

Chapter 379: What Now?

“You sure sound awful excited about everything for someone who just floated in the air and watched almost the whole time,” Derek said with a chuckle.

“I did what I came here to do,” Marrick said. “Nobody needed any more help but that.”

“That guy,” Derek said, and pointed to the body of the dead elf. “Would probably disagree.”

“Raphi was unlucky.” Another of the elves that Derek didn’t know the name of stepped forward and spoke. “He was the first...” the man started, but then looked at the enemy that Avery had hit with his Drill Shot at the beginning of the battle. “He was the second person to die. Raphi was old and tired and entered the fight very aggressively without heeding his own health.

“He really did some damage to the enemies we had to face. More may have died if not for his reckless use of his skills at the beginning. It let us fight on equal grounds, even outnumbered—at least until the Dawn Siren joined us. Then the battle was heavily in our favor.”

“Old bastard was at the end of his natural life,” Marrick said, explaining the situation. “He had less time to live than I do—seems like he wanted to go out fighting. Can’t blame the old fool.” The elder then reached down and stored the elf known as Raphi’s body in his storage ring. “Least we can do is give him a proper sendoff...”

Derek nodded at Marrick, then turned his attention toward Osian and Edward. “So, what are we doing? Are we going to hop on dragon back and storm the city? Kick the gate open and charge in on foot?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Osian said, then pointed into the distance behind Derek.

Derek turned and followed the direction until his eyes fell on three people who were standing out of range of the battle, with a group of guards behind them. The guards were ones who were happily able to retreat early on when the three members of the leadership backed out of the fight. The guards standing behind the two men and one woman each wore very relieved expressions as most of them glanced at Derek and the others, then toward the battlefield where the rest of the soldiers were still healing up at.

It was easy to recognize two of the three as Garrett and Finn, the two men Traven had pronounced traitors and threatened before charging into battle. There was an older woman who had silently backed away with them, and Derek never caught her name. The same relief their guards had was plastered on the faces of those three as well.

Osian turned his hand over, then gestured for the group to come their way. They hesitated momentarily, but eventually it was in their best interest to comply with the King of Indria’s request. Their guards began to move with them, but the three turned and said something, resulting in their guards stopping and staying in their current position. It seemed like they didn’t want to present themselves as threatening or rock any boats.

When they arrived, Osian began to speak. "Your name is Garrett, and your name is Finn, correct?" he asked the two men, then turned his focus to the older woman. "I am sorry, but I didn't catch your name."

"My name is Diana. I am the matriarch of House Reeves. Garrett is the patriarch of House Rivia, and Finn is the patriarch of House Barro. Thank you for allowing us the chance to be spared... if that offer is still on the table." Diana bowed deeply to Osian and Edward, then turned to Derek and Alanah. "Mr. Hunt, Ms. Swan... the rumors have not done the two of you justice."

"It's good to be underestimated sometimes," Derek said, then looked back at Osian. "It isn't always as fun when people believe everything they hear about you."

"Not fun... but lucky for those people," Edward chimed in.

"Indeed," Osian said. "Now, would the three of you care to explain what prompted you to withdraw yourselves from battle? Why you chose to stand down and not fight next to your former king and current queen? Some may say that doing so showed a lack of loyalty."

"That..." Finn stepped forward and spoke. "I can't exactly speak for Mrs. Reeves or Mr. Rivia, but my House Barro has never been on quite the same page as the royal family, if you will. We have become a powerhouse in Astrus by keeping our heads down and staying out of politics for the most part. This being an exception, of course."

"And why was this an exception?" Osian asked.

"Well... because the kingdom was at stake. I owed it to my house and even the kingdom as the patriarch of one of the more powerful houses to ascertain what was going on. I knew that there were two outcomes. Either Traven would somehow find victory, or the kingdom would be lost. With your arrival and pure confidence, I knew that the kingdom was lost.

"When you offered the chance for me and my house to live, I knew that I had to take it. Most would pull every major noble house out from the roots without a second thought when taking over a kingdom—I don't doubt for a second that Traven or Tevarian would have done the same. Just giving my house the possibility of living was enough."

"I see," Osian said. "And the two of you?"

"Unlike House Barro, House Reeves has always been very political and involved," Diana said.

"You're always causing commotion because of your butting heads with the royal family," Alanah said. "I know your house quite well. It's hard to keep things like that private."

"Yes," Diana replied. "That is correct. Very seldom did Tevarian and I see eye to eye. This war was a prime example of that. I was very much against it, so much so that I forbade my house from participating. Though... my grandson couldn't wait to make his mark and he joined the army against my explicit instructions... speaking of the remainder of the army..." She looked at Osian. "How are they?"

