

Chapter 37: The Conspiracy in Our Midst

Rhylix

I'm fighting a god.

I couldn't breathe. As I staggered away from the tent, I sucked and sucked at the air, starving for it, but it wouldn't come. It wouldn't come! It wouldn't-!

A splash of life dove down my throat, and I expelled it again in a cry.

"HELP!"

Seeing double, I stumbled toward what looked like crates, blindly groping for one as my legs gave out. I landed hard, scraping my body down a wooden surface before mud splattered on me, but I paid it no mind, focusing on calming down my nausea. In: one, two. Out: one, two.

Someone stepped in front of me while I was doing this, a woman reaching for me. Chela.

Recoiling from her, I jabbed a finger at the tent.

"In there," I gasped. "Having a seizure."

My meaning must have gotten across because Chela shot upright, sprinting for the tent. While she worked on Raimie, I fought to control myself. I couldn't stop my surroundings from wobbling, so I squeezed my eyes closed, which helped with keeping my stomach's contents down.

When I heard footsteps squelching toward me again, I cracked an eye open, grateful to see only one version of Chela crouching in front of me this time.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Fine. Resting," Chela said. "What did you-? *How* did you heal him?"

Chuckling, I shook my head.

"I did nothing," I said. "Not long after you left, he started screaming before a seizure took hold. He got me pretty good on the side of the head before that, though. I might have a concussion. Don't feel so good."

"You're telling me that he healed himself?" Chela said.

"It's happened before."

Groaning, I leaned my head against the crate, resting a palm over my mouth.

"Chalk it up to a miracle. Alouin working among us, if you will."

Chela was quiet for a moment before clicking her tongue.

"Makes sense, I suppose," she said. "But look at me, getting all curious about healing techniques when I clearly have a patient in front of me."

She brushed her fingers through my hair, probably meaning to position my head so she could see it better, but at her touch, a long-buried fear resurfaced. Slapping her hand off of me, I fell sideways, skittering away.

"Don't touch me!" I shouted.

Memory bucked against its barriers while bits and pieces slid through.

My head firmly held while a needle touches my eye.

Acid bubbling on my chest.

Sharp edges grazing my skin.

NO.

Gasping, I found Chela, sprawled in the mud in front of me, and winced.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "Auden is... not a kind place. It teaches its children the importance of vigilance when one is vulnerable, and that's a hard habit to break."

Rolling her eyes, Chela said, "You don't have to explain yourself to me, healer. So long as you don't hurt me, you can be as rude as you like. In fact, I prefer it that way because then I don't have to worry about being polite. Now, help me up."

She extended a hand, and restraining a disbelieving laugh, I pulled her to her feet.

"And since you're a healer, I'll trust you to take care of yourself," she said, as if nothing had interrupted her. "What will we do about *him*, though? His family will want to know he's alive and well."

Turning to the tent, she scowled at it, crossing her arms.

“That’s usually how it goes, yes,” I said. “Would you like to do the honors? It would earn you favor with the most powerful people in this group.”

Lighting up, Chela spun on me.

“You’d let me do that?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said with a smile. “Just... whatever you tell them, keep me out of it. I don’t need any more embarrassment.”

“I can do that!” Chela said. “Thank you, Rhylix.”

Beaming, she made to run off, but at the last minute, she stopped, examining me.

“You’ve changed since leaving Allanovian. Still haughty as hell sometimes, but less distant. Less... cold,” she said. “I like this version of you.”

Ducking her head, she sprinted into camp. I watched her go, thinking about what she’d said.

Had I changed? I didn’t feel like a different person, but after who knew how long cut off even from myself, I couldn’t say who I was anymore.

Sitting on a crate, I rubbed my hands together between my knees. This had been a close call, too close of one, and we hadn’t even left Ada’ir yet. I had to do better than this, *be* better than this, because when Raimie eventually attracted Doldimar’s attention...

Sighing, I hung my head.

A few days ago, Ferin, Aramar, and I had made a plan, one that would get us through the Withriingalm safely. Each of us would watch Raimie while hurrying our group along as much as we could. The idea had been that if eyes were always on the kid, he couldn’t hurt himself, and when assigning watches, I’d volunteered to take the longest of them for one reason alone: I’d have help with it. It appeared, however, as if I might have expected too much from myself.

