

Chapter 87: Flight to Domark

Lysette spent much of the morning Cultivating and tending to her love with gentle caresses as they slept until nearly noon. The couple hadn't arrived back at Lysette's old home until some ninety minutes before dawn, and after another hour of bedroom fun— at Mirae's indignant insistence— it was nearly day by the time Mirae finally collapsed onto the small bed in the room.

Being back in her own home after so long was comforting in a way, but discomfoting in other ways. On the one hand, it had all the comforts that she had once been so accustomed to. A wonderful view of nature peering in through her bedroom window, and actual living, cooking, and dining space of her own, rather than a shared bedroom. The smell of the great outdoors in all its glory, rather than the iniquitous and sanitized taint of Cultivator society that permeated every facet of the sky island.

But on the other, it was an all-too painful reminder of what she'd lost and what she'd left behind to begin her new life. Still, because of it, she had met Mirae, and had learned for the first time what it meant to be in love. Such joy, even in quiet moments like this, could never be enough to quell her thirst to inflict her Reciprocity in full upon Asterion and all who supported his fell designs. But in that small regard, she was grateful, in a roundabout way.

Mirae groaned as they stretched out in the bed, their hand nearly knocking into Lysette's head if not for a quick dodge by the demigoddess. Instead, they wrapped their other arm around her waist as they spun toward her, pulling her in closer and nuzzling into their side.

“Good afternoon, Mirae,” Lysette said. “It's been almost three days.”

“You lie!”

“Okay, you got me. It's just after noon; you've been asleep for about seven hours.”

“I was about to say! I’m pretty sure that I, as a mortal, still recognize the passage of time a little better than *that!*”

“You’re right, you’re right, I’m sorry.” Lysette leaned in and kissed Mirae. “With that said, we should get going soon. It’s still quite the distance if we want to make it back to the Academy by dusk.”

“I didn’t think the scion of the Goddess of Darkness would— Oh, I get it. You’re missing your custards.”

“Yes. Yes I am. Though, in my defense, we will need to go report back to the Guild first, and I do want to have some time to listen to the happenings on campus.”

“So, am I going to wear you back to Domark?”

“I think I’ll carry you. Even after spending some time buttressing my foundation last night and honing my shadow dissolution yet further, I’m still not fully confident I can maintain that form for several hours in broad daylight.” Lysette gazed at Mirae’s unamused stare. “What? Even a demigoddess is allowed to have *some* limits.”

Mirae poked Lysette’s shoulder and stuck their tongue out. “That was for earlier.”

Lysette sighed before her bemused stare turned to a wistful smile. “I just can’t stay mad at you, Mirae. Anyway, shall we be off?”

Mirae’s aura flared out and their eyes wandered Lysette’s body. “I think we can spare a few more minutes.”

About half an hour later, the two got dressed and departed Lysette’s old home. Lysette spared one last forlorn glance at the simple dirt road that led back to what was once her hometown and, satisfied with the memories seared in her heart, stood behind Mirae, wrapped her arms around their waist, and sprouted her icy azure wings.

The afternoon sun was warming and relaxing, although it did provide some small discomfort to Lysette as she had to focus a bit more on maintaining her wings and keeping them aloft. But as soon as the first droplets of sweat began to appear on her cheek, the air around her chilled and the wings upon her back grew wider and stronger.

“It’s the least I can do for you, love.”

“Thanks, Mirae. I love you too.”

Lysette flapped harder, pushing herself onward through the afternoon heat, something which quickly became easier as they soared higher into the air and through a number of thick, puffy white clouds. The air inside was cool and refreshing and light sprays of mist pelted both of their faces as they flew onward. Although visibility was nearly zero inside the heart of the cloud cover, Lysette’s aura perfectly perceived through the cloud. A fact Mirae was especially grateful for after the couple narrowly avoided a small murder of crows flying just below them.

“Will you feel comfortable if we go a little higher, love?” Lysette asked. “It should be even cooler up there, but the air will be thinner too.”

“Of course. If I start to get lightheaded, I will let you know.”

“Thank you.”

Lysette flapped harder as she pushed herself even higher, now towering above the clouds over Domaria. The two were now perhaps 18,000 feet up, and despite being hundreds of miles away from the capital, the floating sky island was already becoming visible upon the far eastern horizon.

And all around, Lysette took in the surroundings, seeing Kraciell in a way she’d never done before. Billions of trees sprawled out over tens of thousands of square miles in every direction, the forests of the center of the continent only broken up by the occasional road, farm, or small

village dotting the landscape. Far to the north lay the rugged highlands near Domaria's northern border with Terea, and only there among everywhere Lysette could see did the fertile forests give way to scrubland upon high and rocky plateaus.