"Those who did not die have either been captured or are still wandering around Indria, but I believe we found almost everybody and are holding them. They knew of their king's demise and have been quite

passive afterward. My brother and I gave specific commands not to harm them and to take care of them for the time being in hopes that we would be able to release them soon,” the king answered.

“That’s great news!” Diana perked up after hearing that. “I know that he is not dead, as his name continues to be on contracts. When... if he comes back, I’ll give him a good beating for not listening to his matriarch and grandmother.”

Derek giggled at hearing that. He wondered if she would have been the type of grandma to have her grandson go out and pick his own switch for his punishment. Of course, with the system and everyone’s endurance, a regular switch would do nothing these days. *She’d have to have him go pick out a quarterstaff or a club... maybe even a sword for his punishment.*

He couldn’t help laugh a little out loud at the thought. Her words reminded him a bit of his own childhood. His grandma had sent him out into the woods to pick out his own switch before. That was the worst part of the punishment, the mental aspect. The light strikes coming from the frail old lady on the back of his legs never really hurt, but the experience of choosing his own switch stayed in his memories.

Then, that would always cause a spat between his mother and grandmother because his mom was very much against any kind of corporal punishment to her children. Derek actually held those as some of his fond memories. He’d always see how hard he could push his grandma before she had enough. He wasn’t exactly the best child, and he still preferred what his grandma did over the spankings he would get in school. *I’m going to have to try to get back to Earth once this is over to see what’s happened since I left...*

Everyone turned to look at Derek because of his short outburst of laughter. “What?” he asked. “I was just imagining what kind of punishment she was going to give her grandson.”

“And it was funny?” Diana asked. “What did you imagine, exactly?”

“Well...” Derek shrugged. “I kind of imagined you sending him into your treasury to pick out which weapon he wanted you to beat him with.”

“Interesting...” the older woman said. “It could be punishment and training. Not a bad idea.”

“Uh... how old is your grandson?” Derek asked.

“He’s almost 40,” she replied.

This caused Derek to snicker once again, but he didn’t say anything else.

“Uhem...” Osian cleared his throat. “Can we get back on topic?” he nodded his head pointedly toward Garrett.

“Oh, well... I can only say that I chose to retreat from the battle for the chance at my house’s survival. There was no other reason. It didn’t take you showing up on dragons to know that winning against your two kingdoms was a fool’s errand... then you showed up on dragons... so...” Garrett answered.

“And you ranking inside the kingdom?”

“Oh, House Rivia is one of the major noble houses in the kingdom, just like House Reeves and House Barro. I uh... I’m the new patriarch—the former patriarch, my father, recently died... three years ago.”

"I see," Osian said. "So, as three major noble houses in the Kingdom of Astrus, what would you suggest is the best approach now?"

"It's simple," Diana said. "Eradicate the royal family, then... thin the houses that went against you. Once all the royal family is gone, appoint a new king or queen—essentially establishing a new royal line."

"And that will go over well with the kingdom's citizens?" Osian asked.

"Most of the commoners don't care one bit about who is king or queen. As long as their daily lives don't change much, they won't be a problem. As for the middle and minor noble houses... with our three houses standing behind you—assuming you allow our houses to survive—they will fall in line. Maybe with a new ruler we can make some proper changes to this kingdom..." she muttered the last bit.

"Well, there are definitely going to be a good number of changes, but that can wait until we have control of the kingdom. As for a new king or queen..." Osian looked around. His eyes landed on Derek, but he was quick to turn as soon as Derek narrowed his own. "As for a new king or queen, we will figure that out later."

"So," Marrick spoke up. "Shall we finish conquering a kingdom?"

Edward and Osian looked at each other and nodded.

"If the three of you would be so kind as to escort us into the city," Edward said. "I believe that will make things much easier."

Soon, Derek found himself walking in the middle of a group toward the city of Icecrest, the Capital of Astrus. In the front were the three surrendered leaders of major noble houses, followed by Edward and Osian walking side by side, then everyone else from Cydaria and Indria. The guards from the three noble houses followed closely behind.

It was agreed upon to leave the dragonkin companions outside the city, so as to not overly scare any of the citizens with their massive sizes and vicious looks. Finally, they reached the gigantic gated entrance to the city, and dozens of guards looked down at the group, unsure what to do.

"Open the gates!" Finn shouted from below. "Do it now! You saw what just happened. Stop wasting time!"

After some discussion between the gate guards, the gates finally opened. Everyone stepped through. They had finally made it to the Capital of Astrus. Derek took in a deep breath.

He was already beginning to miss Indria's capital city, Eloria. *They're definitely going to have to take some cues from Indria and Savannah. I'm tired of most of the cities I go to smelling terrible.*