

Chapter 82: Sudden Hostility

Raimie

“So?” Ren’s father said. “Who are you, and what do you want from me?”

I waited for a heartbeat before answering, certain that Ren would override me again, but when she didn’t, I smiled at the stranger.

“I’m Raimie, and my companion’s called Oswin,” I said. “My business is with Tiro’s leader. Is that you?”

Crossing his arms, the stout man said, “Leader’s such a strong word. I like to think of myself as Tiro’s father... or perhaps its guiding influence. You can call me Tanwadur.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” I said, dipping into a bow.

Relaxing, Tanwadur waved at me.

“No need for that, young one,” he said. “Just tell me why you’re here.”

Oh... shit. Gods damnit, why hadn’t I considered this conversation while on the way here? Instead, I’d stayed shocked by the revelation of Oswin as a spy, which had been a mistake.

How much could I reveal about myself or my purpose in this initial meeting with Tiro’s... guiding influence?

But Tanwadur was tapping a finger on his thigh. I’d have to start talking and hope that something wise came out of my mouth. For once.

“Primarily, I’m here to introduce myself. Considering who we both are, we’ll likely work together soon,” I said. “In addition, I hoped to learn how my people might help yours, but with that, I may have already found a way. You’re having trouble with food, yes? Since many of our supplies went down with our ship, I’m not sure how much my people can spare, but if we have anything extra, it’s yours, provided you want it.”

Beside me, Oswin tensed with his hands drifting to his weapons, and I wondered what had made him so nervous until Tanwadur spoke.

“Your ship?” he asked, having gone still.

Well. That had been a slip of the tongue. My mention of a boat had revealed that me and mine weren't native to Auden, and given how rarely merchant vessels sailed here, it had also probably come off as something strange or potentially dangerous.

Still, I tried to play it off.

"Indeed. We were attacked... but you shouldn't care about that," I said. "Like I said, we have supplies to share, which you need."

After a moment of staring, Tanwadur said, "The two of you aren't from Auden."

So, my diversion hadn't worked. As if chagrined, I rubbed the back of my neck.

"Technically? No," I said. "However, as far as I know, we're all of Audish descent. Why does it matter? Do you care where a form of help might come from?"

Apparently, he did. Ren leaned forward to say something, perhaps trying to help, but Tanwadur lifted a finger toward her.

"You keep saying 'we' and 'us'," he said. "May I ask who these others are? I'd like to know what sort of people have landed on our shores."

Sure... that was *definitely* the only reason he was asking.

Where was the harm in answering him, though?

"'Us' is my family and a bunch of crazy soldiers who followed us here," I said.

Softly hissing, Oswin glanced away, which told me I'd made another mistake. What had it been?

Completely blank now, Tanwadur asked, "How many soldiers?"

I was much less comfortable with sharing this information, but since I'd already dug myself into this hole, I might as well dig deeper. I didn't, however, know the specifics of what Tanwadur had requested, so I turned to the spy in our midst.

"Oswin?"

Stiffening, Oswin said, "Yes, sir?"

"Answer the man's question," I said. "I know you'll have memorized those numbers."

Oswin clicked his tongue, but he did as I'd asked.

"One hundred and thirty-two civilians and would-be soldiers joined us on the way," he said through gritted teeth. "We also have five hundred and fifty-four Zrelnach, who if you didn't know, are elite Esela fighters-"

"I'm familiar with the Zrelnach," Tanwadur said. "We had them here before Doldimar wiped them out."

Oswin paused, glancing at me. Apparently, that was news to him as well. Shaking himself, he continued.

"And then, there's the rest of us: sailors, soldiers, and spies."

Crossing his arms, Tanwadur grumbled, "How many?"

With a sigh, Oswin closed his eyes.

"Four thousand, five hundred and seventy-six."

At that, my eyebrows soared into my hairline as high as Tanwadur's had. Gods... so many people had come with me. What would I do when I eventually got them killed?

"Goodness, young one. You have a veritable army at your beck and call," Tanwadur said. "Why is that?"

