

Chapter 58: What Have You Been Up To?

Rhylix

I cannot live under the control of a god.

After a long day, I trudged into the safe house, pushing my hood back and stretching out the kinks I'd gained over the many hours I'd spent hunching. My unusually tall height had always been an affliction, especially when I was blending in, and it had especially been a burden over the last three months.

"Rhy! You're in the way," someone drawled behind me.

With a faint smile, I stepped aside, letting a teenage boy blaze past me, so he could start pounding up the stairs.

"Training as soon as you've changed clothes, Dath," I called after him. "I'll be up shortly. You'd better be practicing your forms by the time I reach the roof."

"I knooooow," Dath groaned before disappearing.

For perhaps the millionth time, I found myself stunned by that boy's existence. Given my luck, I'd expected Aya and Gistrick to find Dath dead on the night they'd gone to rescue him. Instead, they'd found him unharmed and furious with a gag in his mouth. Apparently, he'd been shouting too many insults at the 'true traitors', as he'd called the Zrelnach who'd followed the Council's orders, for them to leave him ungagged.

After they'd snuck him into Sev, I hadn't been sure how to greet Dath, hesitating until the boy had rolled his eyes and pulled me into a hug. The kid's ridiculous energy levels had yet to relent to this day.

Sighing, I climbed the stairs at a much slower pace, ducking into my designated room as soon as I reached the top.

I didn't need to change or anything like that. Even if I hadn't been playing the safer role of teacher during Dath's nightly training sessions, I wouldn't wear armor for them, as it would only slow me down. No, I was in here with the door closed behind me for privacy.

Answering my silent summons, Creation popped into being as I sank onto the bed.

Throwing an arm over my face, I said, "Well?"

"According to your ally's Order piece, things in Daira remain stable," Creation said. "Raimie's apparently pulling some harebrained scheme tonight, something to do with the queen's bedroom? I'm not sure. They were, as usual, extremely brief in their visit to the whole, which makes the information I pull from them garbled. They did stick around long enough to leave a clear message for you, though."

Of course they had. When Bright had first started leaving messages for me, I hadn't been sure why they were doing it. After listening to the third one, however, I'd recognized what the 'messages' were and had dissolved into a laughing fit that had seemed to last forever, all while Creation had looked on with annoyance.

Peering under my arm, I smirked at their currently guarded expression.

"So?" I said. "What is it this time?"

Stiffening, Creation cleared their throat.

"When we were examining a portrait today, some uppity noble walked in on us," they said. "He obviously wanted something, heading straight for Raimie like he was a servant, but before the man could speak, Raimie asked a question he'd been pondering. The noble gave him an answer before launching into a lecture about Ternidian, the artist who'd painted the portrait, and how he was also a famous scholar. During the explanation, Raimie patiently nodded along, but at the end, he pointed to a plaque below the painting, asking if Ternidian was another name for the Malnashem who was listed. I'll let you speculate on what happened next."

"Oh, *gods*."

I could barely breathe. Having started snickering halfway through the message, I slapped at the bed, desperately trying to control myself.

That had been one of the better ones. I needed the dry updates that Creation gave me, but I loved these brief glimpses into Raimie's life in Daira. I hadn't had a friend for so long that I'd forgotten what missing one was like.

"Apparently, Raimie mentioned you today," Creation said. "Order didn't think it was important but..."

How did they know the best ways to bring me down? I wasn't unhappy that Creation had shared this, the opposite in fact, but hearing that Raimie might miss me too was both endearing and

sobering.

Sitting up, I rubbed my face before swinging my legs over the bed's edge.

"Anything else I should know?" I asked.

"Nothing to do with Raimie," Creation said, "although I'd suggest that you hurry your rescue plan along. The situation in Daira may be stable now, but it will soon boil over."

Nodding, I said, "I thought as much. Don't worry. Everything's almost ready. I have only one more item to address."

Creation was silent for a concerningly long time.

Before I could check on them, though, they said, "Ferin?"

Stiffening, I pushed down the wash of hurt rising in me, bracing on the bed's edge. I was still taking steadying breaths when Creation stepped into view.

"I'm sorry," they said.

But then, they were gone, and I fell back on the bed with my head dangling from the other side. I lay there for a while, blankly staring at the ceiling.

When I eventually gathered myself, I headed for the roof. Flat with a knee-high crenellation running around it, it made a perfect place for weapons training, even if its white-painted adobe reflected the sun's heat.

Dath was here, practicing sword forms like he'd been told, but he wasn't alone. For the moment, Aya was doing my job, correcting the kid when he made mistakes, while Gistrick watched them work.

