

Chapter 3: A Celebration

Raimie

When an invisible and *impossible* force stopped pulling me backward, I oriented to where I was.

What the *hell* had that been? As I jogged home in starlight, I tried to piece the phenomenon that I'd witnessed into my limited understanding of the world, and it fit nowhere. Light spawned from nothing and a sword in the middle of a forest? Those sounded like story elements pulled from a fairy tale.

Magic. It had reminded me of magic, but that was impossible in modern times. The Esela, Alouin's chosen, had vanished long ago, and any other magical phenomena—the legendary primeancers included—were a myth. They had to be.

So, what had that been?

Without more information, I was at a loss, and I *did not* like mysteries. Maybe Eledis' store of books would hold an answer, both for this puzzle and my earlier Auden conundrum. I'd look into it and solve the puzzle because that was what I did. I couldn't let it lie.

I couldn't decide whether having two anomalies visit me in one day was a blessing or a curse. I welcomed their distraction from what today represented, but at the same time, dealing with these irritations alongside what was waiting for me at home seemed... irksome.

At least the rain had stopped.

As I approached home, a cracking twig froze me solid. Had I run across one of the predators that stalked these woods? One of Queen Kaedesa's rare patrols?

The sight of torchlight had me lowering my bow, if not my focus. If this was a patrol, I shouldn't have anything to worry about, but it paid to be prepared. Considering how dark it had gotten...

Well. Many dangerous things came out after the sun went down.

As I trod forward on silent feet, however, I recognized the voice muttering ahead of me.

"Eledis!" I called.

Firelight flickered across the foliage while I stepped into my grandfather's field of view, and seeing me, Eledis slumped before shaking his head.

"There you are!" he said. "We've been worried sick."

Of course they had been. I shouldn't have stayed out past sunset.

"Sorry. I lost track of time," I said. "Where's dad?"

"Waiting for us back home. Someone had to stay put in case you showed your face," Eledis said. "Alouin, Raimie! You can't scare us like that."

Wincing, I patted at the air.

"Like I said, I'm sorry. If it helps, it won't happen again. I meant to head home earlier. Fell asleep instead."

Again, Eledis shook his head at me.

"I suppose it couldn't have been helped. You've always been fiercely independent," he said. "Well? Let's get back before your father keels over."

He turned to lead the way, but I paused. Wouldn't it be better, if possible, to keep my father out of my quest for answers?

"Here. Before I forget," I said.

Extending my borrowed book to him, I waited for Eledis to take it before saying.

"I found something interesting while reading it. Mentions of a place I've never heard before. Auden, is what the author called it. Do you have any other books about it?"

Eledis wordlessly stared at me, as if judging how serious I was. I wasn't sure why he'd gotten so intense over a single, seemingly innocent question, but I withstood his silence regardless.

Once his decision was made, he said, "I have one. I'll get it for you on our way back."

That had gone more easily than I'd expected. Usually, my grandfather held secrets—which based on his behavior, this clearly was—close to heart.

"Thanks," I said.

Nodding, Eledis once more moved to lead the way out of the forest, but I didn't stop him this time. In silence, we hiked through the wood's confines until light beckoned us from its embrace.

The small homestead that I called home opened up before us: cottage, hut, smoking house, and a garden plot. Rather than the release of tension that the sight usually wrought, however, a clenching hand took hold of my throat, closing it.

I trudged behind Eledis to where he kept his store of knowledge, waiting while he ducked inside. When he returned, he withheld his retrieved book.

"You can't tell your father about this," he said.

An easy enough promise to make. When I nodded, Eledis handed the book over, and the two of us made for the homestead's second house. My grandfather threw its doors open, but I didn't follow him. I didn't want what was waiting in there.

But today marked the day that my mother had died because of me. No matter what else it might be, I owed my father a show of gratitude for whatever he'd provided this year. It was the smallest gesture I could offer to make up for what I'd done.

Plastering a smile in place, I walked into warmth and light and love.

