

Chapter 34: The Withriingalm

Raimie

For six days, we marched, quickly establishing a routine. The group rose with the dawn, breaking camp before setting off. We usually stopped for a midday meal, but that was the only rest we enjoyed before it was time to set up camp for the night.

Everything in between was a steady hike until we ran across a town. When that happened, my family and I, along with a token force of Zrelnach, approached it to negotiate for supplies, leaving most of the group far from the town's outskirts.

Delays like this only occurred twice, but both times, we came away with more items to help us reach Sev: horses, wagons, tackle, arrows for those who'd been hunting, crates of food, blankets for when the nights grew colder, and the like. To me, our little band of soldiers was starting to resemble an army, and I didn't know what to think about that.

Honestly, I didn't know what to think about a lot of things.

First, the Zrelnach, whose attitude toward me fluctuated from fearful to resentful to near worshipful.

That last one, I wasn't sure how to handle. I couldn't change who people hated, so when I saw it directed at me, I acted no differently from how I normally would. The Zrelnach's opinion would shift, or it wouldn't.

Fear was easy to overcome. All it required was an effort to seem harmless or even kind, and it eventually dissipated.

But awe? When I had no clue how I should react to it, seeing that look on other people's faces just made me uncomfortable.

At least they didn't think I was crazy.

Second, the anomalies, my splinters, who'd been watching me with concern.

Since not much had been required from me lately, I'd had them stay visible more often, getting used to them hanging around. If they were to play such a significant role in my life, if I was a...

I couldn't have them hiding in the background, like I had to this point.

They kept trying to discuss... *it* with me, but I was having none of that. Every time one of them had brought *it* up, I'd ignored them until they started buzzing, which left them irritated. No one had mentioned *it* for the last couple of days, so maybe they were learning to leave it be.

Third, a creeping suspicion that Ferin's offhand comments about me claiming the Audish throne might have more meaning than I'd hoped.

Our lessons together had included subjects like diplomacy, macroeconomics, the different types of governances, and the many versions of etiquette found among the world's kingdoms, although we had spent one evening on military history.

I considered the topics that my teacher had chosen for me, and I saw a crash course on how to be a monarch, which made me uneasy. I tried not to think about what she wanted from me.

I'd done a lot of not thinking lately.

Over the course of this morning's march, a mist had slowly settled over the group until it was swirling all around us. As water merged with soil, the bank of the river we'd been traveling beside had become less distinct, and the terrain had changed from an endless sea of grass to splotches of pooled water, muddy ground, and an abundance of reeds.

A marsh.

Frowning, I pulled up my mental map of Ada'ir. I'd heard something about the swamplands on this side of the Fractured Peaks, something hair raising, and on inspecting the map, I sucked in a breath.

As I hurried through the Zrelnach, I noticed how tense they'd become, how their heads were ever on a swivel, and wanted to kick myself for not seeing it earlier.

Then again, if I had, what would I have done? Altered our path? That would have pissed Eledis off more than he already was.

When would he start talking to me again?

The horses and carts of our wagon train had kept to a maintained path, one that was elevated out of the bog. I jogged beside them until I found the one I wanted, but then, I vaulted into its seat with its wheels still rumbling beneath me.

Catching my breath, I asked, "Why are we headed into the Withriingalm?"

“Well, hello there, Raimie,” my father said with amusement plucking at his lips. “So nice of you to speak with me.”

I winced.

“Sorry. I’ve been busy. And you didn’t answer my question.”

Tucking his chin to his chest, my father said, “No. I didn’t.”

And nothing else. Was he keeping something from me again? I’d thought we were past that.

Looking at him, though, I bit my lip. My father was holding the reins in a white-knuckled grip while working his jaw. Damn, it looked like he was trying to gnaw a hole in his cheek.

Was he afraid?

“Dad... how worried should I be about this place?” I asked. “I know the stories. Wraiths haunting the mists, luring people to drown in sucking mud. Souls getting pulled out of recently dead bodies and the like. I thought the tales were a metaphor for bandits or something similar. Are they... not?”

After learning how many things I’d once considered a myth were real, I could see this story having a grain of truth to it too. If magic and Esela and... primeancers could exist, why not soul-sucking wraiths?

Barking a laugh, my father unfolded from his clenched state.

“No, those stories are just that. Tall tales,” he said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you worry. It’s just... your question. I don’t like remembering why we’re crossing these Alouin forsaken marshes. Normally, I’d bring you nowhere near an outlaw haven. For a while, I even argued with Eledis about coming here, but...”

He started chewing his cheek again, and I barely kept from clicking my tongue.

“Yes?” I said.

Sighing, my father said, “But it’s the fastest way to Sev, and we need to get there as soon as possible. Before we left Allanovian, we started getting reports of activity that can only have come from one of Doldimar’s minions, possibly Teron. Last I saw of him, the bastard wasn’t dead, although Alouin knows how.”

