

Chapter 60: Personal Trouble

Raimie

The study's door banged open, and in the split second after it had, there was no separation in the being named NylRaimie, only us, but then, we fell apart, leaving me gasping as I clung to my desk while Nylion stared wide-eyed at me.

"That was..." he breathed.

A hammer slammed down on my head, and I clenched my teeth together so hard that I thought they might break. My last hour might have been full of wellbeing and... something distinctly else, but it hadn't erased my hangover.

We'll talk about it later, I managed to squeeze through the pain.

"Agreed," Nylion groaned.

For once, he didn't disappear when he felt me moving my focus elsewhere, merely stepping back, and I paid attention to the voice filling my study.

"-promised you'd stay with Ring!" Oswin roared, stomping up the stairs to me. "How are we supposed to keep you safe if you keep traipsing off on your own?"

"Sorry. If it helps, I was very, very drunk. Shade melding home wasn't a conscious decision," I hissed through gritted teeth. "Now that you mention Ring, though, I should probably check on her, huh? Leaving her alone with those crazy Matvai probably wasn't a good idea."

I was *not* looking for the slightest excuse to run from Oswin and was *definitely* not fleeing from an unspoken confession. The spymaster had simply surprised me with his presence.

So, I found something that would remove me from it for a short time, enough so that I could bury memories of my past with Oswin and all we'd once been to one another. By shade melding to the Matvai's ceremonial hall, I could become another version of myself, someone devoid of those memories for long enough to avoid rousing Oswin's suspicions. Long enough to delay with speaking a truth I'd been concealing for months.

How fortunate that the sun had created a patch of shadows around me.

"Raimie, no!" Oswin yelled.

But I didn't listen to him. Fixing the ceremonial hall's rough, wooden walls in my mind, I let the shadows take me. They merged with what made me 'Raimie' and tore it apart, setting the fragments floating.

Images passed: fleeting glimpses of people, a house where a familiar man stared at a metal belt, a charred forest that was only now showing signs of life, a room draped in decadent silks and hazed by incense smoke, a city with buildings coated in white light and filled with black-vined people, a roughhewn wood room with intricate carvings in the columns, a cave where a bear stirred from its hibernation. Wait. Go back one. Yes, that was the place. Now let go, shadows of greed.

Rolling out of a darkened corner, I ended up on my back with my limbs splayed. A lantern was hanging above me, and I stared single-mindedly at its gorgeous flame and lack of shadows.

"I told female yu'd be back," a deep voice grumbled nearby.

"Sigemond," I said with a sigh. "Got anything that'll help with a hangover?"

Rustling sounds came from behind me, followed by the trickle of liquid, and after that cut off, Sigemond lumbered to stand over me, offering me a glass of water.

"That is quite possibly the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I said.

Snatching the glass from the barkeep, I greedily gulped it down.

"Why are yu back?" Sigemond asked. "Taelk did nut gu well yesterday."

"I wanted to make sure that Ring was safe," I said, glancing around the mostly empty room. "Is she safe?"

"Said sumthing about finding someone to punch," Sigemond said with a laugh. "My people will be mur than haeply to comply."

"Great. Let's hope she doesn't cause a diplomatic incident," I said. "Not that she could do much to ruin the negotiations more than I already have."

I finished off my water, relieved that my headache had started receding.

"Speaking of negotiations, anything mur to say to Vasnavai?" Sigemond asked.

"Mm."

Was there anything else to say? Was gaining uninterrupted access to the North Sea's storm-free waters worth dealing with the contrary people who guarded the passes to it?

"Oh, come, heart of my heart," Nylion said. "You know you like them."

With an absent smile, I said, "You can tell her that I agree to her terms. The outlaw of your gods' worship will be overturned. I never understood why Ada'ir and Auden insist on the sole worship of Alouin. No other realm does it, and I don't care who or what my people choose to place their faith in, so long as they remain loyal to their kingdom as well."

