

CHAPTER 113: KING ME

The beleaguered pair of Kai and Lenal dragged themselves back into camp between the protective sanctuary of the Sourcestone and the Sacred Tree.

The dome was far cozier than that tent had been. The fresh scent of the [Nature Crystals] and [Wind Crystals] mingling together overpowered the lingering stench of Zuu meat.

“You didn’t...” Kai wheezed. “Have to make the holes face each other.”

“Face what?” Sam asked, puzzled.

A dark expression passed over Raiko, complete with a smirk. “No, I didn’t have to. But I *did*.”

“That’s evil,” Sam told her with a dark grin.

“Evil *and* easy to make.” She cackled.

“We held onto each other,” Lenal whispered in horror.

That got most of the group laughing.

Kai looked uneasy. He got up and left without a word, but Sam swore he could hear him mutter under his breath as he passed Lenal, “You weren’t supposed to say anything!”

That was one secret Sam would have taken to his grave. Then again, Komachi would have outed him pretty fast.

“Okay,” Sam said, addressing the group. “Now that the evil has had a chance to work through some of you, and you’ve recovered somewhat, we’re going to do something stupid.”

“Like eat more [Zuu Meat]?” Lenal asked with a tremble of primal fear.

“No. Raiko and I... technically own this Skyshard now. It’s a partnership of sorts—”

“You mean marriage?” Komachi butted in.

“No, Komachi. We’ve been over this.”

“Uh-huh.”

Sam cleared his throat. “As I was saying! We have the ability to create a Faction, and it wants a governance type.”

“Didn’t you and Raiko already talk about this?” Matt asked. “I thought you came to a conclusion.”

“Komachi put a wrench into things,” Raiko explained, narrowing her eyes at the cat.

That was all Matt needed to hear.

“Moving along,” Sam continued, “based on what we’ve talked about, it seems like doing something like a modified monarchy might be best, but we were curious what everybody thought.” Raiko gave him a look. “Okay, *I* was curious. Monarchies are... not exactly considered good where I come from.”

Lenal looked curiously at him. “Then how do you ever decide anything? The Academy is... well, I guess you could call it a monarchy of sorts. The Archchancellor heads it up and his word is law, but there are senior professors who have a say in matters as well, but without the Archchancellor, everybody would spend all their time going in a thousand different directions. You need a leader.”

“Therein lies the problem,” Sam told her. “There’s not many of us.”

“That won’t be true for long,” Lenal said assuredly. “The Academy will see reason and join you. Their skills will be undoubtedly useful to you in your attempts to build a kingdom, which, in my humble opinion, you should form posthaste.”

“Then there are the others out there,” Matt said. “That starting island was only one of many. We’ve seen at least five other islands that have a similar layout with those strange docks that are mostly empty. There are *many* Skyshards out there now with people confused and scared. I imagine most don’t have the powers you two have.”

“Can a monarchy be composed of two royal Houses, however?” Raiko asked. “Or must it be merely the one?”

“Why not?” Sam asked.

She shrugged. “Typically, it is just the King and Queen at the top, but we’re not... of the same House.”

“Diarchies are one of the oldest forms of rulership,” Matt put in. “They used to be quite common, really. You could either split up the duties evenly, if you wanted to, or both rule over the same things. I imagine if you were married or otherwise bonded by blood, this wouldn’t be much different.”

“There’s that word again,” Raiko said testily.

“Ah,” Matt said knowingly. “One of *those* people.”

“Do you want to duel?” Raiko started, incensed. “Because we—”

Sam got up between the two. “Let’s get back on track, yes?”

Once Raiko sat back down, Sam continued, “Okay, so a diarchy isn’t out of the question. Komachi could be the tie-breaker if we can’t decide on something.”

“Komachi!” his cat cried happily at hearing her own name. Otherwise, she was heavily invested in grooming her back paw by

holding it with her forepaws and struggling to get over her chonky belly.

Raiko wasn't the only one that stared at Komachi, knowing full well that she might have a hand—or rather a paw—in deciding major future decisions for their Faction.

“Spartans were known to have two kings from different families,” Matt elaborated. “Though it was mostly for wartime, it is still highly effective to have more than one ruler... in case.”

“In case two rulers become one?” Sam asked with a chortle. “That’s a fair point and kindly sidesteps the whole succession thing. I heard they can get tiresome and bloody.”

“Already speaking like a king!” Matt said enthusiastically.

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it.” Sam sat back down and drummed his fingers on Chompers’ lid. “What do you think, Raiko? We both rule different Houses but united under a common throne, as it were. Do we need to build a throne?”

“It sounds, essentially, what we wanted all along. If one of us... marries into their House, it further complicates things. As a monarchy, there’d be no power change. Not that I like thinking so many steps ahead on this.”

“I’m not thinking beyond tomorrow,” Sam admitted. “Because the truth is, if we don’t set things up now, food, shelter, walls, etc., then we’re not going to have much of a future to think about. So let’s focus on the here and now.”

Komachi looked frustrated. It seemed she wanted something other than a diarchy, and he could guess well enough what that was.

