

# Chapter 41: The Investigation

## Rhylix

*Instead, I marshal the remnants of my sanity to delay Corruption.*

After Raimie woke up, we gave him two more days to recover, and then, it was time to run again. The delay had made anyone who was aware of Teron's pursuit antsy, seeing as how it had almost negated the advantage we'd gained by going through the Withriingalm.

I couldn't tell anyone this, but we had no reason to worry. While we'd been in the marshlands, the group had created quite the distance between us and our pursuer. The point of repulsion that had once hastened me to Raimie's side had been lagging, although I wasn't sure why. Was something about the Withriingalm foiling Teron's plans?

But since no one but me knew about this, the remaining days spent in the swamp saw an air of fragile peace hovering over the group. It wasn't a good environment to investigate the Zrelnach in, but I did what I could.

For several days, I followed the people whose names Dath had given me, hoping they'd lead me to others, and they did, but it was never anyone I could pinpoint as the conspiracy's leader. Still, learning about other accomplices was helpful, if only in forming a comprehensive list of the conspirators. When Aramar and I eventually told Eledis and Ferin about this, there was sure to be a cleansing of the Zrelnach's ranks, and I wanted to leave as few conspirators among us as possible.

Aramar had been following his own leads, focusing on the acts of sabotage that Dath had brought to our attention. While he hadn't gotten anywhere with identifying the sabotage's source, his snooping had lessened the number of broken axles and the like that the group had struggled with.

Every night, the two of us conferred on our findings, and as the days passed, those meetings became much more tense and terse. If we wanted to get anywhere, we needed to change our strategy, but I didn't know what else we could do, besides watch identified conspirators while seeking a means of infiltrating them.

Each night after finishing with those check-ins, I turned to what *had* been my favorite part of the day: combat training with the younglings. Ever since Raimie's close call in the Withriingalm, however, Dath had needed to skip these lessons, not only because attending them might get him recognized but also because of the exhaustion he accrued from holding an illusion all day. He usually took this time to rest, in case he was needed later.

As for Raimie, he'd become withdrawn. Guarded.

And this change made me nervous. Did he regret asking about his primeancy? We hadn't discussed his magic since that first conversation, so I couldn't exactly ask what he was thinking, and while I found hope in how he'd distanced himself from everyone, not just me, I also wasn't sure what else this change could be about.

I couldn't give it much consideration now, though.

Four days ago, the swamp had yielded to plains once more. We'd left the Withriingalm behind—good riddance—and the ground had begun to dip and rise into the rolling hills that surrounded Sev. With the sun nearing the horizon, I'd already run Raimie through his drills, and after an hour of this, it was time for controlled, real-world application, the best way to teach someone how to fight.

In other words, sparring.

Most days, Raimie was cautious during our fights, defending as best he could until he saw an opening where he could 'disable' me. This was, after all, what he'd said he wanted to learn: the ability to fight until he could retreat.

Tonight, however, he was aggressive. He didn't give me time to go on the offensive, hammering down on me with blows that had far too much power behind them, and it was drawing a crowd. In the thirty seconds since our sparring session had begun, several Zrelnach had stopped to watch.

I let their presence fall to a lower state of awareness. With each moment that passed, matching Raimie's skill level had become increasingly difficult. Something that he'd kept hidden or repressed was peeking above the surface.

I'd been prodding my friend—subtly, mind you—toward unleashing what sometimes gave him an unconscious affinity for fighting, and it seemed I'd found it now.

It, however, wasn't a good time to reveal this, not when several highly trained warriors were watching him. Let the Zrelnach think their chosen leader was martially weak, at least until the loyal among them had been verified.

So, I considered removing the cap that I'd placed on myself for years. Revealing that side of myself would be annoying, but most in this group already knew that when it came to fighting, I outclassed them.

Before I could decide, however, I spotted a strand of night wriggling over Raimie's skin, and my mouth went dry.

What was he doing? Using primeancy, especially of that type, here?! Was he trying to get himself killed?

Distracted, I fumbled a parry, which threw my sword arm wide, and a fist, swarming in black splotches, came for my face.

Without thought, I dropped my sword, and my arm blurred in front of me to catch Raimie's wrist. Twisting it behind the boy, I ignored his yelp of pain, dragging him closer so I could slap a hand on his back.

I only remembered that I was manhandling a friend in the breath before I would have unleashed Ele, flinging my enemy away. So, instead of repelling a Daevetch user as far from me as possible, I shoved him, and by the time Raimie had regained his balance, I had my sword tip at his throat.

With him stopped short, focus returned to the kid's eyes, and he *laughed*.

"Oh, you should see your face," he said. "I've never seen you so livid before."

"I have good reason to be pissed," I hissed. "What in the void are you doing, Raimie? You can't- you *can't*..."

Folding his arms, Raimie lifted his chin.

"Says who?" he asked.

Oh, Alouin above. He was letting Daevetch influence him. How did one calm down a teenage boy, drunk on newly realized power?