“What happened?” I asked under my breath.

Silently, my constant nuisance... Creation stepped into view.

“Order said that they had it under control,” it said, “and I’m still cut off from the whole, as I’m sure you can tell. I left the watch to them while trying to reconnect, thinking I’d be of better use to you at full power. While doing that, I got distracted, otherwise I’d have heard Order’s warning earlier than I did.”

Rubbing my face, I said, “All right. I can’t blame you for that. It’s my fault you’re so disconnected. Just... try to pay more attention?”

“I’m insulted you think I need to be told that.”

Jerking upright, I choked on my indignant retort when I saw Creation’s teasing grin. That boring, rigid nuisance was *mocking* me? Strange.

Without deigning to respond, I resumed my vigil, and Creation returned to wherever it had been healing.

For a while, I did nothing more than keep watch, protecting Raimie until others could, but when a commotion started nearby, I hopped to the ground. I waited long enough to watch Aramar flat out charging for the tent before hustling toward my own destination.

In a relatively quiet part of camp, I ducked into a secluded hideaway, created by wagons and crates, only to have a sharp edge greet my neck.

“I’m guessing the antidote worked?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow.

Flushing, Dath sheathed his knife.

“Hell. Sorry, Rhy,” he said. “I’m a little jumpy.”

“Understandable.”

Squeezing into the hollow, I folded to the ground, sitting knee to knee with Dath.

“Is he ok?” he asked as soon as I fell still.

“He’s alive,” I said. “Whether he’s ok is another matter entirely.”

Still, Dath slumped against the wheel of a cart.

“Oh, thank Alouin,” he said. “I didn’t get him killed.”

“You got pretty damn close to it,” I growled. “Want to tell me what happened?”

Right now, all I knew was that Dath had staggered out of the mist an hour ago, clamping his hand over a bleeding wound. Pointing behind him, the boy had said something about people attacking Raimie, and I didn’t remember much about what had happened afterward, besides stashing Dath somewhere safe. Judging by the gauze pasted to his neck, I must have stuck around long enough to patch him up.

With his eyes pinched, Dath wouldn’t look at me, picking at his tunic’s hem instead.

“After my first trial, I meant to stay in Allanovian. Did you know that?” he said. “Before this group could leave, though, Yrit approached me, asking if I wanted to save the Esela in Ada’ir.”

Yrit. The noxious Councilman who’d always hated me. Somehow, I wasn’t surprised to learn that he had something to do with this, even distant as he was.

“He introduced me to some Zrelnach,” Dath said, “two of whom were the ones I-”

With his voice locked away, the kid’s throat worked, and my heart resonated with his hurt. Attacking comrades, even ones who were no longer yours, was always hard.

Sniffing, Dath said, “Anyway, I joined this group with the express purpose of dismantling the expedition. I thought that would involve spoiling food and other sabotage, but instead, I was ordered to befriend you and Raimie. So, I did.”

The boy was practically tearing at his tunic, rapidly blinking with his body set to flee, but I couldn’t comfort him. Not yet.

“But?” I said.

“But...”

Dath snapped his eyes to me.

“But then, Raimie happened. The longer I spent with him, the more I realized how wrong the group’s goal was. He’s... Rhy, he’s-”

And now, I took Dath’s hand, pulling it away from his tunic.

“I know,” I said. “So, you decided to get out, recruiting Raimie for help with the endeavor, and it went horribly wrong. Am I right?”

With a hesitant laugh, Dath said, “Pretty much, yeah.”

Which meant that by coming to me after Raimie had been attacked, the kid was burned. No matter. He could still serve a purpose.

“Ok. I’m assuming you don’t know many of your co-conspirators?” I asked. “Maybe one or two, each of whom knows a person from a different cell?”

Drawing back, Dath said, “Yes. That’s it exactly.”

“Fucking fantastic.”

The leader of this plot must be wily indeed. When working to betray someone, only the seriously dedicated and shrewd used a system like this, one that made pulling the conspiracy apart difficult.

