

Chapter 42: You, All Along

Rhylix

One last fight to convey my wishes before I no longer can.

I was beginning to think that I'd made a mistake. A week had passed since my 'argument' with Raimie, and no one in the conspiracy had approached me. Not only that but tonight, the group had made camp perhaps a day's march from Sev, our destination.

Which meant that the conspirators would have accelerated their plans. If they wanted to stay in Ada'ir, they'd have to make their move soon.

I had one more day before that happened. This afternoon, Raimie and Eledis had entered Sev, presumably to charter a boat, and in all likelihood, the dissidents in our midst wouldn't act until the object of their machinations was among us again.

So, having done everything I could in my investigation, I was sitting on a hill's knoll, training my eyes on the northernmost of the Robzul city states. Occupying the sole harbor in Blackwell Bay—one of the only refuges from the Accession Tear's storms—Sev had been a prime target for pirates over the last few generations. Maintaining the city's defenses had drained its coffers dry, leading to a host of economic problems.

It had also produced a solid wall around the city, one whose gates were only open during the day. After dark, nothing got through them, no matter how high the bribe.

I was intimately familiar with all of this. When I'd arrived on this continent's shores, Sev had been where I'd spent my first few miserable years. What bad luck that Eledis had chosen it as our port of departure, even if that decision had been entirely logical.

I didn't like to think about the time I'd spent here or of the depravity that I'd sunk to, but it was best to confront this part of my past now, when I was far from Sev, rather than when I was walking down its streets.

Hence, my position so far from camp.

Even still, a Zrelnach found me. When she came to a stop at my side, she didn't speak, and I was content to let this continue. She, however, wasn't.

"You're no longer enamored with the young king," she said, like it was a question.

Tightening my embrace of my legs, I slowly looked up at her, flinching when I recognized Ona. The Zrelnach's top fixer peered at the city in front of us while strands of hair drifted around her face.

"How did you-?" I said.

"You can't get in such a tremendous argument and expect that people won't notice," Ona said with a small smile. "Well? Your thoughts on the boy?"

She rested her hands on her hips while I considered how to reply. This seemed like the opening I'd been waiting for, especially with an identified conspirator asking the question, but it paid to be careful.

"I think... he's young. And woefully unprepared," I said. "He can't learn everything he needs to know before reaching Auden. I think... it might be best if I stayed in Ada'ir. If Raimie's in charge, I don't like our chances of bringing Doldimar down, and I don't care to die for no reason."

While Ona weighed my words, I shifted in place, hoping it appeared the right amount of nervous.

"I'm part of a group with similar views," she eventually said. "If you're interested, our leader would like to meet you."

Their *leader*? This was going better than I'd expected.

"I'm interested," I said. "When would this meeting happen?"

"Now," Ona said, tilting her head with a sardonic smile in place. "Unless you have something better to do?"

"No. Now works fine."

Scrambling to my feet, I turned my back on the city.

Ona didn't lead us into camp, getting us lost in the land around Sev instead, but after about a half-hour, a Zrelnach squad came into view from around a hill, and my guide stopped, pointing at the ground.

"Sword, dagger, and your six hidden knives here," she said.

Hell, she was good. After relinquishing the weapons that she'd specified, I'd be unarmed, physically at least. Still, I did as I was told, only pausing when removing my dagger. Having raised her hand, Ona bobbed it, and I cautiously placed the blade on her palm, letting her inspect it.

It was an odd weapon, after all, with its blade a tad longer than a typical dagger's length, but that wasn't what had caught her eye.

Hefting the dagger, she balanced a finger on one end of its cross guard.

“What’s the point of having this piece if it’s too short to catch a blade on?” she asked.

With a ghost of a smile, I said, “Oh, you can catch a blade on even that small of a cross guard. Learning how to do it just takes more practice than most think it’s worth.”

“Hmm.”

Ona narrowed her eyes.

“I could have sworn I’ve heard of a dagger like this before, something from a history book,” she said before shrugging. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, though.”

The dagger went on top of my weapons collection, and Ona beckoned me onward.

“Our leader isn’t here yet. Unsurprising, given how busy everyone’s been,” she said. “You’ll have to wait until she arrives.”

“Not a problem. Waiting for people has become a specialty of mine,” I said.

She. So, the ringleader of this conspiracy was a woman. Interesting.

Once Ona had handed me off to her companions, she angled her body back the way we’d come.

“I’ll find our leader,” she said. “You wait with these fine individuals. I shouldn’t be long.”

“I look forward to it,” I said.