From such a distant view, the land looked pristine and beautiful, full of vivid greens of myriad shades and punctuated with the crystal blues of small streams and a couple of lakes with which Lysette was unfamiliar. The breeze was unrelenting at this height, the whipping of the winds joined by the choruses of honking ducks flying in their trademark v-shaped formations. Every so often, a cloud beneath them would cast a shadow down onto the surface far below, and out among the far southern expanse, there was a small thunderstorm brewing, a lightning bolt illuminating an otherwise dark cloud. And to Lysette, all of it was beautiful, though nothing quite as much as the person in her arms viewing it right alongside her.

The flight itself proved uneventful. If any on the ground were tracking them— something Lysette considered very unlikely— none announced their presence, let alone made a move to intercept them. And so, for nearly two hours, the two flew high overhead to the east, eventually veering around the outskirts of Domark and to the north to avoid flying over the cityscape. Only once they had reached a large forested enclave a few miles north of the city did Lysette finally begin her descent.

As before, Mirae spun around and clutched onto Lysette's back as the two dove at blinding pace. Mirae gripped tighter and tighter as Lysette accelerated, the wind battering at her face and whipping up the hair on both of their heads. If not for her ability to dissolve her body, she would have been more than a little concerned of their hair tying together into any number of painful knots.

And she would have blitzed at a full dive all the way to the surface, so great was her enjoyment of these sensations, but for Mirae's nearly imperceptible pleas to slow her descent. Pleas she quickly abided by, slowing to a measured descent over the last thousand or so feet until landing in a grassy meadow.

"I'm sorry I worried you, Mirae. I'll remember to be more considerate in the future."

Mirae looked at Lysette, and Lysette looked back at Mirae, and the two stared in each other's eyes before Mirae broke the mutual gaze by stealing a kiss.

"You're forgiven, love."

Lysette dissolved her head to seamlessly separate their conjoined hair, and only once she'd stepped back a bit did she fully rematerialize. Mirae's hair had gotten quite scruffy, and a quick flare of her aura confirmed that her own was somehow even worse. The two shared a long embrace and then took a few moments to straighten each other's hair before finally walking hand-in-hand back to the Hunter's Guild.

The outskirts were as quiet as they normally were, with thankfully no glares or other signs of discomfort from the onlooking townsfolk as the two passed by a few mudbrick houses on the very edge of the city before entering the guild headquarters.

Unlike the last time they were there four days prior, the guild was back to its usual level of occupancy, more or less. A few heated discussions filled the back of the hall, relating to how to allocate payment for a recent assignment, and there were a handful of people discussing some of the assignments. But no longer was there a massive line stretched out the door and partway down the street as there had been when they'd left the last time.

Only a minute passed before Leonn welcomed the two to the reception desk with a small wave and a polite smile.

“Miss Barret, Mx. Trosst,” he said. “It’s good to see you back alive and unharmed.”

“Likewise, Leonn.” Lysette transmitted. *“I hope you can forgive my insistence on using telepathy for this conversation. We’re here to report back on that special assignment you had mentioned the other day.”*

“Of course. Please, continue.”

“Mirae and I crossed into Elithria yesterday evening and raided a garrison called Kattor just inside the border. We discovered that there were plans for an invasion, but unfortunately, we have only hearsay to go upon. We found no documents or other war plans, and after slaying the commander of the stronghold, we judged it too risky to remain in hostile territory.”

“This is disquieting information for certain. I will see it relayed to the palace.”

“Thank you. And one other thing. Please don’t mention that we were the ones who carried out this assignment. The absolute last thing I want is to attract any more of the palace’s attention.”

“I will relay your request for anonymity, but please do not be upset if I eventually am forced to relent under pressure. The military leadership will want to know who provided this information, and we do, despite some level of independence, answer to the crown.”

“I see. Then, whatever happens will happen. For now, the two of us will be returning to campus. Classes start back up tomorrow, and I’d like to spend some time back on campus attending to my own matters.”

“I wish the two of you both a fruitful course of study and well wishes in your endeavor. Also, I wanted to give you two a total of 150 platinum as payment for your successful mission.”

“Even without any proof of our findings?”

“I’m a good judge of character and when people are lying. And I detect no lies in how you conducted yourself. Plus, I’m sure Serrena informed you of Hunter’s Privilege.”

Lysette vaguely remembered her mentioning as such. Namely, that each guild member was bound under threat of future disciplinary action, including potential revocation of membership, to truthfully report the success or failure of a mission. And that said word was considered valid proof of assignment. A trust-based system that relied on mutual benefit and reciprocal agreements. Something which sat very well with the Demigoddess of Reciprocity.

“Thank you, Leonn. If we have some time later, perhaps we will accept another assignment.”

With a small bow, Lysette prepared to depart, but as she turned around, she was frozen in place by a voice near the front door.

“Lyse? Is that you?”