

Chapter 85: Kattor Infiltration

Lysette charged out of Marol at a full sprint, Mirae still in her arms as she burst into the wilderness. The moths and owls and other nocturnal critters were scurrying about, oblivious as they always were to the happenings of humans and gods and demigoddesses alike. Chirps of crickets and cicadae filled the moonlit night, helping to obscure the couple's approach as they darted through the underbrush.

The sky was still dark save for Asterion's stain upon it, and there would still be several more hours until the arrival of the dawn. Lysette wished Mirae could have gotten some more rest after the previous two days of looking after her, but a quick and decisive response was needed. The garrison in Kattor would be expecting the return of their squadron soon, and Lysette wanted to secure her objective before then. To gather any documents relating to the invasion and annihilate this Captain Brudiar before they bolstered their defenses with added sentries, maybe even reserves from the capital.

Lysette arrived at the outskirts of the garrison about five minutes after departing Marol, but remained shrouded behind the nearby trees as she planned her assault. There didn't seem to be anyone manning the guard towers, nor did she sense signs of anyone using any Cultivation technique, but neither did she discount the possibility that this was a trap waiting for her.

"What do you want to do, Mirae? You could come along with me, or retreat back to Domaria while I take care of things here. Personally, I don't know what's waiting for us, and I'm worried I might not be able to protect you if you come along."

Mirae shook their head. "No, I said I was your companion and your attendant, and I mean that all the way. Where you go, I follow. Even to the pits of the Infernal Realm, should your path lead you there. But, perhaps you could wrap around me in your shadow form while I charge

in? They might expect you, but I don't think they'd be looking for me. And this will allow you to protect me fully at all times."

Lysette wanted to decline the offer, but a glance of Mirae's resolute stare and fierce will overpowered her resistance, and so she acquiesced. Instead she dissolved her body and wrapped herself around Mirae. She willed a few nearby shadows to merge with her, and molded her form into a suit of shadowy armor that fully cloaked her love's body. And once she was satisfied with the form of her love's armor, she sprouted a pair of wings upon their back to complete the look

Mirae examined themselves, gazing upon their new ebon fullplate made of their love's body and flexing their arms about, admiring the subtle designs Lysette had formed within their gauntlets. They took another couple of moments to stretch about, and smiled with glee.

"It's beautiful, just like you, and incredibly flexible despite its appearance. I love it."

Lysette formed another handful of shadows and wrapped them around Mirae's head and neck, forming them into the shape of a beautiful helm in the shade of fine onyx, one which ensnared and absorbed any light landing upon them.

"I will protect you with everything I have. Now, steel yourself fully for battle, Mirae. Once we charge in, there will be only enemies. Do not hesitate to do what needs to be done."

"As you command, my goddess."

Mirae drew their blade of ice while Lysette sprouted a pair of wings at their back, and, after a deep breath, Mirae charged forward, rushing at their full speed. They leapt into the air as the two crossed into the clearing surrounding the small fortress, and Lysette took over, vibrating her wings and sending the two soaring above the stone walls and onto the ramparts above.

As they landed, a single guard turned around and attempted to call out, but a single slash of Mirae's sword was enough to silence the man, turning his tepid attempt at a war cry into a gurgle

as the icy sword neatly slashed the man's jugular. Blood splattered about, some daring to impugne upon Mirae's figure, but a quick wall of shadows covered their face and stopped any of the crimson liquid from besmirching them.

Mirae turned away for a half second, but just as Zarielle did for her, Lysette beckoned them to look upon the corpse as its warmth faded away and its Spark was absorbed into Lysette's being.

"It was your first time taking a human life, was it not?"

"It was."

"It's never pleasant, and it never gets easier. But this is the world we live in, and the one we must fight through to change it. If you truly believe in the world I strive to create, then acknowledge your actions and accept the consequences of them with your head held high."

Mirae stared at the bloodied mess and quivered for a half second before their eyes turned resolute once more. *"Yes, my goddess."*

"Do you see anyone else around, Mirae?"

"No, Lyse. No one else seems to have noticed our presence. Shall we begin?"

"Look for the command center. It should be the largest building in the fort. If there are any documents relating to an upcoming invasion, they'll be stored in the office of Captain Brudiar."

"Understood. I will not fail you."

"I know."

Mirae jumped off the ramparts and touched down on the grassy fields in the encampment commons while Lysette looked around with her aurasight. Sure enough, there was not even a single guard awake within the range of her aura, and no signs of even a candlelight through any

of the building windows. The prospect of a trap seemed even more likely, but Lysette still beckoned Mirae forth toward the building in the center of the stronghold.