He looked mighty disgruntled about that idea, not that I could blame him.

“Anyway, we thought ourselves reasonably safe from this person. The reports were coming from the most random of locations, as if their originator were aimlessly hunting for us, but we’ve heard stories of similar activity in the towns where we’ve stopped, and it’s become clear that the trail of this activity is converging on us. Whoever’s on our tail, they’re tracking us now. Given that, we need to get ourselves across the Narrow Sea. Soon.”

That would explain why we'd entered the Withriingalm but...

"We're running?" I asked. "That seems..."

Unbidden, Bright popped into being, sitting between me and my father. With its teeth bared and its face red, it looked livid.

"You *cannot* run away from the enemy," it snapped. "It is your responsibility to destroy-"

"But as he is, the 'enemy' would destroy him."

While I fought to conceal how badly my heart had just leaped in my chest, Dim grinned from where it had appeared, crouching in front of my face with its arms on its knees. Clearly pleased with itself, it rocked back, aiming to land with its head in Bright's lap, but with a squeak, Bright scrambled into the back of the wagon. From where its hair was brushing my father's thigh, Dim pouted at its counterpart, dangling its legs in my lap.

"The one chasing you is Teron, by the by," it said. "His Volatility piece says... well, they said a lot of unkind things, so I'll just translate it as 'Hi'."

Teron, the man who'd massacred Fissid. Teron, who'd almost killed me. Why did I want to rend that piece of shit to pieces and yet run screaming from him?

"It seems what, Raimie?"

Snapping my eyes to my father, I rubbed the back of my neck with a sheepish grin, all while blood drained from my face. Would my father realize what my distraction had meant?

What would happen if he had? Where I'd once thought such a revelation might have been harmful before, now I knew how devastating that could become because of... *it*.

"Seems wise is all," I said. "Sorry, dad. You know how I get, stuck in my head. I've always wondered if that's why I clung to the pretense of an imaginary friend for as long as I did. Nine years is such a long time."

Laughing, my father ruffled my hair.

"Maybe," he said. "You've always had the most vivid imagination."

"Not vivid enough when it came to my imaginary friend," I ruefully said. "I can't even remember his name. It started with an 'N', I think. Nelson, maybe? Navranthit? No, too complicated. N- n- n- Hmm. Nyl-"

"Raimie. We were talking about why we're in the Withriingalm?" my father said.

With an eyebrow raised, he looked concerned, so I abandoned the subject of my long-gone imaginary friend. It had served its purpose, distracting my father from my excessive

absentmindedness.

“Well, if we have someone on our tail, taking the quickest route to Sev makes sense,” I said. “How do you suppose this minion of Doldimar is tracking us, though?”

Bright and Dim, yet to vanish, joined my father in his indulgent look, although they didn't pat my knee like he did.

“They're following your sword, of course,” all three said with minor variations.

But only my father continued.

“I'll be grateful to reach Auden, if only because the weapon's damn ringing will stop. Or that's what the stories say, at least,” he said. “Since you first touched the blade, that noise has been giving me a migraine almost every day.”

Drawing my eyebrows together, I leaned toward Silverblade, currently hanging from my hip.

“Funny,” I drawled. “I don't hear ringing.”

“Of course you don't. You're... well, you're *you*, apparently,” my father said, waving at me. “And you know exactly which sword I meant, son.”

Yes, I did. Alouin damned Shadowsteal. I'd lost track of the sword after my Zrelnach trials, content to forget it existed, but apparently, that wish wasn't to be.

So, I noncommittally mumbled something, leaning on my knees with the intent of parting the mist with my glare alone. This didn't work, obviously, but it kept my mind off of the awkward silence between me and my father.

I wasn't sure how much time passed like this, enough for an argument to break out between Bright and Dim at least, but eventually, my father cleared his throat.

“I was hoping that you might tell me why you're avoiding Rhylix,” he said. “You two seemed close, which I found gratifying. I wasn't sure if you'd ever have friends.”

Rhylix. That was a... delicate subject.

“I'm not avoiding him,” I said. “Every night, he's been teaching me to fight after Ferin's had her turn at lessons.”

And with Dath as a fellow student no less. I'd found this development strange but not completely unwelcome.

Over the last few days, the trainee had lost his initial antagonism, and without that as a stumbling block between us, I'd found that I actually *liked* Dath, which was unsettling considering we'd been trying to kill each other within the last month.

“And outside of your training?” my father asked. “In the last few days, have you spoken to Rhylix about anything besides combat?”

I pressed my lips together. Hard.

It wasn't like I was purposefully dodging my friend. I just knew that if I spent time with him, *it* would come up. It was inevitable.

And I wasn't ready to continue that conversation.

