

Chapter 62: Nice to See You Again

Rhylix

I know what I'm asking of you.

“They’re here.”

Opening my eyes, I stared at Creation for a moment before sitting up. After rubbing my eyes, I rested my hands between my legs, letting my knuckles brush the dirt.

The last week had been... difficult. Helping to get the Zrelnach in line, saying goodbye to Ashella when leaving Sev, dealing with Dath... the fallout from Commander Ferin’s death had been more exhausting than I’d thought it would be. At least it had been a good distraction.

For the most part.

“Where are they?” I dully asked.

“Making their way through camp,” Creation said. “They’ll end up where Gistrick has set up his command tent.”

Over the last week, the splinter had been unusually helpful, offering their assistance every time it was most needed. Perhaps they understood how taxing I’d found it to get reacquainted with some of the least pleasant emotions. We’d been together for a while, after all.

“Thank you for the update,” I said.

With a look of surprise on their face, Creation cautiously nodded before disappearing, and once they were gone, I pushed myself off of the folded cloak I’d been sleeping on, wincing at the disarray around me. Clumps of grass had been torn from the ground with furrows raked into the dirt beside them, the typical evidence that I’d once more fallen into my past while dreaming. I looked myself over for grass stains before rounding the wagon shielding me from the rest of camp.

The Zrelnach had been subdued since their commander's death. When I'd walked through camp over the last few days, it had been so quiet that I could have sworn its inhabitants had vanished off the face of the earth.

The same held true today. Mostly.

As I walked between bedrolls, I could feel nervous energy buzzing around me. It had been hovering since I'd informed Gistrick that Raimie was already on his way here, information I'd obtained via Bright. Three days had passed since then, and that anxiety had only built in strength.

With the fate of the Zrelnach to be determined in the next hour, it was at its peak now.

Long before I reached Gistrick's tent, I caught sight of Dath. Pacing several feet away from the entrance, he was digging a rut in the ground while chewing on his thumbnail. He was so focused on his feet that he jumped when I took his elbow.

"Rhy!" he gasped, clutching at his chest. "You scared me to death."

With a half-smile, I said, "If that's true, you'll have to tell me how you're still breathing. I've never seen the dead walk. People who should be dead? Sure. But never corpses."

Snorting, Dath lifted a hand to cover the noise. Ever since the awful night when the boy had witnessed death firsthand, he and I had entertained an unspoken contest over who could be the most callous about it. I didn't get much out of the exchange, but I was well aware of the many coping mechanisms people used in the face of trauma. This was how Dath was dealing with his.

"So?" I said. "Were you planning on going in, or will we have a new trench out here once they've finished talking?"

Making a face, Dath said, "I don't know if I should. Given the plan we discussed a few days ago, I can't contribute much to the discussion."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Besides letting Raimie know that you're ok?" I said. "Before Kaedesa took him, he'd grown to like you, you know."

"I know," Dath sighed.

Silently, he rubbed the back of his neck while staring at his feet, but soon enough, he dropped his hand.

"All right. Let's go," he said.

He strode toward the tent with me following, if more slowly. Before I was reunited with my friend, I needed to make some adjustments to my mask. I was always wearing one when around other people because when they saw me for who I really was, laid bared to the world, they inevitably ran

screaming from me.

Ferin's death had blown a few holes in that mask. Fortunately, people had been attributing them to grief, but Raimie would notice them right away. So, I patched them, or I did so as best I could.

But then, I was ducking into the tent.

It was crowded inside. At first, I could see nothing more than the back of the person in front of me, but once I shuffled into place with Dath, the other players in this scene came into view.

Immediately, Aramar jumped out at me. With his arms crossed, he was doing his best to stay out of the spotlight, but when I entered, he tensed, which only had me sighing. I knew a part of me would never forgive this man for what he'd done to Ferin, but he'd be part of my ally's life for an indefinite length of time. For the sake of my goal, I must keep things amicable between us.

Fortunately, doing this was helped by the fact that aside from the obvious source of contention, I actually liked Aramar. The people who held any form of acceptance for the Esela were rare, and I couldn't remember the last time someone hadn't attacked me as soon as they'd learned I was a primeancer.

So, Aramar tensed, and I shook my head at him with a soft grin, hoping my somewhat friendly nature would remind him of the talk we'd had a few days ago. It must have worked because he relaxed, returning his attention to his son, but once he'd done that, he was digging his fingers into his arms again. What must he be going through, restrained from touching a son that he'd thought he'd lost?

The cause for this inability was found in the people around Raimie.

I recognized one of them. I couldn't tell if Eledis was trying to hide how miffed he was, but if so, he wasn't doing a good job of it. That was typical for him, though, so I skipped over him to the man at his side.

