

# Chapter 87: Accept Your Role, Stubborn One

## Raimie

We found my father in front of a tent, one that was slightly larger than the common soldier's. He was lying in the grass with sunshine blazing down on him, a stack of papers held in front of his nose, and his tunic off. At the sight of the metal dots and wires climbing over the outline of his spine, I winced, and perhaps that alerted him to our presences because he lowered his papers before scrambling to his feet.

"Raimie! When did you get back?" he asked, reaching for his tunic.

"Not long ago. Oswin mentioned that I should check on you before getting some sleep," I said. "What were you doing?"

"Reviewing Auden's history," my father said while pulling on his clothes. "Oh and catching some sun. Nothing interesting."

I narrowed my eyes at him. Bullshit. Since when had he enjoyed lying out in the sun?

"You mentioned needing sleep," he continued. "Is that urgent, or can I borrow you for a moment first?"

Must I attend to him? Really? Any second now, I'd collapse, having lost consciousness. I was a little concerned about whether I could get to my own bedroll before that happened, but sure, I could indulge my father.

When I nodded, he ducked into his tent, sitting on its cot, and gestured for me to join him. A stack of clothes covered the cot's end, and while I pulled that into my lap, I hummed, watching Oswin make himself comfortable nearby.

"Hey, you don't have to stick around," I said. "Thanks for helping me find my father and the other thing, but don't you have better things to do?"

When the spy exchanged a glance with my father, I started humming louder. I *didn't like it* when I was missing something obvious.

“Oswin’s just doing his job,” my father said. “He wouldn’t be a good bodyguard if he didn’t keep an eye on you.”

“A what?” I snapped with my eye twitching.

They thought I needed a bodyguard? Why?

Crossing his arms, Oswin scanned our surroundings.

“I told you he wouldn’t know what last night meant, Aramar,” he said. “Subtlety doesn’t cut it with him.”

No. No, no, no.

“I don’t want someone constantly watching me,” I said. “What makes you think I’d need something like that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe how many times you’ve almost died in the last few months?” Oswin said.

“But I *didn’t*!”

My father took hold of my shoulders, turning me to him.

“Maybe you don’t need someone to watch your back. Maybe you do,” he said. “I’m asking you to let Oswin do this because I trust him and it’ll ease my mind. Please?”

Gods. damn. it.

“Fine,” I hissed, jerking free of my father.

I did my best to ignore the awkward silence that followed, picking at the pile of clothes I was holding. After a moment, I unfolded the top piece, holding it in front of me.

“I don’t understand why everyone’s still wearing these,” I said. “Queen Kaedesa won’t be happy to learn so many deserters have the uniform of Ada’ir’s army. She’ll come after us for it.”

“Oh, she won’t care about that,” my father said. “She might for the soldiers she lost but what they wear? Not so much.”

“And that’s not Ada’ir’s uniform, sir, although I can see how you might mistake the two,” Oswin said. “Three hundred years ago, Ada’ir’s monarchy stole its styling from the hemorrhaging corpse of Auden’s standing army. They’re very similar, as you can see.”

Facing me, he gestured toward his body, and he was right. There were many similarities between his outfit and what I was holding.

Both sets of uniforms claimed loose pants and matching boots as well as identical weapons belts, although a jacket hid the one hanging from Oswin’s hips. It closed at the body’s midline with a line

of buttons running to a clasp at the jacket's collar. Embroidered symbols on this collar designated each soldier's rank—a horizontal pair of bars in Oswin's case—with their silver color accenting the uniform's navy-blue fabric.

"You're not just a captain of a boat, I see," I said. "Captain Oswin of the army as well, huh?"

Shrugging, Oswin said, "It's a common enough rank, one that's often overlooked, and that makes it perfect for me."

With a nod, I returned my attention to the uniforms I was holding.

"That begs the question of who these are for, though," I said.

Said uniforms boasted several differences from what Oswin was wearing. For one thing, the jacket's sleeves cut off halfway down the upper arm, allowing the wearer greater maneuverability. Its shoulder caps were hard enough to stop a sword's glancing blow, and its buttons were not only positioned off-center but they were flush with the fabric they kept closed. It was shorter than Ada'ir's jackets, allowing easy access to the uniform's weapons belt, and several loops and pockets on the trousers provided storage for knives, gunpowder, and other such items.

When it came to combat, this uniform was much more practical, although some things remained the same, such as the collar.

What I was inspecting, however, had no insignia there, which I found strange. Even an army's recruits had an emblem to designate their rank. Maybe these uniform had yet to be finished, leaving their embroidery incomplete.

"Those are for you," my father said. "Some of the soldiers have noticed how deplorable your wardrobe has become. They asked me if they could fix it."