Frowning, I cocked my head at him. For a meeting between strangers, that question bordered on invasive. Given the caution that was welling from Nylion, I gathered it could be dangerous too, something that was only emphasized by the headshake that Ren gave me from behind her father's back.

She was helping me? Why?

Unfortunately, I couldn't avoid answering this question, and if that wasn't bad enough, I'd always been horrible at lying. I'd have to choose my words carefully.

"Honestly, good sir, I don't know why," I said. "I suspect they've followed me because they believe I can accomplish an impossible goal. I don't know if I can realize that dream, and yet—"

Here, I slid my gaze to Oswin.

"—I intend to try."

With a slight smile, the spy inclined his head to me, which warmed my heart.

When I'd only known him for a couple of months. Why?

"What do these people want from you?" Tanwadur asked.

Tensing, I jerked my head toward him, wiping incredulity off my face. If that last question had bordered on invasive, this one landed squarely in that territory. I'd offered to help him, and he seemed intent on prying into my life.

Clicking his tongue, Oswin stepped between me and Tanwadur, facing me.

“Your Majesty, he knows. He’s been fishing for it throughout this conversation, enough to become insulting,” he said. “Take my advice, and give him what he wants so we can return to camp. He has no intention of treating with you.”

What was he doing?

I must have stared at him for too long because he stepped aside—

“Oswin, no!”

—before gesturing toward me.

“May I present His Majesty, King Raimie, finder of Shadowsteal, destined destroyer of Doldimar, and rightful claimant to the Audish throne.”

Blinking at the back of Oswin’s head, I fought to keep my suddenly scattered thoughts in order, helped in part by Nylion’s emanated calm. I’d put this issue off for so long—too long—and now, Oswin had shoved it to the forefront. He’d proclaimed me as ruler to the first leader we’d met in this land, and so now, I must answer a personal question.

Did I refute Oswin’s claim, or did I make it my own?

As my fingers curled into my palms, I wasn’t sure what I’d say. I only knew that I had to fill this silence. So, I hissed my decision into it.

“I am *not* a damn king.”

When Oswin glanced at me, he radiated such pity and regret that it made me flinch.

“You’re the only one who believes that anymore, sir,” he said.

Sucking in a breath, I let my mouth fall open, wanting to deny what he’d said, but before I could do that, two words cracked through the house’s interior.

“Get out.”

From his face to the bit of ankle peeking out from beneath his trousers’ legs, Tanwadur had turned stark red.

“I knew you looked familiar, too similar to *him*, and that means you need to GET OUT!” he shouted, taking a step forward. “Get out of this house, out of this square, out of this city!”

With Oswin having pushed between me and Tanwadur, I laid a hand on his shoulder, moving him aside. All the while, I prayed that I’d been wrong about how the Audish people would respond to who I was.

"I've upset you," I said. "Please, we can't be hostile toward one another. Tell me how to fix my mistake, and I'll remedy it as best I can."

"You can't fix who you are!" Tanwadur shouted.

I'd been right. Gods *damnit*.

With fire building inside, both my own and one from Nylion, I took a deep breath, stopping it from raging through me.

"You blame me for the crimes of my long-dead ancestor. So be it. If it makes your life easier, continue to hate me," I said, "but don't let my identity stop you from accepting the help that my people can give-"

Shoving past Oswin, Tanwadur slammed a finger into my chest, and something strange started burgeoning from Nylion. What-?

"We don't need your help, Raimie from the line of kings," Tanwadur said, poking me again.

And this aggression let something unpleasant slip another step free.

"You and your cursed family should have withered to nothing on the other side of the sea!"

As Tanwadur jabbed his finger into my chest again, rocking me, something *burst*, and I started moving, but I was hardly paying attention to that. All of my focus went to Nylion and what he was projecting.

Nyl, what-?

Suddenly, Ren was in front of me, resting her hand on Tanwadur's chest while keeping a firm hold on my wrist.

"Enough! You two need to *calm down* so Oswin and I aren't left with cleaning up your corpses," she hissed. "Dury! You should leave. Go help mom with the refugees."

