

## Safety

The city was under siege. A fact that everyone seemed to either forget or simply ignore. There had been one run-in with the soldiers that had constantly targeted the baroness. It had not gone well. It was like the city could only focus on one thing at a time. Now, Marketbol's council had imposed curfews and checkpoints. Luckily, most of the Reinhart Center's staff lived in the dormitory on campus. The few with families were reassigned to shifts that would ensure they were safely within their homes at the appointed times. Ernald had even assigned guards who would escort those people to and from work at set hours.

Not *everyone* was entirely at ease, Adaega had to admit. It seemed the only one who truly felt trepidation was Nadia. The esquire herself was pouring the two of them a drink from Adaega's now stocked liquor cabinet.

The woman turned around holding two filled glasses.

"I was talking to my brother today, and you know what he told me?" The woman asked.

Adaega had to contain her eye roll. Stefan constantly came up in conversations. "No, what did he say?"

Nadia sighed dramatically. "He has been going to the temple and visiting the statues of Relena and Tenera," She complained, articulating with both of their glasses even as Adaega attempted to grab one.

"Why is that an issue?" Adaega asked. Nadia paused, and Adaega took the opportunity to grab the glass with less alcohol.

Adaega did not know much about the pantheon that the people of the world worshipped, but she was surprised that *not* being religious wasn't something that others looked down upon. Relena and Tenera were the two goddesses that those of this world believed were represented by the two moons. Relena was the goddess of death, and the patron of the raithe as a whole, while her sister Tenera was the patron of the moon elves, and the goddess of night.

She personally thought the dichotomy the two had with their parents, Alos and Eona was fascinating. The ruler of the pantheon, Alos, was the god of day and represented the sun, while Eona was the goddess of life, the namesake of the world itself.

The raithe woman looked down at the glass she still held with a bit of surprise but then took a sip. "Because..." She took another sip and then pointed with the hand that held the glass. "He isn't religious. At all. Ever since he and the baroness visited the temple he has been acting strange. Ignoring the complete delve into training with anyone and everyone, what happened there changed him."

Lady Reinhart had spoken briefly to her and Ernald about it. What she had revealed was... Adaega didn't really have a word for it. It was like something out of some fantasy or science fiction novel. Even then, the explanation the lady gave felt completely beyond the imagination of even the best authors of her world, for they had no true connection with the ubiquitous computers that dominated every aspect of life on Lady Reinhart's Earth.

“I admit that it is indeed strange. Yet, we live in strange times. I feel like this does not change much in the grand scheme of things. It simply means there is a more *logical* design to what is happening to us.”

“Yes, I agree. Which lends more credence that this is the work of the gods. Others are calling it a new age. The Age of Strife, they say.” The woman swirled the brown liquid and looked down at it, seeming uncertain, uneasy. It was eminently relatable.

Adaega took a sip of her own drink, wincing at the strength of the alcohol that her guest preferred. “How are you doing with all of it? Are you going to take Lady Reinhart’s offer to have everyone within the House go through the temple’s... uh... ceremony?”

The woman hesitated with her glass to her lips, then lowered it. “No. No, I do not think that I will. I know my path in life and I can do *good* with it. I *am* doing good with it. I do not need the gods to tell me my purpose or however many steps or levels or whatever they are called.”

She could understand the sentiment, even if she didn’t necessarily agree with it. Unlike the esquire, she *did* want to see what this ceremony was all about. If only for the contributions it could do to their research. If they could recreate it then they could use it to narrow their selection of potential candidates to join the campus and thus the House. She could tailor roles and positions for people based on their true potential, fostering a level of productivity and efficiency that even her world would envy.

“I understand. I think I want to,” Adaega said.

The esquire eyed her critically but did not say anything to that. Instead, she changed the subject as she moved to sit on the couch by the fireplace. With a flourish, she asked, “How have you been doing? Everything here seems to be running smoothly.”

Adaega raised her glass in salute. “I am doing... better. Diving into my work is a pleasant distraction. That we are able to assist with the war effort also helps. It makes me feel as if we’re not *just* waiting for the Vlatedian army to be defeated or breakthrough.”

