

Chapter 56: Advancing on the Capital

Eledis

You know the old adage, 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth'? Bullshit! Always inspect a gifted horse. You don't know what awful diseases that mangy beast may be carrying.

-Unknown

Another two weeks of marching across Auden's southern border passed, and then, there it was. After decades of strife and struggle, I laid my eyes on the city that had haunted my dreams since I was young.

Elisk didn't look like I'd always pictured it. That was to say, the city itself matched my expectations. How could it not with its soaring walls and eclectic buildings, climbing a hill to the elegant palace at its pinnacle? The glass-like spires stretching above that massive building sparkled through the tears in my eyes.

What came as a surprise, however, was the spread of ramshackle shanty towns outside of the city's walls. Reports—both from our scouts and Pointer—had briefly mentioned these, but they'd focused more on the city's defenses than anything found outside. They'd failed to emphasize how widespread those flimsy hovels were. Alouin but they stretched for at least a mile!

Coming up beside me, Raimie asked, "Why are we waiting?"

"Our plan calls for a charge of the wall," I said, "but we can't charge through that mess without significant problems. I don't like that we've run into a disruption to the plan before we've even begun it."

Beside Raimie, his new friend, Ryvolim, snickered into his hand.

"I'm not sure why you brought the horses in the first place," he chirped. "The Kiraak'll just spook them."

Frowning, I let a beat of silence carry the weight of my disdain for this man.

"And *why* didn't you mention this earlier?" I asked.

As Ryvolim leaned closer to me, his ever-present smile disappeared.

“Maybe I wanted to make you look incompetent, Eledis,” he said under his breath before rising with his irritating smile back in place. “Besides, the plan doesn’t need to change. Advance without the horses. You’ll be fine.”

For a moment, I could only stare at this man with my mouth hanging open. Then, I waved in front of us.

“Are we seeing the same battlefield?” I snapped. “Who knows what sort of traps and ambushes could be waiting for us in the chaos of those slums?”

“Doldimar doesn’t work that way.”

As Ryvolim changed his tone of voice, his eyes lost focus, drifting up and over my head.

“He enjoys a pitched battle, full of carnage and death. Picking off individual soldiers isn’t his style.”

“And you know this, how?” I said.

But Ryvolim only showed me a cagey smile. Frustrating man. I’d never understand why Raimie had made friends with him.

Surely the kid would know better than to commit to a charge. We should step back, picking another battle plan from the ones I’d drawn up. Our next best option would involve sending small, suicide squads against the wall as a distraction, something Raimie was guaranteed to disapprove of, but he planned to use the whole of his army in the same way. So, how could he complain?

“No charge,” Raimie said.

And I thanked Alouin for common sense.

“But we do *slowly* advance without the horses,” he continued. “At the first sign of unexpected resistance, we retreat.”

Was he joking? Please, say he was joking.

“Spread the change in orders,” Raimie told Oswin.

The spymaster signaled the other soldiers around us, and while they took off, Raimie dismounted, followed by Ryvolim.

“Coming?” the kid asked.

Hell, he was going to get us all killed, but could I do anything else to change his mind? Probably not. I also climbed off of my horse, shaking my head at the stupidity of youth.

So it was that our rebel army strolled toward the fight to capture Auden's heart. Made up of soldiers loyal to Raimie and those from Ada'ir, the army was bound by a tenuous link of betrothal between their two monarchs, and even now, the tension between those two sides was visibly palpable. Given this, I didn't look forward to the coming battle. Already at a disadvantage in terms of numbers, we didn't need the complication of an uneasy alliance adding to that tension, especially since Queen Kaedesa had opted to stay on the city's outskirts with our reinforcements.

When we crossed into the sprawling shanty towns' outskirts, the army's pace slowed to a crawl. I quietly hummed to myself as I retrieved a spare handkerchief to secure around my head while the soldiers coughed and gagged.

"Are they trying to kill us with their smell alone?" one of them choked out.

Raimie quickly followed my example while Marcuset pinched his nose. Someone behind us threw up, which seemed a bit excessive, but what did I know?

