

Chapter 36: A Proposition

Raimie

Turning on Oswin, Queen Kaedesa grinned at him with an almost feral edge to it.

“Middle! How good to see you!” she said. “You had me worried when you disappeared from my court without warning.”

Bowing, Oswin said, “Your Majesty.”

And nothing more.

“Still reticent as ever, I see,” Kaedesa said with a chuckle before turning to me, “but from what I understand, Raimie, the tale you told me so many months ago wasn’t merely a delusion.”

“Or at least, enough people believe his story to form an army around him.”

A pinch-lipped man joined the group, never ceasing his glare at me, and while I could tell she tried to restrain it, Kaedesa still grimaced at his words.

“Ah, yes. This is Pierdriel, my... advisor,” she said. “He’s here as an observer for Ada’ir’s nobility.”

Oh, *shit*. They’d forced a watcher on her? When I’d fled from Daira last year, how much trouble had I left Kaedesa in?

“...It’s nice to meet you,” I stiffly said.

That was all I could allow myself when it came to Pierdriel. As soon as I could, I focused my attention back on Kaedesa.

“If I may, why are you here?” I asked. “You’re a long way from home, Queen of Ada’ir.”

Before Kaedesa could answer me, Pierdriel snapped, “Do you mean to ask why, besides the fact that *you stole so many resources from us?*”

Ah, yes. I’d hoped we could go for a little longer before getting into that subject, but I supposed that had been a pipe dream.

“Forgive me, Pier, but have I suddenly lost the ability to speak for myself?” Kaedesa said in an acid tone. “Because otherwise, I believe an advisor’s role is to *keep quiet* until I ask for advice.”

“Your Majesty, I wasn’t trying to-” Pierdriel started.

“But you did, didn’t you?” Kaedesa snapped. “As I’ve said, you can kindly keep your mouth shut, or do you know what might be better? If these two monarchs could have a nice, private chat together.”

Folding her hands in front of her, she smiled at me.

“What do you think, Raimie?” she said. “Will you join me on a stroll through the woods?”

I forced myself not to smile back. Gods, I’d forgotten how absolutely fiery and assured of herself this woman could be. My stomach might be churning when considering why Kaedesa was probably here, but I had to admit that it was nice to see her again. I opened my mouth to reply, but again, the advisor interrupted us.

“Your Majesty, please! You can’t! Think of the scandal that might come from you spending time alone with... him,” he said. “And what if the rumors are true? What if he *is* a primeancer?”

Ok. That was enough.

“Oh, the rumors are true,” I mildly said, “but I have no intention of hurting your queen, whether with primeancy or anything else. Besides, if I’m remembering correctly, I had several private meetings with Her Majesty while I was a guest in your fine capital, and from what I saw during them, she is *more* than capable of defending herself.”

That left Pierdriel sputtering, which gave me no small amount of pleasure.

“You see, Pier? Nothing to fear,” Kaedesa said. “Shall we?”

She held out her elbow for me, but I paused before taking it.

“Oswin, can you please stay here with the honored advisor?” I said. “You know I can take care of myself for the time it will take to finish one short conversation.”

Stiff as a statue, Oswin said, “That’s true, sir, but to ease a dutiful bodyguard’s mind, would the two of you please stay mostly within eyesight? I know you may need complete privacy at times, but please, let me keep my eyes on you for the most part. I hope that’s not too much to ask.”

It really wasn’t.

As Kaedesa dipped her head in acceptance before once more retrieving her pistol, I squeezed Oswin’s arm.

“Everything will be fine,” I whispered.

Taking a deep breath, Oswin nodded.

“Be careful, sir.”

Smirking, I said, “I always am.”

“Well, that’s a blatant lie,” Oswin said.

But he laughed.

“Coming?” Kaedesa called from the edge of the forest.

“Of course, Your Majesty!” I said.

And we headed into the foliage around us. As I trailed behind Kaedesa, I ran through a host of reasons for what I’d done in Daira. I could only imagine the position I’d put this woman in when I’d fled from her. She’d encouraged that flight, of course, but on top of escaping something that others might have considered an iron-clad imprisonment, I’d taken what had amounted to one-fifth of her armed forces with me as well. What had that theft done to her standing with both rival kingdoms and the constantly rebellious nobles in her own realm?