Aramar was sprawled across the roof in a corner, which had me wincing. No matter what sort of adjustments I made to the device that let him walk, nothing had eased his pain or stopped his body's flailing. Those twitches only paused when he was sitting down, so he'd been doing a lot of that lately, to the point that I wondered if he wouldn't be better off without the device.

Near him, Ashella was perched on the crenellation with her half-Eselan... lover? Business partner? I'd never figured out what their relationship was, but whenever they were together, he was standing beside the newly made guild leader, as quiet and unobtrusive as always.

And that was everyone who'd been involved with my activities over the last three months. Seeing them gathered in one place, I stopped short, wondering if I could sneak inside before anyone noticed me.

For weeks now, I'd known a confrontation like this was coming. I'd been delaying it with every trick I could, but when Dath glanced over and his face lit up, I knew it was time to face them.

“Rhy!” the kid shouted. “Everyone’s here! Isn’t it great?”

“That’s one word for it,” I said to myself.

Meanwhile, Aya smacked Dath upside the head.

“What in the void makes you think you’re finished?” she snapped. “I should make you run laps for such a lapse in concentration.”

Snapping his head to her, Dath growled, “You’re not my teacher.”

“No, but I am,” I said.

Gliding over the roof, I sank to the floor beside Aramar.

“And I say that you do as you’re told.”

Groaning, Dath glared at Aya through narrowed eyes, snapping his body back into position, while the others converged on me and Aramar. Once everyone had made themselves comfortable, they eyed me.

I wasn’t sure when my role had transferred from plan maker to leader, but I steered the group now, which was disconcerting. Ever, I’d worked in the background, moving within my ally’s shadow. With Raimie gone, though, the methods I usually took had gotten me noticed. The rest of the group expected me to run these meetings.

Sighing, I said, “Can I get your reports before we address the topic we’re here for?”

“So long as we get to it eventually,” Aramar said.

As the months had dragged by, that man had been getting understandably crankier. I couldn’t imagine what having a child held prisoner was like, let alone when that imprisonment could turn into an execution at any day.

Given that, I’d been surprised by how civil Aramar had been throughout this. Not once had he questioned my instructions, but everyone in our group could feel the tension and anxiety that he was always leaking, growing in strength every day.

“We will. I promise,” I said before moving on. “So. Ash? How goes propping up Sev’s government?”

One of my first tasks after learning Kaedesa had taken Raimie had been to strengthen Sev’s standing. If the Robzul city state closest to Ada’ir became noteworthy practically overnight, its meteoric rise would distract Kaedesa from Raimie, and the more affairs of state stole her attention, the longer he lived.

So, I’d set Ashella on the first half of that project. She and her thieves guild had been loosening the stranglehold that the bankers and merchants guild held on Sev.

Considering that the city's main source of income had always been the tariffs they placed on visiting ships, the city's governors had, until recently, gleefully exploited any and all who passed through their waters, but the last few years had seen the bankers, merchants, and other ship captains banding together to resist this treatment. Their strategy had been effective enough that Sev's current governor had started pandering to them, afraid of driving them away, and to make up for the resulting loss of income, she'd significantly raised taxes on the average city dweller.

Like most short-sighted people, she hadn't realized why doing this had either driven her citizens into poverty or had them leaving in droves. Tax the people as heavily as she had and people started hoarding their coin, spending it only on the things that they needed. Businesses that relied on excess coin, like jewelers or butchers, dwindled away to nothing, and thus started a chain reaction. Without a continuous flow of revenue, an economy withered, or it did in a small population like Sev's at least.

To counteract this, Ashella and her thieves had been stealing from the merchants and bankers guilds. For the most part, they'd taken information, to be spread throughout the city. The hope had been that no matter their affiliation with a guild, Sev's merchants would use this information to sabotage each other, and to this point, the strategy had worked.

Mostly.

"Our oh so mighty leader is being an idiot, as usual. She's released another proclamation about our thievery, increasing the city guard's presence in the streets instead of on the wall," Ashella said. "No little ones for you to rescue tonight, Rhy. They've all come home, safe and sound."

"I'm still dying to know how you get them out of lockup," Gistrick said.

"And you'll continue to wonder," I said, settling against the crenellation with a smile. "I have to keep some secrets."

Frowning, Ashella asked, "Why?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. Why did she always insist on causing trouble?

"Because I do," I said.

When Ashella opened her mouth again, her half-Eselan associate rested a hand on her shoulder, squeezing, and she grimaced but said nothing more.

I glanced at the other two men, unsurprised to find them indifferent to Ashella's goading. Gistrick would understand the necessity of maintaining secrets, Zrelnach warrior that he was, and Aramar already knew how the little ones had been freed from lockup most nights, considering how many times he'd gone with me to do it. He, after all, was the only one here who knew about the secret that could see me dead.

