

Chapter 59: Goodbye, Dear Friend

Rhylix

Especially not one whose sole aim is to destroy creation.

Sneaking into the Zrelnach camp was almost too easy. With our armor matching the people around us, Dath and I weren't questioned as we strode to where Ferin had erected her tent.

It wasn't just the uniforms, though. For three months, these soldiers had sat around, waiting for orders that had never come. Boredom had withered their normally impeccable attentiveness.

Reaching the tent didn't take us long, but when it came into view, I winced. Someone was standing guard at its flap. At least it was someone I'd never treated in my clinic before, so we stood a chance of remaining unrecognized.

As Dath and I approached, the woman watched us, resting her hand on her sword's hilt.

"You have business with the commander?" she called.

Nodding, I jerked my thumb at Dath.

"He's just returned from the capital. Apparently, he has a message from the queen," I said. "I'd like to make sure the commander gets it, if you don't mind."

And all the while, I prayed that I knew Ferin as well as I thought I did.

"Oh, good. Maybe we're finally going home," the guard said, lifting the tent flap. "Go on. You know how antsy the commander's been about getting these messages as soon as possible."

"Tell me about it," I said.

Taking Dath's elbow, I escorted him inside, and here, he had his first true reaction to what we were doing. When confronted with the woman who'd ordered his death, he backtracked into my chest. It didn't matter that she was sleeping. Dath was set trembling at the sight of Ferin.

I squeezed my hold on him, giving him a reassuring smile, and he stopped trying to retreat through me, although he didn't relax. He stepped aside, letting me come further into the tent.

Ferin was sprawled across her desk, fast asleep, and seeing such vulnerability on her face made me wince. I could recall with perfect clarity the years that we'd spent training together, sleeping in the same barrack. I remembered staying awake to stave off nightmares and watching Ferin snore. How I'd wished to join her in that blissful oblivion!

How we'd changed since then.

Drawing my dagger, I strode to her, touching the tip of my blade to her throat before kicking her boot. Snorting, she rose from the desk with my dagger following her. Once she was fully awake, she reached for her own weapons, but when a sharp edge tapped her skin, she raised her hands, glaring at me.

"What are *you* doing here?" she snapped.

"Talking some sense into you," I said before gesturing to Dath. "You remember my friend, yes?"

When Ferin glanced at the boy, something unreadable flickered over her face, but she nodded.

"He and I have a few things to say, and *you* are going to listen," I continued. "He'll go first."

I gestured for Dath to join us, and taking a deep breath, he did so.

"Go on," I said once he was by my side.

Shooting a confused look at me, Dath hesitated, but soon enough, he started speaking.

"I understand what you did. I can't say I agree with your motives but threatening me? I get why you did it.

"What I don't understand is why you're so intent on opposing Raimie. Yes, you're protecting Allanovian. That's well and good, but as a Councilwoman, you're also supposed to listen to the people you represent.

"For you, that's the Zrelnach, and I don't know if you've noticed—I'm not sure how you could have missed it—but the Zrelnach want to be a part of Raimie's crazy quest. You're the only thing stopping them because unlike me, they're not ready to abandon their loyalty to you.

"Please, listen to us, Councilwoman. Please, listen to me, one of your people who's willing to sacrifice everything for Raimie's cause. And... that's it."

Dath glanced at me with a sheepish look on his face.

"How many times have you heard me practicing that speech?" he asked.

Shrugging, I said, "Enough to know it was good and that you needed to say it here."

With his face reddening, Dath muttered something incoherent while Ferin turned to me.

"And you?" she asked. "What do you have to say?"

I looked down on this woman who for years, had been my only ally, who'd been a companion when I'd most needed it, and I knew I could never see her dead. She had to see reason. Now.

"Have you realized how much of a mistake you've made yet?" I asked.

Normally, a question like that would have turned Ferin indignant, but tonight, she flicked her eyes away from me. While chewing on her lip, she slowly nodded.

"I should never have gotten Kaedesa involved with this. I thought that handing a human problem to a human monarch would be best, but she's had me and my people sitting here for months with our supplies slowly dwindling," she said. "Instead... instead, I should have brought the Council's concerns to Raimie and Aramar. Definitely not Eledis. I should have worked with the younger two... but I didn't, and now, look at the mess I've made."

I stared at Ferin for several heartbeats, searching her for deceit, before sheathing my dagger.

"Then, do it now," I said. "Come with me to meet Aramar. While you're with him, I'll keep you alive, and together, we can figure out how to help a boy we've all come to love. Once he's safe, we can discuss how Allanovian and the Zrelnach might contribute to freeing Auden, even if that's with nothing at all."

With her eyebrows soaring, Ferin blinked at me.

"I... would like that," she said.

Inclining my head toward the tent flap, I said, "Then, let's go."

Ferin sprang to her feet, flinging a cloak over her shoulders. When leading the way out of the tent, she paused beside Dath, hesitantly taking his hand.

"I am truly sorry," she said. "I'll do my best to make it up to you."

Swallowing, Dath nodded, and Ferin left it at that, hurrying toward Sev.

When we were far away from the Zrelnach encampment, she slowed down, jerking her head toward Dath as she met my eyes.

"How much do you trust him?" she asked.

That was an interesting question, coming from her.

"I trust him more than I do most people," I said.

Absently nodding, Ferin curled her chin to her chest, slowing down even more. When she stopped short, I cocked my head. What on earth was she doing? Had I somehow walked into a trap?

“What’s going on, Ferin? We should keep moving-”

“I have a question about what happened on the day of the coup,” Ferin blurted. “I saw something... impossible. Something-”

She lifted determined eyes to me, and I went cold inside.

“Something about you,” Ferin finished.

Beside me, Dath stiffened, which made me stop breathing. Did he know what she was talking about?

