

Chapter 77: Burgeoning Faith

Lysette headed back to her room after exchanging a few more words with Danitha. In contrast to the quiet air outside, the inside of the dormitory complex was filled with no small amount of chatter, not all of it as quiet as she would have expected given the hour. The sound of students gossiping in their rooms mingled with snores and some noises from activities Lysette wished she could hear a little less of. Upon hearing them, she quickly retracted her aura down to about a quarter of its maximum range, eager to give what privacy she could.

The door to her own room was locked and latched shut. Whether Mirae had done so out of habit or as a cute prank, Lysette did not know, but in either case, she opened the door as far as it could and dissolved her body into the shadows to get inside. Mirae was sleeping soundly in Lysette's bed, while Danitha was nowhere to be found. And it seemed as though some of the latter's belongings had been moved out of the dorm room since the morning.

Lysette slid off her cloak and dissolved herself in the darkness of her room as she slinked over to her love. She crawled up the bedframe and slithered over Mirae's body, wrapping herself snugly around her love and conjuring a small blanket of shadows to drape over them.

Mirae giggled. "That tickles, Lyse." Soon after, their breathing returned to a slow, restful state, and Lysette returned her body to its physical state, keeping her arms wrapped around her partner the entire time.

Soon, but not soon enough, you will truly begin your ascension, love. And then we can spend all night cuddling and Cultivating together. With a quick kiss of Mirae's forehead, Lysette let the sensations of the outside world fade away as she turned her attention inward to her Cultivation realm.

The events of the attack on the Academy had certainly not gone unnoticed by the student body. Where the number of plants growing in her garden had previously numbered just under sixty, her adherents now numbered five hundred and seventy-nine. Most of them were nothing special, either non-Cultivators or new students who had yet to progress beyond the basics of their Cultivation paths.

There were a few exceptions, of course. Her love and Danitha were continuing to blossom as Cultivators at a remarkable rate thanks to the pacts they shared with two demigoddesses. And Serrena, being the other of said demigoddesses, was improving herself at a remarkable rate now that she had awakened her divinity. Such was inevitable given her domain of Ambition, coupled with her no longer needing to sleep. Judging by the size of the burning willow within her own domain— the manifestation of belief and Serrena’s Cultivation path— she was not quite on the same level as Lysette. But Lysette knew that she’d need to dedicate her all to maintaining that lead over the fiery redhead, lest it evaporate in an instant.

And there were two new plants that also dwarfed most of the others; Lysette speculated that she had finally converted Kristil and Nicholas to her nascent following. Each of them was about as strong as Mirae in terms of raw Essence coefficient, based on the size of their respective plants, though, with each of them specializing in a Mental-type Cultivation path, she wasn’t sure how they would fare in terms of combat capabilities. Still, in terms of the sort of organization Lysette planned to one day build to reshape Aimarion’s society, their abilities would be even more useful than those who specialized in pure combat capability.

Espionage, reconnaissance, counterintelligence operations. In order to truly build a faction— a nation, really— that could challenge the gods on a level playing field, those and other agencies

would need to be established. And further, they'd already shown an aptitude for both leadership and organization, both of which she would need in droves going forward.

The irony wasn't lost on her. As a human, she took the position as Osstia's herbalist to get away from the townsfolk and live a life of relative seclusion. As a Godslayer, she'd been instructed by Zarielle to keep a low profile and work undercover. But her goals of one day ascending and rebuilding this sinful, greed-infested world would soon require her to step out of the darkness and onto the world stage.

Lysette wasn't sure how long it would take before that day would come, but she would remain cautious and patient. As soon as she announced herself to the world, she would have any number of enemies, mortal and divine alike, all eager to take her head for their own. And when they did finally make a move against her, she would act quickly and decisively, dispensing her Reciprocity without remorse and demonstrating that the only options are alliance or annihilation.

There were still a lot of steps left before then, not all of which Lysette had fully cognized. Figuring out what sort of government best exemplified her ideal of reciprocal relations, establishing trade and diplomatic relations with potential allies. And that said nothing of dealing with what sort of organized faith would eventually develop around her.

Mirae's actions had already shown that that was going to pop up organically sooner or later, so best to get some sort of official body sanctioned with tenets her devotees would need to abide by. She gave them another gentle kiss on the forehead in physical space as she sat at the base of the Divine Tree within her Cultivation realm and began to work.

Lysette expanded her mind wide and far, stretching her presence to encompass the entirety of the world inside her soul. It was of her, borne from her, and was subject to her will. And as she closed her eyes in both the outside and inside worlds, traces of ambient Essence made

themselves visible, waiting to be gathered alongside the tiny crystals that had collected beneath the plants of her believers.

