

Chapter 81: The Aestori Sanctum

The stone dais beneath Lysette and Mirae shook, nearly toppling to the ground before Lysette caught them in her arms. The platform continued to jostle around, and as it began to move upward, Lysette sat cross-legged in its center, with Mirae sitting in her lap. Lysette closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around her love as she took several deep breaths and prepared for a long Cultivation session.

“Are you going to be okay, Mirae?”

“I will be. As long as I have you by my side. I am curious, though. What do you think Finis meant when they spoke of ‘the legacy we Aestori left you’?”

“Either we will be exposed to memories of the conflict that wiped them out, recorded in some other strange device, or they have some artifact with strange power that they are gifting us. Or both. Or I suppose neither and it really is something else.”

“You really have no idea, do you, love?”

“I think both possibilities I listed are good conjectures. But, in terms of actual knowledge, I have nothing. All of this is new to me.”

“You weren’t kidding when Zarielle left you in the dark.”

“I mean, at least she was kind enough to tell me I wasn’t human anymore. As far as I knew at the time, I was just a little stronger, that’s all.”

“Godslayers aren’t just given information based on instinct?”

“Nope. Just research, conjecture, experimentation, and revision of previous hypotheses. That’s more or less how I’ve had to learn about all of my powers. Including my domain, that I could Cultivate your and my other adherents’ growth, and everything that happened when our

Cultivation paths grafted onto one another. Not to mention the fact that I had no idea what it meant to make a pact with someone until after I inadvertently did so!”

“Despite all that, you’re pretty natural at using my abilities.”

“From what I could tell, you did a pretty good job of using mine too.” Lysette kissed the back of Mirae’s neck. “But it seems we’ve arrived.”

The dais came to a stop as the pair entered a chamber slightly larger than the inner sanctum of Zarielle’s temple back in Domark. It was nearly as dark as well, and while that posed no challenge as the couple each extended their aura and proceeded onward, the room was filled with a thick fog of lightly glowing Essence. The room was filled with strange objects of various shapes and sizes, none of which Lysette knew of, and some which were softly aglow with stored Essence as well.

Through the thick fog, Lysette picked out another, more ornate dais near the far side of the room, upon which a large throne lay. She motioned to Mirae, who had been investigating a strange octahedral-shaped crystal of some sort. It did *look* like an Essence crystal on the surface, but it was not as dense, and far larger than any she’d seen— perhaps the size of a small pumpkin.

With the momentary distraction set to the side, the couple stepped up four stairs and approached the throne. Lysette sat down upon it, and Mirae sat in her lap as the demigoddess wrapped her arms around them.

“Are you ready, Mirae?”

“Of course, love.”

The two took a deep breath in sync, allowing all sensations but those of the other’s body pressing against them to fade away as the two entered the Cultivation realm formed by the merger of both of their individual ones. As Lysette’s vision focused inward, her projection

manifested in the metaphysical space, still with arms wrapped tightly around her love. And for a few seconds, Lysette was content to sit motionless, simply enjoying the gentle sensations of being with them. But soon after, the couple both stood and got to work.

And only once they did so did Lysette truly grasp how mind-bogglingly dense the cloud of Essence in the chamber truly was. Thick and potent enough that a mere hour of Cultivation and absorption of Essence within the sanctum would advance a skilled Cultivator as much as an entire week on the outside. And with the two lovers working in tandem to collect and process the Essence, it would be faster still.

Lysette eagerly got to work, opening her mind and willing the Essence flowing through her and Mirae's body to flow into their respective Sparks— her own Divine Tree, and the increasingly thick tower of ivy that surrounded it. But as the Essence flowed into her body, so too did memories assault her mind.

Memories might have been the wrong word. They were *experiences*, perhaps. Experiences of Aestori dying in the most brutal and horrifying ways Lysette could have imagined. Asphyxiation and strangulation, immolation, disembowelment, entombment in a watery grave, being trampled underfoot and fed to magical beasts, and many, many more. And as the Essence continued to enter her, her body began writhing and twitching, experiencing the pain of dozens of deaths at once.

Lysette screamed out, though she didn't make a sound, and any ability she had to sequester the pain and focus on her task was overwhelmed as every one of her consciousnesses tried and failed to process the incoming stimuli and make sense of the excruciating sensations. She hoped in vain that the pain would be sufficient to cause her to white out in sheer agony, but she was

spared even that mercy. For every time she nearly reached that threshold, the bodily memories slowed down just enough to deny her reprieve.

“Are you okay, love?”

Mirae’s voice was faint, almost imperceptible through the overwhelming sensations of feeling her body skinned alive as she Cultivated, this strange Essence having a will of its own and empowering her Divine Spark even without her consciously interacting.

“Pain.” Lysette’s voice struggled even to whimper as much. “Deaths. So many. Millions.”

Perhaps even more than millions— so many deaths continued to tear at Lysette’s sanity. She felt the sensation of being stabbed through the heart and the stomach, of having her limbs torn off by wolves and the slow, crippling death of being crushed and digested within the body of a constrictor.

