

# Chapter 35: Unexpected Guests

## Raimie

*As Nylion fuzzed over, I started asking, What are you talking—*

“—about?” I sleepily finished.

I blinked at the vague outline of Oswin, hovering over me, until he retreated.

“I’m sorry to wake you, sir,” he said, “but I’ve stumbled into one of those times of dire consequence that you mentioned.”

Removing his hand from my shoulder, the spy gave me space, and after swinging my legs over the bedside, I stretched.

“What’s the problem?” I said. “And how long have I slept?”

“It’s morning, sir. You got a full night’s rest for once, which is the good news I suppose.”

Falling silent, Oswin grimaced with one eye closing, which was not... good.

“What’s the bad news?” I asked.

“An unknown army gathered on the ridge overnight,” Oswin said, “and my scouts aren’t sure if it’s friendly.”

Any sleep that had been clinging to me vanished, and I was on my feet before I’d registered it.

“You’re only waking me up now?” I said, reaching for Silverblade.

“Marcuset didn’t think it was wise to wake you up until we were sure we needed you. As a commander, he can handle a hostile army by himself,” Oswin said. “When said army sends an envoy to initiate negotiations, though, is when he wakes up his king.”

Pausing in my rush out the door, I said, “Negotiations?”

Holding my arms out to either side, I looked down at my uniform's stiff, blood-soaked state. Given that, I could only imagine how the rest of me looked.

"Gods damnit. I'm a mess," I whispered. "I can't meet an envoy like this."

"It's a good thing I brought you a change of clothes, then," Oswin said.

He gestured to a uniform, lying on my cot.

"You can sponge off the dirt and grime at a wash basin, but I agree that we can't do much about your face. Those elephant ears!"

Glaring at Oswin, I growled, "Get out of here so I can change."

With an elaborate bow and a teasing grin, Oswin backed into the hallway.

No matter how much my mind was urging me to rush into my next task, I made myself take a moment to absorb everything that had happened in the last ten minutes. Learning of yet another threat on my life and to my people wasn't as much of a stressor as it should have been. It seemed I'd gotten used to that, which was... a little sad, honestly.

But fighting with Nylion? That had never happened before, not that I could remember at least. I wasn't even sure if we were fighting, but that conversation we'd had in our shared dream space... gods. I didn't know how to feel about it.

I hadn't thought I'd been avoiding my other half. In fact, I was sure I hadn't been, but... he was right that I'd been ignoring his feelings about certain things. Over the winter, I'd change the subject every time he'd reminded me about our memories or the fact that I needed to learn a new skill. I hadn't been doing it intentionally! But still, it had happened.

Why had I been avoiding these things?

In the end, I guessed the 'why' didn't matter. That problem had an easy fix, something I could handle the next time I slept.

So, I focused on the threat that had once more cropped up in the real world for now.

Taking off my ruined uniform brought me more relief than I'd expected. Too busy and exhausted to change since the battle, I'd almost forgotten whose blood had been stiffening this fabric. At that reminder, the dried, brown remnants leaving a crust on my skin left me trembling, and ignoring the host of scars across my chest and stomach, revealed by my lack of clothing, I hurried to swipe water over my body, even if its icy chill drew a hiss from me. With my teeth chattering, I donned yet another emblem-less uniform, reveling in its warmth, before retrieving Silverblade.

"How do I look?" I asked after calling Oswin inside.

He squinted at me for a moment.

“Decent,” he eventually pronounced. “May I?”

When he vaguely waved at my face, I nodded, and he used a knife to scrape stubble off of my face. He also trimmed my hair, although he left the strands hanging around my temple alone. Maybe he was hoping they’d disguise my ears or something.

Once he was done, Oswin stepped back, making an appreciative sound.

“That good, huh?” I said.

“You actually look... reputable, sir,” Oswin said.

I might have taken that as a compliment if he hadn’t sounded so surprised while saying it.

“Thanks...” I said, rolling my eyes. “Let’s see what this envoy wants, yes?”

We headed out.

Oswin must have chosen the cave I’d slept in because of how close it was to the stairs I’d created yesterday. If, by some harrowing happenstance, we needed to flee the Birthing Grounds, there would be an escape route easily within reach. I could appreciate his logic, no matter how typical it might be for a bodyguard like him.

When we reached them, I stopped at the base of the floating stairs.

With my hands on my hips and my head tilted back, I said, “I can’t believe this is still here.”

Hovering on the edge of my vision, Dim rolled their eyes.

“Did you think I was lying to you last week?” they said. “This will stick around, so long as you want it to. My whole wouldn’t give up a means of access to the physical plane so easily.”

