

Chapter 103: Finishing Touches

Nylion, Rhylix

Nylion

In the dark of night, I waited for my target to come home. Raimie had fallen asleep not long ago, which had let me take control with relative ease. I hated doing this, limiting its recurrences as much as possible, but I had a final threat to address.

Earlier today, we'd arrived in Tiro. Our reception here had been lukewarm at best, but to me, this had been preferable. With it, we hadn't attracted attention, even as our soldiers had readily acknowledged every sacrifice we'd made for them.

If only they knew how much we'd suffered... but considering Raimie was still in the dark about that, I couldn't blame everyone else for their ignorance.

I'd kept a careful watch while Raimie had greeted the commanders. Thankfully, things with Marcuset had resolved well. Other than a few gruff comments about us keeping too many secrets, he'd seemed quite proud of Raimie, which had been a relief. I hadn't looked forward to having that man as an enemy.

Gistrick had been a different story. While he hadn't been hostile toward us, he had acted in a distant manner, which concerned me. I'd have to keep an eye on him.

But then, it had come time to reunite with Eledis and Aramar, our 'family', and I... I was ashamed to admit that I'd fled. I'd tried to pay attention while Raimie had said hello, but it had been too much for me, especially after everything that had happened over the last few days.

Soon enough, though, that unpleasant task had been concluded, and Raimie had finally gone to sleep, leaving me free to complete my business.

"This is a bad idea, Nylion," Chaos said beside me. "You shouldn't keep secrets from him."

Sighing through my nose, I settled deeper into my seat, never ceasing my fingers' tap on the desk in front of me.

You surprise me, Chaos, I said. Is not Deception and all other types of concealment a part of Daevetch?

“Of course they are, but this? Not talking to him? It’s not wise.”

I knew that. Trust me, I knew, but Chaos didn’t understand. I didn’t think they ever could understand.

So, instead of explaining how much I was protecting Raimie right now, I said, *I will eventually tell him, just not now. He is not ready for this. He is nearly there, but... not entirely. Not yet.*

And that was the truth. At the moment, Raimie was too blithely innocent to know about the underhanded and sordid things I did for us. Over the last year, he’d come to recognize that his high ethical standards prevented him from doing everything that we must for survival, but even now, he clung to them. Maybe soon, he’d loosen those standards, enough for me to share.

Not yet, though.

He was definitely nowhere close to ready when it came to knowing the full truth of our lives.

Across the room, the door opened—it had taken the bastard long enough to come home—and I waited for Tanwadur to notice me. He was halfway across the room before he did, and when it happened, he went for a drawer in a sideboard.

Clicking my tongue, I wagged a finger at him.

“Do not waste the effort,” I said. “I have already disposed of all weapons in this place.”

Tensing, Tanwadur faced me.

“What do you want?” he snapped. “Come to rub your victory in my face?”

“Not at all.”

When I straightened in my seat, Tanwadur flinched, which only made me sigh.

“Please, relax,” I said. “Despite your preconceived notions, I am not here to hurt you. Doing that would gain me nothing.”

It took a moment, but eventually Tanwadur accepted what I’d said, coming to sit opposite me.

“Why are you here, then?” he said.

“Simply put, to ensure that you cause... me no further problems.”

Gods, speaking in the singular was still uncomfortable.

"I know you will be tempted to undermine me now. Perhaps in the coming days, you will want to try a coup or something equally as damaging. I am here to present you with a better option."

Tanwadur's lips tightened—not a good sign—while he drew himself up.

"Which is?" he growled.

Leaning forward, I folded my hands on the man's desk.

"Tiro has a food problem," I said, "and during my soon to come activities, I am certain to liberate such food from the current people in power. I thought we could come to a mutually beneficial arrangement. You provide my people with a base of operations in Tiro, and I will feed its residents."

It was a good deal, to my mind at least, but Tanwadur only sneered at it.

"You're as horrible and manipulative as I thought," he spat. "Who'd hold a source of sustenance over so many people's heads? Not to mention how impossible refusing you would be with your army already inside Tiro's walls."

"Which is why I came to you tonight. Alone," I snapped.

I took a deep breath, letting it calm me down. I didn't know why Tanwadur was being so unreasonable, but it was irritating.

"I am not holding anything over your head. If you refuse my people sanctuary, I will do what I can to see that Tiro is fed, and I will lead my army away without a fuss."

True, because no matter my opinion on these matters, Raimie would see that these things were done.

"I am trying to make things easier for everyone. With this arrangement, perhaps the people of Tiro would be more willing to accept me and mine. I am merely trying to avoid further violence, unintentional as it may be on both sides."

For a moment, Tanwadur considered what I'd said before shaking his head.

"No, I can't believe you'd be so reasonable," he said. "Considering who you and your family are—"

Wincing, I snapped, "If anyone knows how despicable my family is, *it is me.*"

I had to bite my tongue to keep a sob from emerging, but when I could, I continued.

"I am trying to change that. I *do not* want to be like them."

As those words boomed around us, tears filled my eyes, and I swiped at them. I couldn't show such weakness now.