For some reason, something about this stranger had me narrowing my eyes at him. With his dark brown hair and tan eyes, he looked like a typical human, but I could swear...

I didn't know what it was, but something about him screamed off. I'd think he was holding a shape change, one to hide his Eselan characteristics, but all the typical markers for that type of magic weren't there.

Disconcerted, I shook my head. Later, I'd have to ask a Zrelnach if they were seeing the same thing as me but for now...

The third man, Gistrick. Who was kneeling in front of Raimie, although his sword was planted in the dirt instead of raised overhead.

"-ever to be your shield," he was saying. "May my blade always prove true to you."

An oath of fealty? Over the last few days, Aya, Gistrick, and I had discussed ways to prove the Zrelnach's loyalty. Having their newly raised commander swear himself to Raimie wasn't how I'd have gone about it, knowing my friend's temperament as I did, but...

This display of loyalty wasn't meant for Raimie. That kid would have taken the Zrelnach back without a second thought.

No, this was for Eledis and the soldiers from Ada'ir. Watching the stranger behind Raimie, who surely had something to do with this group, I couldn't tell if it had worked.

But that was a long-term concern. For now, all that mattered was how Raimie would respond to Gistrick's oath.

"Again?" he said, as if to himself.

But he drew his sword, and when he did, I let myself focus on the kid, frowning at what I saw.

Raimie looked different. For one thing, he was wearing armor now, if only a light set of hardened leather, but... it looked natural on him, which I'd never thought would happen. In addition, a weathered aura hung over him like... like he was surer of himself. He looked...

He looked like a warrior and a seasoned one at that.

As Raimie nicked his thumb, pressing it to Gistrick's forehead, I caught Aramar's eye and raised my eyebrows. Had he seen the change too?

Hugging himself tighter, Aramar turned away from me, and I knew that he had.

"-serve you as a leader should," Raimie said, finishing his side of the oath.

He, wisely, didn't help Gistrick to his feet, perhaps remembering how much more value the man had placed on self-sufficiency since his arm's amputation, and only once the Zrelnach commander was standing did he glance over the tent's interior. His eyes lit up when they fell on me.

Sheathing Silverblade, he said, "I'm glad to have this awkwardness put to rest. Now that it is, though, we should move toward the ships as we discussed. Can I help with that process, or may I have a moment with my friends?"

The stranger behind Raimie shifted in place.

"Please, Your Majesty, let your subordinates handle grunt work like this," he said. "It's our place, after all."

Huffing, Raimie lifted his eyes to the heavens.

"Normally, I'd argue that point, Marcuset, but I'm too tired to do it now. I decidedly do not like horseback riding," he said, rubbing his lower back with a wince, "and how many times have I told

you to stop calling me 'Your Majesty'?"

With a poorly restrained grin, Marcuset said, "Not enough, apparently. May we be excused, Your Majesty?"

Groaning, Raimie rubbed his forehead.

"Yes," he said. "Get out of here."

With a laugh, Marcuset threw an arm around Eledis' neck, practically dragging the old man outside with him, and Gistrick was quick to follow, avoiding my eyes as he went.

Aramar stuck around for a while longer. While he and his son talked, Dath and I waited out of earshot until the two hugged. Then, I started for my friend, switching places with his father.

As I approached, Raimie said, "Hey, Rhy. It's been a while."

"Indeed," I said with a half-smile.

While Raimie shuffled in place, staring at the ground, Dath stopped beside me, seemingly content to wait his turn.

Abruptly, Raimie jerked his head up.

"Are we fighting?" he blurted. "I don't think we are, but it's been three months, and I've been replaying that sparring session in my head over and over again, analyzing what you said, and—"

Rolling my eyes, I tugged Raimie to me, pounding his back a few times before letting go.

"We're not fighting," I said. "It's good to see you."

"Ohthankthegods. I'm so glad to hear that. It's good to see you too, of course, and oh," Raimie said. "Hi there, Dath."

Offering a hesitant smile, Dath said, "Hello, Raimie. I'm glad you're back with us."

"Oh, me too. You have no idea. Life in Daira was... interesting," Raimie said, "but I hear you two had it rough here as well. I'm sorry that saving my ass required so much work from you."

"It wasn't all bad," Dath said. "I got to meet some interesting new people."

Ashella had been particularly teary-eyed when saying goodbye to the boy, more so than she had been with me. I hadn't realized how close those two had become.

When Dath said nothing more, paying exclusive attention to the grass beneath our feet, Raimie glanced at me with a question in his eyes, but I couldn't hold his gaze, turning my head aside instead. I knew what Raimie was asking, just as I knew why Dath was acting more subdued than before, but I couldn't speak that reason aloud. It hurt too much.