Every fiber of muscle in her body was shredded to ribbons. Every bone within her was ground to powder. Tendons and ligaments were ripped apart and organs were flayed down to the cellular level. And just as quickly and with all of the pain and none of the lasting damage, Lysette’s body was repaired. And the process repeated over and over again, each time leaving more scars in her mind while rebuilding her body yet stronger than it had ever before been.

The pain stopped as abruptly as it began, but the Aestori were cruel indeed, as new memories flooded into her mind. Not of the sensations of bodily pain being experienced through her every nerve, but a pain far closer to home.

Lysette was confronted by her sister Celica, running for her life on the night her village was attacked. Tears flowed down her cheeks and she ran into the streets with a horrified expression on her face. Her entire body trembled as she rushed toward the edge of town with little more than a flimsy nightgown on, hoping to take refuge with her older sister as the entirety of Osstia

was besieged. But she hardly made it outside her house when an inquisitor grabbed her and threw her to the ground.

She screamed and cried, begging for Lysette to save her. And praying to whomever might listen that someone might intervene. Zarielle did answer those prayers. Not soon enough to save Celica's life, Lysette cursed. But soon enough to save her own, and ensure that one day, Celica's killers would experience Reciprocity's wrath.

Her errant thoughts were forcefully shoved aside as the final memories of Celica's life being wrested away surged to the forefront of her mind. It was much like how she nearly died before her rebirth, being trapped within a cage of light. But where Lysette had gone down fighting, pressing every bit of her strength into defending herself until she was fully spent, Celica could only break down and sob as the beams of light closed in around her.

And Lysette saw the fate that would have awaited her had Zarielle not intervened. The beams of light surrounded Celica, closing in until they pierced through her skin. They did no damage to her physical body, but as they tightened their grip, the harvester wrapped its luminous tendrils around Celica's chest, grabbing hold of the Spark within her core and pulling it out through her mouth. Her body was left undamaged in every other way, and yet, without a soul, she was, for all intents, dead before her limp but still warm body fell to the ground.

And so it was with every other villager, including her own parents who fell to the same vile action moments later. Lysette was forced to watch each of their deaths, one at a time. And, as with every other time witnessing such senseless deaths, seared the memories, the screams, the voices and helpless memories into her mind and used them to fuel the vengeance and thirst for Reciprocity that surged within her.

A familiar, loving hand squeezed her own as the final memories subsided and faded away into the recesses of her mind. Mirae was sitting beside her, tears in their puffy red eyes, gently stroking her hands, seeming to have been crying for quite some time.

“Are you okay, Lysette?” they asked.

Lysette’s head throbbed, but the pain lessened with each second. “I will be soon. It was pain unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before, or want to experience ever again. I must have felt and experienced over ten million deaths. Mostly deaths of the Aestori, but then I watched every villager in Osstia die at the hands of Asterion’s Inquisitorius. What about you? Did you have to suffer through all of that as well?”

“No, but I’ve been so worried about you, my love. I’ve been counting my breaths while you’ve been fighting through that horrible ordeal. About fifty thousand of them in total. Assuming I didn’t lose count, we’ve been in this chamber for about two full days now.

“Strangely, I’ve not been tired through it all. Though, now that I say that, I think my body is starting to reach its limit.”

“We’ve been Cultivating this whole time, Mirae?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been, not consciously at least, and I’m sure you couldn’t have focused on anything else either. But the entire time, I could feel my Spark getting stronger. And yours even more so. Far stronger than I had imagined we would become after Cultivating here.”

If two whole days have passed since we arrived, by my calculation, we should have experienced an entire year of growth.

Lysette turned around, and sure enough, their plants— their Sparks— were both much taller and a bit thicker than they were before. Judging on instinct alone, Lysette had gained about as much Essence from her Cultivation session as she had during the battle for the Academy, and

Mirae had absorbed roughly half that amount. Strong enough that they would be at least as strong as Lysette was against the orephage, and possibly a bit stronger still. Something that made her very, very happy and equally excited to see in action.

“Do you know what techniques you want to develop next, Mirae?”

“I can think of a few. How about you?”

“Yeah. A few techniques I think we’re both going to need for our incursion, as well as a couple of techniques I’d like to have for the future. But more than that, with your permission, I’d like to try grafting again.”

“Grafting? Like—”

“How our Cultivation paths became intertwined and we both gained a portion of each other’s power. The last time, it just happened subconsciously when we reached a deeper link, but right now, I’d like to try a more measured approach. One that might work for Cultivating the growth of my other adherents as well. But I won’t do so without your permission.”

Mirae lay down on the ground in their joint Cultivation realm. “I need some rest, but you absolutely have my permission. As I said, I pledge myself fully to you, and I trust you completely with my very being. My heart, my body, and my soul. Please, love. If I might give you this so you might realize the world we seek to build, I will do so without the slightest bit of hesitation.”

“Thank you, Mirae. I won’t let your trust be betrayed.” *I must succeed.*