When her army’s camp disappeared behind a mass of twigs and leaves, Kaedesa rounded on me, and I braced for whatever punishment she was sure to rain down on me, the one I so thoroughly deserved. So, when she wrapped me in a hug, surprise froze me solid, almost concealing a surge of bubbling panic and nausea.

“Thank Alouin you’re all right,” Kaedesa said.

But then, she withdrew, and while she kept her hands on my arms, her retreat took my panic with it.

“I heard you began the ocean crossing with a bearing that would take you right beside the Accession Tear,” Kaedesa said. “I was afraid its storms might have ripped my ships to flotsam.”

I was... so confused.

Cocking my head, I said, “You’re not angry with me? I thought for sure that after what I did-”

“Oh, I assumed that taking so many of my soldiers with you was Commander Marcuset’s idea, not yours. He’s always been a conniving bastard,” Kaedesa said while wrinkling her nose. “You should make sure he’s nowhere near me for a while, by the way. If I see him, I might tear him limb from limb.”

What a terrifying image.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said.

What was happening? Kaedesa should be attacking me or screaming or throwing punches or... I didn’t know, pouring some form of caustic acid, whether in the form of words or not, on me. She

shouldn't be... this. Whatever this was.

"Why aren't you angry?" I said. "After what my people did to weaken Ada'ir, you should have ordered your army to attack mine the moment we stumbled across one another."

Laughing, Kaedesa said, "I'm sure my court would love it if I decided to fight you, but just this once, I'm not going to sate their lust for battle. Bloodthirsty bastards, all of them."

Shaking her head, she pursed her lips.

"Honestly, you did me a favor. Without any recent rebellions to trim the fat, Ada'ir's standing army had been getting bloated and unwieldy. The mass defection of the Audish loyalists within it both lowered its size to a more reasonable one *and* showed me exactly which of my soldiers serve only me."

Ok. That explained why she seemed almost *happy* to see me, which was...strange. I could let myself believe I was safe. Even as I started to relax, though, I felt compelled to voice my other worries, no matter that doing so wouldn't help me or my people.

"That may be the case, but Ada'ir surely invested time and coin into the soldiers and ships I took with me," I said. "How can I repay that debt?"

With an indulgent smile, Kaedesa said, "I'll get to that soon. We have two other matters to address before then. Two gifts, of a sort. The first of those: I should return something that I stole from you."

Unhooking something hidden within her voluminous skirt's folds, she offered a sword to me, and taking one look at it, I started backing away.

"Oh, no," I said, lifting a hand. "You can keep that thing."

Which had Bright and Dim popping into the center of my view.

"Are you *mad*?" Bright shouted.

At the same time, Dim growled, "You idiot!"

And all the while, Kaedesa asked, "Why would I do that?"

Pressing a hand to my temple, I squeezed my eyes closed.

"Give... me a moment, please," I managed to get out.

Turning on the splinters, I said, *Why do you two start talking at the most inconvenient times?*

"Because sometimes, you do incredibly stupid things," Dim snapped, "and we have to stop that."

You think it's stupid for me to refuse Shadowsteal? I said. *It's caused so much trouble in my life, and if that's not enough, I can never predict what will happen when I touch the damn thing.*

Besides, I already have a perfectly good sword.

I patted Silverblade, hanging at my side.

“That may be so,” Bright said, “but is that sword tied to your foretelling? Can it eliminate a-?”

“What are you doing?” Kaedesa asked.

On turning to her, I winced to see her still offering me Shadowsteal.

“I’m having a silent conversation. Please, don’t worry about it,” I said before sighing. “Thank you for returning my family’s property, truly, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to touch that sword. Do you remember what happened the last time I did that?”

“You handily defeated my palace guard in a few heartbeats, moving faster than I’d have thought a human could go,” Kaedesa said.

Pausing, she looked down at the sword in her hands.

“Perhaps you’re right,” she said.