"I'm glad the kids are safe. Also, if I were you, I wouldn't worry about the governor, Ash," I said. "The election's coming up, right? I doubt she'll be in power once it's over."

Frowning, Ashella said, "Why would you think that? The ignorant cow has already finagled her way through three elections, despite how unpopular she is."

"Yes, well. She's never had me opposing her," Aramar said, straightening. "Let's just say that this time, her power base isn't as strong as she might think."

Ashella looked down her nose at him.

"And where did you find the time to destabilize her along with everything else you're handling?" she asked.

"I've learned how to operate on less sleep than most people need," Aramar said. "It gives me a lot of free time."

Ashella kept giving him a side-eyed look, making him sigh.

"Look. You spend years waking up to your son screaming because of his nightmares and then, tell me you'd need a full night's rest," he said. "That's the wonderful thing about humans and Esela. We adapt to our circumstances."

Having rocked away from him, Ashella blinked at Aramar. Even I was a little surprised by his intensity. It was like he'd released a week's worth of agitation in a few sentences. Before things could become more combative, I lifted two fingers, drawing attention my way.

"Plus, I've helped him, the same as I have with everyone else in this group. Remember. Our little project is a team effort," I said, "but speaking of our goal, why don't you tell us how things went with our militia today, Aramar?"

Forming one had been the second half of our effort to strengthen Sev. The main problem afflicting the city was the near constant pirate attacks that Sev's city guard worked to repel. A large portion of its tax money went to training replacements for casualties and the like.

I'd been using any coin stolen from the banking and merchant guilds to arm Sev's population, or any of them who were willing to fight for their home at least, and Aramar, who was a better teacher than I'd expected, had been training them.

This militia would have to appear on the wall at the start of a battle and fade away once it was over. Until a new government was established, citizens couldn't come to the city's defense. Doing so was quite illegal, so the militia had been training anywhere the city guard's presence was lacking. When the pressure to defend the city had eased, perhaps some of the tax money currently given to those guards could go toward revitalizing Sev instead.

"I don't have much else to teach them, not as one man who's instructing dozens of people at least," Aramar said. "During the first few attacks, the militia will probably struggle, but once they've gotten through their initial fumbling, they'll do all right."

"Honestly? That's better than I expected," I said. "Seems you're chock full of hidden talents."

With a small smile, Aramar said, "You have no idea."

Gistrick snorted at that, which made my eye twitch. Aramar and his Zrelnach friends were hiding something, although I had no idea what it could be, and even though this shouldn't bother me, it did.

As usual, however, I ignored it in an effort to avoid conflict. Aramar wouldn't mind me asking him questions, although I doubted he'd answer them, but the Zrelnach...

They had history with me, and while Aya and Gistrick had been nothing but pleasant to me since we'd started working together, most of what lay in our past wasn't good.

Still, I turned to Gistrick.

"And how are things with your comrades?" I asked.

Despite my initial projections, Ferin and the Zrelnach had yet to leave their encampment outside the city. Neither Gistrick nor Aya had figured out why they'd stayed, but I suspected that in response to my group's activities, Queen Kaedesa had requested they hold position, which might have an unintended benefit.

Our two, allied Zrelnach had spent most of their time in that camp, recruiting for Raimie. For the most part, they'd had partial success with this. Save for a small number who were fiercely loyal to the Council, the Zrelnach had been eager to offer their support. Their only reservation was...

"Ferin's all that's holding us back," Gistrick said. "In recent years, she's been the one reasonable person on the Council, and she's our commander. The Zrelnach love her."

And we'd returned to the topic I'd been avoiding for weeks.

"If you want the full loyalty of the Zrelnach, Ferin..."

Trailing off, Gistrick swallowed hard, avoiding my eyes.

"She has to go," he said.

None of them would look at me.

"We can't abduct her? Take her somewhere until a new commander is appointed?" I said.

"That's not how it works, and you know it, Rhy," Aramar said. "The commander of the Zrelnach stays commander until their retirement or death and when that last one happens-"

"The rank and file have to see proof of death before a new commander can assume the role, yes," I snapped. "It's a fine way to minimize power struggles within the ranks, but it's certainly not helping us now."

Rubbing my temples, I listened to my companions' silence, hating my circumstances for once more bringing me a choice like this.

"While Ferin lives, none of the Zrelnach will swear their loyalty to Raimie, no matter how much they might want to," Gistrick said, "and he'll need us. Where else will he find trained soldiers, willing to cross the Narrow Sea with him?"

"I *know* that," I said.

Dropping my hands in my lap, I tilted my head back, taking in a perfectly blue sky. Here I went again, helping people murder a perfectly decent woman because my ally needed it.

"I-"

"Are you two asking Rhy to kill someone?" Ashella asked with her nose wrinkled. "Because that won't happen."