"No."

Tanwadur brushed Ren's hand off of him.

"I want this... boy out of Tiro."

"And I'll make sure that happens. Tomorrow morning," Ren said. "*Don't say a word*. I'm not done. He and his friend are not from here. If we make them return to camp through a forest crawling with Kiraak at night and alone, they will die. Without question. What do you think his army of five thousand will do if they learn that he died because we refused him refuge for one night? No. He will sleep here, and when I can, I'll take him to his people in the morning."

Hissing, Tanwadur closed his eyes.

“Fine,” he said, “but you’re in charge of finding them a place to stay.”

He stormed out of the house, and I let tension leak from me. This was, of course, when Ren shoved me, sending me stumbling away.

Immediately, I found Oswin, waving for him to lower his weapons, but I also cocked my head on seeing Dim, flickering out of existence beside him. Why had the splinter come to the physical plane now when they’d been so clearly avoiding me earlier?

“And you!” Ren snarled. “I bring you to my home in good faith, trusting you’ll behave yourself, and you nearly attack my father because he insulted you?”

I struggled to swallow inexplicable fear, fluttering at the back of my mouth.

“I don’t know what came over me,” I started.

“Then, maybe you should learn to control yourself!”

Wincing, I nodded. She was right. Even if Nylion had started a physical confrontation, I had to accept the blame for it. In many ways, he was me. What he did was also my responsibility.

“I’m sorry-”

“That’s not enough! Not for this mistake.”

With a frown, I said, “I’m confused. Why do you care so much about this, out of everything I’ve done to irritate you? I get that he’s your father, but... come on, Ren. I was offering him help, and in response, he practically spat in my face.”

Spinning away from me, Ren hugged herself, and while she thought, I caught Oswin’s eye, wondering if he knew what was running through this frustrating woman’s head. He just lifted a hand to hide his smile.

“He saved me,” Ren said. “After Rhy left me so many years ago, I thought I was dead. During a Harvest, Kiraak don’t bother to spare children. They do unspeakable things to them.

“So, imagine my surprise when the first Kiraak to find me died on someone else’s blade. Tanwadur’s resistance fighters had come to evacuate my hometown, but they’d arrived too late, for the village at least. They took me with them to this city.

“For weeks, I waited for my brother. He never found me, so Dury gave me the next best thing: a new family. I had parents again. I even had an older brother, a boy they’d adopted years before, to fill the hole that Rhylix had left behind.

“Dury saved me in every way. Forgive me if the fact that you almost attacked him angers me.”

Stalking to the door, Ren paused before opening it, finding Oswin.

“You should stay here,” she said. “I’ll return with food and blankets, but if I were you, I wouldn’t leave this house.”

She slammed the door behind her, and I couldn’t take my eyes off of it, rubbing my chest. Why did it feel like I’d been punched there, so hard that it had bruised my heart?

“Well, that was interesting.”

Wandering to the abandoned chair, Oswin threw himself into it.

“Was that your first fight with a woman, sir?” he asked.

Dumbly, I nodded. Gods, why couldn’t I move?

Humming, Oswin said, “Makes sense, given how you were acting. In the future, you’ll learn to avoid those because they only end one way.”

With effort, I faced the spy.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“The woman wins, of course,” Oswin said with a smirk. “Now, are we doing as we were told, sir?”

“No, we’re not. Of course we’re not,” I mumbled.

I wasn’t sure what else we could do here, though. Considering Tanwadur was dead set on opposing us, we couldn’t ally with Tiro.

Could we?

“Why are you sitting there?” I said, keeping my lips flat. “You were part of a Hand, Oswin. You should know what I want.”

Lifting an eyebrow, Oswin said, “As much useful information as I can gather?”

When I nodded, he performed an exaggerated salute before climbing out of the chair.

“And you, sir?” he asked.

I thought back on everything that had happened since arriving in Tiro, wondering what, if anything, I could do to help.

With a slow smile spreading across my face, I said, “I’ll think of something, I’m sure.”