

Chapter 1: Keeping Watch

Middle

In the two months since the battle against Teron's forces on a nearby beach, protecting Raimie had gotten much more difficult. Fortunately, that difficulty hadn't lain with the man himself this time, although he was prone to making fantastically reckless choices. No, for once, the steadily rising danger to Raimie was coming from a known, tangible source. Unfortunately, said source of danger was also incredibly varied and numerous.

As I trailed behind the pair of men I'd been following for the last quarter mark, I kept my hands in my pockets with a quiet whistle on my lips. People always assumed that if you meant to track someone, you had to 'stick to the shadows' and 'stay silent'. I'd always found those methods made you look suspicious much more quickly than a normal, friendly demeanor might.

These two targets had been planning something sinister for a while now, but I had yet to take care of them, hoping they'd lead me to other, like-minded people before I had to make a move. While their obvious hostility was concerning, they hadn't made any definite plans yet, merely shaky fantasies of kicking the crap out of the 'disgusting primeancer king' in their midst.

Alouin, if I didn't hate them for even thinking about laying a finger on Raimie's head, but currently, we were in hostile territory. Sure, the leader of this town, Tanwadur, might have reluctantly welcomed Raimie and his army into Tiro—

And hell if I knew how that had happened. My people certainly hadn't been involved with it.

—but everyone knew how much both Tanwadur and Tiro's citizens resented the presence of foreigners in their midst. Raimie had been helping with that by staying open and friendly with anyone who approached him. Perhaps he even thought his efforts were working, but I couldn't afford to be as optimistic, not when I was the one standing between him and a blade in his chest.

The men I was following made a sudden turn into Tiro's city square, hustling across it toward Tanwadur's home, but they didn't approach its door, which surprised me. I'd thought for sure that *that man* would have been involved in this plot, and after walking for a bit more, the two men proved me right. They scuttled to one of the home's windows, huddling against it after one had tapped on its surface, and ambling past them on the far side of the street, I turned around the next corner, still whistling. Still with my hands in my pockets.

Once I was out of view, though, I switched to a quiet hum, leaning against a wall with my arms and ankles crossed. There, I waited until I heard people moving in the street beside me, and as that

sound drew closer, I fell silent, drawing as close to the wall as I could get.

The two men soon came into view, fervently whispering to one another. They were so intent on this that they didn't notice me sliding into the street after them, but... that was to be expected. These two weren't members of a rival kingdom's Hand or one of the cloth-wrapped spies that Tiro claimed as its own. They were simply prejudiced men, ready to indulge in their ridiculous hatred instead of giving the person they despised the benefit of the doubt.

Soon enough, the two split up, but not before I spotted one of them handing off something *extremely disconcerting* to the other. When had Tanwadur—who this item had surely come from—gotten his hands on a pistol? From what I'd learned, the Audish people didn't have that piece of technology at their disposal. So, did that mean one of Raimie's soldiers had lost theirs? Or could they have willingly surrendered their sidearm, on the promise that it would be used to kill the reviled primeancer in their midst?

If that last supposition was true, the target of said soldier's malice would most definitely not have been Raimie. To my great relief, the kid had worked his typical magic on the people who called him king. He held their loyalty in a near-iron grip.

No, said soldier had probably thought his weapon would be used against Rhylix, Raimie's friend. Also, the other primeancer in our midst.

Not that any of that mattered. The proposed scenario was simply that. A hypothesis that I hadn't tested or proven. Either my associates or I would find out the truth within the next few days.

In the meantime, I continued strolling after the man who had the pistol, subtly signaling to my backup on a nearby roof. He'd been following me the whole time, in case this exact situation happened, and for once, I was grateful for his insistence on redundancy. He could take care of the other man while I continued following the main threat.

Eventually, my target reached his home, and I settled in to wait, crouched in an out-of-the-way corner. Still merrily humming, I retrieved a flask from a pocket. It was full of water, but to anyone who spotted me, I'd look like someone who'd finished my work for the day, enjoying a drunken state as a result.