When she hid the sword in her skirt again, Bright and Dim groaned, and despite how annoying I might find it now, it would be best to make sure those two were at least a little appeased.

“Maybe another member of my family could take it for now. Someone it won’t react to,” I said. “You should give it to my grandfather. I’m sure its return would overjoy him.”

Shrugging, Kaedesa said, “It’s your sword. I’ll do whatever you want with it.”

“Then, that’s settled,” I said before turning my focus to Bright and Dim.

Happy?

“No,” Bright grumbled.

“But giving it to Eledis is better than leaving it with the forgetful one,” Dim added.

They faded into the background, and I mentally rolled my eyes at them. So dramatic at times.

“And the second... gift?” I hesitantly asked.

I wasn’t comfortable with how long we were taking to address my concerns.

With a grin, Kaedesa held out a folded sheet of paper.

“A letter from a friend,” she said.

On taking it, I briefly scanned the message within, wanting to take a closer look once Kaedesa and I had gone our separate ways. I was glad for that caution on reaching the signature at the end.

Shooting my head up, I said, "Dath?"

How did she know my left-behind friend?

Fortunately, Kaedesa seemed to know what I was really asking.

"He's been an excellent addition to my palace guard. Came highly recommended by one of my new contacts in Sev," she said. "Once it's less... barbaric here, I mean to bring him with me when I visit you in Auden."

This gift took my breath away, if only for a moment. Dath was safe and employed, able to live a comfortable life in Ada'ir. I'd been wondering if he'd find the means to do so, but the position he'd gained was so much better than any of my meager hopes for him.

And Kaedesa was offering safe and ready transport for him to visit me in Auden. It was yet another thing added to the list of things I owed her for.

Before I could open my mouth to thank her, Kaedesa stepped into my shocked silence.

"With that bit of business concluded, shall we discuss how you'll pay back your debt to me?" she asked.

It seemed she wanted to move on quickly, then. She'd picked the perfect opportunity to return to this subject, off-balance as I now found myself.

Dreading what might be coming, I said, "If that's what you want, Your Majesty."

Which had Kaedesa making a face.

"Stop that!" she said. "From what I hear, you're a king in your own right, and so, there's no need for deference between us. Call me by my name."

Fuck, how had I forgotten about that part of my etiquette lessons? Not that I particularly wanted to follow this social rule.

"As you like... Kaedesa," I made myself say. "What can I, with my meager resources, give you in exchange for the crimes I've committed against Ada'ir?"

With a wicked smile, Kaedesa said, "Hmm. What should I ask for? What could possibly make up for my loss? After all, according to you, all that's yours is mine for the taking."

Oh, hell. Why had I reminded this woman of everything I'd done to her again?

Given that, I was more than a little relieved when Kaedesa's evil grin softened.

“Fortunately for you, I’ve already settled on a relatively insignificant price,” she said.

Oh, thank Alouin.

“What is it?” I asked.

Kaedesas took a deep breath before meeting my eyes.

“I want a position at your side, King of Auden, making an alliance between our nations. To that end, I propose that you make me your queen,” Kaedesas said. “It’s simple, Raimie. If you want to repay Ada’ir, you’ll marry me.”

Rapidly blinking, I choked on a laugh with the noise of it so loud that an animal, hidden in the brush, scampered away from us. She wanted *what* from me?

“I’m sorry. I- I must have misheard you,” I coughed. “Are you asking to be my *wife*?”

Cocking her head, Kaedesas said, “Is that such an unusual request between monarchs? Marriage alliances *are* commonplace among the world’s kingdoms, are they not?”

Backing away, I lifted my hands in protest.

“I wouldn’t know!” I squeaked. “I wasn’t exactly trained for this job. It fell into my lap. You don’t remember how amusing you found my lack of court etiquette while I was your prisoner?”

Kaedesas hummed with a fond smile.

“I’d forgotten about that, but it certainly sounds like something I’d enjoy,” she said. “I assure you, however, that such arrangements are mundane in the world of kings and queens.