Sigemond slowly clapped.

"Nice speech. But Vasnavai will never believe you," he said. "Wun't believe me either, if I'm one to tell."

"You can say that I'm returning this as a sign of good faith."

Pulling a dagger off of my belt, I handed it to Sigemond, and as he accepted it, the barkeep-turned-emissary looked confused. When he examined the dagger's ivory-bone hilt and its razor-thin, obsidian blade, however, wonder suffused his face.

"This is..." he said before something unknown strangled his voice.

"The dagger your Vasnavai almost threw at my face last night?" I said. "Yes, I know."

Sigemond shook his head.

"This is wud maekes Vasnavai the Vasnavai," he said with wide eyes. "By taeking this, yu have become leader of claens."

Fucking *really*?

Sigemond tried to give the dagger back, but shuddering, I backed away from it.

"I don't want it," I said. "Return it to Vasnavai Dyomina. I have enough on my plate. Such as going home so Oswin can finish murdering me with his screaming."

Sigemond's wordless stare conveyed his incredulity, and at my side, Nylion shook his head, seemingly agreeing with the barkeep.

"You will regret this someday, I think," he said. "We could use them."

Maybe, I said, but I'm having a hard enough time with managing Auden. Let's not throw another group of people into the mix, yes?

Snorting, Nylion followed me into the room's corner, and I let its shadows take me before my foot hit the floor. Soon enough, I stumbled out the other side and into my office. Glancing around, I threw my arms above my head with a whoop.

"Three successful trips in twelve hours!" I said. "Maybe I'm finally getting the hang of this."

"Raimie, watch—" Nylion started.

Someone grabbed my arm, twisting it behind me, and before I could break away, my assailant shoved me into a chair with cold iron binding my wrist to wood.

“—your surroundings,” my other half finished with a sigh.

But I only smiled.

“Where were you hiding this, Oswin?” I asked, lifting the shackle around my wrist with a light tug. “Our uniforms are so tight! I thought concealing anything under them was impossible.”

When he pressed steel against my neck, though, I went cold.

“Shut up,” Oswin snapped. “This isn’t a game.”

“What is he *doing*?” Nylion hissed.

Standing beside the chair, he wrapped his fingers around Oswin’s wrist, but this did nothing to stop the spy.

“Oswin,” I said, careful not to swallow so his blade wouldn’t break my skin, “what are you doing?”

Slamming a hand on the chairs’ backrest over my shoulder, Oswin bent to my eye level.

“Do you see, Raimie?” he said. “Do you see how easy it would be to kill you? If I were anyone else, your throat would be cut, and you’d be bleeding out on the floor right now.”

Coldly, I said, “I’m perfectly capable of handling myself.”

I raised a handful of Daevetch into view, silently begging Nylion to back off, and to my relief, he reluctantly did so.

“You’ve seen me in the field,” I continued. “How many murderous criminals have we eliminated over the last two years?”

“That’s different!” Oswin shouted in my face. “You’re talking about the average bandit. I’m talking about *assassins*, people trained to kill you before you know they’re there!”

For a moment, I blinked at him, trying to fit this view of Oswin in with what I knew about him.

Crossing his arms, Nylion said, “Something else is the matter.”

Looks that way, doesn’t it?

“All right,” I said.

Slowly, I pushed the dagger away from my neck, holding Oswin’s gaze the whole time.

“What’s going on?” I said. “I’ve noticed your agitation over the last few weeks, no matter how much you might be trying to hide it. Something’s bothering you. What is it?”

As his jaw tightened, Oswin removed his dagger, replacing it in his hand with a key. He crouched to unlock the shackle around my wrist.

“I’m almost certain a traitor is lurking within our ranks,” he said. “I’ve received reports... well, let’s just say I have good reason for my suspicion. The trouble is, I don’t know who this unknown spy is working for. The only nation that we could have been enemies with has become our greatest ally, and we should be beneath the notice of everyone else, too broken from years of tyranny for any other kingdom to want our land. Not yet, at least.”