Only Ryvolim looked unaffected.

"I've smelled worse," he quietly said when glanced at.

I wasn't sure how to describe it. Unwashed humans mixed with excrement and rotten food? Or maybe the smell was more akin to putrefying corpses. The trash heaped on the corners and sides of the makeshift streets explained some of the odor but the rest? Who could guess?

What I did know was that cities were supposed to stink—that was what happened when thousands of people were crammed into a few square miles—but this was barbaric.

When a shadow peeled away from a shack's base, flitting across the street in front of us, I jumped. What had that been? Some unknown form of primeancy? One of Doldimar's soldiers who refused to die?

A... girl?

She slunk into the sunlight, headed our way, and for the first time, I noticed the glittering eyes staring at us from the buildings on either side. The girl stopped well out of reach, which halted the front line, and I wondered if Raimie knew how many gazes drifted his way, waiting for him to take the lead on this.

He took two steps forward, making the girl tremble, before crouching to her eye-level.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Shifting in place, the girl defiantly lifted her chin.

"Are you here to hurt us?" she asked.

Rocking back, Raimie paused for a moment before gently taking her hand, folding it between his own.

“Why would you think that, sweetheart?” he asked.

“You’re armed and armored, but you’re not Conscripted soldiers or Kiraak,” she said. “We don’t know what you are, so we don’t know the rules. Are we supposed to play run and hide?”

“No! No, sweetie, you’re not...”

Sighing, Raimie hung his head, and as she waited for his response, the girl continually flicked her eyes to her captive hand.

“Then, what are the rules?” she eventually asked.

Looking up at her, Raimie firmly held her gaze with tightened lips.

“I want you and your friends to find somewhere safe, somewhere you can wait for a time,” he said. “Stay out of sight until I return. I don’t want you caught in the fighting. Can you do that for me?”

“So, we *are* playing run and hide?” the girl said.

“Yes, but this time, no one will hurt you,” Raimie said. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Patting her hand, he rose to his full height, and with a wrinkled brow, the girl stared at him for a moment before darting off. As she did, Raimie turned in a slow circle, and I followed his lead, taking in the grime, the shacks that looked like they’d fall apart with a breath of wind, and the people who were too terrified to leave those deathtraps.

“These people need help, Rhy,” the kid said to his newest friend.

Ryvolim laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Eliminate the danger first, and then, you can help,” he said.

“I know.”

And that? It raised my suspicion again. Raimie didn’t make friends easily, especially not ones he’d feel comfortable sharing his quiet despondency with. In fact, only one man had ever claimed such a bond with the kid but...

It couldn’t be, could it?

I’d already set my misgivings aside once. When they pestered me twice, I knew I should listen to them.

As we moved closer to the city, I said, “Rhylix!”

And Ryvolim, the peppy, distinctly human being in front of me, the one who was the opposite of everything that had defined the reserved Eselan I'd known, half-turned before catching his mistake.

It was enough. Alouin, my eyes might pop out of my head. That Eselan and the kid had pulled off the impossible, fooling me for so long. They'd *faked Rhylix's death*.

But that meant...

Hell, how powerful was he? Adopting a human guise was no mean feat, and to maintain it for who knew how long took an exceptional kind of willpower as well as a *deep* magic reserve.

Slowing down, I let the two younger men pull ahead of me. I didn't want to be anywhere near someone of such strength, especially when I'd blatantly celebrated his death while in his presence.

As if in response to my fears, Ryvol- no. *Rhylix* faltered in his stride, cocking his head.

"What? That's not-" he said under his breath.

Hearing that now perceptibly familiar voice, I shrank. How had I never noticed it?

"What is it?" Raimie asked.

"Not sure yet," Rhylix said, "but I don't think that advancing was such a wise decision now."

"Should we expect a fight soon?" Raimie asked.

In response, Rhylix drew his weapons, but despite his misgivings, we reached Elisk's outer wall without further incident. What was waiting for us there, though, brought the army to a grinding halt.

The gate we'd been approaching had been flung open, and wind whistled through the empty square beyond, rustling through the ranks of the army that had come to break it down.

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