the jostling of the carriage and various people bumping into each other as the flying cart touched down upon the surface. Lysette willed her own feet into shadows to stabilize herself, and pulled Mirae a bit closer to keep them from falling backward.

The door creaked open, each split-second proceeding with excruciating sluggishness before the entrance had grown wide enough for people to begin filing out. As they did, Lysette rematerialized her feet and the couple made their way out of the station and off to the west, retracing the same steps Lysette took when she traveled to the capital a month prior. As they passed through the outskirts and into the fields surrounding Domark, Lysette grabbed Mirae by the hand, looked up to the morning sky, and sighed with contentment.

“Is something the matter, love?”

“Not at all. Just enjoying the scenery. And the company.”

The crisp clear air, the dewdrops refracting the sun's early morning rays streaming in from behind them. The blue sky high overhead, with shades of indigo and violet ahead, the last vestiges of the previous twilight being whisked away by the coming day. The scenery of small trees and plenty of grains and grasses blowing in the light southerly breeze with little more than the occasional farmhouse and the cobblestone road to give any indication that humans walked this part of Aimarion. And it was all even crisper and sharper than it was when she had traveled

to the capital, as though the frail human eyes she had once had were as useless as leaves on a mushroom.

The metaphor probably wasn't a particularly good one, but Lysette paid it no mind as she leaned in and rested on Mirae's shoulder.

"Mirae, do you want to go for a little run?"

"A run?"

"The border is quite far from here. A few days for non-Cultivators by foot. I think we could get there by nightfall quite easily, but I think this is a good chance for you to see what you're truly capable of."

"But you are still four times stronger than I am, Lyse. And you've specialized in Physical skills as well."

"That's exactly why, Mirae. You are doubting yourself. And doubting your goddess and her abilities as well. She finds herself mildly displeased at this."

Mirae turned and gave an expression Lysette interpreted as a playful pout. "Well, if that's how it's going to be, then I'll see you later!"

Mirae stuck their tongue out and dashed off upon the cobblestone road at a pace that would have baffled Lysette's comprehension five weeks ago. The movements simply weren't natural, with how their legs seemed to blur together from moving faster than a human eye could track without the aid of Essence to enhance oneself. And yet, to Lysette, her love was merely quick by mortal standards. She took off running at a speed a third that of her maximum, not unlike the race she'd had with Danitha a month ago.

Of course, Mirae already knew full well what Lysette was capable of, and Lysette didn't need to hide any of herself from them the way she had had to with Danitha a month prior. But

pushing Mirae and allowing them to observe their own abilities for themselves was second only to actual combat in terms of getting them prepared for the challenges which lay ahead. And so Lysette merely sought to match their top speed, pushing them to keep going and tap into the full extent of their formidable might.

To Mirae's credit, they were able to maintain nearly their entire top speed for upwards of an hour, though they were getting increasingly winded as they pushed forward. Domark was long out of sight by then, and already half their journey was complete when Mirae finally stopped underneath a large hickory tree just off the main road.

They were standing with legs bent, hands on knees, and breathing heavily when Lysette arrived ten seconds later, little worse for wear. Lysette got to work immediately, expanding her aura and wrapping it around her love, pulsing her regenerative technique through it to comfort her love as their breathing gradually returned to normal. Mirae looked at her with a stern stare, but upon seeing Lysette's soft smile, Mirae's expression softened to match.

"I was going to tell you off, Lyse," Mirae said between deep breaths. "For pushing me this hard, and matching pace while barely breaking a sweat. But when I see that face of yours and how much you care for me, I just— I can't stay mad at you. Even if part of me really wants to."

"Thanks, Mirae. And look at how far we've gone in just over an hour. We've been making incredible time. We'll be in Osstia by noon, even at a light jog. We probably covered seventy miles. If not closer to a hundred." Lysette pulsed her aura a couple more times before canceling her regenerative effect.

"Are you going to be okay going back there?" Mirae stood up and looked at Lysette with sunken eyes.

“It won’t be easy. But I have you with me. And, part of the reason I wanted you to be here, is that I want you to see what happened for yourself. I want you to see the devastation for yourself, so you can understand why I am who I am now.”

Mirae wrapped their arms around Lysette and buried their face into the side of her neck. “Of course, love. I’ll be there for you, no matter what.”

Lysette returned the embrace. “Thank you.”

The next two hours continued in relative quiet as the couple made their way down the now-dirt road at an efficient but not strenuous pace. By this point, the few settlements were small and sporadic, the other people along the road few, and the environs closer to those of wild, unclaimed nature than the grassy fields and fertile farmlands nearer the capital. And as Lysette had predicted, by the time the sun had reached its zenith, a series of too-familiar hills and bends in the road greeted the couple.

Emotions of joy and contentment clashed with grief and heartache and loss as the dead village she’d left behind a month ago again came into view. Anger soon followed. Anger at Asterion and Lieutenant Lacos, yes. But also anger at herself, for not having been able to stop the annihilation of everyone she once knew. And sorrow yet remained. Were she still human, she would have cried from the strain of trying to process the overwhelming cascade of emotions. She wanted to, so badly, to experience the catharsis that followed in the wake of shed tears.

But instead, her Godslayer brain and its multiple independent strands of consciousness processed and compartmentalized each emotion as it came in with brutal and inhuman efficiency. All she could do was walk forward, not making a sound save for footsteps in the soft dirt and her quiet breaths. Mirae, godsend that they were, took her hand and the two walked in silence past what had once been her house and into the heart of the village.

Little had changed from the last time she'd been through the town, and nothing had been done in the interim either to raze the town or attempt to restore it. There were hundreds of half-destroyed buildings filled with clothing and torn-up furniture and dishes and various personal effects, some of which lay upon the street or were caught under bricks or boulders. Shards of glass and bits of copper and silver jewelry glittered from the sun's rays high above, and the whistle of the wind was soon accompanied by the chittering of rats and the slithering of snakes and other such lizards that had taken refuge in the village she had once called home.

"Were there any survivors?" Mirae asked. "I know you said it was total devastation, but—"

"If there were, I never found them. And while I want to hope that someone managed to escape, I find the prospect exceedingly unlikely. Asterion's Inquisitorius was ruthlessly efficient in both its tactics and fighting power, a nearly perfect force designed to harvest as many human Sparks as possible to give that god more power to enact whatever twisted vision he has for Aimarion."

Lysette walked into the very center of the town, gripping Mirae's hand snug as she dropped to a knee and knelt her head. Mirae followed suit after a moment.

"This is where I burned every body I could find from around the town. Eleven hundred eighty-seven of them. I don't remember all of their names— a lot of my human memories are jumbled and scattered about like that. But each of their faces, each lifeless expression, is forever seared into my memory. I fight not just for the satisfaction of seeing Asterion made to suffer as I have. But because these and so many other souls cry out for recompense."

"I'm so sorry, Lysette. I know you've told me before— told *us* before. But seeing it, experiencing the weight of what's happened with my own senses, that's something completely different."

“Thank you, Mirae. I can’t rewrite the past. I can’t undo these senseless deaths any more than I can revive those who were killed in the attack on the Academy. All I can do is to make sure that I use this Godslayer power I have to bring the war between the gods to an end. And to make sure that those responsible are made to pay for their actions.”

“I know. I can feel it when we jointly Cultivate. I can see it in your eyes and hear it in my very soul. It is a conviction so strong that the world itself will accommodate you. And I will support you every step of the way.”

“Thank you, Mirae, my love.”