It was locked, predictably enough, but a couple of small cuts in the base of the door provided enough of a gap for Lysette to stretch one of her many shadowy appendages inside and unlatch the three deadbolts and two latches that held the door fast.

The inside was filled with numerous doors, beyond which were a number of small offices little different from the ones back in the Hunter's Guild. There was no reception area, no paintings or other decor on the walls, and the few pieces of furniture scattered about could best be politely described as 'functional'. Mirae jiggled a couple of locks while Lysette flared her aura to its limit, weaving it through the cracks between each door and doorframe to peer into each office.

She would have furrowed her brows, had they existed in tangible space at the time. *"It seems we're expected, Mirae. The large office in the back right. A middle-age man with a large beard sits in his office, tapping his fingers against the desk. If you wouldn't mind."*

Mirae nodded and, as they approached the room, a deep voice bellowed out to them.

"Please, enter."

They did so and were greeted by a man about half a head taller than Mirae. His voice was scratchy and his face covered in scars. He wore an immaculate uniform of silver and purple, decorated with a pair of chevrons upon his right chest the same shade as the abominable moonlight that shone through the window. And he stood up from behind his desk and nodded his head at Mirae.

"If you are here now, I take it that my soldiers failed."

"They did," Lysette projected into the man's mind. *"Captain Brudiar, I presume."*

“Indeed. I appreciate your sparing my soldiers sleeping in their barracks. Foolish though it may be for your ambitions.”

“And as long as they stay sleeping, I will take no action against them. You, on the other hand, ordered seven of your soldiers to kill me in the dead of night as I slept. For your actions, I’ve come to Reciprocate your soldiers’ hospitality.”

“I am a soldier of Elithria through and through. I will not allow my nation to be infiltrated by enemy spies. I will complete my mission, and I will see you cut down by my spear.”

As he spoke, a spear with a crimson shaft and flaming tip appeared in his right hand.

“With that said, I would prefer if we did not fight here. Things might get... messy, and if you truly are sincere about not wanting to harm my soldiers, then you wouldn’t mind fighting outside. There’s a grove about half a mile to the north. We’ll not be disturbed there.”

“The invasion plans,” Lysette said. “Bring them with you. That way, I will have no reason to come back and tear this place apart looking for them. And no funny business; if I do have to come back, I’ll end the lives of everyone who catches sight of me.”

“If that is your only condition, then I gladly accept.” Commander Brudiar reached into his desk and pulled out a small envelope, placing it in a pocket inside his jacket. *“The plans are right here. If you want to claim them, you’ll have to take them along with my head.”*

“I would expect nothing less. Now then, I don’t suppose either of us trust the other to not stab the other in the back as we head to our destination.”

“Obviously not.”

“There’s a clearing just to the south of here. I’ll leave, and you follow a hundred or so paces behind. And you will follow behind in accordance with this agreement if you truly value the lives of the soldiers under your command. My ears are sharp and my eyes sharper still. If you try to

renege and rally your troops, I will kill everyone in this garrison. If you don't follow behind, I will make your death as painful as I know how. If you try to flee, I will find you, and I will end you."

"Straight to the point, child. But I'm curious. Do you really think a child like you can best a seasoned warrior?"

"Only one way to find out, Captain." Lysette made clear her disgust with the way she spoke that last word.

Mirae bowed and walked back out of the command post, leaping up and allowing Lysette to take flight as soon as they passed through the building's threshold. The grove mentioned by Captain Brudiar wasn't too difficult to spot from the air, and as the couple flew over the nearby trees, Lysette materialized the front of her head out of Mirae's back and watched for her soon-to-be adversary.

"Is he following along?" Mirae asked.

Lysette looked down and watched the man jog at a comfortable pace for an ordinary human, but one which would have been seen as pitifully sluggish to any competent Cultivator.

"Stalling, I'd say. Plans to try to wait us out until the sunrise. Perhaps he knows my power will diminish then. Or maybe he's expecting reinforcements."

"What do you want to do?"

"Play along for now. There's still a full three hours left until the first light of dawn. If he believes he can stall us out that long, he underestimates my capabilities."

"How strong is he, love?"

"I would say stronger than Lacos, weaker than Leonn. Not a significant threat unless he has some trick up his sleeve. And I wouldn't be surprised if he did."

“You don't seem worried.”

“You say that like we don't have several of our own. Not to mention that there are two of us.”

“You don't think he recognized us?”

“He didn't give any indication that he realized I was the one communicating with him, not you. Perhaps that was part of his ruse, but I don't think he has the same sort of perception abilities that we do. However, it seems we will have no more time to speculate. He has arrived.”