

Chapter 653 Banquet

Jyraiu tried to get some distance between himself and Edwin. After all this time they had worked together, Edwin still didn't spare a single thought towards appearances. *And nobody even knows he's a member of the Redleafs.*

Aliana's offer had seemed too good to be true. Jyraiu knew plenty about shady jobs, both as a performer and occasional adventurer. It's not like he really had a choice. Aliana might've let him go, if he thought about it in hindsight. Edwin however, that he wasn't so sure about. Now he understood very well why the woman had hired him.

She's just as unknown to the public as he is at this point, he thought, glancing at the mud and blood covered man walking a few meters to his right, a bottle to his mouth as he walked with his eyes closed. He had made inquiries of course but Jyraiu hardly had any meaningful contacts in the capital, or Lys at large. Edwin was known but generally seen as exiled, dead, or missing. The circumstances to any of those assumptions varied widely.

"Those Mudward were hardly worth the silver," Edwin muttered, glaring at a guard walking past.

"They did manage to injure you, and they nearly killed me," Jyraiu said, sighing as he looked at his hands. How many times had he jumped into danger now? A mundane adventurer, just like so many others. He had to bide his time. Compared to thousands of others, he had an incredible opportunity at his hands.

Edwin waved him off, throwing aside the empty bottle, the glass breaking against a nearby wall.

"Apologies," Jyraiu said to the nearby people, opening his pack and getting out a small container. He started picking up the largest pieces with gloved hands. *Armor doesn't suit me,* he thought. *But it does have its uses.*

"Ah fuck off, you just didn't want to get dirty. How can you focus on something that stupid while fighting creatures close to your own level? You'll never reach the two hundreds if you keep your priorities like that," Edwin said.

That's not the goal, now is it? Besides, I'll get there in time. There's no reason to rush anything, Jyraiu thought, ignoring the man.

"You should've seen the Taleen Guardians I fought. Now those were monsters. They would've sliced you up like a pig ready for slaughter," he mused.

And there he goes again with his stories, Jyraiu thought, suppressing a sigh. Edwin was tipsy right now, and even drunk he was more perceptive than most people walking around Virilya. If he wanted to talk about monsters, perhaps he should be looking at himself. A level two hundred sword master with body enhancements and blood magic. There were hardly any combinations Jyraiu could think of that were more deadly. Only nobility and the military managed to reliably get specialized Classes like that.

"You should've seen how Maria and Ilea fought. It's not a surprise they're both feared all around the plains," the noble added with a grin.

And I was the one to train them! They would be nowhere without my help! Dead in a dungeon I say! Jyraiu mused, having heard the same at least fifty times before. But he couldn't be too annoyed.

Today he had actually tried to teach him again. And he intervened much earlier than he did just a few months back.

“We should clean up before we arrive,” Jyraiui said, trying to interrupt the ceaseless arrogant reminiscence. Maria was supposedly some famed assassin feared even by high profile nobility in the capital. He could perhaps believe that much based on the status of Edwin’s House, but Ilea? Supposedly known as Lilith, the Ashen Shadow. Ramblings of a drunkard with illusions of grandeur. He pitied him, he really did. And he hated him at the same time. For he was still here, trying to get him back on some kind of path.

Nobles get everything shoved up their asses. Gold, opportunities, beautiful and talented entertainers to help them get purpose in their meaningful lives!

Compared to Edwin, Jyraiui was nobody. He had to work for his fame and the damn Elves took that from him. He was treated like some unknown refugee in this city. But he had started from scratch, he could do it again.

Edwin waved him off. “Aliana’s magic hardly gets any use these days. Should’ve seen her boil those slavers,” he said and laughed.

Jyraiui sincerely hoped that story was made up. Edwin didn’t talk about her much. Only Felicia he talked about even less. Either perhaps only in moments of lucidity, but those weren’t good for anything in the vicinity. He had seen plenty of people with furious tempers but Edwin had something much deeper within him. Something only a driven man could have had, and yet it seemed there was nowhere to direct it to.

Something about his father, he thought, sure of his conclusion but unable to prove anything. Arthur Redleaf had died, killed by his own daughter some say. Killed by mercenaries, others claim. Lost in a Taleen dungeon some whisper. It was more difficult to get reliable information in this city than it was to get a pay raise from a tournament organizer after signing a contract.

He followed the noble as he was ought to do. At least Aliana refrained from drenching him as well if he stood far enough away from Edwin when they arrived, if he did manage to stay somewhat clean.

Their bath was rudimentary compared to the luxurious installations in Salia. *May they rest in peace*, he murmured in his mind. And yet he was thankful to have a warm bath at least. Some of their jobs took weeks to complete after all.

The two soon arrived near the mansion, the building still looking pretty much like when he had broken in. *A year? Longer?*

He had been at his lowest. To think Jyraiui of the West would stoop so low as to break into a mansion. He shook his head and followed Edwin inside, making enough noise to notify Aliana. She would be cooking at this time, and he wouldn’t risk Edwin walking inside with all this mud on him.

