

Chapter 127: Mirae's Transformation

Lysette's jaw nearly dissolved into shadow and dropped to the floor as she stared at Mirae's new body. Mirae stood up and stretched, spinning around a time or two to show off, while Lysette flared her aura out to enjoy every moment of it.

Most notably, Mirae's face was a fair bit more masculine, with a more square and rigid jaw. Not a hint of facial hair, but certainly androgynous enough even without hair and clothing cues, they'd be mistaken for a man as easily as they would be for a woman. Their hair style, a cross between a pixie cut and a man's cut with slightly spiky hair, only furthered the general air of androgyny they'd been both cultivating and Cultivating.

They were also about two inches taller than before, such that Lysette's head only reached to the middle of their eyes, and her eyes were level with their mouth. But rather than being lithe and thin as Lysette was, Mirae's new body was well toned. No overly large muscles, but solid tone in their arms, shoulders, and torso.

Their hips were nearly completely square with their shoulders, and their breasts were now much flatter, more reminiscent of a set of manly pecs than feminine breasts. And yet, the subtle curves around their waist remained.

"This is your ideal self?" Lysette asked.

"More or less. With unlimited time, I'm sure I could make a few more changes, but I'm happy with the body as it is."

"May I, Mirae?"

"I'd be hurt if you didn't, love."

Lysette wrapped her arms snug around Mirae's new body, and Mirae did the same, resting their still-quite-soft hands on Lysette's waist. The two stared at one another, Lysette letting

herself be entranced by those soft, golden brown eyes, before Mirae leaned down and in with a long, deep, and passionate series of kisses.

Lysette's entire body shivered with delight as she pulled Mirae closer, enjoying the sensation of her body rubbing against Mirae. And then took things a step further, leaping up and wrapping her legs around Mirae's waist. Mirae, to their credit, didn't even flinch, and neither bothered to so much as open their eyes as they continued their liplock for another minute and a half.

"We still have some more time until lunch, love," Mirae said. "What would you like to do in the interim?"

"What I'd like to do is show my partner off to everyone on campus, and maybe traipse throughout the city in your arms. But I think it would be wiser to go about our normal routines for the time being, as well as generally be *seen* on campus. Though I dislike the idea of the Chancellor continuing to spy on us, if we aren't moving around normally, he will suspect something."

"And if he can see us in the dorm rooms?"

"Well, then we're no worse off either way, and there's yet more reason why the Chancellor shouldn't be. And if we can prove as much, we'll win yet more popular support for our cause."

"Is his scrying active right now?"

Lysette uncloaked her eye and walked to the window. The day was now in full swing, with numerous students walking out of the dorms and streaming in from town, some heading to the dining hall, and others to the various classroom buildings. She looked around, up above her dorm room window, and all around the capital, tracing the patterns of Essence permeating through the campus. But even after five minutes of analysis, she saw nothing like what was tracking her the previous afternoon.

“Not that I can see. But that doesn’t mean he’s not using a different technique. Or relying on other forms of surveillance. We should still be cautious.”

Lysette and Mirae made their way outside the dorms, but as the pair stepped outside and took a moment to breathe in the cool morning air, they were approached by an unfamiliar man in an uncomfortably formal suit. Lysette turned to Mirae, who only raised their brows slightly.

“Are you Miss Lyse Barret?” he asked Lysette, his tone flat and mechanical.

“I am, but who are you, and what do you want?”

“I am a courier, sent to deliver a message to Miss Barret.” The man pulled an envelope out of the inside of his coat and handed it to Lysette. “That is all.”

“Who sent you?” Mirae asked.

“I’m not at liberty to disclose my name or who sent me. Now then.”

The man nodded curtly and walked off, each stride propelling him further than should have been physically possible. He didn’t seem to have any Cultivation potential worth noting, meaning he was likely wearing some sort of movement-enhancing artifact. Lysette considered the various other applications of such items before turning her attention back to the letter.

There were no markings on the envelope, no official seal, just a thumbnail-sized glob of wax fastening it closed. Lysette opened the letter and read it.

Miss Lyse Barret,

Your actions have not gone unnoticed, and will not go unpunished. Though I write for myself, I am not alone. The time of your reckoning is nigh.

There was no signature, nor anything else written on either side of the small sheet of paper. Lysette examined it with her aura to double check, but there was no trace of any hidden messages

or any other signs that the paper had been doctored. She handed it to Mirae, who reached the same conclusion after half a minute of close examination.

“I wonder which noble sent this?” Lysette messaged Mirae.

“Noble? Not the Chancellor?”

“Not likely. The Chancellor wouldn’t send a warning message like this. I don’t expect him to make his move until the Blood Moon. Further, the wording seems off for the Chancellor. His animosity toward me is deific, not personal, in nature; he wouldn’t have told me all those things about staying out of the war of the gods if he were looking for an excuse to kill me. No, he said that, tried to talk me out of my revenge, because he was looking for an excuse not to have to.”

