

# Chapter 38: Nothing But Derision

## Eledis

*Caution is an incredible asset in a monarch's arsenal, but when situations call for decisive action, it should be tossed to the wind, lest your people perish due to your cowardice.*

*-Sephicus, Philosopher King of Lyzencroft*

The news of Raimie's victory reached the city scant hours before his arrival. I'd never seen a crowd so enthralled by one man's return. The throng of them undulated to the beat of their cheers, screaming a chant to honor their returning champion.

Surprisingly, Raimie brushed through the celebrating masses, making a beeline for Tanwadur's house and subsequently, leaving the crowd disconcerted in his wake. They quickly realized, however, that they didn't have to stop their revelries because their guest of honor wasn't there, and so, music and laughter soon drifted from their midst once more.

When Raimie broke free from the crowd, I was sure that he meant to report to me, especially when considering the unexpected news he must be carrying, but the kid bypassed me with only a single, venomous glance. He marched toward the room where his father had been relaxing for the last hour before firmly shutting the door behind him.

That had been... unusual behavior from him, but I knew that soon enough, Raimie would find me, meaning to apologize for seemingly bad behavior. It was what he'd always done. Still, I paced the square outside for a while, but Raimie never emerged from Tanwadur's house, and when the sun reached its peak in the sky, something reached a breaking point in me.

I needed to know what had happened in the Birthing Grounds. I needed to know if- if...

No. Not yet.

I stormed away from Tanwadur's house before I gave in to the desire to break down its door. Over the years, I'd learned when to take a step back and breathe before my temper made a *truly* inconvenient mess, and now was one of those times.

Which wasn't to say that I didn't deserve answers from Raimie. Just a couple of weeks ago, a foreign army had landed at Nephiron, conquered the city, and moved on to the Birthing Grounds to do Alouin knew what to the people my family had allied with. Considering that Raimie had returned to Tiro alive, said army must not be hostile, but I still didn't know anything about their origin or leader.

Their leader... please, say it wasn't her.

But because of this, curiosity and dread nagged at me, and I was forced to ignore those aberrant emotions while wandering down Tiro's streets.

The hidden city's residents went about their business without a care in the world. In fact, many of them had joined in with the morning's revelry without a clue as to what had caused it.

I envied them. Their simple lives appealed to me in a way that other things couldn't.

Not that I'd trade the power and privilege I had for the simplicity they enjoyed. That wasn't even an option.

By the time the sun was touching the horizon, I found myself at the city's gate. Alouin, the temptation to activate its mechanisms, opening the doors, and dart outside was incredibly alluring. Tiro was a nice enough city, but it wasn't home, and I'd stayed here for too long.

I needed a sense of purpose, to feel as if my goal was drawing closer, and spending hour after hour researching for and tweaking the same battle plan multiple times in a row didn't relieve that need in the slightest.

Ahead of me, a commotion in the gate house spilled out into the street. Two cloth-swaddled individuals were arguing with one another, apparently unaware of how far their voices were carrying.

"I know the family is grieving, but they'll want to know about this," one of them snapped.

"I'm not sure about that," the other one said. "Maybe we could consult with that Raimie kid instead. Both Kylorian and Ren seem to trust him."

"Maybe they did before the bastard murdered Hadrion."

The first one to speak hissed with his hands clenched into fists.

"Besides," he continued after a moment, "this is *our* city. I won't let a foreigner make a decision this important for us."

Having reached the two, I asked, "What seems to be the problem?"

Bristling, both men jerked toward me.

“You see?” the first one said, gesturing toward me. “This is what I mean. Another Alouin damned foreigner, sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong.”

I raised my hands placatingly.

“I only want to help.”

Because if I did that, maybe I could gain some information that might help me in other areas of my life.

“Fat lot of good you ‘help’ has ever done us,” one of the men snapped. “We don’t need it.”

As much as those words hurt, I’d still love to argue that point, reminding these two of the many accomplishments that my people had achieved for the Audish citizenry in a few months, but I knew better than to argue with someone who’d already displayed fanatical tendencies.