Of course it wouldn’t.

*I know that, I said, but it’s one thing to hear how long Daevetch can last here and another to see it in action.*

Clicking their tongue, Dim said, “I’m getting real sick of people assuming I’m lying to them, just because my whole is associated with Deception.”

Snorting, I started up the stairs.

*I’d have had the same doubts, even if Bright had been the one to tell me about this, I said.*

“What?” Bright snapped, which only makes Dim snicker. “What possible reason could you have to trust *them* as much as you do me?”

*Well... I said, while I'm grateful for everything you two have done for me, including all the times you've saved my life, and I actually LIKE you, which is strange to think about, that doesn't change the fact that you both still want something from me. Something I don't know about. I know that's not your fault, and I don't blame you for it, but sometimes, this unknown makes it hard to trust you.*

I shrugged, even as I winced inside. Telling other people, especially the ones I liked, about difficult things always felt horrible, like I'd somehow violated all that was good in our relationship. Still, this was how I felt when around Bright and Dim. Keeping that to myself wouldn't help things between us.

While the two of them considered what I'd said, I forced myself to find another distraction from the growing distance between me and the ground. Normally, heights thrilled me, making me feel free in a way nothing else could, but right now, I was trusting my control of Daevetch to keep from plummeting to a bone-shattering death. I'd much rather have something sturdy, like tree branches or a roof, under my feet.

So, when Dim started up with a horrid mixture of coughing and gagging to my left, I stopped short, certain that my Daevetch source was about to disappear on me. Behind me, Oswin tripped over his feet, which had me wincing, but I forgot about that on catching sight of my splinters.

Both Bright and Dim were floating in the air beside the stairs, but Dim had hunched over on themselves with their hands on their knees. With an almost fond expression on their face, Bright was patting their back.

"I could have told you that would happen," they said.

*And what, exactly, happened?* I said.

Had Dim somehow been hurt? If they had, how did I keep them away from whatever had hurt them in the future?

Waving at me, the Daevetch splinter hoarsely said, "Please, stop worrying. I was only trying to tell you about... that thing you mentioned before, but once again, I failed. Can't believe I'm about to say this, but *fuck* my whole for restraining me like this. Damn, that was idiotic. I don't know why I thought this time would be any different."

Oh.

Sighing, I shook my head before continuing up the stairs.

*I've told you before. I don't want you to hurt yourselves when trying to share this,* I said. *I never said that I don't trust you AT ALL, only that I don't FULLY trust you, and that's not a bad place to be with me. I only trust one person fully, and that trust only exists because I consciously chose to trust him in that way.*

"Rhylix," Dim darkly muttered.

Yes, *Rhylix*, I said, rolling my eyes. *Dim*, you should get used to him being around. I'll be working with him for A WHILE, and I'm hoping he'll stick around after *Doldimar's* defeated this time.

Making a face, *Dim* mouthed several curses while *Bright* somehow managed to laugh and sob at the same time.

"It would be nice if the backlash didn't take him this time," they said.

*Backlash? What's-?*

"Sir, I'd suggest finishing your conversation with your *invisible* splinters at another time," *Oswin* said. "I doubt your soldiers would take kindly to their king, absently waving at thin air."

Oh gods, he was right. Much as I refused to be ashamed for my primeancy, it was still best to limit any displays of what other people might consider unstable behavior.

"Thanks for the warning," I said.

With a half-smile, *Oswin* said, "It was no problem. Maybe focus on our surroundings, though?"

Right. I should do that.

As I climbed off the last step and onto the cliff's edge, I bit back a gasp at the sheer volume of people spread before me. The unknown army had set up their camp a good distance away from my soldiers, but still, their number was vast, enough to swallow everyone who was under my command.

Numbers by themselves wouldn't have concerned me too much—skill counted in a fight, after all—but the orderly manner that the other army had arrayed their camp in spoke to deeply ingrained discipline, something that only some of my soldiers could claim. Granted, that was still a significant portion of them, but nothing compared to what I was seeing here.

Gods. How had I not heard about an army like this approaching *Auden* yet? I'd thought that was what my *Hand* was for. Given, their spymaster and I had been in unusual circumstances for the last week... but still.

Spotting *Marcuset*, I trotted to join him and the stranger at his side.

"Please, forgive my delay," I said as I approached. "I came as soon as I could."

Facing me, the stranger in our midst smiled.

"You must be King *Raimie*. Please. There's no need for any apologies, Your Majesty," he said. "From what your commander has told me, I gather that your recent days have been extraordinarily busy. I can understand why you might need time to present yourself. If we can get started now, however, I'd introduce myself. *Merlaro*, at your service."