“Would marrying me be so distasteful? I’ve already helped you by capturing a port city along this land’s coastline. I could give it to you as part of a wedding dowry, if you require such a thing. I can also finance your war effort, and once you’ve cast off Doldimar’s tyranny, my experience in statecraft could be invaluable while you’re establishing your kingdom. I know I don’t bring much to the table physically, what with being a widow and all, but-”

“What? Why would I care about-? No, that’s not the issue,” I said, still flustered all to hell. “You’re beautiful Kaedesas. Anyone would be lucky to have you: looks, experience, and all. It’s just that...”

How was I supposed to tell a powerful queen that all I could think about right now was Ren and how this proposition might distress her? *Why* was that the only thing I could think about right now?

“I understand that you’ll need time to think it over,” Kaedesas said. “I don’t expect an answer right away, and while you make up your mind, my people will stay in Auden to help you.”

Why would she...?

“Won’t your soldiers be upset about working with ‘traitors’?” I said.

“Yet another reason to accept my offer,” Kaedesa said with a grin. “If we’re to be wed, I can claim that the troops and supplies you ‘stole’ were sent with my blessing, to help my future husband with his endeavor.”

Good gods, why was she doing this? I didn’t need more logical reasons for marrying Kaedesa. If I thought about it, I knew doing that would be beneficial for my big family of soldiers, just as I knew it was probably the right step but... but Ren. Why did I also *know* that dropping this problem in her lap would be an issue? Gods, especially after her brother had died.

As a conjured image of Hadrion’s slack face came into view, it walloped me, right in the gut, and I couldn’t be here anymore. I needed to get away.

Tightly, I said, “I’ll carefully consider your proposal. For now, though, may we return to your camp? Your people might be getting anxious, and we haven’t exactly kept our promise to Oswin.”

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Kaedesa said with a laugh. “Even if we’re out of eyesight, he’s more than capable of protecting those he’s sworn to. You should bless Marcuset for making that acquisition for you.”

Even if it hadn’t been Marcuset who...?

No. Gods. I needed to go.

“I’m sure that’s true,” I said. “Still. If there’s nothing else we should address at the moment, may we return?”

With a defeated look in place, Kaedesa said, “Of course.”

I barely noticed our return to her tent. After collecting Oswin, I practically sprinted away from the queen’s camp, neglecting any polite farewells I should have made.

As we approached our camp, Oswin said, “Went that badly, did it?”

Startled, I glanced at him, wondering what he was talking about. I was *still* seeing Hadrion’s face in my mind’s eye, a distraction I couldn’t afford right now. I thought I’d addressed him and his... death last night, but it looked like that wasn’t the case. Instead, it had already caused me a potential issue, given how abruptly I’d left a potential enemy’s camp and...

What had Oswin been asking about?

Right. The marriage proposal. Fuck.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said.

I couldn't talk about it. If I even thought about doing so, all I saw was an imagining of Ren's face after hearing the news about her brother, and... and... gods, I just *couldn't*.

Once we were back with my people, I ignored Marcuset's call for me, nearly tripping in my haste to get into the Birthing Grounds again.

"How soon before I can return to Tiro?" I asked.

With Hadrion and Kaedesa and potential marriage and- and *everything*, I needed to see Ren. I needed her help if I was to get anywhere near a calm state again, and she *wasn't here*.

"Ah... I believe the only task that requires your specialty is finishing with the Kiraak," Oswin said. "The others can handle the rest."

Ignoring his concerned look, I said, "Great. I'll start where I left off yesterday, then."

So, once in the Birthing Grounds' pit, I did just that. I cleansed the Kiraak of Corruption well past when the sun had descended below the horizon. In my haste to be done with this, I abandoned the slow and safe process that I preferred, and because of that, screams disturbed the Birthing Grounds throughout the first half of the night.

When the last of the Kiraak had slumped into unconsciousness, I flung Corruption away from me with disgust, and as it left me, Daevetch burned through my every vein, every muscle, every inch of my skin. Good gods, it *hurt!*

I wobbled in place for a moment before my stomach lurched, protesting everything I'd done to stress myself over the last day, and when I collapsed, Oswin's worried face intruded into my rapidly narrowing field of view. His mouth began soundlessly moving before the world went black.

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