“Yes, absolutely. Yet, even with the army outside the walls, I have an endless line of prospective clients who wish to make claims against each other! Why just the other day someone wanted to take action against a merchant for limiting the amount of food he could buy! The city is literally under siege and this person wants to have someone else penalized for not allowing him to hoard!”

Nadia was a bit of a dominating conversationalist. It wasn’t that the woman didn’t care about what you had to say, it was because she had to sit and listen to people complain all day and she could not do anything in response but maintain a professional demeanor. Adaega considered that it may be the reason they still didn’t have an actual House esquire. Nadia simply enjoyed the change of pace and hadn’t actually been helping them search for someone.

If she were honest, she enjoyed it. Letting the woman blow off some steam allowed her to take a mental break and she often found herself adding ‘mhm’-s and other little verbal nods to encourage the raithe to continue.

However, the gossip would inevitably get to a point where she wanted to hear more gossip. That—unfortunately—is where Adaega came in.

“Have you worked with Elodie recently?” Nadia asked, clearly building up to something.

The sun elf woman had been nearly as busy as Adaega. Putting everything into motion for the Runecard business had her all over the place. Securing the assets to ensure they could weather the siege was another. The woman was making full use of the money they had been making from the city. Lady Reinhart’s enchanting business was *known* throughout the city, and even with the near-constant supply to the army, aristocrats of other Houses sought Reinhart’s services for their own guards. Lady Reinhart had wanted to expand upon the same type of business her dwarven associates had, but Elodie had pointed out her lack of time or manpower to accomplish such a thing in the meantime.

“We see each other regularly to discuss business.” She perked up, remembering something. “Actually, she did mention she wished we could all get together again. I believe she is due for a break.”

Nadia’s eyes all but lit up, and Adaega knew that the woman had something *juicy*.

“I am not entirely certain the woman needs a *break*. In fact, I believe she is entirely *relaxed*,” she said vaguely.

“I cannot read between those lines, Nadia,” Adaega said drily.

The woman huffed. “Oh, fine. Take away my fun. I do believe someone has caught her eye.”

That made Adaega sit up. While she loathed to admit it, the taller, more beautiful sun elf had been a constant source of a *pinch* of jealousy for her. In fact, barely a hint. None, no jealousy even tinged her thoughts. Ever.

“*Who* is it?”

Nadia laughed. “I *knew* you would be interested! Now, we may have to suss it out of her, but I just happened to bump into her the other day on the way to a house. She said she was on her way to simply get a massage due to all the tension she felt from work.”

Adaega nodded along, that made sense. Nothing really there.

“But!” The woman said dramatically. “I happened to see her *the very next day* going to the same place!”

Adaega deflated. “That could be anything, that doesn’t tell us anything at all,” she pointed out.

“On its own, you would be correct. However, she was carrying *flowers*.”

“Flowers.”

“Yes! She was carrying flowers with her to see a *masseuse*? Well, that just piqued my curiosity even more. Here I was thinking, ‘that masseuse must be *amazing*. I would love to see what he could do.’ So, of course, I went to investigate.”

Adaega gasped. “You *didn’t!* Nadia!”

“Imagine my surprise when a woman opened the door, and then... imagine my *shock* when I asked if she had any openings in her schedule for a massage and she said ‘*excuse me?*’”

“What? That’s it? ‘*Excuse me?*’ What else did she say?”

Nadia smirked. “She said that she *wasn't* a masseuse and had no inkling of where I received that information. So, of course, I didn't betray my source, and I apologized profusely before making a hasty retreat.”

*Oh! Oh no... I was jealous... ugh...*

It was a crazy tale, and Adaega hated that she loved it. She needed to know more. “I am writing a note. We must schedule breakfast, lunch, dinner, a midnight snack... *anything* with Elodie. We'll suss out the details of this rendezvous, yet.”

“We absolutely *must*. For our friend, of course. Wouldn't want her heart to get hurt or anything. She needs her friends to be there for her.”

She agreed, but it seemed that Nadia wasn't done yet. Adaega sighed before lifting her glass and taking another sip.

“Speaking of rendezvous... How have things with you and Ernard been?”

Adaega spewed her drink everywhere in front of her and started coughing. “W-What?!”