“He told me what he shared with you in Path,” my father said.

My heart stopped. Slowly, I straightened, noting Dim and Bright crouching in front of my father. I couldn't tell if they were poised to attack or merely curious about the situation.

“He did,” I flatly said.

Alouin, did my father know? What would he do if he did? Would his love for me outweigh his disgust for... what I was?

“I won't hurt your friend, Raimie,” my father said. “I've known his secret since Fissid.”

So, Rhylix had only told my father about himself.

Wait.

Spinning on him, I said, “You've known for that long and have kept the secret? *Why?*”

And my father turned to stone.

“That man saved your life, gave you your hands back, and provided me with mobility after that disastrous fight with Teron,” he grated out. “I can never repay my debt to him so *no*. I did not and will not ever sell him out.”

With nothing else, I knew this to be true. Once someone had earned my father's trust, he was loyal to them no matter what harm they might later inflict.

I wasn't sure how I knew this. Our previous life of isolation had given me no examples to judge by, but *I knew*.

“And what do you think of Rhy's secret?” I asked. “Knowing what he is, do you think he's evil incarnate, like everyone else would?”

Arcing an eyebrow, my father asked, “Do you?”

Of course I didn't. I'd never thought primeancers were evil, but I blamed that disposition on learning about them through books, not people. Sure, certain tomes could be as opinionated as a human when discussing the subject, but most history books tried to stay objective with their

retelling of the past, documenting the good *and* the bad.

But I wouldn't admit my opinions on primeancers first, not with my connection to them. So, I stared at my father until he relented.

"What Rhylix can do," he said, "it's like any other power given to humanity or Esela. It, in and of itself, isn't evil, but the people who use it can be, and if they are, they'll abuse it in devastating ways."

All of which I knew. I tried not to wince at how casually my father could say something like that about... *it*.

"But!" he soon continued, lifting one finger. "Good people can use this power too, advancing the world in the process. They are just as legitimate users of primeancy as those with ill intentions. Which is a long way of saying that no, I don't think Rhylix is evil because of what he can do, and based off of what he's shown me so far, I'd say that he is, if fact, the opposite of evil."

"Hmm."

Cupping my palms in front of me, I remembered when Rhylix's hands had filled with light a few days ago. Could I do the same thing? Was using that power worth the risks that came with it?

"Is this why you've been avoiding him?" my father asked.

"No. Partially. I can't... I can't talk about it, dad."

Because yes, my father had accepted Rhylix for what he was, but would he do the same for me? Could I accept this gift without driving my family away? Could I let myself be a... primeancer?

Fear swelled in me at the idea, and I couldn't let my father see it.

"Thanks, dad," I mumbled. "I'm going to... yeah."

Leaping out of the wagon, I landed in mud while a wave of it splashed over me from the wheels, but I didn't notice. With my eyes unfocused, I swayed in place, comparing who I was now with who I'd been two months ago, and I didn't recognize myself. There was a disconnect here, one that could be explained if I could only find the missing piece.

But that missing piece wasn't clear.

Add to that how a part of me was so Alouin-damned eager to accept this newest revelation—how Rhylix had said, "You're a primeancer too, Raimie" and something had just *clicked*—and I was a child again, facing monsters in the dark. What my friend had told me had been something that I'd always known, spoken aloud, and it had *scared the shit* out of me. Still did.

So, I stood here and looked through my twins—were they shouting at me?—until the one in white disappeared, and my thoughts skipped on themselves all the while. Fear loudly rang in my ears.

Desperation twisted every part of me into knots. Self-disgust yanked my stomach up through my mouth.

And here I stayed, gibbering in my mind, until a word jolted me out of it. A name, so beloved. One that manifested for the briefest of moments—“Ny...”—before it was swallowed to the back of my mind again.

I straightened, only for someone to run into me.

A woman, an Eselan who wasn't wearing the Zrelnach's leathers, recovered from her stumble, reaching out to steady me.

“I'm so sorry!” she gasped. “Please, forgive me. I should have looked where I was- *Your eyes!*”

As her face slackened, I blinked at her, wondering why something was dully throbbing behind said eyes.

“What about them?” I asked.

“Their pupils... they're- they *were* so dilated, barely any irises left,” the woman said, “but... oh, Alouin. You're- you're *him*. The one who found-”

“It's just Raimie,” I said, rubbing my temples. “I'm sorry. Can you remind me where we are? I'm a little disoriented.”

With her brow wrinkling, the woman said, “The Withriingalm, Your- sir- Raimie.”

“That's right. I remember now,” I said. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” the woman said.

But she continued to linger. When I raised an eyebrow at her, she took a deep breath.

“Are you ok?” she rushed to ask.

Oh. Concern for me. How sweet of her.

Smiling, I said, “I'm fine. Everything will be fine.”

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