

Chapter 53: While on the Way Part One

Eledis

When I'd learned about the order to leave Tiro, I'd been irate. Why hadn't Raimie consulted with me about this beforehand?

And when I'd figured out where we were headed, I'd been confused. Time and again, Raimie had proven he had a decent tactical mind. He couldn't believe that we should attack such a well-defended target now.

But when the soldiers had obeyed the order without question, gathering up the belongings that they'd so recently unpacked after their return from the Birthing Grounds, that had been when I'd become concerned.

Nearly a week had passed since we'd begun this march, and no one had come looking for me or checked if I'd joined them. I'd begun to think I would need to track Raimie down when a messenger brought me a summons to the cramped tent that the kid had made his own.

"Everyone should already be here," the messenger said as we approached it. "I'll find the king and let him know you're ready. He'll be with you shortly."

As he took off, I frowned at his back, unnerved by both the reverence with which he'd spoken Raimie's assumed title and the borderline disrespect with which he'd treated me. Things truly were not going to plan right now, and I didn't like that.

With a headshake, I ducked into the tent, and my stomach dropped at the collection of familiar faces that turned toward me.

Queen Kaedesa frowned at me from her corner, separate from the others, but then, she'd always liked keeping her distance from men of war. I bowed to her, which she acknowledged with the barest of nods.

At my entrance, Marcuset had gone a little pale, and judging from his fish-face, I'd say he'd come to the same conclusion as me. Beside him was-

"Gistrick!" I said, all smiles. "How long has it been?"

“Two months and three weeks,” Gistrick grumbled. “Eleven weeks I’ve been trapped in that damn fortress, doing administrative work to stave off boredom. I’m almost glad for this fool’s quest, if it means I can return to what I do best.”

Raising an eyebrow, I said, “You mean serving a king that Rhylix practically forced you to swear loyalty to, a man who may or may not be crazy?”

As I finished speaking, Gistrick nervously chuckled, flicking his eyes away from me. Good. He should be questioning his loyalty.

“Eledis!” Marcuset hissed, beckoning to get my attention.

When he jerked his head toward a corner opposite Kaedesa, I joined him and Gistrick there, glancing at the queen as I did. Rolling her eyes, she turned her back on us.

“What?” I snapped once our circle had closed.

Swallowing hard, Marcuset said, “Surely you’ve noticed-”

“Who Raimie has gathered here? Yes. What of it?” I whispered. “I don’t see Aramar among us. He’d be here if we had anything to truly fear.”

With a frown, Marcuset said, “Aramar’s been banished. Didn’t you hear?”

The idea of this had his face tightening.

“How could Raimie abandon his father to Doldimar’s domain, especially with how difficult walking is for him?”

Shaking his head, Gistrick said, “Aramar caught up with me before this march started. We needed to confirm a few things before he went traipsing into the unknown, and when we talked, he didn’t have that damn piece of tech on him.”

“He didn’t?” I said.

I found that hard to believe because-

“Without that piece of tech, he can’t move. How did he come to see you, then?”

“He... he’s not paralyzed anymore,” Gistrick said. “Someone *fixed* him, if you know what I mean.”

I did. Alouin... the implications of that could be devastating.

“I don’t care if Raimie found an Ele primeancer to take on Aramar’s paralysis before sending him into the cold!” Marcuset said with his mouth twisting. “He still *banished his father*, and those two were close. Why would he do that?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, but you two won’t shut up long enough for me to get it out!” Gistrick hissed. “When Aramar visited me, he left us a warning. Nylion’s back. Raimie remembers everything.”

As my thoughts skittered to a stop, I knew my mouth had dropped open, which was embarrassing. I wished I could close it but...

Fuck! The spell containing the aberration in Raimie’s head was supposed to last for decades. DECADES. As in more than the one it had managed.

After she’d cast that spell, we’d complied with the suggestions of the Eselan witch who’d placed it. We’d isolated Raimie from locations that might trigger a memory, minimized the stress he daily dealt with, avoided arguments with him when possible...

But those things had happened *frequently* since we’d left home. No wonder the spell had broken!

Hell. What were we supposed to do now? The Eselan witch had died a few years ago, and I didn’t know of another Eselan who’d inherited her ability to manipulate the mind.

Of more relevance, however, was that I knew absolutely *no* Esela in Auden, besides the Zrelnach we’d brought with us. Apparently, one of Doldimar’s obsessions had included eradicating that race, and within Auden’s borders, he’d been quite thorough with it. All of which meant that no one could replicate the spell that had, for years, kept Nylion in check.

“He’s brought us on this march to kill us,” Gistrick whispered. “That’s what Aramar was trying to tell me last week.”

Nodding with wild eyes, Marcuset said, “Except for Aramar, everyone involved with... *that* is in this tent, at least of those close to Raimie at the time.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I don’t know why *you’re* panicking, Marcuset,” I said. “You and Kaedesa should be safe, at least compared to Gistrick and me. You never approved of our decision to remove Nylion, and at the time, both of you were too embroiled in running a foreign nation to help with a family matter.”

That made my friend bristle.