The woman laughed and came over, patting her back. Adaega waved her off. *Why do people think you need to pat a back for a cough! I'm not dying!*

*Maybe I wish I had a hole to crawl into...*

Still getting over her coughing fit, she spoke slowly as she wiped herself off. “Ernard has been fine. He has been exceptionally busy with the House Guard. We still see each other at breakfast to go over security concerns for the day, but that is about it.”

“*Security concerns?* Really, Adaega? You may lie to yourself—”

She rolled her eyes. “I do not lie to myself, Nadia.”

“Fine, fine. What else? How is he taking the siege and everything going on around the campus?”

The man had been busy as well. In fact, *everyone* had been busy. She didn't have time for such things that the woman was hinting at. *Well...*

“I think he is taking it well. He has dove into his training with the rest of the knights with enthusiasm. Even Nemura and Stefan have joined them. I just saw Stefan out there last night, actually.”

That got the overprotective sister's attention. “Stefan? Why is he training with the knights?”

“I am unsure, but perhaps it has something to do with what he learned at the temple? He *has* shown a lot of drive since then. Perhaps he just wants to improve himself?”

Nadia went silent, and it felt as if the room took on an icy stillness. She swirled her drink as she liked to do when deep in thought, her eyes falling to observe the diminished level of alcohol. Adaega intended to give her friend time to collect herself. However, when she saw the first tear, Adaega quickly made to sit next to the woman.

When Nadia spoke, it was almost a whisper. “I just... I just want my brother safe, and if he now has this *drive*... I am afraid he is going to get himself killed.”

Adaega nodded and put her arm around the raithe. Nadia immediately leaned against her and took another sip of her drink. The two women finished their drinks in silence.

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“I saw Nadia, today,” Adaega said. She sat on her couch in her office, and Ernard lounged on the other one she had near the fireplace. The sun elf man was tired, she could tell in his posture. He leaned against the side and had a leg sprawled out on the other half of the couch.

“Oh? House business or just enjoying each other’s company?” He asked.

“She came by to complain about Stefan,” She said with a huff.

Ernard shook his head. “That man is something else, but I have to respect his change in heart recently.”

Adaega absently nodded her head. Ernard was one of the knights that got to train the most. The others spent the day either on campus or patrolling the quarter. The thought that the Ressa woman could strike at the House’s main location was on everyone’s mind.

“Has he talked about his and Lady Reinhart’s visit to the temple? I know the lady told us what had happened, but she tends to view things differently.”

He sat up and looked at her. “Yes. He met with the head paladin for not just the city, but for the region. That...” Ernard looked up in thought, tapping his fingers. “It is not something that happens every day. For those in the more martial fields, the Paladins of Alos are these almost mythical beings. They are the most well-trained, well-equipped, and *relentless* force on the continent. That this woman casually met with Sloane was... strange. Although, Sloane is a... *force*, herself. I am not surprised that the two butted heads.” He chuckled ruefully, “I can only imagine the thoughts going through the paladin’s mind when she learned she had fewer steps than Sloane... Then there is the whole ceremony...” *I hope Lady Reinhart doesn’t hear him say ‘steps’. She has been quite insistent on her own terminology.*

He went silent and looked down, and she opened her mouth to speak, but then he continued, “To learn definitively, from the gods no less, of your path and purpose? It is a life-changing moment. His purpose and path... are interesting. I look forward to seeing how Sloane best utilizes his skillset.”

“And you? Do you want to know?”

He glanced up at her. “Yes. I think I do. Ever since Sloane had told us about magic and the possibility that we too could perform it, I have longed to know the truth. It is something we all have sought. We have wandered essentially aimlessly ever since Havensway. The others are returning to our home...”

She got up and walked over to the man, reaching down and grabbing his hand. “And you wish to know if you made the right choice. Staying here.”

“I do. I feel like I have. You... you need me here, Adaega,” He said.

Adaega lowered herself so that she could look level with the man’s eyes, pulling his hand up to her chest. “Ernard, you have done so much for me. I do not know if this is your purpose or

your path in life, but what I do know is that I want to join you on your path. I... am happy. I am happy that you are here. I cannot imagine what you are going through, but I know that I would not have made it to where I am without you.”

