

Chapter 86: Brudiar's Self-Destruction

Mirae, clad in the armor of Lysette's shadowy form, stood upon the northern edge of the large clearing, while Captain Brudiar emerged out of the grove just to their south. The full moon shone its silvery blight upon Aimarion from high above, illuminating the captain while Lysette's form rejected the pale glow.

Mirae drew their icy blade and pointed it at the captain, who stared resolutely back at them with silvery eyes that seemed to shine in the night and glow in the light of his spear ignite.

He pulled a small capsule out of his pants pocket and began to breathe heavily as he crushed it within his teeth. And as he chewed, the Essence within him turned from a warm golden glow to a fierce, infernal crimson. Even his skin turned red and steam began to sizzle out of his body. Sinew and flesh likewise crackled as his muscles bulged and expanded in a twisted, malformed mess not unlike what Lysette imagined the demons of the Infernal Realm must be. And most insidiously of all, his eyes metastasized from a silvery hue to an ominous glowing scarlet.

"What's happening, Lyse?"

"He seems to have taken some pill that has ignited the very Essence within his body, burning his Spark's flames at an accelerated rate. He's undoubtedly far stronger, but... His body already struggles to handle the pressure and, well, there's only one end result for him after that."

"So we just have to survive until then."

"Fight defensively. We'll focus on healing, and I'll let my new ability deal damage instead."

Lysette flared her aura to its limit and enforced her Reciprocity Dominion on the area. Meanwhile, Mirae stepped back into a defensive stance and held their weapon close, ready to parry at a moment's notice.

"Why?" Mirae asked. "You would go so far as sacrificing yourself just to try to defeat us?"

“That’s right, child. You may not understand, being so young and naive, but that is what it means to be a soldier.” He grunted and his flesh writhed further, his voice turning scratchier and more monstrous with every moment. “To make the difficult sacrifices, to do what needs to be done for the sake of the mission and the greater good of your nation, your king, and your god.”

Mirae’s eyes narrowed. “I do understand. For my goddess, I would give my life if she asked. But I would much rather fight to see the future she would build, and to stand right there alongside her through it all!”

“Good! That’s the way it should be! Now then, let us begin!”

Brudiar’s now hulking form bolted toward Mirae at an obscene speed, closing the roughly fifty yards between them in just over half a second and thrusting his spear directly toward their chest. Mirae sidestepped the blow and attempted to bat away his spear with their blade, but the surge of ice and fire instead sent clouds of steam hurtling through the field as the vapor hissed like a rattlesnake.

They quickly reforged their blade as Brudiar lit his spear still brighter, letting golden flames fly about. Mirae dodged as best they could, countering those few they couldn’t with small beams of frost energy. But when Brudiar launched consecutive fireballs, the second behind cover of the first, Mirae was caught off guard, leaving Lysette to absorb the impact with a tenebrous arm. It stung a bit, not even close to the most intense burning sensation she’d felt in the past week, and her regeneration quickly got to work repairing the singed tissue.

“Did it work?” Mirae asked.

“He was mere inches outside my Dominion. I doubt he knows exactly what my technique does, but he probably senses it somehow.”

“So I need to get closer. Understood, Lyse.”

Mirae nodded and charged into melee range, and Brudiar retreated in a circular path, strafing for distance while launching multiple fireballs to cover him. Mirae countered with beams of ice, while Lysette beat her wings to propel Mirae faster still. The two were getting better at coordinating their movements, Lysette occasionally pushing at the ground or launching a reverse wingbeat to subtly adjust Mirae's position and momentum alike.

And the assault was bearing fruit. Brudiar's Essence continued to burn as bright as the trees alight in the grove from their battle, but there were even more muscle tears forming within his legs and arms alike, while Mirae was only lightly sweating. The two continued on for several more minutes, and while Mirae was pressing the attack, Brudiar, with his superior experience and combat acumen, was just barely keeping them at bay, even with Lysette's assistance.

“Mirae, concentrate on readying your strongest ice attack; I will take control of our evasion.”

“Understood.”

Lysette clamped a bit tighter around Mirae's body like an insect's exoskeleton, coordinating their joints with precision only a Godslayer and her multipronged mind could. She quickly took the pair just off the ground and began zigging around in her attempt to approach.

Orbs of flame were cleft in twain by the couple's sword of ice as Brudiar attempted to escape Lysette's dominion. But she was closing the distance, and upon wrapping his body fully within her Dominion, she allowed the subsequent bolts of crimson to deal blows to her right hand and shoulder.