“It’s Doldimar,” I said, rubbing my wrist. “Has to be.”

Stiffening, Oswin fell into the posture of a soldier, addressing his superior.

“As you say, sir.”

Huffing, Nylion turned away from him.

“Why do they always do that?” he said.

I didn’t know, but it was annoying.

“What? Not going to tell me to let it go? That two years have passed since the Dark Lord disappeared? That what drove him out of Elisk must have scared him away for good?” I said. “Everyone else mocks my continued belief that Doldimar’s watching us. Why not you too?”

“I’d never question you, not about the Dark Lord or anything else you truly believe in, sir. Never,” Oswin said. “You’ve simply reminded me of the reason that I rushed here as soon as I heard you were home, besides to remind you of your Hand’s purpose at the moment. I’d straighten up the evidence of your current obsession, if I were you.”

This... already didn’t sound good.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Last night, Kaedesa arrived in Elisk, and having heard about your unexpected homecoming this morning, she’s eager to speak with you,” Oswin said, raising an eyebrow. “I believe she mentioned something about wedding plans?”

Oh, gods.

“Where is she?” I snapped. “I have to... gods, I *need* to hide.”

“You could shade meld elsewhere,” Nylion said. “It would get us away from her.”

True, but that would be running. Hiding, I could stomach right now. Running from the problem, though... I was already doing enough of that.

"How is hiding going to do you any good, sir?" Oswin said. "She'll eventually find you."

"*Where is she?*" I shouted.

With a wicked grin, Oswin said, "You see, this is why I was telling you to straighten up. She should be approaching the door now. Give it a second."

Backing toward the head of the stairs, he gestured.

"May I present Her Royal Majesty, Queen Kaedesa of Ada'ir!"

When the study's door was flung open, the woman herself stormed inside with all of her fiery temper brought to bear.

"There you are," she snapped.

Through a tight throat, I managed to say, "Hello, Kaedesa. I wasn't aware that you'd graced our shores with your presence once more. Is Dath with you this time?"

As she advanced up the stairs, Nylion and I both took unconscious steps back, raising our hands, and when she stopped in front of me, she poked my chest.

"Cut the bullshit. You know why I'm here," Auntie Kaedesa said. "When's the wedding? Have you set a date?"

Not this. I could take anything but the wedding today. Previously hidden memories had been running strong through me this morning, especially with what Nylion and I had done earlier, and every instance of guarding Kaedesa's door when training to be part of her Hand, every time she'd once treated me like her favorite kid nephew, slammed into the forefront of my mind when I looked at her.

I still hadn't figured out why she didn't remember me.

"If I recall correctly," I faintly said, "you're the one who was supposed to make the arrangements."

"I did, and I have, and still, I wait for you," Auntie Kaedesa snapped. "How long will you keep me in suspense like this?"

At my side, Nylion said, "Have you been dealing with *this* while I have been sulking?"

Don't worry about it, Nyl, I hurriedly said.

"Good gods, you have!" Nylion said. "I am so sorry, heart of my heart."

"*Raimie!*" Auntie Kaedesa shrieked through her gritted teeth.

“I- I wanted to guarantee that you receive everything you once bargained for,” I stammered. “I’m not the king of Auden yet, despite the long list of people who insist on calling me ‘Your Majesty’.”

“And why is that? Still waiting for the people’s decision between you and that upstart, Kylorian?” Auntie Kaedesa said. “Really, Raimie, you should know by now that you’ve captured your subjects’ hearts. Stop delaying what must come next!

“You’ve spent enough time on your silly projects. Using your primeancy to restore roads and villages, your fighting prowess to eliminate bandits, and your skills with diplomacy to set up an alliance with the Matvai, of all people! Alouin, Raimie! You’re already doing the king’s job! Take up the position in truth.”