“All right,” I said. “Give me any names you’ve heard in your dealings with these people.”

After pausing to consider, Dath rattled off a list, although only two of the names stood out to me. Ona, a Zrelnach who, back in Allanovian, had been sent to ‘tame’ nearby towns if they caused trouble. And Dozat, one of Aramar’s friends.

This was good. I could use this.

“Rhy? What should I do?”

Right. The teenager who’d gotten himself caught in a middling level catastrophe.

“That depends,” I said. “If you want to stay safe, you should return to Allanovian immediately. News of what’s happened here isn’t likely to reach them for a while yet, and you can start your own story well before it arrives. But if you want to make amends with Raimie, I have a task for you.”

Dath gave me an odd look.

“I’m sorry. Why are you offering me a choice? I’ll only take one of those options,” he said. “How do I help Raimie?”

Even as I relaxed, I wanted to smack myself senseless. Knowing this kid, I should have realized that making amends would be the only option for Dath. If I’d wanted to protect him, I shouldn’t have alluded to it.

“Raimie needs someone to watch his back for a while,” I made myself say anyway. “Can you do that?”

Fervently nodding, Dath said, “Definitely.”

Gods, if this got the kid killed, I’d hate myself forever. More so than normal, at least.

“Then, we should get you by his side,” I said. “How good is your illusion work?”

Making a face, Dath said, “I get by.”

“Good enough.”

I pulled a cloak from the back of my belt, handing it over.

“This should help,” I said. “If you make yourself look like a scout, I’ll handle everything else.”

Including besting the training of the Zrelnach we were about to walk through, training that had taught them how to detect Esela magic.

Accepting the cloak, Dath threw it over his shoulders, partially raising its hood, and after a moment, his features shimmered, settling into that of a stranger.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I think you need to keep quiet,” I said, “but otherwise, it’s quite good. Ok. Give me a minute.”

Dragging my fingers through the mud, I applied it to my face, pulling a bow and arrows from the cart behind Dath. After that, I only needed to summon a few animal carcasses from campfires, hanging them from my body, to complete the disguise. A couple of short summonings would be much easier on me than maintaining an illusion for the length of time that we’d need to reach

Raimie.

This, of course, wouldn't be enough to divert the Zrelnach's attention, but I had other tricks for that. Plus, Dath looked impressed.

"Wow," he breathed.

Ignoring him, I said, "Stay beside me, no matter what. Understand?"

When Dath nodded, I left our hiding spot. I walked with confidence toward the only tent in camp, and whenever someone gave us an odd look, I shot a miniscule pulse of Ele in front of their eyes, something that would look like a random sun glare to them. This induced disorientation, combined with our disguises, got us past curious eyes without question.

When we reached the tent, I slowed down, pricking my ears for noise, and when I heard nothing, I requested Creation's presence under my breath. At the jerk of my head, the splinter disappeared through the tent's canvas, and two heartbeats later, it reemerged, shaking its head.

So, I slipped inside with Dath, releasing a breath on finding only Raimie there. I was a little surprised that not even Aramar was present, but if we'd arrived right as everyone had scattered to handle their affairs, it wouldn't surprise me. If so, it was a stroke of luck, one that would give me time for my own preparations.

"All right. I'll let Chela and Aramar know that you're here. They'll be the ones visiting Raimie most often. Everyone else is suspect, so if they come inside, you'll have to improvise," I said. "When I can, I'll relieve you. Can you handle this?"

With his face crinkled, Dath had his eyes fixed on Raimie's sleeping form, chewing on his lip.

"I think so," he said.

"Good," I said. "In that case, I need to go. Good luck?"

With a half-smile, Dath said "Thanks, Rhy."

I didn't want his gratitude, so I left the tent without a word, glancing at Creation as I strode into the midst of bedrolls and supplies.

"Will you tell me if Raimie's splinter notices anything suspicious?" I asked under my breath.

"I don't like spying on others like that, but in this case, I think it's warranted," Creation said. "What will you do?"

I didn't reply, but that was only because my intentions should be clear. I'd find proof of this scheme. Then, I'd root out its members and burn them all.

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