“You are right, though. I know how unbelievable this sounds,” I said. “You should not answer me now. Take some time to consider my proposal.”

When I got to my feet, Tanwadur hastily joined me.

“This concludes my business with you,” I said, “although...”

I wasn't sure if I should add anything more, but if *certain things* continued in the same manner, I should clear the way for Raimie.

“I would remind you that your daughter is a wise and capable woman,” I said. “She can make her own decisions, especially when it comes to who she allies with.”

I wasn't looking forward to having that conversation with Raimie. When it came to certain matters of the heart, there was a very good reason that he was clueless, and I was apprehensive of what might happen if he continued down his current path with Ren.

With his face darkening, Tanwadur said, “What's that supposed to mean?”

I spread my arms wide, grinning.

“Exactly what it sounded like.”

Then, I fell out of the open window behind me. I'd planned to leave this way, so I landed in a controlled manner, even if when I rose, I found Chaos shaking their head at me.

“Always so dramatic,” they said.

Only because drama worked best in most situations when I was in control.

Pulling from Chaos, I formed a Daevetch bubble around myself, ignoring the influx of inaudible dialogue that popped into being around me as a result, but that was easy. I was used to that sort of thing. Even still, I hated using this ability, mostly because Chaos showered me with disapproval when I did.

I swore that, especially in recent day, they'd been acting more like an Ele splinter than one belonging to Daevetch, all to protect their precious 'Balancer'. Not that I'd ever tell them that. I could only imagine the absolute mess that would come from that comment.

Still. Why couldn't they see that everything I did was to protect Raimie as well? He was my everything. I would do what I must to keep him safe.

Including slinking, invisible, to where my people had set up camp. Hopefully, Oswin wouldn't have noticed my absence from Raimie's tent, but... I couldn't bring myself to face him again. I couldn't bear to hear him call me 'Raimie'. Not tonight.

So. If he'd noticed my absence, I'd let Raimie handle it. It was something small that he could shoulder for me.

Rhylie

Several days after the battle, I found myself alone and unnoticed enough to use Ele. Finally, I'd have time to tie up the threads left dangling from my last conversation with Raimie.

Making a final leap, I balanced on one of the beams that made up the lattice hiding Tiro. Why in the void had Raimie decided to come up here, so far from the ground?

At least it would ensure that we had privacy.

Slowly, I made my way across the beam, refusing to look down, and when I reached my friend, he craned his neck to look up at me from where he was lying.

"Hey, Rhy! I was wondering when you'd find me," he said. "Care to join me?"

As he gestured to the beam in front of him, he sat up, and I made a face.

"Can we go somewhere else?" I said. "Maybe somewhere a little closer to the ground?"

With shock painted across his face, Raimie held a hand in front of his mouth.

"Why, Rhy! Are you afraid of heights?"

Huffing, I rested my hands on my hips.

"If you must know, yes," I said. "Neither of us would survive a fall from this height, and I don't want to die like that. Not again."

Gods, talking like this with him felt strange.

With a frown, Raimie said, "I'd think it would be quick."

"Yeah, you keep thinking that."

When I glanced through a hole in the ivy between us, I shifted in place, and Raimie winced.

"Sorry. Of course we can move," he said. "I just find this height freeing. No one besides you is likely to look for me so far in the air, not even Oswin."

As he stood, he made a face, which I could only laugh at.

"Getting sick of having a bodyguard already?" I said.

Brushing his hands off, Raimie peered at me through his hair's fringe.

“You know I am,” he said. “Alouin love Oswin for everything he’s doing, but hell, if it isn’t suffocating at times.”

He led the way toward a rock shelf, jutting out from the mountain, and when we stepped onto this solid patch of ground, perhaps he noted how much my shoulders had lowered from my ears because he flopped onto it.

Spreading his hands, he said, “So?”

With a chuckle, I got comfortable before pressing my fingers together.

“How are you holding up?” I said. “Things have been stressful lately.”

“Yes. Who’d have thought I’d be more afraid for my life after the battle than during it?” Raimie said with a snort. “That’s getting better, though. People are starting to discount the tales of me using primeancy during the battle. It’s amazing how willing they’ve been to ignore it. Not sure how comfortable I am with that.”

“At least you have their ignorance.”

I shook my head to stop Raimie from apologizing.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I am exceptionally good at surviving when people are hunting me, even when living among them.”

I chose to keep quiet about the harassment I’d already received. Thankfully, it hadn’t gotten violent yet, but that would come soon enough.

“I heard Tanwadur’s letting us stay in Tiro,” I said. “Your doing?”

For some reason, this made Raimie scowl.

“No. I don’t know why he’s allowing it, and given that he seems more unhappy with me than before, it makes me uneasy.”

Hmm. How curious. Add that to my long list of Raimie-related items that I should investigate.

“But...” he continued in a drawl, “right now, that doesn’t matter. I have somewhere to start this mission of freeing Auden from. Hell if I know how to actually do that, though.”

I gave him time to think, watching him stare at his hands in his lap.