“Look,” I said instead, “why don’t one of you retrieve your illustrious leaders while the other explains your problem to the stupid foreigner? I mean to stick around until I’ve figured out this mystery, and I’m sure you don’t want to explain why I’m hovering when Kylorian, Ren, or Alouin forbid, Tanwadur show up.”

The angrier of the two continued to fume in my general direction, but the other one laid a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s a good idea,” he said, “and I can have him gone before you’re back.”

“Fine!” the angry man shouted.

Turning on his heels, he stormed away, and I watched him go with a slight headshake. People like that were always so hard to reason with.

At my side, the other man said, “Please forgive him, Eledis. He’s actually ecstatic about the help your people have given us, but he’s also disappointed that your family has so quickly reached goals that we’ve been chasing for years.”

I raised an eyebrow at him.

“You know who I am?”

“It’s hard not to,” the other man said. “I’d say the whole of Auden will know who you are, once they see you.”

Hmm. That could be problematic. How much so, though?

“You don’t... hate me?” I said.

I’d find that exceptionally hard to believe, even if I’d love to hear it anyway.

“I never said I don’t! But I recognize that you’re trying to help us. What I feel about you and your family can be cast aside, given that,” the man said. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you what’s caused such a commotion for us today.”

Following his lead, I climbed the gatehouse’s staircase, and at the top, my guide gestured for me to peek outside. Evening’s rusty glow had transformed the forest beyond the stone doors into a fairytale setting, replete with mournful birds and rustling leaves. The sun had painted the sky with brilliant shades of purple, orange, and red, a final farewell before that celestial object died for the night.

On the other side of Tiro’s wall, three depleted horses were trembling with their flanks heaving. Two of their riders were shifting atop them, jerking their gazes across their surroundings, while the third had tilted her head back to stare at Tiro’s nearly invisible gate with her lip pinched between her teeth. It was like she was trying to open it with the force of her mind, even if she couldn’t know it was there.

Of course she was.

“They rode up to the gate not long ago and have been waiting there since,” my guide said.

With a dry mouth, I said, “You should let them inside. Don’t wait for your leaders. Let them in now.”

The other man pulled away from me.

“What?” he said. “Why?”

Pointing, I said, “That woman is the queen of Ada’ir. You may not have heard of that kingdom, but across the sea, Ada’ir is the second most militaristically powerful realm in existence. I’m not sure why their queen is in Auden, but I do know that she’s brought her army with her to this place. Now, you can wait to let her in if you want, but I guarantee that if you do, she’ll use her army to force her way into your hidden city as soon as it catches up.”

The other man held still as he processed what I’d said before wordlessly pulling a lever, which activated pulleys and winches, and as the door cracked open, I raced down the stairs, nearly falling in my haste. I burst out of the gatehouses as three riders nudged their exhausted horses into Tiro.

The first two, probably the queen’s bodyguards, scanned the city with their hands on their sword hilts, but Kaedesa’s eyes were gleaming. She took in everything—the gate disguised as a cliff face, the dusty streets, the lanterns hanging between buildings, and the canopy of lattice and ivy overhead—and laughed.

When she turned that glee on me, I released a quick prayer to Alouin, but no recognition flickered across her face. Instead, it darkened with distrust creeping into her joy, but the change was so small that only one who knew her well should notice it.

With a shallow bow, I said, “Your Majesty.”

Here, I had no need to give her the deference that I'd shown in Ada'ir. Not only was I no longer at her mercy but we could claim equivalent power and status in Auden.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"My name is Eledis," I say. "You recently held me and my grandson, Raimie, captive."

After receiving a short nod from one of her guards, Kaedesa said, "Oh, yes! You must forgive me. So many matters of state occupy my time that details like names and faces slip through the cracks sometimes. I hope you'll forgive me for the imprisonment part as well. I'm sure I had a legitimate reason for it at the time."

When she glanced at him, there was another nod from the guard, but I was too busy considering what she'd asked of me to pay that much attention.

I could forgive her. I wanted to forgive her, but having Queen Kaedesa in my debt could be useful. It was best to hedge my bets.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Has Raimie not told you about what we discussed?" Kaedesa said. "Given... he has been busy. I suppose he'll get to it in his own time. As for your answer from me, my business is with him, not you. But!"