Her usual methods involved gathering all the Essence together, refining it within her Divine Tree, and then spreading it back out to her followers in roughly equal proportion. That made most sense to her sensibilities and was in accordance with her tenets of Reciprocity. But tonight would be different. Tonight, she would funnel the accumulated Essence— even that which she had gathered herself— to Kristil and Nicholas.

This, too, aligned with her tenets, and her Star high above— the physical manifestation of her domain as a divine— pulsed in acceptance with her understanding. The principle of giving more to those who had more sat poorly with her, but this was different. It was not giving in equal measure to all, but instead in relation to what one gave back. No different than expecting to be paid more for more involved or more specialized services. No different than Mirae receiving more of her attention and love as her partner.

And, should they be amenable, each of the siblings would play an important part of the plans Lysette was forming. It was both an advance of sorts, as well as preparation for the missions that they'd one day have to undertake to further their shared mission. Freeing Aimarion from the tyranny of the gods and kings alike. A society where one's station is based on their individual achievements and mutual respect, not whose child you are or what your ancestor did a millennium ago.

That, and it was an indirect way of gathering more adherents to her cause. A sudden spike in the strength of those two would be the perfect catalyst for generating many rumors about her capabilities. Rumors which would be true, but for which Lysette would have an alibi of being far away from campus at the time. After all, goddesses were allowed to work in mysterious and

sometimes unexplainable ways, and she was no exception. The only person she feared might start gathering any suspicions was Chancellor Vanniere.

She shuddered thinking of the man. An extremely powerful Cultivator, far beyond her own prowess, and a loyal adherent of Asterion. Or at least, he was playing the part of one in public. Worse still, he not only knew of her and the *reputation* she'd been building, but also was the one who had tipped her off regarding the interplay of gods and mortals in the first place. Right now, with her being a student and therefore protected from the capricious actions by the nobility, he remained her biggest potential threat. Hopefully, he wasn't truly an enemy, though she attached no weight to that hope.

At least with her leaving for a bit, that might deflect whatever suspicions he or any of Asterion's followers had toward her. *Or make them worse.* She cursed under her breath, careful to remain quiet enough not to wake her love as she weighed the various options. But ultimately, after ruminating on matters for a while, she ended up with no concrete plans beyond 'prepare for everything and form what contingencies she could'. Hopefully, she'd soon find some more information to refine those plans, and the sooner the better.

She gently stroked Mirae's back to calm herself down as she turned her focus back inward, pruning the bits of decayed matter on Kristil and Nicholas's plants and using the extracted Essence to shore up their respective foundations. In truth, there wasn't a lot for her to do; whereas Serrena had pushed her techniques to the absolute limit of her Cultivation path, weakening and destabilizing her foundation, the two siblings had taken a far more measured and disciplined approach, content to spend significant amounts of their Essence shoring up said foundations again and again.

In truth, by Lysette's estimation, they might have done so a little *too* much, to the point that they were sacrificing too much current ability for the prospect of potential benefits down the line. Benefits which, for too many, never came— in a world still marred by wasteful wars or duels for honor or dominance, sacrificing current strength for future potential seemed like it could be a quick path to an early grave. But still, that much was their decision to make, and beyond cleaning up the small imperfections in their current Cultivation paths, she would not interfere with the specifics unless asked to do so.

Altogether, the Cultivation process, along with her thoughts and various ruminations about policies and future plans, lasted through the remainder of the night. The first light of the dawn streamed in through the bedroom window, and was soon accompanied by the quiet moans of Mirae rousing from their nightly slumber. Lysette, satisfied with her night's work, allowed her Cultivation realm to fade from her view and returned her senses back to the physical world, holding her love a bit closer and burying their face within her chest.

“Are you okay, Lysette?” Mirae asked.

“Much better than this time yesterday. And it's all thanks to you.”

“I'm glad, my goddess.”

“Your goddess? Not ‘your love’ or ‘your girlfriend’?”

“Those too, Lyse.” Mirae kissed Lysette. “But sometimes I like reminding myself just how incredible my love really is. And how lucky I am to have her.”

“It wasn't just luck. It was your drive to support me, your belief in me, your willingness to stand beside me, even in the face of adversity, and your affection toward me that together earned you my heart. And I am all too happy to reciprocate those back to you, Mirae.

“Thanks, Lyse. I will continue to work hard, so I can be someone you can rely upon in the challenges ahead. Anyway, I’m ready to leave whenever. Are you?”

“Of course, love.”

Mirae sat up and stretched. “Shall we depart?”