

Chapter 46: An Angry Queen

Raimie

The fight didn't last long. I fended off two questing stabs at my innards, noting with surprise that the Zrelnach warrior was standing on the sidelines, before a host of additional enemies flooded into the waystation.

As soon as I could, I dropped Silverblade, raising my hands above my head, but that didn't stop the man I'd been fighting from shoving me into a wall. While I panicked over whether I'd ever be able to breathe again, another man checked on his unconscious companion before spinning on the Zrelnach woman.

"What the hell?" he roared. "Some elite warrior you are. You just stood there while we were fighting!"

The Zrelnach warrior blinked at him for a moment, as if making sure he was finished, before crossing her arms.

"Don't assume I'm one of you. I'm not. I am a citizen of Allanovian, a city whose independence your queen has recognized," she said, "and my only orders were to identify these two for you. Nothing more, nothing less."

"You bitch," the man growled.

With his hands raised, he took a step toward her, and when her stance shifted, I forgot how little air my lungs had regained.

"I wouldn't attack her if I were you," I wheezed. "She could kill you without breaking a sweat, and none of us want that."

The man who was pinning me slammed my face into the wall, and burning heat in my already injured nose formed tears in my eyes.

"Shut up," the man growled.

"No, he's right. You shouldn't punish him for speaking the truth."

I looked for the woman who'd joined the conversation, but all my watering eyes would allow me was a glimpse of a chestnut mass on top of a person-shaped blob.

“Your Majesty,” several people murmured.

Your Majesty?

“Hmm. They’re not what I expected,” the newcomer said. “I’m glad I was nearby when you found them. Jeme, love, can you take our prisoners into another room? Search them for weapons. I must prepare myself for an interrogation.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the Zrelnach warrior said.

“The rest of you can wait outside.”

The blob moved past me, and soon after, the pressure on me relented. Wincing, I gingerly touched my nose while scrubbing my eyes.

“I think it’s broken,” I said to myself.

“It definitely is.”

Jerking my head up, I kept my face still at the sight of the Zrelnach warrior holding my grandfather by the elbow. Behind her, uniformed people were filing out of the waystation with its owner watching them go.

Poor man. Such unneeded chaos we’d brought him.

“Will you make me drag you along like Eledis here, or can I lead the way without that hassle?” Jeme asked.

I wouldn’t leave my grandfather here, and she knew it, but still, I nodded to show my agreement. She took us to a guest room, leaning against its door once we were inside.

“Disarm,” she said. “Leave your weapons on the bed.”

Even as I started doing as she asked, I lifted an eyebrow.

“Silverblade?” I asked. “I assume it’s still where I dropped it.”

Nodding, Jeme said, “I’ll get it. Make sure it’s left in good hands.”

“Thanks.”

What else was I supposed to say? I had a pretty good idea about what was happening here—context clues were everything—but I couldn’t be sure, and I desperately wanted to be wrong.

Because of that, I couldn’t know how deeply Jeme’s betrayal ran or if she’d even betrayed my family in the first place. I’d love to straight up ask her, but I didn’t want to anger a woman who could easily end me-

“Are you with the faction of Zrelnach plotting against us?” Eledis said.

Oh, Alouin, he’d straight up asked. Pausing, I glanced at Jeme, unsure what I’d see.

Indifference, apparently.

“I am, first and foremost, loyal to Allanovian,” she said. “If our Council has designs against you, then I have them as well.”

“Ha! A likely story,” Eledis said. “One or two people on your precious Council might want us dead, but they could never get the majority needed to authorize something like this. You’re working on your own, meaning-”

“Eledis! Stop,” I hissed. “Loyalty isn’t something to laugh at, even when it’s used against you. You can’t pick and choose when to value it, not if you expect people to stay loyal to you as well. Now, would you please finish? We should get this over with.”

Glaring at me, Eledis withdrew a final set of knives as slowly as possible before spreading his arms wide.

“Acceptable? Or do you need to pat me down?” he asked.

As if a Zrelnach wouldn’t notice if we’d kept a weapon on us. Indeed, Jeme left without a word, and grumbling under his breath, Eledis followed her to the dining room.

Before I could join him inside, Jeme stopped me, softly gripping my arm. Ignoring the unpleasant prickles running from that point of contact, I frowned on seeing her chewing a lip. She was conflicted about something?

“Thank you for stopping that man before I had to hurt him,” Jeme said, “and...”

While her throat worked, I became painfully aware of how hard she was fighting to hold my gaze.

“I wanted you to know that if there was ever a cause or person that could change my loyalty, it would have been fighting for Auden’s freedom and for you,” she said. “I would have happily sworn myself to you, Raimie, if you’d asked.”

Releasing me, Jeme retreated a step so she could bow to me—which was horribly disconcerting—before hurrying away, and for a moment, I was left staring after her. That had been...