Mentally, I was already preparing an escape route for if this turned to shit. With eight Zrelnach around me and an unknown number still coming, I’d have to make a bolt for it instead of fighting, but that shouldn’t be too difficult. It was amazing the amount of Ele that one could use around sunset. Its glare was wonderful for concealing bursts of light.

Hopefully, though, I wouldn’t have to run. Hopefully, I could learn who this conspiracy’s leader was and leave with her thinking I’d joined their cause. I’d love to bring Aramar good news tonight.

With Ona gone, I waited in silence with... what role did these Zrelnach play in the conspiracy? Guards for their leader? Eight seemed excessive to protect her against one man.

Regardless, I waited, occasionally squinting at the pile of my belongings. Would I have time to collect them if I needed to flee?

When a cluster of people rounded the hill ahead, I blew out a slow breath. With the sun sinking below the horizon, Ele usage would soon go from hidden to blatantly apparent, and I *did not* want these people learning that I was a primeancer. So, thank goodness this meeting would soon be starting.

Part of the cluster peeled off from the rest, running toward me and my 'companions' at double time, and I prodded my mouth into a welcoming smile.

It was a smile that withered as the cluster approached. Numb, I watched two women pull to a stop in front of me, hardly out of breath. Ona joined the other Zrelnach around me, all of whom had shifted into threatening stances, but the other woman sadly smiled, tucking her purple-blond hair behind her ears.

"Hiya, Rhy," Ferin said.

Oh, at that greeting, something throbbed behind the ice coating me. I didn't look forward to learning what it was.

But this explained why so many guards were here. Ferin was perhaps the only person in Ada'ir who knew how good I was with the blade.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

As her already fragile mask of ease cracked further, Ferin clasped her hands in front of her.

"My job. What else?" she said. "I'm removing the biggest threat to Allanovian from the board."

"So... you *are* these people's leader?" I said. "You tried to have Raimie killed?"

How those questions crushed a portion of the hope that for weeks, I'd been growing. It was a small fraction, but their quashing hurt nonetheless.

"I am, and to my great shame, yes, I did," Ferin said. "I'm the one that you and Aramar have been looking for since the Withriingalm. I've enjoyed watching your investigation from afar."

"But... *why*?" I shouted, taking a step forward.

One of the Zrelnach moved in front of me with a weapon bared, and I rocked to a stop.

"Why choose now to hurt Raimie rather than in Allanovian, when he was at your mercy?" I continued. "Why act as if you were sympathetic to his cause for so many weeks? You saved his damn life, for Alouin's sake! Hell! Why are you opposing him at all?"

Behind the Zrelnach protecting her, a wistful smile swept across Ferin's face.

"Actually, I am not opposing Raimie. I believe in him, want him to succeed in everything he does. He's a good kid," she said, "but I can't listen only to myself. I'm a Councilwoman of Allanovian, which means that the city's needs take priority over what I want, and the Audish royal family is a threat to it, perhaps the greatest one we've faced.

"When you brought him to us, my fellow Councilors advocated for finishing off what Teron had started, like you suggested, but in this case, what almost killed the kid saved his life. Some among

us realized that Doldimar's minions would track that boy to the ends of the earth, and we knew what would happen if one of them visited Allanovian.

"Since our tear repels intruders from the village, we had a little time. So, we put together the army that you've traveled with over these last few weeks, although many of them don't know the full extent of their orders yet. Our job was to draw as many of Doldimar's minions away from Allanovian as possible, duping the royal family into believing us loyal all the while, before permanently ending the threat to us. Hence, the assassination attempt in the Withriingalm."

She paused, fixing her eyes on thin air, and I bit my tongue. The longer Ferin talked, the more I learned, information that I could share with Raimie and his family.

"But I like that boy, far more than I should," Ferin whispered. "Alouin, if I weren't bound by my duty, I'd follow him to Auden, taking on the Dark Lord with him. It's why I've been so fervent during our lessons. It's why for so long, I delayed in giving the kill order. It's why when I found him in sinking mud, I went berserk to free him, starting chest compressions even with my mind screaming that he had to die. That night, I realized I could never see Raimie murdered, not by my hand or my order, so I did the only thing I could. I gave the task to someone else."

I stopped breathing while my stomach tied into knots.

"You didn't," I breathed.

Because there was only one person Ferin could safely give her problem to, only one who could deal with the Audish royal family, only one human Allanovian had maintained friendly relations with.

"I did," Ferin said. "The next morning, I sent a message to the queen, and Kaedesa was quick to respond. If we've gotten our timing right, she and her royal guard should be waiting in Sev for the ringleaders of Ada'ir's most recent 'rebellion', leaving me free to bring my people home. As soon as she gives us permission to go, of course."