“You know why we infiltrated Ada’ir’s ruling caste!” Marcuset hissed, keeping his voice down with difficulty. “We were hoping to raise an army in case the foretelling failed!”

“Stop it, you two! We should be focusing on more important issues,” Gistrick said, glaring at me and Marcuset. “How are we going to kill an angry primeancer before he does the same to us?”

“Kill?!” Marcuset yelled while I said, “With the element of surprise, of course.”

We fell silent, eyeing each other.

With a hoarse voice, Marcuset eventually said, “How can either of you even *think* of killing Raimie? He’s like the son none of us truly had.”

Exchanging a glance, Gistrick and I chuckled.

“Sure, I was fond of Raimie when he was my student,” Gistrick said, “but now? I’m not so sure. He’s... changed, nothing like the pliant boy I knew.”

“And *I* think you’re projecting, *Emir*,” I said, just to goad him.

Which worked.

Going stiff, Marcuset shouted, “*Don’t call me that!*”

As the ring of his shout faded, the tent flap at our side lifted.

“-sure someone in the Hand is on Rhy at all times, Oswin,” Raimie said. “I don’t trust him to stay put, despite his promise. Or to care that running off on his own like that would make him a hypocrite.”

Neither the people around me nor I moved as the boy came to a stop, taking in the tent’s occupants with a faint smile.

“Good! You’re all here.”

Folding cross-legged in the dirt, Raimie rested his hands in his lap while Oswin stood at attention behind him.

While worriedly scanning the kid, I noted that he looked... worn. Ever since returning from the Birthing Grounds, he’d been almost frenzied in his activities, more so than usual.

Speaking of which. Raimie had certainly chosen a good time to leave Tiro. With the mess he’d brought home with him—with Hadrion’s death—we’d needed to leave the hidden city before Tanwadur worked himself into a fury that would have seen everyone from Ada’ir forcibly removed.

Given Raimie’s state, perhaps the rumors about his involvement in Hadrion’s death were true. Perhaps that was why he’d looked so haunted in recent weeks. Had Nylion somehow caused the other kid’s death?

Somehow, I contained my shudder at the idea.

Perhaps something else was troubling the kid, though. I hadn’t seen him with Ren lately, which had been both a blessing and curse. Because of it, rumors of Eselan love magic had stopped swirling around the kid, and while that was helpful right now—Raimie would need all the support he could get when this ‘march’ of his inevitably failed—it would also impede my goals. I was walking a fine line between making sure Raimie was popular enough to stay alive but not enough to become king.

If Raimie and Ren had fallen into a rough patch, I had to wonder if it was permanent. Given the kid's recent betrothal, I'd think that was so, but you never knew. Enough 'kings' had kept a mistress on the side in the past. I could see that happening here.

But out of all the possibilities, it was most likely that Raimie was stressed because of what he'd learned from Nylion.

"Please, sit," the kid said, waving a hand in front of him.

All three of us men reluctantly joined him on the floor. Even Kaedesa left her corner to come closer.

When he saw her, Raimie was on his feet almost immediately, which had me flinching at the sudden movement.

"Oh, Your Majesty!" he said. "I didn't think to provide you with the barest of comforts. My apologies."

Snorting, Kaedesa said, "A little dirt has never hurt anyone, Raimie. And if you refuse to use my name, then at least get my title right. When it comes to you now, I'm 'betrothed', not Your Majesty'."

Nervously chuckling, Raimie slumped to the ground.

"Of course. How silly of me. I apologize once more."

Somehow, the kid had managed to sidestep publicly naming them as engaged. If I wasn't so nervous, I might have been proud of him.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I've asked for you when we're weeks away from our destination," Raimie said.

He had *no* idea, but no one was brave enough to put forth a speculation.

"Truth is, I'll be ridiculously busy in the coming weeks with preparations and—"

He slid his eyes above our heads.

"—personal projects. I wanted to share the plan for Elisk with you while I have the time."

So... he wasn't planning on killing us?

"You have a plan?" Marcuset asked with a laugh. "Does it involve anything besides us dying in front of Elisk's gates?"

Before Raimie could reply, I said, "Yes, I'm curious why we're doing this instead of consolidating our power base, grandson. You'd have us go for the grand prize when we're nowhere near ready for it."

"I know," Raimie said with an honest nod. "I'd much rather wait a few months before doing this, absorbing more towns and resources into our growing sphere of influence, but outside factors have accelerated my original timetable *significantly*."

Glancing to the side, he made a face.

"*What* outside factors?" Gistrick asked, clearly annoyed.

With his face going even sourer, Raimie said. "Can't tell you. They involve secrets that aren't mine to share."

Scoffing, Gistrick crossed his arms.

"Well, that's bull," he said. "You've never failed to tell us your plans in the past, even when you knew we might not approve of them. Hell, you told us you were a *primeancer* for Alouin's sake, which is something you most definitely should have kept to yourself!"

"Why?" Raimie asked, cocking his head.

"Because- well-" Gistrick sputtered. "Because primeancy is evil! You took a huge risk when sharing your secret. You're lucky your people are so loyal, otherwise you'd be short a couple thousand soldiers by now. I know that I seriously considered leaving after I learned about it."