"One of our ships had a crate of Ada'ir's uniforms in its hold," Oswin continued for him. "On the journey here, we've been modifying them when we found the time, intending to properly outfit your people, but those two are for you. As for the lack of insignia—"

"You're not part of the military's structure," my father interrupted.

"And yet, you are."

Crossing his arms, Oswin glared at my father, and I shivered at the chill in the air. When had those two found the time to form a rift over such a silly subject?

"We didn't know what insignia to give you," Oswin continued, although he held my father's gaze. "At first, we thought a gold star, like what Commander Marcuset claims, would be best, but technically, you're even higher rank than him."

Good gods, why did people keep placing such importance on me? Despite all the evidence to the contrary, I still said I was nothing special.

As I raised my eyes to the heavens, seeking patience, Oswin smiled.

“As we got to know you, however, we figured out the best insignia for you,” he said. “None. With nothing on your collar, you’ll have a degree of anonymity without sacrificing the need for the average soldier to know who’s in charge, and you are in charge here, sir, whether you like it or not.”

With stinging eyes, I folded the uniforms into my lap, focusing on how much care and attention had gone into them instead of what Oswin had said.

“They’re perfect. Thank you,” I said. “I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve this, but I’m grateful for it. After I’ve gotten some sleep, we can see how they fit, and speaking of sleep, did you need anything else, dad, or may I go?”

Ruffling my hair, my father said, “There’s nothing else. Get some rest-”

*“Aramar.”*

Stepping into the tent, Oswin towered over me and my father, although his heated gaze seemed reserved for the older man.

“Stop sparing him. In the long run, it’ll do more harm than good,” he said. “Please. Burst the bubble he’s been living in.”

With my father having shrunk on himself, I glanced between him and Oswin.

“What’s he talking about?” I asked.

Screwing his face up, my father took a deep breath before slowly letting it out. When he opened his eyes again, all emotion had bled from him.

“Raimie. Much as we might wish otherwise, you found Shadowsteal,” he said. “Do you know what’s expected of you because of that?”

Several things I’d much rather never think about?

“Defeat an all-powerful overlord,” I said. “Free this land.”

“Yes, that’s true,” my father said with a nod. “And after you’ve done these things, what will happen to Auden? How will it recover?”

Cocking my head, I said, “I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it, not with current concerns taking my full attention.”

“That’s understandable. I want you to think about it now, though.”

So, I did, and after only a heartbeat, I knew where my father was going with this.

Nervously laughing, I said, "I'd rather not."

With a click of his tongue, Oswin abruptly left the tent, all while I burned the back of his skull with my gaze. He'd started this. The least he could do was stick around until it was over.

"With their overlord dead, the Audish people will need someone to lead them," my father said, "and they'll turn toward the one who saved them for that."

"Go- Alouin. So, you've joined the people trying to make me a king?" I said. "I already made my decision about this, dad. I won't do it."

"What makes you think you have a choice?"

Rolling my eyes, I pulled one leg onto the cot so I could face my father.

"Everyone has a choice in what they do, but sure. Let's assume I don't," I said. "Tell me. What qualifications do I have to rule a kingdom? I'm an eighteen-year-old kid, barely figuring out my own life. How am I supposed to guide a nation's worth of people too?"

"My only source of legitimacy comes from Shadowsteal, *which I've lost* in case you've forgotten. Even the foretellings that might, *might*, be about me say nothing about ruling Auden. Destroying evil? Suffering some unknown, awful fate? Sure. Leading? Not a word.

"Even if they did, however, and our family retook a throne that we lost generations ago, I wouldn't be the one to sit on it, not by every established rule of succession. That honor would go to Eledis-

*"Shut your mouth, Raimie."*

Obligingly, my teeth clicked together while I swayed away from my father. I'd never heard him so angry before, not even when long ago, I'd mentioned the emptiness that only Nylion could fill.

"In all of the crap you've spewed, you were right about one thing," he growled. "You are acting like a child."

Gods, his face was red. The sight of it made my fingers itch to hold steel, to protect, while cautious wariness rose from Nylion, but I couldn't move. I could only listen.

"Tell me, son. In your lessons with Ferin, may she rest in peace," my father said, flinching at the former Zrelnach commander's name, "did she get around to explaining what a monarch's role is?"

Held fast by fear, one I didn't want to explore, I flicked through my mental index, desperate to find an answer for my father.

"Ternidian said that a monarch was the head of a state, which doesn't explain much...

"Oh! But in his autobiography, page 178, King Sephicus of ancient Lyzencroft said that '-a monarch represents and protects their subjects, whether within the kingdom or abroad. They negotiate with

other nations on behalf of their people for resources that are scarce within the kingdom's borders, and if negotiations break down, they lead the army in defense of their people. They maintain law and order within the kingdom so that their subjects have every chance to advance in station...' and then, there's something about establishing laws in the first place as well as building infrastructure."