“A-Adaega... I-”

“Ernald, let us go to the temple, together. Let us see what our purposes are,” She said.

“Do you really wish to? What if...”

“If your purpose leads you away from here, then I will be here, waiting for your return. Or I will join you.”

He shook his head. “No, it isn’t safe... You-”

“And the situation we find ourselves in now isn’t? We have a massive army choking the city just outside the wall, and we have a crazed terrorist within who keeps attempting to kill Lady Reinhart. She could attack us here at any time. *You* will be one of the ones to fight her. In the two times she has attacked, none of your Order or even Lady Reinhart has been able to stop them. The city’s army cannot stop them, and many people have been killed thanks to her and her people. We have been here for *weeks* and that woman has everyone chasing their tails. Do not tell me that we are safer here than anywhere else.”

He sighed and pulled back his hand gently. Ernald stood up and walked around, grabbing her hands, pulling her to her feet. She gazed up into his eyes as he held her hands in between them. She could lose herself in those soft, caring eyes. The man, even tired, looked perfect.

“Adaega, you have been through so much. Torn from your world, subjected to the worst imaginable acts, and even now you stand strong. How?”

She tilted her head. It was so simple, how couldn’t he see it? Was he simply as blind as she had been? Was it his honor and duty that prevented him? Adaega could tell the man felt *something*, but what if she had read it wrongly. What if what he felt wasn’t what she felt?

Adaega took a deep breath, then looked back into his eyes. “Because I have you.”

His eyes widened as if something had finally clicked. Mouth ajar, he stared down at her. She almost chuckled, but no. Adaega did something else.

She grabbed the back of his head and pulled him down as she stretched upward on tiptoes. Her eyes closed and their lips met, and for but a moment, the world vanished and all that remained was them.

His surprise was evident in the way he tensed, but it was gone in a heartbeat. He leaned into the kiss and she melted all over again. Her hand slid down the side of his face and she gently cupped his cheek. His arms wrapped around her. A feeling of safety and a sense of belonging overcame her in a way she had never felt as she did at that moment. It was as if she had found a moment of eternity. One that she dearly wished would never end.

Too soon the pressure of his lips left hers and she was left wanting. The man she loved looked down at her, and she up at him, as they fell into silence. She dearly wished to know his mind, to listen to the thoughts that swam within, and to know if they matched hers.

“Adaega... I-”

Her heart stopped. She turned her head away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't—"

Ernald drew her back and leaned into her again. His kiss was more forceful, *determined*. She met it with her own. Her mouth opened to his and their tongues met for an instant before he pulled back.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"I believe I have told you how sure I was twice now. *Do* make me tell you again."

He smirked, a lovely crooked thing that made her swoon.

Adaega glanced over at the bed that had been set up in her office and returned that same smile as she pulled him closer, and it was as if their bodies molded together perfectly. This time, they would not part until morning.

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It was as if a blush was a permanent fixture on Adaega's face the next day. She couldn't stop smiling, and every time she glanced over at Ernald another fit of giggles threatened to erupt from her.

She sighed in contentment as she drank her green tea, taking a moment to examine the notebook she used as a planner. A simple idea that Elodie and many of the staff had loved.

She had a few meetings today, however...

"What do you think about the thirteenth bell for us to go to the ceremony?"

Ernald glanced up at her and then up at the ceiling. His head subtly bobbed as he likely ran through all he had to do for the day.

"I think I can make that work. What do you want to do after that?"

She smiled. "Well... I know it may be difficult, but what do you say we try and get dinner together? Perhaps we can then discuss where our paths may lead us?"

Ernald blushed, and it was so *cute*. "I'd like that, Adaega."

Picking up her spoon, she pointed it at the man. "*Good*, because you're not getting rid of me that easily, mister."

He chuckled. "I would never dream of it."

Her cheeks immediately heated up, and she quickly looked back down at her tea.

She'd gone through a lot to get to this point, but she'd found love, and maybe soon, she'd find her purpose.

Adaega Merbaker glanced up at *her* knight. His beautiful eyes focused on hers and she smiled as she noticed his expression was filled with love.

Maybe this new life wouldn't be so bad after all.