Aliana opened the door a moment later, squinting at Edwin.

Jyraiui stepped aside graciously as a torrent of water slammed into the warrior. He did wonder why Edwin never teleported out of that. Perhaps he really meant what he said about her magic.

“Welcome home,” Aliana said, looking at the both of them. “I’ll expect you to take a bath as well.”

“Of course, ma’am,” Jyraiui said and bowed with as much grace as he could summon.

She didn’t seem impressed.

It annoyed him.

She simply lacks the required education to appreciate a Dawntree art school bow.

Edwin vanished into the mansion, likely restocking on the liquor Aliana had hopefully set out for him.

“Any issues?” Aliana asked.

Jyraiu walked closer, keeping enough distance to make sure his scent wouldn't summon another torrent. “No. He told more stories. He intervened when I was close to getting injured, showed me a few evasive maneuvers and explained my failure in using the terrain to my advantage,” he said and got out a small booklet. “Sixteen bottles. And he ate three times, from the stew I made. Third one I didn't even add liquor.”

The woman nodded lightly. “Good. Thanks for the report. And your diligence. Are you staying for lunch?”

How could anyone refuse her cooking? he thought. “Gladly, Miss Aliana. I will inform you about the next job later today.”

“He seemed to be doing alright. I think a break of a day or two is acceptable,” the woman said.

Jyraiu blinked. *In a good mood today?*

His working conditions weren't exactly high standard but he could leave whenever he liked. But he wouldn't be employed again by the Redleaves if he did. By now he wasn't sure if that was really true, but he wouldn't push his luck. The adventuring with Edwin wasn't half bad anyway. He could work on performance ideas, songs, poems, and other important business while they traveled. The fighting itself was a mere fraction in most weeks. More than enough by his standards anyway.

“Thank you. I'll go take that bath then,” he said.

“Ah, there's a guest eating with us today. She's heard of you apparently,” Aliana said and walked back inside, to her slaughter hall.

She didn't even complain about the lack of kills we brought.

Jyraiu found himself intrigued by a guest visiting this mansion. Few ever came here, and only those closely trusted. Which also meant that he had to present his very best. Those close to the Redleaves inner circle were highly influential themselves. *And she knows me? Someone with a sense of taste. Marvelous.*

He heated up the water to his precise preferred degree and bathed thoroughly, getting rid of the stench of travel and battle clinging to his very essence. Back in his comfortably large room, he chose a set of fine clothes loaned to him by the very House he worked for. They had lots of clothes and only Edwin to wear them. The man of course preferred his absolutely run down set of light armor. Only a House like the Redleaves could pay for smiths to maintain the state of that absurdity.

Jyraiu looked at himself in the slightly cracked mirror and smirked. *A little rugged*, he thought, touching the short beard he had grown. It suited him. But then again, what didn't?

Ready to impress, he went to the dining hall. By now it seemed at least somewhat orderly. Edwin was nowhere to be seen, but he usually went out after they came back, on whatever business a level two hundred blood mage noble went about in the capital of the fucking Empire.

Aliana was spreading out various dishes on the long banquet table, enough food to nourish an entire band of starving adventurers. Nothing new there.

What was new however was the woman piling dishes in front of her, a grin on her face that rivaled that of a monster. She was so entirely absorbed in her lunch that she didn't react to his arrival in the slightest.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

A battle healer. With black hair and blue eyes.

No.

He simply refused the idea, sitting down on a random chair opposite the woman. He grabbed a plate himself and relaxed. "Enjoy the food," he said. "She's a wonderful cook."

"Spare me your flattery," Aliana said.

He ground his teeth a little, glancing at her before he found himself staring into two freezing blue eyes. He gulped, the hand going for his fork unable to move. Something felt wrong. He shook the feeling and smiled, focusing back on his food as he started eating.

"I will. And I know," the black haired woman said, starting to eat herself. "You're Jyrai. I remember you more... fiery."

He couldn't help but smile. "You've enjoyed one of my performances?"

"In Riverwatch. Years ago. I really liked your wings," the woman said.

Is she interested in me? No. That sounded more like a monster about to kill its prey.

"I appreciate the compliment," he said.

The woman smiled. "I'm being rude. It's nice to formally meet you, Jyrai. My name is Ilea, and I too have wings," she said as two large appendages made entirely of ash manifested on her back. Their form looked smooth and durable, nothing like what the few ash mages he had met could conjure up.

He gulped. "Edwin has... mentioned you. Is it true that you're... Lilith?"

The woman smirked.

He double checked, but it seemed like everything the drunkard had told him was true.

[Battle Healer – lvl ???]

Jyrai had to draw on all his experience to stay calm. His breathing still increased and he knew she would be able to tell. He knew she could smell his fear. *She can even read your mind*, he thought, trying to get himself back under control. *Three marks. Three marks.*

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

What... no. I didn't imagine that. I refuse. An illusion? She's eating as if nothing has happened. Acting like her status is not worth a mention.

