

Chapter 54: While on the Way Part Two

Raimie

I didn't want to catch up with Kaedesa right now. I'd much rather head into the wilds, where I could get started with the only thing that had helped me find sleep for the last week. It would even be nice simply to continue trailing behind her and Oswin, watching her chat with him in a carefree manner while he stiffly replied.

But at the moment, the queen was my people's most powerful ally. I needed to make sure my relationship with her stayed as stable as possible, for their sake, and when it came to this, I couldn't let myself feel any emotion. I must shut out the parts of me that screamed for *Ren, Ren, REN!* The only safe woman I'd known.

So, I reached Kaedesa's side, ignoring Oswin's quietly relieved sigh, and I smiled, no matter how fake that expression had felt on me in recent days.

"Have you given up on us yet?" I asked.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, given your perspective—Kaedesa only laughed at that.

"I think things aren't nearly as grim as you or your commanders believe," she said. "Yes, we may be an attacking force with significantly fewer numbers than our enemy, but Ada'ir isn't known as the military superpower of our world without reason, Raimie. Plus, you have the Zrelnach among your people, *and* you've gotten those notoriously secretive warriors to teach the rank and file their renowned fighting techniques. That's not to say that your fears about this coming battle are unwarranted, of course. Just... try to look at your advantages too."

I understood what she was saying. Truly, I did.

But I also looked at the 'advantages' she'd named and saw how they could ruin us as well. As we walked through the army's encampment, no one among those three mentioned factions mingled with any of the others. Ada'ir's loyalists camped on one side while my people had taken up another section, and solely because they were Eselan, the Zrelnach had been shunned by the other two groups, if only to a degree.

We might have been marching together for a week—one long week since I'd accepted Kaedesa's proposal and she'd announced that my 'traitors' had been an engagement gift for me all along—but lines were still drawn in the sand. I didn't see how those divisions could be healed in the short time left before the battle, but I most certainly saw how they could cause *problems* once the fight had begun.

Even with that, I only said, "I see your point."

Kaedesa laughed under her breath, but since she provided no explanation for that, I wasn't sure what she'd found so amusing.

Eventually, I continued with, "So, you're sure about helping with the battle?"

Stopping short, Kaedesa lifted her eyes to the heavens.

"Yes, Raimie. I have made my decision and let it be widely known," she said. "I can't take it back, no matter how much Pierdriel and you seem to want me to."

Thank Alouin that man hadn't joined us on this march, staying in Tiro instead. The one time we'd met had been more than enough for me.

"Since you're so sure, I won't ask you about it again," I said. "My apologies if my insistence about it has bothered you."

Chuckling, Kaedesa said, "It hasn't. Trust me."

She reached up to pat my cheek and-

"You're such a good boy," Auntie Kaedesa says while brushing my cheek. "I don't know if I should let your father have his way. No one as sweet as you should become a trained killer."

Frowning, I grab Auntie's wrist when she draws away.

"You're supposed to be telling me a bedtime story, not worrying," I say. "So, tell me a story!"

She laughs before sitting beside me on the bed, throwing an arm around my shoulders as she draws a book onto her lap.

"That's true," she says. "So. Where did we last stop the story?"

I point at the bookmark, sticking above the top of a page and-

"So. Tell me about those foretellings you mentioned," Auntie... no. Just Kaedesa said.

Blinking, I struggled to orient myself to the plains and people and campfires around me. I couldn't focus on returning memories or Nylion's pale face at the corner of my vision or *anything* but what was happening *right now*. I turned to... a woman who'd apparently told me bedtime stories when I

was a child. And I was supposed to marry-?

Clenching my fingernails into my palm, I barely kept from vomiting, taking deep breaths until I could speak.

“You’ve never heard of the foretellings that shroud Shadowsteal in myth?” I said as mildly as I could.

Laughing, Kaedesa said, “I may have, but if so, they’d be written down somewhere, not stored in here.”

Tapping on her temple, she ruefully grinned.

“Why don’t you remind me about them?”

I’d rather not.

Still, I said, “Well, there are several of them, but only one is relevant to our current endeavor. It goes: *Leaving chaos and order in his wake, Shadowsteal’s rightful bearer shall destroy destructions epitome, returning our land to peace and prosperity.*”

“I see,” Kaedesa said.

