

Chapter 45: Ruined Plans

Raimie

All I could consider in the moments after waking up was the dull throb behind my eyes. I tried to scan my surroundings, vaguely recalling a sense of danger from before, but my head wouldn't let me, making me clutch at it until the pain had faded enough for me to think.

When I could, though, I sat bolt upright, going for a knife, but... I was alone. Houses crowded the alley around me, and a pile of rubbish was sitting within touching distance, but the people who'd attacked me weren't here.

So, what had happened?

Carefully, I got to my feet, expecting all sorts of aches and pains, but I felt fine. So, the attack hadn't been a random beating of a gullible boy, pain inflicted for the fun of it, and this thought made me chuckle. What had my world become to make me think something like that was possible?

When I patted down my body, however, I quickly discovered what my assailants had wanted from me. The sack of coin that Eledis had given me this morning was gone. That would be fun to explain.

Sighing, I trotted to the alley's end, making a face when I saw the sun near the horizon. There went any hopes of recovering the coin.

I made my way back to our designated meeting spot, fully expecting a berating, at the least. More likely, Eledis would stop speaking to me again, but I couldn't do anything to change that. I might as well get it over with.

My dread doubled when I saw him waiting for me. He was tapping his foot with his arms crossed, scanning the marketplace with a piercing gaze, and when he spotted me, he tossed his hands to either side before coming my way.

"Where have you been?" he growled when we met. "I've been waiting for ages."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I-"

"No, never mind. I don't need an explanation," Eledis interrupted, lifting a hand. "Did you have any luck?"

Struggling to keep my face neutral, I said, "No. Everyone I talked to seemed resistant to our proposed trip."

Loudly sighing, Eledis pinched his nose.

"I experienced the same," he said. "How I wish we could just go to Marcuset..."

Eledis clicked his teeth together, dropping his hand, but despite my rampant curiosity about a name I'd never heard before, I kept my expression placid. I'd learned over the years that showing a lack of personality was the best way to deal with my grandfather when he got like this.

After examining me for a moment, Eledis relented.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just..."

"Frustrated?" I finished for him. "I don't blame you. It's been an irritating day."

Grimacing, Eledis said, "Thank Alouin it's over. Oh, well. Let's find ourselves a waystation, shall we? Although... I'll take my coin back, if you please."

He extended a hand, and I shrunk on myself.

"I don't have it," I said in a small voice.

After a beat of quiet, Eledis drawled, "Why?"

Shuffling in place, I hugged myself, warding off my grandfather's displeasure.

"I was mugged. I think," I said.

Slowly, Eledis lowered his hand.

"Are you hurt?" he gruffly said.

Shaking my head, I said, "Just a minor headache."

I said not a word about my nose, still fiercely throbbing. I'd already gotten hurt too often on this trip, and that had stressed my family enough.

As hoped, tension leaked from Eledis.

"Thank Alouin for that," he said.

He took my elbow, guiding me to somewhere quiet, and once there, he dropped his hold, spinning on me.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

So, I did, although a strange sense of déjà vu settled over me while I spoke, and Eledis got paler with each word. By the time I was finished, he was sucking on his lip, looking over the rooftops around us.

“Damnit, ‘saya. Why do you always make things more difficult?” he said to himself before focusing on me. “We should leave Sev. Hopefully, we can get out of here before sundown.”

“Why before sundown?” I asked.

I didn’t dare question our sudden need to leave.

“Because after that, we’ll be stuck here,” Eledis said. “Less talking, more running.”

As we hurried down streets, people shouted curses in our wake, but while I cringed at these, Eledis didn’t seem to care about them.

When we reached the square that bordered the gate, however, he backtracked, grabbing me by the tunic to drag me out of sight, and once hidden, I slapped at the hand holding me.

“What is it?” I said. “See someone you didn’t like?”

Leaning around the corner, Eledis said, “You could say that.”

He was silent for a moment, watching something in the square, but eventually, he clicked his tongue, facing me.

“Unfortunately, we won’t get back to the others tonight,” he said. “We should find a quiet corner and wait for morning.”

“Ok...” I drawled. “Why can’t we walk out the gate now? From what I saw, it’s still open.”

“We just-”

Eledis glanced over his shoulder.

“We just can’t, all right?” he said. “When it comes to getting us across the sea, a lot of pieces are in play, more than you know, and this is one of them. You have to trust me.”

Trust a man who’d lied, for years, about who I was. Alouin, but that would be difficult.

Taking a steadying breath, I nodded.

“Good. Now, we should get off the streets,” Eledis said. “Her spies are probably all over the place, and even if they’re not the members of her Hand, they can identify us. Probably. Ugh! I hate dealing in uncertainties.”

He scrubbed his scalp with a growl.

Watching this, I hesitantly said, "I saw a waystation a couple of streets back. We could spend the night there."

Lowering his hands, Eledis glowered at me, but it seemed more fond than irritated.

"You really want that bed you mentioned, don't you?"

With a smirk, I said, "It would be nice."

Eledis barked a laugh, slapping a hand over his mouth once done. When no one came running toward us, he shook himself.

"Let's get you one, then, shall we?" he asked.

The waystation that I'd suggested sat off the main thoroughfare, but it was so squished between buildings that it was easy to ignore, and its exterior façade looked shabby, which wasn't helped by its dim interior. Just inside the entrance, a portly man sat on a stool behind a counter, and when he beckoned for us to enter, Eledis stepped forward, accepting the role of haggler.

I was left free to wander, although I didn't go far. Making the owner of this waystation antsy didn't seem like a good idea.

As I made a circuit of the waystation's dining room, I reviewed the day's events, storing the host of new mysteries that I'd accrued without a hint of frustration.

Snorting, I shook my head. If the Raimie from a few months ago could see me now, he'd be baffled. Comfortable with his predictable life, he'd probably be a mess right now, like he'd been on learning he was royalty.

It was funny how time and circumstances could change people.

At some point, I should probably make a decision about this quest I was on instead of coasting along, letting others make my choices for me, but...

Not yet. Tonight, I'd fix my relationship with Eledis, something a few mugs of brandy should handle. Tonight, I'd sleep in luxury, even if I had no sleeping tinctures to help with that. Tonight, I'd eat a well-prepared meal, not the unappetizing rations of the road.

Speaking of which, I should find out what my options for dinner were.

As I returned to the front of the waystation, I noted Eledis still negotiating with its owner before the door to the outside opened—

"-worry, gray eyes. This is the last one on this street."

—and four people strode inside, three of them in an outfit similar to the people who'd mugged me earlier. The other one was in a set of black, leather armor.

A Zrelnach.

She was still glaring at the humans behind her. They were, of course, laughing at her expense, so as subtly as I could, I caught Eledis' eyes, jerking my head toward the newcomers, and when he saw them, he tensed. As he backed toward the closest source of cover, I followed his example.

We weren't fast enough. Sniffing at the other three, the Zrelnach warrior turned to examine the room, and when her gaze landed on me, the briefest of grimaces passed over her face.

Pointing at me, she said, "Gentlemen, one of the men you're looking for."

The others in the group snapped their attention to me while the Zrelnach got out of their way. Then, three men were advancing on me with their swords drawn, and I froze.

What was I supposed to do? Fight? With the current odds against me, that seemed like a bad idea, but surrendering didn't seem wise either.

Maybe I should run?

From behind, Eledis slammed something into one man's head, dropping him, and just like that, I didn't have another option. This had become a fight.

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