Oh shit.

Frowning at her, Aramar said, "That's not exactly what we were thinking but... still. What do you mean?"

"Ash..."

Damn, she looked perplexed, glancing between Gistrick and Aramar with her associate carefully watching her.

"You two don't know?" she said. "Rhy can't kill Ferin."

Understanding dawned in the men, and Gistrick reached over to pat Ashella's knee.

"I've seen Rhylix fight before," he said. "I can assure you that he'd defeat Ferin in a fight, hands down."

"Ash!"

Batting at Gistrick's hand, Ashella crossed her arms.

"You don't understand," she said. "Whether he'd win in a fight doesn't matter. I'm telling you that Rhylix literally cannot-"

Shooting to my feet, I shouted, "Ashella! Stop!"

Whatever Ashella saw in me had her skittering backward while her associate dove in front of her with a knife drawn, but I didn't back off.

"I think it might be best if you checked on the little ones, yes?" I said with my voice ice. "They rely on you, and everything else we must discuss today concerns only the people who mean to leave

Ada'ir soon."

Ashella slowly nodded, accepting her associate's hand up when he offered it. They descended into the safehouse while I struggled to wrangle my temper under control. What she'd been about to reveal was the one true thing that I'd told her about myself, something I'd shared in confidence, and she knew how fragile my trust was.

She *knew*.

Still, I'd never seen her so afraid before, and we'd done a lot of dangerous shit when we were kids. Once this meeting was over, I should apologize.

I should probably thank her associate too. That kid had thrown himself out of the inconspicuous role he normally took, all to keep Ashella safe, and I knew how difficult that could be.

First, though, I needed to handle everyone else on the roof. Gistrick and Aramar were staring at me with their faces closed off while Aya had her sword half raised but Dath...

Dath eyed me with his lips pursed and his eyebrows drawn together.

'Are you ok?' he clearly mouthed.

And I wished that lightning would strike from the sky, killing me. How had I let someone get so close?

When I nodded, Dath relaxed, nudging Aya, and once she'd shifted her focus to him, I met Aramar and Gistrick's eyes.

"Before you do anything, I want to talk to Ferin first," I said. "Maybe I can get her to reject the Council's ruling."

Best not to dwell on what had just happened. Best to move on as quickly as possible.

"The last time I saw her, she almost abandoned it."

Aramar shifted in place, clearly wanting to voice an objection, but I spoke over him.

"I want to talk to her."

Sighing, Aramar nodded while Gistrick said.

"Ok."

Focusing on the one-armed man, I said, "I'll need to borrow a set of Zrelnach armor."

Contrary to what I'd anticipated, Gistrick simply nodded.

"You can have mine," he said before pausing to look me up and down. "If it fits."

No objection? That was surprising.

"I thought for sure that you'd be uncomfortable with me wearing the uniform," I said. "I'm a drop out, after all."

Shrugging, Gistrick said, "Rhylix, over the last three months, I've learned what sort of person you are. If anyone deserves to be called a Zrelnach, it's you."

Hell. How did I respond to that?

"Thank... you..." I tried.

But the words felt strange in my mouth.

Shaking myself, I said, "I'll speak with Ferin tonight, and in the morning, we can discuss what we'll do with her. Once we've dealt with her, we can go save Raimie."

If Eledis' plan hadn't started before then, of course. Over the last three months, I'd been working on alternatives, given that I had no idea what the old man was thinking. The reports Bright had been giving me about it had been even sparser in detail than everything else they typically shared.

In any case, I'd rather not implement said alternatives unless I must, as most of them didn't have pleasant consequences for me. I'd rush into one immediately if I thought it was warranted, but until then, I'd rather hope that Eledis' plan would work.

"And how, exactly, are we doing that?" Aramar asked.

Shaking my head, I said, "One thing at a time. Ok?"

With a loud sigh, Aramar nodded.

"Wonderful," I said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get ready."

"Good luck," one of the two grumbled.

I wasn't sure which of them it was. By that point, I'd reached Aya and Dath.

"May I borrow him?" I asked her.

Speculatively watching Dath, who was fighting to keep his attention on what he was doing, Aya made a face.

"I don't know, Rhylix," she said. "He could use another lesson in discipline."

"Oh, trust me," I said, "With what I have planned, he'll be getting that."

I started for the stairs without waiting for Aya's response, and as expected, Dath soon came clattering after me.

“We’re going out again?” he asked.

“In a bit,” I said. “I have to speak with Ashella first, but then, we’ll leave.”

I sincerely hoped that this outing wouldn’t end with Dath’s spirit broken again, like it had been after Lyli’s death. If I had any say in it, that would never happen, whether this evening or far into the future, but I was also realistic.

Tonight could be the last thing needed to shatter him.

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