Frowning, she tapped on her lips.

“Rather vague, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that.

“Yes, it is. They all are,” I said. “As for your question about the seer from earlier, I’m not sure who they were. These foretellings were made quite a while ago, so the person who foresaw them is probably long dead by now.”

Making a face, Kaedesa said, “That’s unfortunate. A seer would be helpful right now.”

“I’d certainly like to know the outcome of this battle before it begins,” I said, “but then, that would take away the intrigue and mystery around what will happen, even if it would also remove the fear. I’m not sure if the tradeoff would be worth it.”

“Or maybe it wouldn’t make things clear, given how vague the one you shared is.”

When Kaedesa glanced at me suggestively, I smirked.

“Fair enough.”

We walked for a little while longer before I deemed that I’d spent enough time on maintaining this increasingly difficult part of my life.

“Would you like me to accompany you further?” I asked. “Because if not, I have a lot to do before I can rest tonight.”

“Oh. Of course!” Kaedesa said. “Forgive me. I get lost in my thoughts more than I should. Please, take care of whatever business you might have. We can speak more tomorrow.”

Bowing to her, I said, ‘Thank you, Your Majesty. And good night.’”

Even as her lips puckered—I kept forgetting I wasn’t supposed to call her that anymore—she made her own farewell, and I was released. Almost immediately, I headed for the edge of camp, ignoring Oswin when he clicked his tongue behind me. He hadn’t enjoyed the new activity I’d found myself needing.

Instead of commenting on that, I said, “Any updates for me?”

“No, sir. Things have still been quiet,” Oswin said. “We’ve seen no sign of an enemy army, coming to meet us, and the villages between us and Elisk are few and far between. I’m not sure what’s going through Doldimar’s head, but he hasn’t seen fit to head off our attack.”

“Maybe he’s drawn his people back to a more defensible position.”

Even as I finished saying that, Dim snickered into their hand, and I knew they were right. What living being, aligned with Daevetch, would wait to indulge in something as violent as a battle?

Shrugging, Oswin said, “Who can say?”

For a moment, he paused but then forged into an awkward subject, as he’d frequently had to do in the last week.

“Sir? How far out are we going tonight?”

Damn. I’d known he’d ask me that question soon but still.

“Not too far,” I said. “I wasn’t lying when I told Kaedesa I have a lot on my plate. Some of that includes sleep, at some point, but first, I need to... wear myself out.”

Or that was the excuse I’d been giving him for the last week at least.

“All right,” Oswin said. “And you’ll stay within range of my pistol, in case something unpleasant comes along?”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “I promise to let you continue with being a good bodyguard, Oswin. I know how important you *apparently* find it.”

At the far edge of my vision, Nylion whispered, “It is because he cares.”

Which I knew. I wasn’t sorry for my sarcasm, though. I couldn’t be sorry for *anything* right now.

Once the encampment had fallen behind us—still clearly visible but with enough space between us and it—I stopped, mentally tracking the outline of a circle in the plains around us.

“I won’t go farther than the rise of that hill, over there,” I told Oswin, pointing.

He nodded, drawing his pistol and getting as comfortable as he could while still staying on guard.

I pushed away my awareness of him, of practical problems, and of everything that kept me tethered on this plane of existence. Slowly, I fell away from the outside world, holding to it the bare minimum I needed to keep my body moving, and when I could, I reached out for Nylion.

His presence brushed against mine, and I flinched. Over the last week, something had been building in him, something... almost resentful. I wasn’t sure if that assessment was right, hadn’t seen fit to ask him about it yet, but whatever the sensation was, it was causing problems, more than those we were already dealing with. I felt the distance he wanted from me and wanted to cry, which he then felt and wanted to comfort me, but it also made him need more distance. I wasn’t sure how to break free of that vicious cycle, but I did know how to deal with the other part of my internal landscape that had been wrecking me lately.

Together, Nylion and I faced the tide of memories that we’d held off throughout the day. As they came rushing toward us, I dragged Ele to me, and I *ran* and *ran* and *ran* and *ran* and-

Revision #2

Created 28 October 2024 21:23:28 by FatalisticFable

Updated 1 October 2025 02:25:52 by FatalisticFable