

Chapter 11: Well, That Went Poorly

Tracking the strangers was more difficult than I'd anticipated. I'd learned how to recognize the impression of rabbit feet in the snow, but these *people*, dozens of pounds heavier, had left no trace of their passage. I didn't know how that was possible, and the question would have had me tearing at my hair, wondering if I'd imagined Ellair's visit, if Ailig hadn't been rolling in a straight line in front of me, heading toward an unseen destination.

Maybe the construct had locked on to an electronic device that was on Ellair's person. Maybe it saw tracks that I didn't. However it was following the strangers' trail, the teenager should be grateful for it. His creation would save him.

As Brighde's star grazed the treetops, I spotted the glow of a fire ahead of us and raced forward to slow Ailig down. Grabbing the construct, I crouched in front of it, searching in vain for a face.

"We'll sneak to a good vantage point," I whispered. "We'll wait until they fall asleep. *Then*, we'll rescue Ellair."

After a minute, blue light rippled over Ailig. An acknowledgment, I supposed. It was too bad Ellair had been *kidnapped*, somehow, before he'd gotten around to sharing what those lights meant.

As I glided forward, I kept my eyes and ears open. Ailig and I made minimal crunching sounds while moving through the snow, the only noise to break the silence, and in the dying light, I spotted no sign of our quarry, which didn't surprise me.

We were still surrounded by dense trees, and these strange people, whoever they were, seemed like masters of camouflage. Back at my cave, they'd snuck up on me and Ellair without either of us noticing.

They'd made camp in a small depression, and now that we'd come closer to it, I could see that the flames I'd spotted earlier were more akin to a giant bonfire than something smaller. The snow around it was melting, and the tree branches overhead sent water droplets to sizzle in its flames.

When Ailig jerked forward under my hand, I barely kept it beside me.

"Wait," I hissed, glancing where it had tried to dash.

In the clearing, Ellair was sitting against a tree, bound and gagged. His eyes wouldn't keep still in their sockets, flicking every which way, and their sclerae had almost drowned out their irises' lime green. His legs were folded in an uncomfortable position beneath him, and even distant as I was, I

could see sweat drenching his hair.

Caught in terror, it would seem. That would make getting him out of here more difficult, given how completely stupid panic could make people at times, but I'd deal with that when the time came for it.

I saw no sign of the strangers who'd taken him. Maybe they'd gone looking for food or left to perform an arcane ritual, one that goddamn kidnapers like them might undertake. I didn't know what could have drawn them away from their kidnappee, but whatever the case, I should take this chance to free Ellair and run.

Something held me back, though. I didn't know what that was. Instinct? A familiarity with situations like this that books had long ago drilled into me? Listening to that impulse, I refused to move, simply continuing to scan the clearing and my surroundings. Despite Ailig's increasingly insistent jerking and the deepening dark, I became a statue: as frozen as the trees around me.

When the moons hung heavy in the sky...

Well, I say heavy. They'd been hanging heavy hours before, so when the moons sent my heart skittering in my chest because I *knew* they'd pierce Brighde's atmosphere, the strangers still hadn't returned, and I couldn't wait any longer. It would be dawn soon, and if I was going to undertake this rescue, I should do it under the cover of night.

"Right," I whispered. "I'm going to help Ellair. *You* stay here."

Poking Ailig, I immediately regretted doing that. Whatever made up his casing didn't give like flesh would have.

Sucking my finger, I said, "If anything goes wrong, get help. Go to Colavar, find Ellair's mother, do *something* to form a rescue party. Got it? You help us if shit hits the fan."

I didn't know why I was telling Ailig this. It was a machine, controlled by programming, and I doubted that programming would let it comprehend my command.

But when blue light flashed over it, I took that sign as acceptance anyway.

"Ok," I whispered.

Breathing into my hands, I rubbed them together. Oh God, this was a terrible idea, but I wouldn't leave Ellair here. No one deserved to be dragged away from home or trussed up like he was.

So, I crept forward to the clearing's edge. When I crossed into firelight's glow, I cringed, expecting steel or an energy bolt to sink into my body at any moment, but with every step that my expectations failed to manifest, I quickened my pace, and the vice around my heart loosened.

Then, Ellair saw me. His eyes went wider than I'd thought a human's could go while he roughly shook his head.

“God damnit.”

Abandoning stealth, I ran to him, tugging on the ropes binding him with one hand while ripping his gag free.

“It’s a trap!” he said once it was free.

I clicked my tongue.

“*Of course* it’s a trap, moron,” I said in a growl. “What the hell else would it be? But if I can free you, maybe we can fight back.”

With a trembling sob, Ellair continued shaking his head, perhaps hoping I’d take the hint and leave him here.

“Brennan, you don’t understand,” he babbled. “They’re Brúid. We’re-”

Yanking one knot free, I hissed, “*I don’t care what they are.* They tried to hurt you. I’ll *kill* them.”

For the first time, Ellair met my eyes before frowning.

“Why-?”

“Is maith liom an cann seo, a Míde. An féidir linn í a choinneáil?”

Spinning, I watched the man and woman from earlier advancing on me without a care in the world. Their loose clothing created twisting shadows in the light, and both held a pole, like what had knocked Ellair unconscious at my cave, by their sides. Seeing that, my heart soared into my throat even as I continued tussling with knots behind my back.

Don’t think about their eyes on you. DON’T THINK ABOUT THEIR EYES ON YOU!

“Sin cinneadh Dagda, agus tá a fhios agat air,” the woman said.

Licking my lips, I watched them lift their poles, knowing that what came out of my mouth next would need to be brilliant if we were to talk our way out of this.

“Hello.”

God damnit, really? The *hell* was wrong with me?

“I don’t suppose we can work this out peacefully, can we?” I asked. “I’d rather not kill you.”

Another knot came undone beneath my fingers. Snorting, the man paused, nudging his partner.

“Is *maith* liom an bhean seo, deirfiúr,” he said.

The woman slapped the man upside the head.

“Seans go ligfidh Dagda duit í a choinneáil,” she said. “*Tar éis dó a chinneadh a dhéanamh.*”

Rubbing his scalp, the man said, “Tá, tá.”

Ignoring them, I continued my work, unhurried despite the danger we were in. I’d defeated another knot, but who knew how many of them remained? God, had these people thought Ellair was an escape artist?

But the strangers had lowered their poles, advancing on me, and as the ends of those weapons came far too close to my chest, I threw my hands over my head.

“All right!” I said. “No need for that. I surrender.”

Whatever the poles were, they’d sent Ellair under earlier, which we couldn’t afford right now. If I could keep my wits about me, he and I would have a much better chance of escaping.

Stopping short, the man lowered his pole, scratching his head.

“Cad atá á dhéanamh léi?” he said.

Shrugging, the woman shoved her weapon forward. It touched my shoulder, and my world exploded.

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