I *could not* laugh right now. Gistrick's current indignation was a total reversal from the stance he'd held when Raimie was a child, back when the kid could dance circles around him while using Ele. At the time, the Zrelnach commander had seen primeancy as an asset that his student should exploit to the fullest.

Look at him now.

"And that hatred and mistrust is why I waited to share the truth until it was dragged out of me," Raimie said. "I didn't magically gain mastery over Ele and Daevetch in the hours before the beach battle. I'd practiced in secret while hiding my powers for months before then, albeit not very well at times. I do occasionally keep things to myself—I promise you—and as I said before, I can't share the secret in this case because it's not mine. Don't bother asking whose it is either. You'll only end up frustrated."

"Fine," I drawled. "You want us to assault the capital of Doldimar's domain long before we're ready for it because of unknown factors that you won't share. What's the plan?"

With an abashed grin, Raimie shrugged.

"I don't know!" he said. "You're the ones who've analyzed this problem over the last few weeks. I'm sure that during that time, you've devised a few viable battle plans. Pick the one with the least projected casualties and enact it. The assault's only serving as a distraction anyway."

"For *what*?" Marcuset asked.

Making a face, Raimie said, "I plan to fulfill the damn foretelling. I'll kill Doldimar and 'return our land to peace and prosperity'."

Finished, he wiggled his fingers in the air.

"That's it?" I asked. "That's your plan?"

"Mhmm. Hope you like it because it won't change," Raimie said.

With a tired groan, he stood and brushed dirt off of his uniform.

"Discuss amongst yourselves, if you like. I have other tasks on my agenda tonight."

He turned to the only woman in our midst.

"Kaedesa, would you be so kind as to join me? We should discuss how badly you want to commit Ada'ir to my beleaguered cause, now that you know the full situation."

Springing to her feet with a twinkle in her eyes, Kaedesa said, "I'd love to walk with you. I'd also love it if you regaled me with this foretelling you were talking about. I remember you mentioning it in Daira, but... where did you find a seer? They're so rare!"

"I'm sure we'll discuss many things this evening," Raimie said. "After you."

Extending a hand toward the tent flap, he bowed, and the queen of Ada'ir skipped outside, followed by Oswin. Once the flap had closed behind them, Raimie woodenly rose from his bow with a change sweeping over him. His posture shifted, and a deceptively relaxed stance took hold of his body, solely betrayed by the tension in the shoulders. He faced us and such hatred! I flinched from the loathing I saw in those dilated eyes.

"Nylion," I breathed.

Ignoring my exclamation, Nylion raked his gaze over us.

"You should know that the only reason you are still here is because of your high stance among the soldiers," he said. "Getting rid of you now would leave such a sizable power vacuum in the army that it might collapse on itself. Your tenuous roles and Raimie's attachment to the idea of delivering *justice*—"

He rolled his eyes as he said that word.

"—are the only things staying my hand. No matter how vexing I have found it to this point, I will continue with letting Raimie decide your fates because he has always been the nobler one of us. Do. not. make me regret it."

He'd punctuated his last words with finger jabs, capturing each of us with his glare. Then, he turned on his heels, jogging to catch up with Kaedesa and Oswin.

“Shit,” Marcuset muttered.

Shit indeed. I’d hoped that Aramar had been wrong with his warning, that we wouldn’t need to contend with the Nylion problem in addition to everything else.

“At least he didn’t outright attack or scream at us. That’s... different,” Marcuset soon continued, “but still. What do we do now?”

“I thought that was obvious,” I said. “We’ll play the faithful vassals for now. It’s all we can do until another option presents itself.”

“Even if that means following Raimie’s reckless plan?” Gistrick asked.

“To be fair, his plans have worked in the past, no matter how reckless they’ve seemed,” Marcuset said. “Look how far he’s led us!”

“So, maybe his strategy for Elisk will work as well,” I said, “but if the battle goes poorly, I’m sure Raimie won’t blame us for retreating if it will save lives. We have an out.”

“Shit!” Marcuset said again, clutching at his head. “How did things end up this way?”

We sat in uncomfortable silence until Gistrick cleared his throat.

“If it helps, I have an idea for solving this problem,” he slowly said. “It might involve doing some morally ambiguous things, though, and I’d need to leave camp for a few days while we march. You two might need to cover for me, if Raimie asks where I’ve gone.”

He had an idea? That was new. Usually, Gistrick liked following someone else’s lead, which was why I’d found Ferin’s death so unfortunate at the time. It had put a foot soldier into a commander’s position.

“Whatever it is, I think we can stomach it,” I said. “Anything to get us out of this mess.”

Marcuset hesitated, but it didn’t take him long to reluctantly nod.

“It can’t be something that will kill him, though,” he insisted before hugging himself.

“Of course not,” I said, looking over my friend’s head at the Zrelnach commander. “We’d never want to do that.”

When Gistrick inclined his head, I pulled my lips into something between a grimace and a grin. At least one of my companions understood how awful this mess might get by the end.

“All right, my friends!”

I slapped my knees.

“Let’s play the dutiful soldiers and pray that Elisk isn’t as well defended as we’ve been told.”

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