"Maybe not here, my friend?" I said. "We can discuss it in private."

"Why?" Raimie said. "If I wanted to, I could tear everyone around us apart. They're not a threat. So, tell me. Why should I hide a part of myself?"

"Just-"

Oh, I wanted to *strangle* the kid right now. Look at the cocked heads and concerned faces around us! This disagreement needed to end. Now.

"Just listen to me. Ok?" I said. "You have to trust that I know what I'm talking about."

"Do I? Really?" Raimie snapped. "You're asking me to trust you when you're hiding something from me. If you don't want me knowing one of your secrets, that's fine. I don't care. But you can't deny that you're hiding one. It's *rude*."

With my throat closing, I held perfectly still. When Raimie had told me what he'd seen after the accident, it had been the first time in forever that I'd outright panicked. I'd had the presence of mind to finish my conversation with Raimie first, but once I'd been free of that tent, I'd darted

through camp, frantically seeking a place of solitude.

Because Raimie had almost seen the one thing that I most hated about myself. And speaking with Alouin... that he'd done *that* had sent me into a shivering fit, and its aftershocks were still appearing, days later.

Suppressing one now, I said, "I find it interesting that you don't want me hiding things from you when you're doing the same thing with me."

Expression dropped from Raimie's face.

"Excuse me?"

I should heed the warning in that monotone voice, but damnit, this situation had made me angry. This boy, this *human*, had already intruded enough on my life, and I shouldn't have allowed it.

Raimie was supposed to be my ally, for fuck's sake! What would I do when that status got him hurt or killed? Having come to like him, could I survive his downfall, especially after I'd lost so many loved ones already?

"You heard me," I growled. "How is it that at times, you can fight like an experienced soldier? Why have people across Ada'ir recognized you? How do you sometimes know the words needed to defuse a situation? How are you flying through Ferin's lessons so quickly? Individually, I'd think you were capable of doing these things but together? Whether you know it or not, you have a secret too, Raimie."

Trembling in place, the kid clenched his already tight fists at his sides.

"Don't," he said. "Don't say that."

I flung my hands above my head.

"Say *what?*" I hissed, fighting to keep my voice down. "That our situations are so similar, it hurts my heart to consider? That you're not normal? That there's something different about-?"

In a muted flash of light, a fist cracked into my jaw, followed by something solid connecting with my stomach, and I was propelled backward. Sky and grass and wagons spun as I tumbled to a stop, and once motion had ceased, I lay there for a moment, blinking.

Raimie had hit me? Gods, if I didn't have to maintain the illusion of injury, I might have howled with laughter. For the novelty of getting surprised alone, I'd have forgiven the kid but *damn*. When it came to his emotional state, Raimie could defend himself.

Good.

Besides, I'd pushed him too hard.

"Ohmygodsohmygodsohmygods."

When had he started using *that* phrase?

"Rhy! Are you ok?"

Cracking an eye open, I waves away Raimie's offered hand up, laboriously getting to my feet on my own. Woozily swaying in place—completely unnecessary by my body's standards but required for the disguise—I spat out the mouthful of blood that I'd been holding since stopping, smiling at Raimie's whimper of worry.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I don't know what I was thinking. I was just so angry."

He continued speaking, but I was too caught on an idea to listen. Could this be the opportunity that Aramar and I had been looking for? Enough Zrelnach were nearby, watching with amusement, to start a rumor.

"Stop, Raimie. I'm not upset. Pretty sure the punching and kicking me thing was Daevetch talking," I said under my breath, "but we don't have much time, so listen carefully. I'm about to act like you've insulted me. You haven't. I *am not* angry with you, but I have to pretend like I am so that I can get some traction on this investigation. All right? Don't nod. Just say yes or no."

Raimie looked might confused, but he said.

"Yes."

Gods, the trust that boy showed me! I didn't deserve it.

Roaring, I tackled Raimie before straddling him. Swinging my fist back, I barely stopped myself from punching my friend and with my shoulders heaving, I refused to interpret what the look in his eyes might mean.

"You're Alouin damned lucky that you're royalty. Otherwise, I'd beat you black and blue," I shouted. "Fuck you, Raimie! You can find yourself another weapons instructor."

Ducking to his ear, I forewent the personal insult that the audience was probably imagining I was giving.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Remember. We're good. I am your friend for a long as you want that. Good luck over the next few days."

Hopping to my feet, I spun, leaving Raimie in the dirt. Hopefully, he'd realize what I was doing, but if he didn't, I wouldn't keep him in suspense for long. The story of what had happened here would spread throughout the group, eventually reaching someone in the conspiracy, and with a little luck, they'd see me as a valuable asset to recruit.

And once I was in their ranks, I could wreak havoc.

## **TTS Chapter Forty-One**

---

Revision #2

Created 21 August 2024 03:34:11 by FatalisticFable

Updated 19 March 2026 00:06:37 by FatalisticFable