

Chapter 100: Wrecked Plans

Eledis

Storming into the Ministers' chamber, I roared, "All right, you lot! What's so difficult that you couldn't figure it out on your own?"

I'd been so close to happiness with Illasaya, only to have it snatched away at the last moment. It was enough to make even the most congenial of men irritable, and congenial, I was not.

This had better be good.

The Minister's Chamber was decidedly less populated than when I'd been king. Five people: Kylorian, Oswin, Marcuset, and the two Eliskians whose names I could never remember—Umvarith? Xyro?—versus the dozens who'd crowded the room centuries ago.

They were huddled in front of the windows that overlooked the city with an unspoken anxiety tautening the air. I strode to join them, and as if breaking free of a haunted reverie, Marcuset faced me with his hands raised.

"Eledis..." he said.

The petrified look on my friend's face quickened my step rather than slowing it, as Marcuset had probably intended, and I soon drew even with the other ministers.

For a moment, I didn't understand what had them so concerned. Elisk presented the perfect picture of a peaceful evening with citizens going about their business in their usual, unhurried pace, but when I inspected the plains outside the city wall, my heart skittered to a stop.

A moving carpet of flesh and armor had blanketed what had once been flourishing grass while the fading sunlight glinted off steel. An army, one that we'd never called for, and-

I clutched my chest, leaning against a window frame as my heart tried to break out of its flesh-and-bone cage.

An enemy was approaching Elisk, and no one was waiting on top of the wall to greet them.

"How did this happen?" I hissed. "How did Doldimar—"

Because who else could it be?

“—sneak up on us like this, and *where* are our soldiers?”

“Over the last few days, the city guard’s been needed more than ever to soothe the tension between the races,” Kylorian said. “I had to pull defenders off of the wall to keep the peace.”

“All of them?” I growled.

I rounded on the younger man, the one who looked so like Nebailie, and as Kylorian cowered before my wrath, a cold wash dampened the heat of my anger. It was the same face my brother had worn when our father...

I sighed.

“Go rally the troops, Ky, fast as you can, and we might have a chance,” I said. “Their orders are to defend the wall the best they can, focusing on the gates. When they’re overwhelmed, they’re to fall back to the palace.”

Curtly nodding, Kylorian made to leave before I pulled him up short with a final instruction.

“Take Marcuset with you,” I said. “He can help.”

“What?” both men exclaimed before diverging.

“My place is with you!” came from Marcuset.

“I don’t need any help,” said Kylorian.

Alouin, mortal beings and our insistence on letting emotions rule us.

“Kylorian, you’re about to face *Doldimar*,” I said. “I assume four years haven’t dulled your memory of what the Dark Lord can do?”

The younger man roughly recoiled, slapping a hand to the back of his neck, before staring at his feet.

“That’s what I thought,” I said. “You’ll need all the help you can get, and Marcuset has more experience with battles like this than you ever will. He goes with you. Understood?”

Kylorian moved his head the merest fraction of an inch in acceptance.

“And Marcu... Emir.”

Lowering my voice, I infused warmth into it, adding a tinge of urgency to denote what I must wordlessly convey.

“Watch him.”

My best and only friend clicked his heels together as he held a hand over his heart, bowing.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he said.

He rose, cocking his head as if to ask *Did you like the performance? and I'll see you on the other side, right?* Imperceptibly nodding, I shooed both men away. My friend led Kylorian out of the room, peppering the younger man with questions while he summoned a host of weapons from Alouin knew where.

Good. That was settled. It was a stopgap move for now, but it was better than nothing.

When I returned my attention to the remaining ministers, I smirked at their ruffled composes, although... anxiety had become a standard look for Oswin in the days since the Anniversary Ball.

“What?” I snapped. “Don’t pretend that you haven’t noticed my exact resemblance to the old king in the years we’ve worked together. I assumed you three knew that I was him, based on your constant hostility toward me.”

Opening his mouth to retort, Oswin reached for his weapons, but I waved him into silence.

“Don’t worry. Now that I know my heart's desire won't demand the throne, I’m not a threat to Raimie,” I said. “I want to be king as much as I want to lose the coming battle. Raimie can keep the title and all the pressure that comes with it.”

The tension holding Oswin upright loosened, and he clutched at the windowsill as if his strings had been cut. That man did not look good. A disconcerting mix of red and bruise-like purple rings hung beneath his eyes, and his normally impeccable hygiene had taken a hit, leaving behind a patchy forest of stubble and knotted, mussed hair. Even his uniform had suffered with several snapped buttons and stains marring the front of it.

I’d hate to distress the man further—he’s been a useful tool over the years—but...

“How exactly did an army of that size sneak up on the capital without the Hand noticing?” I asked.

“The five of us-” Oswin started.

“Four, I think it’s now safe to say,” the human minister—Umvarith, I decided—interrupted.

Oswin sucked in air as if gut-punched, and that intake stiffened and straightened him until he towered over the rest of us. I watched him struggle to keep grief off his face, to stop his tears’ insistent crawl to the surface and internally nodded.