“I told her about your adventures. And how you got the job,” Aliana said.

He gulped.

“Must’ve been pretty shit to lose the western cities. How did you escape when the Elves attacked?” Ilea asked.

Is she testing me? What if she doesn’t like what I have to say?

He wished to be back in Riverwatch, facing down the monstrous smiles of ancient Elves, just to escape this conversation.

To think I’m scaring this guy shitless. The same man who seemed like a god of fire to me just some years ago. What a truly magical place.

“Ilea!” Edwin said, holding out both arms, holding a bottle in each. He laughed.

“Edwin. I won’t hug you, if that’s what you’re suggesting with that gesture,” Ilea said and started eating.

He waved her off and set down his bottles, slapping Jyraiū on the back as he sat down next to the man. “See, told you I knew her. Who’s the drunk idiot now?” he asked and downed one bottle in the next fifteen seconds of silence.

“I heard you’re an adventurer now,” she said, working on her third plate. Aliana was a good cook. She wouldn’t dare compare her creations to those of Keyla. The battle would be horrific.

“Moving up in the world. Hunted noble, murderer, and now adventurer,” Edwin said. “You’re moving up too. Naive opportunist, Shadow, and now what? Some kind of Ashen God?” he asked and laughed, coughing a few times.

Ilea displaced a plate in front of him. “Wouldn’t want to offend the cook, now would we?”

The man looked at her and frowned. He shrugged and started eating. “So, what’s true? You do seem like you could kill everyone in this room with the snap of your fingers. I can feel danger from you... like nothing I have ever seen before.”

“What more would you need to know?” Ilea asked, focusing back on the food.

“Ah. You see this fellow here, Jebediah,” he said and put an arm around Jyraiū’s shoulder. “He’s a performer, an artist! A great creative spirit. I’m sure he would be interested in your exploits. Those that are true at least.”

And what about you, Edwin?

Aliana sat down too, staring at the man as she started to eat. “Try this one,” she said and put a piece of slightly fried fish on Ilea’s plate.

“Thanks,” Ilea said and ate the piece.

“All that schooling, and that’s the result. Maybe we should cut the funding for your education. It’s obviously not doing anything,” Edwin said, looking at Aliana before he turned back to Jyrai. “Are you not interested in her? She’s good looking, influential, rich, powerful. She could make you famous in a single day. Lilith... I hear you grant wishes to poor folk and slaves lost in the wilderness. Is that true?”

Ilea displaced the man a few dozen meters up and outside into thin air. “The fish is excellent, Aliana,” she said and smiled at the woman sitting next to her. “Perfectly fried.”

The woman smiled at her, eating a piece herself as a man flew past the large half overgrown windows, a dull crash resounding a moment later.

“Is he doing that on purpose?” Ilea asked.

“I’ve thought about it before. He definitely has enough reasons to feel some guilt. Though he doesn’t ever talk about it. Perhaps he will open up a little with our new friend here,” Aliana said.

Jyrai looked like a death spirit staring down two Ice Elementals.

“I didn’t mean to intimidate you,” Ilea said, using her healing on him to calm him down a little. He hid it well but her status and the stories about her definitely left an impression. Now that she got a better look at him, listening to his heart beat and seeing his tense body language, he didn’t strike her as a particularly experienced adventurer.

[Fire Enhancer – lvl 158]

“Don’t mention it. It’s not every day that one gets to meet a living myth. I was simply struck by your presence,” he said smoothly, the sweat rolling down his back betraying his demeanor. “And I’m sure he will improve,” he added, looking at Aliana.

Edwin stumbled in with a laugh, brushing away a bunch of leaves and dust, not a single injury visible. “Nice trick. Reminds me of Maria. She coming for lunch too? To finish the reunion. Why not invite that quiet metal mage of yours too. I’m sure he could nod along rather well as you speak.”

Ilea burst out laughing, the man joining in while Jyrai tried to get some distance between himself and the noble.

She calmed down and continued eating. *Not a single reaction. He didn’t try to provoke me. He just doesn’t care anymore. And here I had hopes for you. Ah well, I suppose it all lies with you, little fire wings mage,* Ilea thought, glancing at the blood magic warrior who gave her the first real taste of what a level two hundred human was capable of. *And even now he’s more capable than half the Shadows I know. It’s a shame really.*

“Did he come back?” Aliana asked quietly.

“What?” Ilea asked, looking at her.

She seemed a little taken aback. “Kyrian of course. He was... teleported away.”

“Ah, sorry. I just thought about him meeting Edwin now. Yeah... we found him,” Ilea said with a smirk. “He’s... he’s doing okay. It’ll take some time for him to... adjust.”

Aliana smiled. “I’m glad,” she said and paused. “He was kind.”

Aha. Yes. I remember, Ilea thought with a smirk.

“What?” Aliana asked, seeing her expression.

Ilea just continued eating, smiling from ear to ear.

“Stop it,” Aliana said and sighed. “Ah, I won’t be able to visit him anyway.”

“We’ll see,” Ilea said.