Halfway certain of what I’d hear, I drawled, “Ok...?”

“Are you...?”

Chewing on her lip for a moment, Ferin examined me. Several times, she started speaking before stopping, but eventually, she took a deep breath.

“Are you a primeancer?” she rushed to ask.

My heart stopped. Nervously laughing, I glanced between Ferin and Dath.

“*What?*” I said. “What are you-? Where did that-? That’s ridiculous!”

“As ridiculous as you flying toward Sev? Alouin, your speed was impossible, Rhy. As ridiculous as the splashes of light I saw rising from your feet?” Ferin asked. “I don’t think anyone else noticed these things but-”

“I did,” Dath interrupted. “Like I’ve witnessed similarly impossible things while following you around for these last three months. I’ve been wondering the same thing.”

I let my mouth flap, too focused on my racing thoughts to stop it.

With this accusation, I wasn’t worried for my own safety. Escaping two people, even ones as well-trained as Dath and Ferin, would be simple. The loss of everything I’d worked for since Raimie had been taken, however... that would hurt.

“Don’t worry about me, Rhy,” Dath said. “I’ve suspected for months and haven’t said a word.”

He’d made a good point. After this, maybe I could trust him to treat me the same as before but Ferin? I wasn’t so sure about her.

And I wasn’t sure whether I could successfully allay their suspicions.

“Rhylix,” Ferin said. “I don’t care. I just want to know.”

Yes. That sounded like the woman I knew.

As I considered the possibility of answering her question truthfully, however, Creation popped into being beside her.

“I advise against this,” they said.

They’d never liked me sharing what I was, and considering the disasters that had come from doing such things in the past, I could understand Creation’s hesitance. So, perhaps I shouldn’t share everything with these people. Perhaps I should impart a partial truth instead.

With Creation vigorously shaking their head, I said, “Yes, I’m a primeancer.”

For the briefest of moments, I drew Ele to my hands, and the flash of it forced Ferin and Dath back a step. When it faded, however, they looked at me with the widest of eyes, and I worried that I’d made a mistake.

Then, Ferin pressed her hands to her lips while Dath bounced on the balls of his feet.

“That... was... amazing!” he said.

With a soft smile, Ferin met my eyes.

“Perhaps Raimie has a chance at overthrowing Doldimar after all,” she said. “We should-”

From the corner of my eye, something zipped past, jerking Ferin’s head back when it hit her. She crumpled to the ground before I’d registered what had happened, although a distant part of me already knew.

Dragging Dath behind me, I scanned the dark, but when nothing more emerged from it, I spun toward him. Gripping his shoulders, I forced him to look at me rather than at what was lying at our feet.

“Are you ok?” I asked.

Dath’s eyes were wild with his breathing coming in sips, and I tightened my grip to get him focused.

“I’m... not hurt,” he said.

Good enough for now.

“I know you’re rattled,” I said. “I know this is your first time...”

I couldn’t finish that thought.

“I need you to keep watch for me, all right?” I said instead.

Dath nodded, freeing me to acknowledge what I’d been silently screaming denial of.

Ferin was still lying on the ground with an arrow shaft jutting out of her face. She was currently turned away from me—thank the gods—but... I had to know. Crouching, I rocked her head toward me, and my breath caught.

Once I had her resting comfortably once more, I roughly dug my knuckles into my eyes before collapsing. Drawing my knees to my chest, I buried my face in them, hugging my legs.

Time skipped for me, but after who knew how long, the echo of familiar voices drew me back, and I lifted my head off of my legs.

Ferin was lying in front of me with her eyes closed. Someone must have removed the arrow that had been in one of them.

Dath was nearby, wildly gesturing at Aramar and Gistrick, with his body shaking. Strangely, I didn’t hear his shouting. All was silence for me.

When I climbed to my feet, it spun Dath toward me, but when he rushed my way, I brushed past him. I stopped in front of the others, staring at them until they shifted in place.

“This was unnecessary,” I said, hearing my voice as if from a distance. “She was going to join us.”

Shaking his head, Gistrick said, “Wouldn’t have mattered. We couldn’t have trusted her. Once a traitor, always a traitor.”

Almost, I sent him flying with a blast of Ele, but instead, I turned my gaze on Aramar, who already looked like shit, and his bow.

“I thought she was threatening you,” he said. “I saw-”

He nervously flicked his eyes to Dath and Gistrick.

“I saw *something*, something you’d only do in an emergency, and I acted. By the time I figured out what had happened, it was too late,” he said before dropping his gaze to the body. “I didn’t mean-”

Breaking off, he bit his lips while his bow thumped to the ground, and I could taste boiling acid as it crept over my tongue, just waiting to be spewed forth. So, I took calming breaths before speaking.

“I appreciate your concern, but I have not, do not, and will never need you to protect me,” I said. “Now. I intend use Ash’s smuggling route to get into the city. I do not want to see you for a few days. While I’m gone, you will get the Zrelnach’s shit together. You will deal with the mess you’ve made, and while doing so, you will *treat her with respect*. Am I understood?”

Both men opened their mouths to speak. I lifted a finger to stop them.

“Don’t say a word. I’m not sure if I can listen to your voices without doing something I’ll regret,” I said. “Just nod.”

When they did, I didn’t deign to respond.

Striding toward Sev, I called, “Dath, you’re welcome to join me if you want.”

I wasn’t sure if he decided to come, too wrapped in a familiar numbness to hear his footsteps.

I’d hoped that this time, maybe, *just maybe*, the people around me would be spared from the mayhem that inevitably accompanied me. It looked like I’d been wrong.

In a fog, I strode toward a blaze of dotted firelight ahead, once more cursing my existence. Days like this made me wish I could still get drunk. I could use the forgetfulness that alcohol imparted tonight.

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