It hurt like acid poured into her veins, and if not for her experiences enduring such torment, she would have been forced back into her physical state. She persisted onward through her own

injuries, but Brudiar was clutching his hand from the reciprocal blowback, screaming any number of curses as he struggled to keep hold of his spear.

“Burned by my own attack? This makes no sense!”

Lysette used the initiative to power through another orb of flame, accepting a blow to the left leg for the both of them and striking at Brudiar’s exposed right flank as he hobbled, trying to restore his footing.

“Wretched child! I will not be defeated by—”

Lysette seethed internally— this man was rapidly earning her full ire by insulting her love— and continued pushing forward, delivering a pair of icy strokes to Brudiar’s knees and thighs, sending him barreling to the ground. She rushed forward, but before she could deliver a final blow, a massive jet of flame emerged out of the ground, surrounding him in the same cloak of flame that Serrena had used during their duel some months prior.

Brudiar clutched his spear, leaning on it as he struggled to his feet. His muscles continued tearing themselves apart as he wobbled back and forth. By this point, his internal injuries from the drug were causing his internal organs to shut down. Without Lysette’s regeneration, he would certainly die from his injuries before dawn.

For a moment, she considered leaving him to his fate— it would be a suitably painful death to sate her vengeance— but she refused to give him even a slim chance to cheat death and relay intelligence of their capabilities.

“*Mirae,*” Lysette transmitted as she tapped the crown of her armored form against Mirae’s temples. “*I will lend you my strength. Annihilate that barrier.*”

Mirae nodded and raised their right arm, concentrating a massive amount of Essence in their core and moving their focus to a small sphere of glowing blue light at the tip of their index

finger. Brudiar stood with a disgusting, smug grin on his face, sending his barrier alight even further. Lysette would have smirked, seeing him act so confidently at first with his meager power, only to see his attempt to feign a grin despite being so thoroughly outclassed.

The fact that his own actions were what did him in, however, was the true irony in the whole situation. Had he never issued the order to assassinate her, Lysette would be snuggling quietly in her bed with Mirae, something she still needed to do more of once this was finished.

Mirae muttered the words ‘Boreal Ray’ under their breath, and a surge of blue light as wide as their torso smashed into the crimson barrier. For a half second, the barrier held. But then it cracked. Brudiar’s grin turned to a grimace as he attempted to buttress the barrier further, and then to a horrified combination of panic and resignation as the couple’s ray penetrated the sphere, then shattered it entirely.

Shards of crystallized fire scattered onto the ground throughout, melting back into their constituent flames and setting small patches of the grassy plains alight before being snuffed out just as quickly by Lysette’s shadowy touch.

Brudiar, now fallen onto the ground, was whimpering, his skin marred by thousands of icy protrusions bursting through skin and flesh and clinging to life by a razor’s edge.

“Even with all that. I couldn’t even slow you down.” he whispered.

“Mirae, if you would.”

Mirae acknowledged Lysette’s request and, with a single slice of her frigid sword, removed his head from his neck. They then reached into his pocket and pulled out the document containing the invasion plans while Lysette gathered the escaping Spark and subsumed it within her own.

But the pages were completely blank.

“Do we go back to Kattor?”

“No. We don’t know what we’re looking for, or even if there were physical plans. For all we know, they were destroyed long before we even arrived. In the midst of our search, we would likely have to raze the entire stronghold to the ground, by which point it would be daytime and reinforcements might already be arriving. We’ve dealt a blow to the enemy forces and I think it’s best if we retreat while we still have the advantage of stealth and cover of night.”

“Are you certain? I thought the enemies there were supposed to be weak.”

“You’re in no condition to continue fighting, Mirae, even though I know you would gladly push yourself further if I asked it of you. As grateful as I am that you would put your life on the line for me if I asked, the only thing I wish of you is that you continue living by my side.”

“Thank you. If I may make a suggestion. Might we head back to your place tonight?”

“Any particular reason?”

“Classes start the day after tomorrow and I actually plan to attend mine since I don’t have all your godly intellect to just devour knowledge out of every book I read. Plus, I don’t have that instinctual knowledge you do of how to modify my Cultivation path to best suit my needs. It might happen for you with just a thought and force of will, but it takes me time and energy and resources to Cultivate my own Spark.

“Also, Lysette, I’ve been fighting for the last hour and working up a sweat while you’ve been wrapped all around my body. I need some release, and by your name, Lysette, you are going to Reciprocate my devotion for all this.”

“Let’s get going then. And let’s make sure we fly low; I’d rather not attract even more attention to ourselves tonight.”

“Of course, my lovely goddess.”