Once night came calling, I stored my flask again, glancing down the street before crossing to my target's front door. I slipped inside, scanning its shadowed confines, before moving toward the distinctive lump of a man on a bed in the corner. Once there, I plucked the pistol out of his loose grip—gah, why would he leave it out in the open like that?—before sliding his pillow out from under his head. Tucking the weapon into my belt, I got onto my knees at the head of the bed before firmly pressing the pillow over this man's face.

After a moment, he woke up, soon thrashing to get himself free. I didn't move, watching him struggle with a dim sense of satisfaction.

No one threatened my Raimie, my king, *my friend* unless they wanted to end up like this: fighting to breathe while in my arms.

When the man's efforts went from sluggish to nearly non-existent, I released pressure from the pillow's edges, watching his chest until it fell into a slow rhythm, but then, I tossed the pillow away. He wouldn't be waking up anytime soon.

After lighting a lantern, I searched both the man and his home for any ammunition or gunpowder that Tanwadur might have given him, and once my sweep was complete, I left a single round on the table with a message, carved into wood, beneath it.

Try this again, and I'll finish the job.

This and the sudden death of the man's companion should be enough to keep him in line. My associate favored using poison on unsuspecting targets, which usually ended with them as a cold corpse on the floor.

With this chore done, I could get back to what had become both my most and least favorite part of the job: keeping an eye on Raimie. As I started looking for the kid in his favorite bolt holes, I considered what to do about Tanwadur. As the leader of our current refuge, I couldn't make any moves against him, not until Raimie had secured another base of operations, and this *annoyed* me.

I knew that Raimie would almost always be under threat, whether he succeeded with freeing Auden or not, but for now, that threat level was low, and I'd much prefer to keep it that way for as long as possible. Currently, Doldimar and his minions had no idea where he was—we hoped, at least—and an unusually fierce winter was keeping us inside Tiro. This was the safest Raimie would be for the next few years, and Tanwadur was *not* helping with that. I wished I could just fix this problem, in whatever way I must, but... I couldn't. For many reasons.

Tonight, Raimie was at one of Tiro's many taverns, a place owned by a man from the northern Matvai clans. Finding out about that faction had seemed like such good news, up until we'd also learned how isolationist and violent they were, much like Ratchav in the east.

Over the last two months, Raimie had been favoring this place, so I wasn't surprised to see him lounging here, in a booth along the far wall. What did surprise me was Rhylix's absence from his side. I was happy about that, of course, if only for my own admittedly petty reasons, but still, it was surprising and in small part, worrying. Much as I might dislike him, I was happy to admit that Raimie's friend was excellent in a fight. I'd always liked having him as another layer of security around my charge.

When I briefly scanned the tavern, my eyes quickly landed on the woman near Raimie's table, laughing with the group of men around her. Even though I'd asked her to watch Raimie's back while I'd taken care of the threat, my heart still skipped a beat at the sight of her, and I had to concentrate on keeping my face in a congenial smile. Would heat always fill my chest whenever she was nearby?

Thankfully for my focus, another woman's laughter quickly brought my attention back to my charge.

And the girl sitting on the bench beside him. After sliding a mug his way, she leaned into his side while he flushed, and I took a moment to pinch the bridge of my nose.

He was with her? Again?

From the moment I'd seen Raimie with her, I'd known Ren would be a problem, if not in the way that she'd become. As Tanwadur's adopted daughter and Rhylix's sister, she'd presented a complicated relationship that my socially awkward charge would have to deal with, and *of course*, he'd ended up doing that in the worst way possible, the one I *never*—not in a million years—would have expected from him.

Didn't Raimie understand what his courtship of her could cause? She was half-Eselan, and much as I might not care about her heritage, the people of Auden most certainly did. They would *not* support a king who was involved with an Eselan, but it seemed Raimie hadn't thought about that, and I... I didn't know what to do about it.

Sometimes, I wasn't sure if even he knew what he was doing. Over the time I'd known him, Raimie had *never* seemed romantically interested in anyone, and the fact that this had happened now didn't match anything I'd once known about him. He'd always seemed... almost oblivious when it came to things of that nature. Sometimes, it felt like no one had explained the idea of romance and attraction to him.