No, I’m thinking Baron Albine.”

“A petty noble whose son was recently humiliated by your priestess, after which you swooped her up and left him to stew in all his injuries. He has a motive, sure, but why now?”

“Insecurity. Philidor Dozel feels secure in his position. I’m quite confident that Saffron is the only person in Domaria who might best him in single combat, and I wouldn’t stake my life on it. So he can be magnanimous and claim the moral high ground. But Baron Albine? If he suspects that I could surpass him before I finish my course of study, and he’s feeling sufficiently irate to take matters into his own hands? I could see a circumstance where he says ‘damn the law and custom of Domaria, I’m wreaking my vengeance now before it’s too late.’”

“What do you want to do about it? I doubt your Reciprocity is going to allow you to just march right into his estate and start unleashing divine vengeance.”

“Not until I’m certain it’s his note and he’s taken direct action against my life or the life of someone I care about. But I don’t want to leave campus in case the Chancellor decides to make his move.”

“Would you send me?”

“Absolutely not! Besides the fact that I don’t want you to leave my side, I’m... Ashamed to admit it, but I’m afraid that something might happen to you. Something that I could maybe prevent if I were there.”

Mirae giggled. *“Only you, love. Only you would look at me, an awakened demigod, and tell me with a straight face that you were worried about my safety.”*

“I worry about all my friends. You most of all. You collectively are my greatest strength, and my biggest worry. In more ways than one.”

“Mirae, I swore revenge when I lost my birth family. And when I was reborn, that thirst for retribution, to inflict my Reciprocity back upon Asterion, seared itself onto the forefront of my mind. I can suppress it, distract myself from it at times, but it’s always there, always goading me forward to my end goals.

“But I realized something last night, something that you and Serrena both need to know as well. Domains may compel you to act in a certain way, but it’s still your right, your duty, even, to define those Domains for yourself— none are intrinsically ‘good’ or ‘evil’. And from there, how you wish to embody them, and then manifest them on Aimarion. And finally, to determine which actions are anathema to your Domain.”

“I’m glad. I don’t want to feel forced into actions that don’t sit well with me, just because I am compelled to by my Domain.”

“Just, do be aware that if you do start acting contrary to your understanding of your Domain, your connection with it will weaken, and you will not be able to draw as much strength from it until you repair that connection.”

“I trust you know that from experience?”

“I do, unfortunately. Right after my fight with the orephage. I took the life of a sentient creature without even considering the fact that, for all I knew at the time, it had done nothing except exist and possibly scare a few miners. I never once asked if it had harmed or even threatened anyone, and simply took the mayor of Gnaria at his word that the creature was a menace.

“That’s also why I waited until just before those soldiers back in Marol launched their attack before intervening. Had they relented, had they backed down, I would not have slain them. And the same was true in Ciricu. Had the soldiers relented, turned around and headed back to the Terean ducal palace, I would have let them go free after having them pay recompense for frightening the townsfolk.”

“Even if there was a very real risk that they would have come back, in possibly greater numbers, to kill people who now pray to you, in a very literal sense, for your protection? That seems naive and shortsighted.”

“And yet, that is Reciprocity as I envision it. If I start killing just because it’s convenient, out of a lust for power, or because of what my victims might do one day? I would be just as bad as Asterion, and those victims and their families would be in the right to stop me. By force, if necessary.

“I want to be better. It may be a handicap to my ultimate goal of slaying Asterion and ending the war of the gods, but if I have to violate those principles to reach that goal? I would succeed only in supplanting one tyrant with an even worse one. That’s why I need you. Need Serrena, need Dani, need Kristil and Nicholas and Amalia and everyone in Ciricu. To make sure I never let my ends justify my means, and to stop me if I ever do go down the wrong path.”

“That’s a lot of pressure. But I’ll do it. You prove time and time again that your cause is one worthy of my Devotion.”

“Thanks, love. And I expect you to withdraw that Devotion and give it to a more worthy individual if I ever do start using my power for reasons you can no longer abide by.”

“I will. However, there’s something I do want to do before lunch, while we continue to work on how to deal with Baron Albine.”

“Oh? What’s that, Mirae?”

“I want to take you in my arms, strut around campus, be seen by as many people as possible, and positively show off both my new body and that we’re still madly in love. All while the Chancellor scries on us and gets to watch us be lovey-dovey in extreme detail.”

“I didn’t realize you had such a petty streak, Mirae.”

“My Domain allows me to be a little possessive of you, love. Besides, I thought you wanted to try out that passive Cultivation thing you mentioned last night? Seems like a good opportunity to test that out while we wait until lunch time to meet with the Rosari siblings.”

“Alright, well, given we can’t take any missions or leave campus for now, you convinced me. Not that I needed much convincing in the first place.” Lysette wrapped her arm around Mirae’s, which was now somewhat thicker and quite a bit more toned. *“If you would, love.”*