Shuddering, I put Jeme and the idea of people becoming my vassals far from mind, focusing on my very real danger instead.

Even unwatched as I was right now, I didn’t try to escape. By now, hostiles would be guarding the waystation’s exits, and I seriously doubted that I could slip past them. So, I did the only thing I could: stride confidently into the dining room.

I stopped short on seeing the room's occupants, though. Eledis, already seated by the fire, was no cause for concern, and the two men flanking the chair opposite him weren't terribly surprising but the woman in that chair...

Slouching, she had her feet propped on the table with her hands folded on her stomach. She was wearing a tunic, jerkin, and breeches, all tight and formfitting, all the apparel of a peasant or merchant, but I knew that face.

Those sharp, green eyes watching me; those delicate features, littered with freckles; those chestnut curls, barely draping over her shoulders. This was Queen Kaedesa of Ada'ir, and her presence here meant that Eledis and I were thoroughly fucked.

Twisting her lips into a crooked smile, Kaedesa beckoned me forward, and I woodenly marched to her, dropping into the only chair left available. For a while, the queen merely watched us, so still that I could swear she'd turned to stone.

The entire time, I fought to keep from fidgeting, hoping to be as stoic as Eledis. When Kaedesa lowered her feet, removing her gaze from us, it came as a relief to me until the slap of them to the floor had me jumping, and for some reason, that made her chuckle. Resting her elbows on the table, she folded her hands in front of her face.

"Gentlemen," she said, "I have questions."

After a pause, Eledis said, "Anything you might want to know, we're more than happy to explain, Your Majesty, but I'm not sure how interesting you'll find it. My grandson and I live simple lives."

Kaedesa smiled sweetly at him, but something about it had me backing as far as I could into my chair.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I'd love to learn why one family has raised and marched an army across the breadth of my kingdom."

Oh... shit. I knew what Kaedesa was thinking. When the last rebellion had thrown Ada'ir into chaos, I'd been old enough to remember it in vivid detail.

When it had been over, my family had received a summons to Fissid, and along with the townspeople, we'd watched the rebellion's ringleaders paraded down the road behind the royal guard's horses. I remembered the putrid scent of the corpses that had trailed some of them.

Those memories had me opening my mouth, probably to say something stupid, but Eledis preempted me.

"We're not staging a rebellion, Your Majesty. My family is leading an expedition to Auden," he said, "but I know how unbelievable that claim will sound, so let's cut to the chase. I'm sure both of us would rather spend as little time here as possible. So, what will it take to prove our intentions, if anything can?"

Frowning, Kaedesa said, "Why would you make that deadly trip? There's nothing of value in Auden anymore unless..."

Her face went carefully blank.

"You want me to believe that you mean to fight Doldimar?" she asked with her voice dead.

"That is our plan, yes," Eledis said.

I couldn't retreat any further into my chair, but hell, how I wanted to. The way Kaedesa was looking at Eledis and the glance that her guards had shared...

The Queen of Ada'ir burst into laughter, folding onto the table after a moment.

"That's... the... most... *ridiculous* lie anyone's ever told me," she gasped.

After a moment more of helpless chuckling, Kaedesa straightened, wiping her eyes, and when she lowered her hands, I caught my first glimpse of the regal bearing that I'd expected from a royal.

Then, her eyes landed on me. Perhaps they softened when they did, but by that point, I'd ducked my head, letting the squirming that I'd restrained manifest. Why was she looking at *me*?

"I suppose I can give you the benefit of the doubt," Kaedesa said.

With my head jerking up, I was caught in a gaze that was familiar...

Why was meeting her eyes so comforting to me, and why now?

"You will come with me to Daira," Kaedesa pronounced. "While on the way, I will ponder your question, Eledis. I'll have an answer for you by the time we arrive."

Standing, she gestured to her guards.

"Have them brought to my sloop," she said. "I'll join you after I've met with the helpful, little bird who told me about this disturbance in my kingdom."

I could swear her eyes twinkled as she'd said that last bit, but she was gone too quickly for me to verify that.

The trip to the harbor passed in a blur. I caught bits and pieces of what Eledis was muttering to himself, things like 'set back the timeline' and 'need to speak with Marcuset', but for the most part, I ignored him.

When I returned to myself, I was surrounded by iron bars while a slight sway in the floor rocked me. A brig, I presumed.

Eledis was huddled in a corner, gently banging his head on a wall.

“Why, ‘saya, why, ‘saya?” he was saying on repeat.

Seeing this, I rubbed my face, growling into my hands. We were on our way to Ada’ir’s capital on the ship of its queen. Not only that but its queen was known for her vicious nature toward traitors, which she suspected us of being. Oh, and my only ally was currently useless.

Hell. For a moment, I wanted to join Eledis in banging my head on something because...

Gods. *I* might have to save us this time.

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