I was happy for him. Truly. Everyone deserved to experience first love at some point in their life. But I also knew that this relationship would end in heartbreak for my charge, and I wasn't sure how—or if—I could share this with him.

"Oswin!"

With a gasp, I realized I'd been idly standing in place, still pinching my nose, for who knew how long, and dropping my hand, I rushed to fix a smile in place. At his booth, Raimie had raised a hand overhead, which let me amble to him.

"You have perfect timing!" he said as I approached. "One of Ren's spooky friends just summoned her. Gods, will they ever let us have an evening together without interrupting it?"

With a huff, he rolled his eyes, although that quickly turned to a grin when Ren glared at him.

All the while, I watched, wondering if Raimie knew that Ren's 'friends' were actually part of Tiro's defense: cloth-swaddled warriors who ventured into Cerrin Forest to wipe out the Kiraak and Doldimar's scouts. I wondered if he knew that the woman at his side oversaw that group.

"Anyway, she has to leave now, so I thought I'd head for bed," Raimie soon continued. "Care to join me?"

Care to join him. As if that hadn't been a foregone conclusion.

Folding my arms behind my back, I simply smiled at my friend.

“Lead the way, sir.”

Once we were on the street, I paid Raimie perhaps a quarter of my attention, lending the rest to a constant scan of our surroundings. Raimie didn't seem to notice—he never did, thankfully—and I refused to think about how different this was when compared to the past.

Yawning, Raimie stretched his arms overhead.

“I can't wait for spring to come,” he said. “Much as I've enjoyed the break from... well... *everything*, I'm ready to get this show on the road again.”

With a soft laugh, I said, “I've been looking forward to that too.”

If only because it would keep my charge occupied with something other than Ren or the other, frankly, concerning habits he'd taken up recently. Just the other day, I'd stumbled across a book on lockpicking that he'd left open on his bedroll. I'd love it if my friend picked that skill up again, but it had also been rather annoying that he hadn't asked me for help with it. Of course, he had no way of knowing how much I'd have enjoyed teaching *him* the skill, considering how snarky the kid had always been about learning things so much more quickly than-

No. I couldn't think about the past right now.

“We'll be moving on Da'kul as soon as the roads are clear, yes?” I said.

Most of the time, I wouldn't bother with asking that question of a charge, but *this particular one* loved to change the script on me at the last minute. I did my best to stay on top of his erratic behavior, or I did so as much as I could, at least.

“Yeah, that's the plan,” Raimie said. “Eledis, Marcuset, and I have discussed it into the ground already, and we still have at least a week before the winter's snow begins to melt. Who knows how many times they'll want to go over it again before then?”

“You know... you could always ignore them when they ask to do that,” I said, already smiling at what I knew his reply would be.

As expected, Raimie wrinkled his nose as he said.

“Maybe... but I don't want to think about how Eledis would react to that.”

He shuddered, and I suppressed both a need to laugh and a vicious desire to maul that old man's face off. He didn't deserve to go anywhere near my friend...

Hell, tonight was shaping up to be a difficult one, at least mentally.

After several minutes of silence had passed, I noticed that Raimie was roughly rubbing his arms, and sighing, I shrugged out of my coat. It wasn't like I needed it right now. We were getting close to where the soldiers—and Raimie—had been bedding down, and once we'd reached that place, I'd

need to change into my uniform, ever to present as the silent and shining bodyguard of Auden's soon-to-be king.

Silently, I offered the coat to my friend, and after glancing askance at me—which of course made me roll my eyes and shake the coat at him—he took the damn thing, letting out a relieved sigh.

“Thanks,” he mumbled under his breath.

I just shrugged, shoving my hands in my pockets with a hum on my lips again, until we reached our destination and Raimie disappeared behind a tent flap.

It was all part of the job, as I kept having to remind myself. Here, I wasn't a friend, no matter what Raimie might have recently claimed. While in this hostile land, I was the bodyguard and spy of a primeancer king—stuck in enemy territory—doing everything I must to keep him alive.

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