

Chapter 79: Osstia Hills Ruins

Lysette stood up and looked around the ruins of her once hometown, Mirae's hand still in her own. The wind howled and birds chirped high overhead as they flew off toward unknown destination, and yet, some part of the chorus of sounds of nature called to her. Almost like someone was singing, requesting her presence, though whether she heard the sound through her ears or in her mind, she did not know. Lysette wasn't sure if it was friend or foe, and yet, that compulsion from within beckoned her to go.

"Do you hear that too, Mirae?" she asked.

"I don't hear anything except the wind, dear. Unless you're referring to the rats, in which case, yes, I absolutely do hear that, and would prefer to hear much less of it."

"No, it's almost like someone singing. Or maybe it's just how my mind is interpreting it. But something is *definitely* requesting my presence."

"You're going to go, aren't you, Lyse?"

"I am."

"Even if it's a trap?"

"Even if. Besides, there aren't that many creatures on Aimarion capable of defeating me in combat. Even if there were, I can always teleport away in a pinch."

"You know how little sense that makes, right, Lyse? Any creature capable of stirring your mind to this extent is, by definition, much more likely to be one of those few said creatures."

"Well, I don't have to worry then. Because I have a loving, supportive, and caring Ice Cultivator by my side to support me through it all, and to help protect me if things come to blows."

Lysette pulled Mirae underneath a massive oak in the center of what had once been Ostia. It had suffered no shortage of damage in the attack, with charred spots on its bark, a few gashes on its sides, several downed limbs, and plenty of splintered branches. And yet, just like Lysette, it had somehow, perhaps through another act of divine intervention, also survived the attack.

She wrapped her shadowy tendrils snug around Mirae, wrapping them both into a cocoon of darkness not unlike that in which the couple Cultivated during the attack on the Academy. But instead of turning her focus inward to her Cultivation realm, instead, Lysette brought the full focus of all her senses outward, gazing upon Mirae with eyes and aurasight alike as she began to kiss her partner over and over. And Mirae returned the gesture, wrapping their arms around Lysette and reciprocating the kisses in equal measure.

“You said you wanted to be someone I could rely on. And I want that as well. No matter what lies ahead, we’ll face it together, hand in hand.”

“That’s pretty romantic of you, Lysette. But I like it.” Mirae caressed Lysette’s cheeks. “Shall we, then?”

Lysette nodded and retracted the sphere of darkness that covered them. Mirae winced for a half second from the sudden brightening of their environment, but after their momentary recovery, the two departed to the north.

The hills overlooking the town were majestic, and unlike the valleys to the south and east where a number of farmers and one reborn herbalist used to live, there were hardly any signs of civilization. A lot of trees and deer and rabbits and even the occasional goat, none seeming to care or even know what had happened a mere five weeks ago. And Lysette was a little envious of that ignorance, but knew that that was no longer her role to play in the events still to come.

And so they marched ever onward, following the clarion call of the voice in Lysette's ears, singing a gentle tune that she only could hear. Up and through the rugged hills they traversed until they reached a small cave buried into the sides of one of the larger hills in the area. But before Lysette could wander in, Mirae tugged them back outside.

“Are you sure it's not a trap?”

“It doesn't feel like a trap. And I don't sense any hostility from whatever is calling to me. Still, I agree with you; caution is warranted.” Lysette flared her aura to its limit. “If it is one, they will realize that luring us into a deep, dark cave and attempting an ambush is about the worst strategic folly imaginable. And if they are foolish enough to attack you, well, I hope for their sake that they aren't.”

Mirae wrapped their arm around Lysette's own and pulled themselves in closer. “Well, as long as you're aware of the risks and acknowledge them, I'm sure you'll find a way to make it through.”

The two lovers walked into the cave, which, like the hills around, was teeming with more wildlife. Bats snoozed atop the stalactites above while lizards and centipedes crawled along the earthen floor. Just as in the Gnarian Mines, Mirae took every opportunity when one crawled near their feet to grab onto Lysette and latch on tighter around their arm. But unlike back then, this time Lysette reciprocated with zeal rather than indifference, appreciating the excuses for affection nearly as much as they seemed to.

“You know, Lysette. Being able to see in complete darkness is a pretty incredible ability. Thanks for gifting it to me.”

“Is it bad that I still have no idea how exactly I did that? Or have any real idea of how to repeat that process? I’d love to gain access to your Frost Ray at some point. And give you the ability to manipulate shadows like I do.”