"Happy name day!" my father and Eledis exclaimed as I came inside.

Unclasping my sodden cloak, I glanced over the contents of the cottage's table. Fresh meat, a nice change of pace from the dried strips we typically ate. A jug of my father's favorite brandy, hidden except for at the best and worst of times.

And a small cake.

Spreading my cloak to dry, I said, "I'm guessing that came from Fissid. Who should I thank the next time we visit?"

"Mistress Ytrella. She told me to say hello," Eledis said. "Sit down, Raimie! We have that wretched song to sing."

"Hey!" my father snapped. "Samantha loved that..."

I hid my smile as those two bickered, letting that bit of normalcy offset the sickness roiling in my guts, but when I sat at the table, my family fell silent. Soon enough, though, they launched into my mother's traditional name day song.

"Happy birthday to you..."

Listening to their discordant noise, I struggled to maintain my smile. This melody seemed wrong without my mother's voice to balance their toneless droning.

Once it was over, my father set a candle in front of me.

"Make a wish," he said.

I'd never understood this tradition. Why should I wish for something when magic could no longer fulfill it?

My mother, however, had insisted on the practice every year, and after what had happened in the woods earlier, I didn't know whether I could dismiss the superstition behind it as easily as I had before. So, as I gazed into the flickering flame's depths, I considered what I wanted.

What did I desire above all else?

Once I'd posed the question to myself, the answer came easily. Leaning forward, I blew out the candle, and my family clapped.

"What did you wish for?" my father asked.

With a smile, I said, "I can't share, not if I want it to come true. Remember?"

Making a face, my father waved at the meal arranged in front of us.

"Fine. Keep your secrets," he said. "Now, let's celebrate!"

As the evening progressed, my efforts to maintain a pleasant demeanor got easier. The room's focus shifted away from me, and as we shared this meal, I could almost dismiss an underlying conviction that this commemoration of me dishonored the memory of my murdered mother.

As the meal drew to a close, leaving my father and Eledis slightly drunk, I asked a question that had been rattling in me since the woods.

"I have a puzzle for you," I said.

After I'd spent so long in self-imposed silence, my break from it snapped my family's attention back to me.

"Say you stumbled onto something amazing," I continued. "Something that you both wanted and feared. Something that might change your life, for good or ill, but that called to you so fiercely that you couldn't deny it."

I could *still* hear that damn ringing.

"Would you take the chance offered to you?"

Eledis and my father exchanged glances, and even drunk as they were, I could see a silent conversation taking place between them.

"That's a good question. Let me think on it," Eledis eventually said. "Meanwhile, it's past time I got some rest."

After rising from the table, he stopped beside me, bending to clasp my shoulder.

"Read what I gave you," he whispered.

He was out the door before I could stop him. What did the book he'd given me have to do with my question?

Left alone with my father, I faced his inscrutable gaze, internally wincing. That expression usually meant I'd done something I shouldn't have.

"In this proposed scenario, are you unhappy before getting this offer?" my father asked.

What a good question. Most of the time, I had no complaints about my life. I liked the solitude found so far from civilization, broken only by familial communion. I liked the day in, day out routine I'd found here. I liked its lack of surprises.

But that did nothing to negate the engrained sense of *wrong* that had ever hovered over me. Something had always been missing from my life, but I didn't know what it was. Something essential to me.

I couldn't, however, tell my father about that, not again.

"I'm satisfied with my life," I said.

"Then, why would you change it?" my father asked.

He gathered several dirty dishes from the table before inclining his head toward the rest.

"Help me clean up?"

As I washed dishes beside my father, my thoughts never stopped turning to a miraculous sword in the forest or to the book in my cloak's pocket, and once we'd finished cleaning up, my father pulled me to his chest.

"Thank you for putting up with us. I know how much you hate your name day," he said into my hair. "Your mother would be proud."

My father released me, and I watched him get ready for bed with a grimace barely held in check. After what he'd said, I'd never avoid nightmares tonight.

TTS Chapter Three

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