As she dismounted her horse, an acute sense of déjà vu swept over me. Without her skirts to hide them, her riding breeches accentuated every curve of her legs and hips as she swung into the dirt, and distracted by her choice of clothing, I missed her unbuckling a scabbarded sword from her belt. When she tossed it to me, I reflexively caught it.

"Raimie wanted you to have that," Kaedesa said.

Turning to her saddlebags, she rummaged in their depths to retrieve a journal, and after making several marks in it, she returned it to its place.

Meanwhile, I unsheathed the sword, and on seeing it, all was right with the world once more. I spun the blade through the air, flicking its point as I did. Other swords might come close to perfection, but this... this was a flawless balance of power and weight. No other sword felt quite as comfortable as wielding Shadowsteal.

"Thank you for returning it," I said.

I bowed to the queen, and if I did so more deeply than I'd meant to, I didn't let myself notice it.

"I'm only doing as your grandson asked," Kaedesa said. "I offered it to him first, but he refused to take it."

*What?*

Snapping my head up to her, I said, “Why would you do that? It’s-”

With a sharp inhale, I bit my lip, hard.

“It’s his sword,” Kaedesa said with a shrug, “and honestly, I’m not comfortable with giving it to you. Something about you is...”

Running her eyes over me, she shuddered before looking away.

“Now, where is your grandson? I need to remind him of the offer that’s on the table.”

Offer? Did Kaedesa mean to help us? That would make for an interesting turn of events.

“I’d assume he’s with his father still, although he might have moved on to consoling Ren. I hear that she’s recently suffered a loss, and she’s a friend,” I said before pausing. “May I ask what offer you’ve proposed?”

With her lips thinning, Kaedesa handed her horse’s reins to a guard while the other one joined her on the ground.

“A marriage alliance,” she said. “I thought we could combine...”

Her mouth kept moving, but I couldn’t hear what she was saying. I’d gone cold.

Without thinking, I crossed the distance to Kaedesa and grabbed her shoulders, digging my fingernails into them.

“You can’t!” I growled. “I tolerated the marriage to the king of Ada’ir, but this is... it’s *wrong*.”

Someone dragged me away from her, and I let them, afraid of what I might do if I was left free. I was shoved to my knees with my arms painfully bent against my back.

Kaedesa had wrinkled her nose with something desperately fighting to break free, and for the briefest of moments, clarity resolved on her, leaving two pits of icy green piercing into my essence.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do with my life, Eledis. You lost that right a long time ago,” she said. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that you’ve forgotten what I said the last time we spoke, so let me remind you. If you ever loved me, stay out of my business and my life. I can’t have you near me. Do you understand?”

“But...” I breathed. “I-”

“Do you understand?” she interrupted.

I could swear that my chest was about to collapse, so much pressure was sitting on it, but even still, I coughed an affirmative. At that, a veil of confusion lowered, leaving Kaedesa tilting her head at me.

“You said Raimie’s most likely with his father,” she said. “Where can I find that man?”

“Tanwadur’s home,” I wearily said. “In the center of Tiro.”

“Thank you,” Kaedesa said.

But then, she was skipping down a street, swiveling her head to take in the sights, and I watched her go with nausea coiling in my stomach.

A lone, abandoned guard shuffled to a stop beside me.

“It’s been a long ride,” he said. “I need to find a place where I can stable our horses, but after I have, might I join you for a drink? I’m sure you know the finest taverns in this city.”

“What makes you think I want a drink?” I dully asked.

Chuckling, the guard said, “Every person I know of would need to get plastered after a lecture like that, especially when it comes from *her*. So. Will you wait for me?”

I nodded, but after the guard had disappeared, I considered leaving here regardless, returning to my makeshift office. Plenty of problems slipped through the cracks of Raimie’s daily efforts, eventually crossing my desk. Perhaps one of them could pull me free of this dazed state.

But my feet wouldn’t move as I commanded, and when the guard returned, I found that the other man had been right. I did need a drink.

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