Good man. We couldn’t afford for our best spy to devolve into a shuddering pile of pain, not now. He could indulge in it once this was over.

“The four of us,” Oswin slowly said, “aren’t enough to cover the entire realm by ourselves, especially if we’re expected to safeguard the royal family as well. Protecting Auden as a whole is the military’s job.”

“If I were to guess, I’d say that this army marched from the former Eselan Haven. Elisk’s proximity to the Haven might have allowed the enemy to advance on the city without a warning reaching us first. A threat like this is why I’ve been pushing for the establishment of a garrison on the Haven-Auden border, but the ministers have never provided enough troops or funds to support one.”

Oswin stopped, letting his unspoken accusation hang heavy in the air, until eventually, the Eselan minister—Xyro?—cleared his throat.

“The past is the past. Let’s focus our efforts on our current disaster,” he said. “How do we plan on surviving the army that’s coming for us?”

No one had an answer for him. Even I was relegated to silence.

At Raimie’s insistence, we ministers might have made several plans to resist the eventuality of Doldimar’s return, but all of them had assumed that we’d have time to prepare before the enemy stood on our doorstep. As it was, we had—I glanced out the window—an hour, maybe two. If Kylorian and Emir could convince our troops to man the wall in that short span of time, I’d count it as a miracle, but even then, how long could we last?

For the first time, I caught myself wishing that Raimie was with me. Much as that boy’s presence disturbed me, certain situations called for him. For instance, when his ministers balked at solving a problem, who did they usually turn to for a solution?

A crash broke our silence, and I spun, hardly daring to believe that my thoughts alone had summoned Raimie, but that hope was quickly squashed. A few feet distant, a teenager was fighting to disentangle himself from the curtains that he’d gotten caught in. Out of breath from that struggle, he sprang to his feet, scanning the room without truly seeing it.

“Ohthankthegodsfoundit,” he exhaled in a burst.

“Tejesper,” I cautiously said.

The Daevetch primeancer recoiled from the noise I’d made with his hands coated in shadows, but the confusion clouding his eyes quickly cleared when he saw us.

“Ministers!” he said, dispelling his summoned dark energy. “I’m sorry to be short, but I must see the queen. Where is she?”

Alouin, he was twitchy. Swallowing hard, I slowly backed away. The more distance I could put between me and a possibly mad Daevetch primeancer, the better. In contradiction to me, Oswin moved forward with his hands extended.

“Calm down, Tejesper,” he said. “What’s wrong? Where’s Raimie?”

“He’s on the isle, distracting Doldimar, or he was when I left,” Tejesper said with the words almost vomited from him. “I’m not sure how long I was lost in the shadows.”

His eyes landed on the door.

"I must inform the queen that an attack is imminent!"

Dismissing us, he briskly strode toward what must seem like an escape.

"We already know," I said, halting Tejesper mid-step.

When I pointed toward the windows, the teenager stumbled in his dash to press his nose against the glass.

"No..." he moaned. "No, no, no!"

A strained noise wrenched through the teenager's despair.

"Tejesper," Oswin said with something awful in his voice, "what do you mean 'Raimie's distracting Doldimar'?"

The Daevetch primeancer snapped his tear-streaked face toward the spymaster.

"What I said," he said. "Doldimar came to play his games with the king, but Raimie wasn't having any of it. He sent me here to raise the warning, but I'm too late, and we're going to die..."

He returned to the view outside, drawn like a moth to the flame, and once he'd fully faced it, his face slackened as if in the beginning stages of intoxication.

"Take me to him," Oswin said. "I won't let that idiot get himself killed when I can help him. Not again."

"Can't. Orders are to retreat to the fallback point once the message is delivered," Tejesper said in a sing-song voice and with a grin pulling at his lips. "Apparently, me and mine will be useless against Doldimar, despite hopes to the contrary."

Retreat. Fallback point. Take me to him. Hearing these things, an idea started tickling at the back of my mind. If only the others would hush long enough for it to fully form.

"I don't give a damn about your orders!" Oswin growled. "I care about my friend. Take me to him! Now."

He reached for Tejesper's shoulder, but before his hand could land, the spymaster was on the ground with Tejesper's shadow-covered fist where Oswin's stomach had just been.

"I follow the king's orders, not yours," he said.

Then, he slumped against the glass with the fingers of one hand splayed there, and my stomach twisted as I realized exactly why Daevetch primeancers would be problematic in a fight against Doldimar.

“Then, why—”

Struggling to his feet, Oswin coughed.

“—aren’t you following your orders? Why aren’t you at the fallback point with your brethren?”

Fallback point. Retreat. Take me. Brethren.

As a plan crystallized in my head, I somehow managed to hide my hiss, all while suppressing a savage desire to lash out at someone.

Oh, Illasaya... she’d forgiven me for so much. I hope she could forgive this.

“Tejesper’s stayed because he’s realized that he and his fellow primeancers can do more for the king’s people,” I said. “Everyone knows that their safety is Raimie’s highest priority. If he were here, he’d change his orders for the Daevetch primeancers.”