Kaedesa, the queen who'd left the bodies of rebels on display for weeks on end, was waiting for Raimie in Sev. The city closed its gate at nightfall, only opened again at the break of dawn. And the sun was half-hidden by the horizon.

Shit.

"Before you try anything heroic, you might want to wait a moment," Ferin said. "I've brought someone who's desperate for you to stay."

Stepping aside, she revealed the other half of her cluster. Two Zrelnach led a teenager toward us by his bound hands. The black cloth under his leathers was ripped in a few places while scrapes coated his exposed skin, and his lip was bleeding.

When he saw me, Dath gasped.

"Don't let-!" he started.

A Zrelnach buried his fist in the kid's stomach, and he folded over it, coughing.

Dragging my eyes to Ferin, I said, "You wouldn't."

She looked down her nose at me.

"Rhy, I just handed a boy, one I've come to view as a little brother, over to a woman who will execute him in the most brutal manner possible," she said, speaking as if to a child. "What makes you think that I would spare a trainee who's betrayed his home?"

She turned to Ona.

"If Healer Rhylix leaves your presence, you are to use all of your talents on this failed Zrelnach," she said, pointing at Dath. "Are my orders understood?"

Ona nodded, and taking a deep breath, Ferin turned away from me, drooping a little.

"I have far too many tasks left to stay here."

Before she could leave, I called after her with my voice strangled.

"Don't do this! *Please.*"

For a few breaths, Ferin held still before shaking herself.

"See you on the other side, Rhy," she said. "Forgive me."

She strode away with her head down, and with my heart racing, *squeezing*, in my chest, I ran through my options, but even as I dragged this process out, I knew I'd only have one choice at the end.

Save Raimie or Dath.

I forced myself to look at the boy. He was staring at a distracted Ona with wide eyes, probably remembering every story he'd heard of her bringing human villages to heel, and I wanted to help him. *Gods*, how I did.

But my ally was Raimie, and if I was to succeed with my end goal, I needed my ally alive.

How had the creation of collateral damage already begun?

Licking his lips, Dath met my eyes, trying and failing to speak.

On a second attempt, he hoarsely said, "Why are you still here? *Go!*"

Knowing that for the provocation it had been, the Zrelnach around us tensed, reaching for weapons, and with blurring vision, I leapt into the air, pushing Ele from my feet. The primal force's added energy had me soaring over my captor's heads, helping me roll to my feet on landing, and

turning my back on the Zrelnach and... Dath, I hightailed it for Sev's wall.

I had so many things I wished I could tell Dath: that his sacrifice wouldn't be wasted, that he was a better person than I'd expected, that I was proud of him. But none of this was spoken. It was shoved, along with an upsurge of frenzied panic—

It's happening again! Gods, why can't I escape tragedy? Why do suffering and travesties trail in my wake?

—into a small corner of my mind, one resting beside my repressed memories.

Maybe Ferin would decide to spare the kid?

Flying beneath a purple-and-orange-smearred sky, I laughed. Sure, that was a possibility, like it was possible I'd reach Raimie in time.

By the time I'd reached the wall, night had fallen over the world, and despite knowing it would be the case, the city's closed gate had me screaming into a fist, pressed to my mouth.

What was I going to do? It was too dark to use Ele now. If I did, I was likely to get caught, and I'd be no good to Raimie dead or in prison.

If I shapeshifted into a bird, I'd definitely get stuck in that state, given how distracted I was, and if there was a smuggler's route into the city, I didn't know about it. When I'd lived here, nothing like that had existed.

I couldn't get to Raimie. Which meant Dath-

"No."

Logically, my ally should be able to keep himself out of trouble for one night—

Crazed giggling flew around the fist blocking my mouth.

—considering that he was at least passable with a blade. He also had his primeancy as a last resort.

If he could stay out of Queen Kaedesa's hands until morning, I could join him and Eledis before getting them out of the city.

So. What else could I do? I'd give what pathetic dregs of help I could to Dath, obviously, but when I inevitably found his corpse, how could I distract myself from another innocent kid's blood on my hands?

From what Ferin had said, she'd be stabilizing her power tonight. Given that our group was mostly made up of Zrelnach, she wouldn't find much opposition in it...

“Aramar!”

That man was surrounded by hundreds of hostiles, and he didn't know it. If I couldn't help Raimie tonight, I could save his father. He'd be devastated if Aramar died.

So, for the second time today, I turned away from someone who needed my help, speeding back the way I'd came. All the while, I was begging Alouin and anyone else who'd listen that Aramar would be alive when I reached camp.

TTS Chapter Forty-Two

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