He aggressively rubbed her face, which always did well to distract her when she was younger, and she loved it as well. Her little claws came out then went away as she rolled around, biting his hand and batting at it playfully.

“You’re going to have such an unfair advantage with our mediator,” Raiko admitted. Watching Komachi fondly, she didn’t seem to mind.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Sam said, knowing better.

“So what kind of cool powers do you get if you make a diarchy?” Matt asked.

“Follow-up question,” Lenal chimed in, “do... we get anything?” She went beet-red at the sudden attention and looked at her feet.

Sam looked at Raiko thoughtfully, then back at them. “We haven’t formalized it yet, so we don’t know.”

“What do you want?” Raiko asked, leaning back.

“Be cool to be a duke,” Matt said blithely. “You know, able to have my own army of undead to do... undead things. Undead army! Naturally, it’d be under your rulership, but you wouldn’t have to worry about bits falling off because they’d be my problem.”

“You just want to enact your fantasy of Evil Dead,” Sam said.

“I’m sure there are other undead out there, just like me,” Matt protested. “Imagine having me as one of your inner court members! They would be *represented* and trust us enough to join up, or at least not to eat us. How many other people do you think would welcome the undead with open arms?”

Sam had to admit, in the privacy of his own thoughts, that Matt had a point. Not that he doubted either of their capabilities, but was it a good idea to give Matt and Kai both so much power, so quickly?

Besides, wasn’t a duke directly in the line of succession? Granted, so would Kai. While that didn’t bother Sam, it did give him pause. Neither Kai nor Matt had shown even the slightest interest in usurping power or having anything of their own.

Which was odd in itself, but they seemed happy to follow and have a safe place in which to thrive. Everybody was so busy just trying to make it the next day that it wasn't until now that Sam had truly given thought about the future.

Worse than that, the choices we make today might well bite us on the ass a decade later. So much for focusing on the present I guess.

He didn't want to give them a reason to turn against either himself or Raiko. Surviving against all the monsters, gods and all the other threats he didn't even know the name of yet was already difficult enough.

Worrying that the person fighting alongside you might turn on you at a chance to have everything you had was a hell of a temptation, no matter who you were.

The only person he realized he would have truly trusted with that was Kale. And, technically speaking, Raiko could very well kill him and take it all too.

But if he went down that road of treasonous thought, then he'd end up utterly alone. Trust was a necessity, perhaps now more than ever.

"I think," Sam said, "that we'll do something a bit different."

"Oh?" Matt said, leaning forward with interest.

"I'd like to create a system for honor and merit. So people who join us aren't just stuck at being... whatever the lowest class of people is here. Nobody wants to be a peasant. I don't know how far we can go with this and if the Shard can enforce it or not, though."

"That... sounds interesting," Raiko admitted grudgingly, seeming to regard Sam in a new light.

"If we can do it," Sam said, "then it could provide people with a path toward something more than just being an ordinary citizen."

They would be able to gain acclaim and titles within the kingdom if they aided the kingdom, and it would help to weed out people who only abuse or use others for selfish gain.”

“Are you inside my head?” Raiko whispered.

Matt shook his head. “That sounds like a tall order, Sam. How would that even work?”

“It depends on what we’re allowed to do,” Sam admitted. “If it’s all up to either Raiko or myself, then the plan falls apart a bit. But if it’s something we can... I don’t know, codify so that the Shard can treat it like a progression system, then we could do much more.”

“This is more than possible,” Raiko said, fully confident. “It feels, even, that this is one feat the Shard is meant for.”

“Somebody would game the system,” Kai pointed out. Sam looked up, surprised. He hadn’t heard him return.

“You’re not against it?”

“Why would I?” Kai asked. “Having a system of honor and merit means people will be incentivized to work for the good of the group. I would be hard pressed to think of anything more worthy of pursuing. But there would need to be ways to augment it when cheating is discovered.”

Sam nodded. “‘Safety regulations are writ in blood’,” he quoted.

“Okay, so... we need a system in place that rewards honor and merit with... something, and then we need the ability to modify its rules so that when somebody cheats, we can close the loophole.”

“Yes, like when somebody finds out that they can buy a thousand apples to gain merits, sell it back, then buy it back again, losing money but gaining merits.” Matt said. “Not that I’ve been thinking about ways to abuse the system, mind you.”

“What do apples taste like?” Komachi asked, overtaken by curiosity.

“You’ll find out as soon as we can plant some,” Sam promised her. He set his hands on his lap. “So we’re in agreement then?”

“Nothing to agree with,” Matt told him. “Functionally, you’re both the rulers, anyway. You’re just making it official.”

Sam looked at Raiko for one last confirmation.

She smiled, strikingly like when he pulled the [Shatterblade] free. That made him feel like he was on the right path, no pun intended.

Together, they both accepted the creation of their new faction as a diarchy, where they both were equal but independent rulers.

Rules and laws were built up before their very eyes. Sam tried to keep up with all the notifications, but there were so many. It looked like an EULA scrolling past his vision.

Things he had thought to add were automatically added, the system for merits and honor were included without any input and seemed to be pulled directly from their thoughts.

The final notification flashed, demanding their attention.

Please enter a name for your fledgling Kingdom.