Both Oswin and Tejesper were staring at me like I’d lost my mind. Unlike them, the ministers were doing their best to become invisible, but this was good. If I could capture his attention, the teenager wasn’t completely lost in Doldimar’s sway.

“Exactly how would the king change his orders?” Umvarith eventually said.

I was glad someone had asked.

“The Daevetch primeancers can evacuate the city,” I said.

Single-word questions burst on my ears, and making a face, I waved for the others to be quiet.

“Daevetch primeancers have the ability to travel across long distances near-instantaneously, and when using it, they can take other people with them,” I said. “On the day of his investiture, it’s how the king rescued the queen.”

“All true,” Tejesper said before raising a finger, “but! Shade melding requires extreme force of will, and it’s not exactly the definition of precise. My trip to reach Elisk took at least a dozen tries. Only the exceedingly powerful among us manage to land where they want to go on their first try.”

“We don’t need precision. Being anywhere besides the city would be preferable right now,” I said. “Do you know what will happen when the gates fall and the Kiraak stream into Elisk?”

Tejesper curled his hands into fists.

“Yes,” he said, “which is why I’ll stay and retrieve Nessaira from wherever she’s hiding, but you shouldn’t involve the others. They’re only children. I can barely resist Doldimar’s pull. What do you think will happen to them, if they’re exposed?”

I pointed at a steadily advancing army and the tranquil city below us.

“Children also live on those streets. They laugh and play while their parents watch over them, but their short lives are about to be uprooted,” I said. “Your people can help those children. They should be given the chance to do so.”

The other four people in the room held their breath while Tejesper fought against my conclusions, but soon enough, the fists at his sides unclenched while a long sigh escaped from him.

“I’ll ask,” he said. “What’s our target destination when we return to evacuate the city?”

“The gardens,” I said.

Rhylix’s forest was the most easily recognizable landmark in Elisk, and as an added benefit, a second wall surrounded it. Under its canopy, Rhylix and Nessaira had taken their primeancer students to train many times before.

“Aiming for a familiar target will make our task easier. Thank you,” Tejesper said. “I’ll bring help as soon as I can.”

Stalking into a patch of shadows, he vanished.

“So, the civilians are handled,” Oswin said. “How do we hold the city?”

“We don’t,” I said, “or rather, we hinder Doldimar for as long as we can in order to evacuate as many Eliskians as possible.”

“But-” Xyro started.

“Look at that army, minister,” I said. “How many Kiraak do you see? A thousand? Five?”

“Looks more like twenty thousand,” Oswin said, answering for the other two. “Fifteen, if we’re lucky.”

“And how many of our soldiers are in the city, rather than scattered throughout the kingdom?” I asked.

“One thousand, four hundred and sixty-four,” Oswin said, hugging himself.

That gave me pause. Why were the city guard’s numbers so low?

“Exactly,” I managed to say without my voice shaking. “My hope is that we can last long enough to evacuate a significant chunk of the population, but those hopes aren’t high.”

“So, that’s it?” Umvarith drawled. “The plan is to fight for as long as possible and then run? Sounds to me like you’re taking the coward’s way out. Again.”

I took a calming breath. The other man was using sarcasm and anger to blunt his terror. He hadn’t meant what he’d said.

“Do you have a better idea?” I asked. “Because if so, I’m all ears.”

Umvarith merely clenched his lips together, unable to speak.

“If not, I’d appreciate it if you, Xyro, and your respective networks gathered Elisk’s citizens in the gardens,” I said. “I know it will be difficult, but try to keep them calm. You should be good at appeasement like that, or you wouldn’t hold ministerial positions.”

The Eliskians met the challenge with puffed-out chests and blustered words of acceptance before rushing out of the room.

Staring after them, I muttered, “Huh. That’s the first time I’ve guessed a minister’s name correctly.”

“What about me?”

And I jumped. Somehow, I’d forgotten about the spymaster. Even when he was part of a conversation, he blended into the background, but since he was here, what mission could I relegate to Oswin...?

Oh! Perfect for a spy!

“Find Ren and try to convince her to leave,” I said. “Protect her.”

Oswin blanched, which I found amusing. I could hardly blame him, though. The queen had been getting increasingly irritable the longer she’d been with child, and if that weren’t enough, she’d probably mirror her husband’s habits, insisting that she stay with her people until the last possible second.

But this was needed.

Grabbing the spy’s arm, I said, “Oswin, listen to me. Your task might not be the most important from the city’s standpoint, but it’s essential for Raimie’s sake. If either Ren or the baby dies...”

Nylion would assume control.

“I know you’ve always found my family’s foretelling silly, but you didn’t know the seer who made it like I did. Drena was many things, but she was never wrong. Raimie is required if we’re ever to rid the world of Doldimar. Don’t let the deaths of his wife or child compromise him.”

Gently, Oswin removed my hand, all while regarding me with inscrutable eyes.

“I understand and accept the task, Eledis,” he said. “If you don’t mind me asking, what are you planning to do?”

I smiled. How did I convey that despite my despair that this source of redemption had come in such a devastating way, joy was singing along my every nerve, saturating my mind with bright

liberation?

“I plan to fight,” I said.

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