Silly... projects? Everything I’d done over the last two years to help people who’d been bleeding their need across Auden?

And like that, memories fell away from me while my flustered state flattened to nothing, and I calmly blinked at Kaedesa, waiting for more. All the while, Nylion glared at Ada’ir’s queen, taking my hand.

“Oh, are you finished?” I said, when it was clear she had nothing else to say. “I was planning to next share that we’ve set an investiture date. I’d request that our wedding wait until after I’m king. That way, when we marry, you’ll truly be the queen of Auden.”

“And Ada’ir,” Kaedesa snapped.

Pausing, I cocked my head.

“Again, something else is the matter,” Nylion said. “What else could it be besides the delay that she mentioned, though?”

Nodding to him, I said, “Are you not pleased? I thought this was what you wanted, Auntie.”

I didn’t know why her former nickname had slipped through the cracks of my natural guardedness, but on hearing it, Kaedesa flinched, retreating a step.

“Why do you call me that sometimes?” she said. “I’m not... You call me that, and I *know* I’ve heard it before.”

I had nothing to say. If she didn’t remember it, I couldn’t tell her about the times when my father had brought me to see her as a child or of how she would sneak through the palace to read me the occasional bedtime story. Our relationship was already strained and disconcerting enough. I couldn’t add to that.

Fortunately, Kaedesa dropped the subject, hugging herself instead.

“Is something wrong with me?” she asked. “I know I’m at least moderately pretty, and I bring enormous wealth and influence to the table. So, why has this marriage been resisted and delayed

at every step? Why has it been *two years* and we're still in the midst of a betrothal? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing!" I shouted.

She couldn't dissolve into tears, and... I couldn't see her like that. Even with all that was strange about our relationship, I cared for this woman, even if I wasn't entirely sure why.

"She was the mother we should have had," Nylion said.

I shot him a glare. That was *not* helping with anything.

"You're wonderful, Kaedesa!" I said. "I'm lucky to have you."

When she looked at me, such pleading poured from her that I had trouble containing my flinch.

"Then why...?" she said.

Hell. I couldn't tell her the truth, not in a hundred years, so glancing to the side, I lied.

"I'm not ready to be tied down."

With the sudden cessation of our shouting, our breathing loudly echoed against the study's tall ceiling.

"Liar," Kaedesa said after a moment.

Spinning, she rubbed her eyes while flying down the stairs and slamming the door behind her.

"Gods damnit," I muttered.

"You did the best you could, heart of my heart," Nylion said.

Something like a squeeze was pressed against my hand.

"And I will be here to help in the future."

I don't like hurting her, I said.

I couldn't take my eyes off of the closed door with the memory of Kaedesa's face at the end stabbing at me.

"I know," Nylion said.

"I didn't know we had an investiture planned, sir."

Snapping back to my surroundings, I blinked at Oswin for a moment before shaking my head to clear it.

“We don’t. Eledis does. And she’s right,” I said. “The people have chosen, but I’ve delayed with acknowledging it because... well, because I’m terrified.”

I met my friend’s gaze, wondering what I’d see there.

“Understandable, sir,” Oswin said.

The pity in the spy’s tone and eyes pricked at my pride, and hearing it, I bit back a host of scathing remarks.

“I suppose I should find Eledis and ask him to finish with his preparations,” I said instead. “Are you going to follow me there? Even though we’re in the palace?”

“Yes,” Oswin said, “I know having a bodyguard around bothers you, but it’s truly necessary. Don’t worry, sir. I’ll be discreet. This time.”

With a hesitant smile, I said, “In that case, I won’t leave you in my dust.”

“Much appreciated, sir.”

I couldn’t tell if he’d been using sarcasm with that or not.

Revision #2

Created 4 November 2024 17:01:32 by FatalisticFable

Updated 1 October 2025 02:39:49 by FatalisticFable