“They look at me with such trust, Rhy,” he said. “Sure, I helped get them through their first week in this land, but that’s nothing when compared to everything that’s left. How will I keep them safe?”

Oh... well did I know this look. Only the best of my allies had worn it, and somehow, seeing it on Raimie didn’t surprise me. When I rested my hand on the stone in front of my friend’s knee, he

focused on me.

“First of all, we take it a step at a time,” I said. “So, think with me. When it comes to planning our next move, what do we most need?”

Without hesitation, Raimie said, “Better intel. We can’t know where or how to start our resistance if we don’t learn how Doldimar is controlling Auden.”

That answer had come much more quickly than I’d expected, but really. By now, surprises like this from Raimie should be normal for me.

“Exactly,” I said. “And how do we get it?”

This question gave Raimie pause.

“Ask for details from Tiro’s citizens first,” he said. “I’ve already been doing that, but they’re cut off from the rest of Auden. They glean enough information to help refugees escape from Harvested towns, but that’s all. No one knows which Enforcer controls which region, something that shifts quite often I’m told, and that’s just the first piece we’ll need.”

He’d been thinking about this. Good.

“In my experience, the best way to remedy our lack of knowledge is to establish a spy network throughout the kingdom,” I said. “Oswin could help with that. Yes?”

When Raimie nodded, I could practically see the wheels turning in his mind.

“And while that’s happening, we can spread our influence in small ways,” he said. “We’ll start slow. Maybe by taking that nearby fort for ourselves?”

“Not a bad place to begin,” I said, “but remember. In this, you need only focus on one thing: getting me close to Doldimar. If you can mask my presence long enough to accomplish that goal, I can do my thing, thereby handing Auden to you on a silver platter. Trust me. Without their leader, the rest of his government will fall to pieces.”

I’d expected this to relieve Raimie. After all, I’d simplified a seemingly impossible task for him, but instead, he leaned away, frowning at me.

“What about what you were saying before?” he asked. “Ending the cycle that you’re caught in, yeah? How will a repeat of previous cycles end with anything but the eventual beginning of another?”

With a sharp inhale, I blinked at Raimie. I hadn’t thought he’d comprehended everything I’d told him on the night I’d shared my story. I’d thought it might have gotten lost in his shock, and I’d been grateful for that.

Because if he didn’t know how much hope he gave me, I didn’t have to acknowledge it either.

Here we were, though, with him refusing to let me trudge on in misery. Again.

Licking my lips, I carefully said, “I believe that in the process of reaching Doldimar, something new will come along to change things, something concerning you. I’ve never seen a dual primeancer like you before, Raimie, and I’ve certainly never considered that combining the primal forces, as you have, would be possible. You give me hope, my friend.”

With wide eyes, Raimie nervously chuckled.

“No pressure,” he said.

“It shouldn’t be, though,” I said. “It’s not something you should think about, honestly. Instead, you can help me with something else that’s related, and in so doing, you’ll help with my predicament.”

Thank the gods, that idea helped Raimie relax.

“Sure. I’ll always help you,” he said with a sloppy smile. “What do you need?”

Now, I was curious whether I could say this next part out loud. I’d tried in the past—once, shortly before I’d surrendered to a mindless obedience of my role—but at the time, Creation had stopped me, overriding my decision to express a need I’d always had. At the time, it had been the last thing required for my breaking.

This time, they were looking away from me, almost in deliberate ignorance, so I decided to try again.

“My experiment, completed so long ago, was done to save the life of a boy I loved like a son,” I said. “Instead, it caused my world’s end, both personally and globally: the start of the first primeancy calamity, and all of the ones since then? Also my fault, even if I ended them too.”

I was nowhere close to finished, but leaning forward, Raimie cut in.

“Wait. You’re the Eselan Preserver from the tales?” he said before shaking his head. “Given everything else, I shouldn’t be surprised. You know he was my hero growing up, right?”

And that pained me, more than he could know. Sooner or later, he’d understand all of the awful things his ‘hero’ had done.

Still, I smiled.

“At least I brought *someone* joy,” I said.

Raimie must have heard something in my voice because he settled back on his hand with a grimace.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he said. “You were saying?”

What *had* I been saying?

“You were telling him your end goal,” Creation said.

Right. Given how often they’d stopped me from sharing this before, why had they reminded me of it now?

Did that matter?

Leaning back until I could see the stars, I stared at them for a while, enjoying the quiet.

Eventually, though, I said, “I’m so tired, Raimie. So much pain and death... it’s destroyed who I was and anything good I could have been. So many of my loved ones have died that when it happens now, I feel nothing but resignation.”

Lowering my head, I met Raimie’s eyes.

“Don’t let my moroseness worry you, though. I don’t want to die. I just want the cycle to end, both for myself and the world. When the primal forces gained a link to the physical world, it threw reality’s balance into chaos. Their Eternal War has spilled into our realm, and the suffering it’s caused...”

It could never be properly explained or described. Best to move on.

So, I forged forward, and for the first time in millennia, I spoke my heart’s desire.

“I want to right this disbalance, Raimie, and I need your help to do it.”

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