That was everything on the subject, right?

"Was that a word-for-word recitation of Sephicus' dry ramblings? Hell. Sometimes, I forget..."

Jerking my head up, I was... relieved, actually, to see that Oswin had rejoined us. I didn't know how he'd snuck up on me, but considering I no longer felt so unstable—we'd put it—I didn't care.

"That's an excellent explanation, but it's missing one crucial element," my father said. "Whoever accepts the burden of the throne must understand that it's a job, not a right or a privilege. Keeping a kingdom of diverse people safe and happy is rigorous work, and anyone who's eager to step into such a position should be viewed with suspicion."

As Oswin nodded, I refocused on my father. Where was he going with this?

"So, now that we know a monarch's role, we get to a supremely important question. What makes a monarch, or in your case, a king, a king? I'd argue that it involves three things.

"First: a claim to the throne. Trust me, Raimie. You absolutely have that. After your mother died, Eledis and I made a terrible mistake when we rejected our family's history. True, this granted you a happy childhood, a blessing in every way, but at the same time, you weren't prepared to find Shadowsteal. If you'd been trained for that like I was, things might have been different."

He looked away, and again, I was struck by how little I knew about my own father. Had finding Shadowsteal been his dream, and if so, had I taken that away from him? Or had he been relieved that the sword's foretellings weren't about him?

Clearing his throat, my father continued, "Second: consent of the people. Oswin?"

"The exiled Audish nation supports Raimie as sovereign, sir," the spy said.

But the declaration just made me wince. It was well and good, of course. We'd have a problem if the people who'd joined us didn't support me, but what of the actual Audish people, the ones who'd been hostile to me since we'd arrived?

As if aware of what I was thinking, my father said, "Perhaps those who live under Doldimar's boot will disagree with us. Perhaps not. We can't ask for their opinion right now. The people we can ask, however, have given you consent to rule them, and that has to count for something.

"Third and last: the power to keep the throne. That's what we're here to test. Can we take Auden from Doldimar?"

“In all honesty, though, does a king need a throne to be a king? What about a crown? According to Sephicus, a king represents and protects his subjects, and you have subjects, Raimie, whether they were pushed on you or not. They may form a small kingdom, but still, they’re yours.

“Oswin, what has my son done since first accepting Commander Marcuset’s oath of fealty?”

“Represented and protected us to the best of his ability, sir.”

At Oswin’s ‘us’, my father paused, flicking his eyes to the spy, before forging onward.

“That’s right,” he said. “If we accept Sephicus’ definition of a monarch, then you already are one, Raimie.

“As for lines of succession, I promise you that we don’t want Eledis in charge of anyone’s life. Nothing good drives that man. If you value my opinion at all, you’ll never suggest that he becomes king again.”

After he fell silent, I wondered if he was done, half hoping he wasn’t.

For my whole life, I’d valued logic. There was something to be said for following one’s heart, but to me, logic should almost always reign supreme.

Right now, I hated it with every fiber of my being.

Turning away from my father, I let my foot fall off of the cot, leaning on my knees to hide my face.

“All right. I concede,” I said into my hands. “I’m a go- Alouin damned monarch of an Alouin damned kingdom.”

Someone brushed my back, removing his hand when I bristled.

“I’m sorry.”

Laughing, I shook my head, flinging my hands to either side.

“There’s no changing it, so why be sorry?” I said. “May I go to bed *now*, though? I’m assuming you’re done with me, yes?”

Nodding, my father patted my leg, and I stood.

“Once I wake up, we should talk about what happened last night,” I said. “Lots to discuss there.”

Then, I stepped into the sunlight, wandering toward a recently abandoned campsite.

How did my life keep changing so drastically? A king? Me?

Making a face, I banged on my head, hoping it would knock the idea loose from me, until Oswin snatched my wrist. When I opened my mouth to snap at him, he just pointed at where a knife,

strapped to my forearm, had started slipping free, so instead of getting in his face, I wrenched my limb away.

While securing the blade, I said, "You're following me back. Does that mean you'll be watching me when I sleep now?"

"And when you're in the privy. And if you're ever intimate with a woman. Or a man. I don't know your preferences," Oswin said. "That's what a bodyguard does, sir. Are you regretting your vow to be my friend yet?"

For a few steps, I glared at him, trusting other people to get out of my way.

"No," I eventually said.

But oh... if I didn't want to punch him in the face right now.

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Revision #2

Created 28 August 2024 01:16:12 by FatalisticFable

Updated 7 September 2025 21:39:36 by FatalisticFable