As the man bowed, I couldn't stop one corner of my mouth from rising in an awkward smile.

"Raimie, like you guessed, and I'm grateful for your patience," I said. "How can I help you, Merlaro?"

"I'm not worthy to speak of my monarch's desires," Merlaro said, "save that my liege would like to speak with you. Privately."

Shifting beside me, Marcuset said under his breath, "That's a bad idea, Your Majesty. If I were to guess, this leader of theirs most likely wants you out of the picture so that the unease of your loss can wreak havoc in our ranks."

That seemed like an obvious possibility. Still.

"I'd love to meet your leader," I said, ignoring when Marcuset groaned. "I fear, however, that you'll have a hard time separating me from Oswin. He's tasked with keeping me safe."

Inclining his head, Merlaro said, "I doubt my liege would mind one bodyguard's presence."

How... reasonable of them.

"Then, where am I to meet... him?" I asked.

It was a bit presumptuous to assume this envoy's leader was a man, I knew, but if I had to take a stab at their gender, our world's polite mode of address insisted on me choosing male pronouns.

...Maybe that was something I could change someday, assuming I ever got a chance at doing something like that, of course.

With a crooked smile, Merlaro said, "My liege requests that the two of you first meet in our camp, but you wouldn't stay there for long. It's simply a precaution. We've heard a few worrying stories about you, Your Majesty."

They had? What sort of stories about me could *worry* someone else? Had I done something worthy of a reaction like that?

"What about the danger to *our* king?" Marcuset snapped.

Merlaro turned his smile, now bland, on the commander.

"I assure you that King Raimie has nothing to fear from my liege," he said.

Ugh. I still hated those two words combined but... whatever. Focusing now.

Given the conversation we were having, I knew Merlaro had said only what he must, and it wasn't like I had a choice about how I could respond to those words. Gods, Marcuset was not helping me make this go smoothly.

Glaring at him, I said, "I'm more than happy to accommodate your leader. Please, take me to him."

"As you say."

Merlaro turned to make the return hike into a conglomeration of foreign tents, but before I could follow him, Marcuset caught my arm.

"This is a bad idea," he whispered. "We don't know who these people are or what they want. For all we know, this army could be associated with Doldimar."

Had- had Marcuset seriously *grabbed me*, like I was some sort of child?

With a tight grin, I said, "Let me go."

The commander must have heard something in my tone because he near instantly snatched his hand to his chest.

Once he had, I continued, "I'm well aware that this may be a trap, but I don't think it's a good idea to antagonize anyone in this army, especially when they have the numbers to crush us. I'll do what their leader wants until they show signs of hostility, if they show such signs at all, and on the off chance that happens, I'm pretty sure I can get out. Maybe. In the meantime, get our people ready for an attack, just in case."

Marcuset bit his lip, but after a pause, he reluctantly saluted.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said.

I barely restrained an eye roll before jogging to catch up with Merlaro.

As soon as Oswin and I broke through the first line of the foreign army's tents, my sense of unease ballooned, which had me resting one hand on my weapon's hilt. The hostility directed our way seemed as strong as a tidal wave, and against it, I had a hard time striding behind Merlaro with what I could only hope was a monarch's proper carriage.

I only noticed these people's uniforms once we were past the point of no return. Sprinkled among those wearing armor, several of these soldiers sported clothing quite similar to what I was wearing, but rather than short-sleeve tunics, these people had jackets with waistlines that fell below their hips. Still. In style, detail, and essence, their attire looked the same.

"Oswin..." I said under my breath, "are those what I think they are?"

"Quite possibly, sir."

A loud *pop* followed the spy's grudging admission, and on hearing it, the world snapped into crisp clarity for me with my grip on my sword's hilt tightening. With those bursts of noise growing louder as we came closer, Merlaro brought us to the edge of the forest, and when we rounded a last tent, I was hit with a wave of *déjà vu*.

A chestnut-haired woman was aiming her pistol at a tree, squeezing the trigger as we came into view. Sprays of wood showered off of that tree's helpless trunk, making the woman smirk, and on seeing us, she handed off the weapon, gliding our way.

"Your Majesty," she said, nodding to me.

"Queen Kaedesa," I said with a short bow.

"Looks like you were right, sir," Oswin said under his breath. "She did come across the sea for us."

Oh, thanks ever so much for that. I was trying very hard not to think about that fact right now, barely able to remember that this would be a meeting between highly ranked people instead.

Or it was supposed to be, at least. We'd see if Kaedesa conformed to that expectation.

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