“Teleportation would be nice.”

“That’s— That’s something different. My ability to teleport comes from an artifact I appropriated from our enemy a few weeks back, with the help of Zarielle. I don’t think I can integrate it directly into my Cultivation path, and I suspect that as a result, I can’t integrate that technique into my followers as well.”

“Do I want to know what you mean by ‘appropriate,’ Lyse?”

“Probably not. But yes, regarding Cultivation, the gods, and my abilities, there are still many things I still don’t know. Perhaps if I had a different patron, things would be different, but I’m pretty sure Zarielle’s domain compels her to leave me as much in the dark as she can get away with.”

“Well, perhaps a trip to the library is in order when we get back.”

“Assuming we do get back to the Academy without being branded as a fugitive or expelled. Or both.”

Mirae squeezed Lysette’s hand. “We’ll worry about that when we’re done with this mission.”

The two continued their descent into what seemed like the very heart of Aimarion, trekking through a series of spiraling corridors that looked a little too much like a staircase for Lysette’s liking. And Mirae agreed that it was odd— that it looked too much like they were descending into another temple or some other ancient structure built by intelligent hands at some point in the distant past.

Nevertheless, they proceeded onward with an abundance of caution and care. Lysette summoned a pair of shadowy tendrils to surround the two, ready to intercept any incoming attack and retaliate in kind. Neither spoke, keeping all senses fixed on their surroundings. The tapping of their footsteps against the now stone floors was accompanied now only by that strange tune that only Lysette could hear.

It spoke in a tongue Lysette did not understand, and yet, somehow, she was able to make sense of bits of what it was saying.

“In times before history, when Aimarion was young—” and, a short while later, “For millions of years, the gods have warred.”

She could also understand the word ‘Godslayer’ among them. It was fairly clear at this point that this structure was related to the one back in Gnaria, and that both were connected to some ancient civilization that long predated the one which currently existed. One which, if she were to speculate, perished at the apex of a particularly brutal confrontation between gods on Aimarion. And that, in an effort to prevent the same calamity from happening again, they did *something* to leave a legacy behind.

“You still don’t hear anything, Mirae? It’s getting quite loud for me.”

“Nothing more than footsteps.”

Lysette drew more shadows to her side, still uncertain what the voice’s intent was. Back in the mines, it was decidedly and emphatically neutral, but without clear evidence to support that *this one* was the same, caution was warranted. Especially given Mirae was walking alongside her. The two turned to each other, shared a smile and a resolute nod, and passed through a carved archway into another massive chamber deep underground.

Immediately upon entering the chamber, Lysette was taken aback by the sheer quantity of Essence flowing through the area. It was nearly as thick as the inner sanctum of Zarielle's temple. Thick and potent enough that perhaps even one untrained in the ways of Cultivators might awaken to new abilities just by passively absorbing it and subconsciously binding it to their Spark. And whereas the tunnels were quiet, the inner chamber was deafeningly loud with the sound of cascading waterfalls all around.

As best Lysette could make out, there was a massive underground lake funneling down toward a destination she was not keen to explore further. The couple walked along a narrow strip of land, little wider than enough for the two to pass side-by-side, leading from the tunnel to the surface inward to the source of those calls earlier. And all around them was the roar of water shooting down into the abyss.

Before them was a raised platform suspended above the surface not unlike how Domark floated above the surrounding land, connected only by that tiny land bridge to the passageway back to surface high above. And once they passed through the waterfall chasm and into the inner sanctum, the space again became as quiet as it was before.

Lysette opened her eyes, and Mirae followed suit a moment later. Above them was a rich tapestry of color draping down from the ceiling of a room that stretched higher than seemed physically possible, as though space itself were being twisted to accommodate. And it was beautiful, full of blues and reds and a lot of greens, just as Lysette would have imagined based on stories of aurorae she'd once heard.

It was about as bright as the starlit night sky— bright enough to see faint outlines of relief carvings on each of the eight walls in the chamber shaped like an octagonal prism. But not so bright to make out much in terms of color or detail, even with her enhanced vision. With her

aurasight, she could see a little more, though the walls stretched much higher than the limits of her technique.

Mirae looked around, eyes full of wonder as they took in their surroundings, while Lysette's focus shifted abruptly to the dais in the center of the room. It glowed with a strange light of a greenish hue, radiating softly, and again that voice from before began to speak, though this time, in a language she could more readily understand.

“Welcome, Young Godslayer. And welcome also to her chosen companion. We have been expecting you.”