“Oh. *Oh...* She was...” Raimie said.

As he trailed off, a heavy weight fell over me, trying to flatten me into the earth.

“I’m sorry about Ferin,” Raimie eventually continued. “No matter how much animosity hung between us, I could tell she was a good person with many people who loved her. She didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

“No one does,” Dath said.

That pulled me around. I already knew what he was planning to tell Raimie, but I’d thought he’d want to wait for a while before addressing it.

“I’m guessing there’s more to that,” Raimie prompted.

My friend’s bearing had changed. Gone was the hard exterior, the worn soldier. Instead, everything about him screamed open and accepting, a partial return to the kid I’d met in Allanovian, and when he glanced up, Dath must see this because a wealth of tension rolled off of him.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he said, “Watching Ferin’s murder taught me something about myself. I suspected it when I couldn’t attack you in the Withriingalm, but I know it now. I don’t have it in me to kill someone. Hurt? Maybe. Kill? Definitely not. And... I don’t know, Raimie.”

Hesitating, he glanced at me, and I nodded for him to continue.

“I won’t do you much good in Auden,” he said. “Rhylix has told me about the kingdom, and I don’t think a pacifist would last long there. He and I have agreed that I should stay in Ada’ir.”

Biting his lip, he returned his gaze to the floor while Raimie regarded him with a faraway look in his eyes.

“What would you do here?” he eventually asked. “I’m not trying to dissuade you. I just... You probably won’t be welcome in Allanovian, and apparently, Esela aren’t readily accepted in Ada’ir. I want to make sure you’ll be safe.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. Of course Raimie’s mind had gone there first.

Dath, on the other hand, seemed surprised by his words, lifting his head with a jerk.

“I... uh, I have some ideas,” he said. “I have a friend in the city. She mentioned getting me a respectable position somewhere. From what I hear, people with Zrelnach training are in high demand as bodyguards and the like. Fitting me somewhere with my pacifistic streak will be difficult, but Ashella thinks she can do it.”

“This Ashella is the woman who’s been helping you for the last three months?” Raimie asked.

When Dath nodded, he released a long sigh.

“All right,” he said. “Well, I won’t lie. I’ll miss your company, Dath. Maybe once I’ve made Auden safe enough, you can visit.”

“I’d like that,” Dath said.

Grinning, Raimie extended his hand.

“Shake on it.”

When Dath took his hand, however, Raimie jerked the other boy toward him, sliding to the side. Dath didn’t let him take advantage of the opening, though. Using Raimie’s arm as a pendulum, he spun before twirling the other boy in front of him.

Lifting Raimie’s arm up the center of his back, he kicked at the kid’s knees, which had Raimie face down in the grass. Dath pinned Raimie’s legs between his thighs, meeting his second wrist with the first on his back. It was a copy of the way their first trial had ended, although their positions had been switched.

I watched this with a fond smile, hugging my elbows. Seeing the improvements that my students had made, no matter how slight, was good. Raimie had, after all, let Dath take him down, and Dath had done it in the most harmless way possible.

As soon as he could, Raimie was laughing, and with an enormous smirk, Dath climbed off of him before offering a hand.

“If you don’t mind, my... friend, I’d like to make the trip to Sev now,” Dath said. “No need to drag this out, yeah?”

With a serious expression in place, Raimie rested a hand on Dath’s shoulder.

“Yes, you are my friend,” he said.

And then, he smiled.

“Good luck.”

“Same to you,” Dath said. “You’ll need it to defeat a big, bad overlord.”

Raimie shoved him, and chuckling, Dath turned to me, which quickly killed his expression of mirth. Swallowing hard, he bowed.

“Thank you,” he said. “For everything.”

Then, he shot upright and hugged me. Unsure what to do, I hesitantly patted the boy’s back.

“It was my honor to watch you become the noble man before me now,” I said.

“Ha!”

Pulling away, Dath half-smiled up at me.

“Remember what you told me when we first met?” he said. “Something about nothing good coming to the people who get close to you?”

Drawing my eyebrows together, I drawled, “Yes?”

“Well, you’ve been nothing *but* good for me, Rhy,” Dath said.

I opened my mouth to argue, but seeping warmth in my belly shut me up with a soft squeak.

“Never thought I’d see you struck speechless,” Dath said, rocking back on his heels. “And I’ll leave you both on that note. See ya, Rhy. Raimie.”

He was at the tent flap before I found my voice.

“Safe journey to you,” I said. “Always.”

With a nod, the boy left.

Which left me alone with my ally for the first time since the Withriingalm. I chose to focus on that rather than the sense of loss nipping at my mind.

When I faced Raimie, however, he’d disappeared. With my eyes snapping to slits, I reached out and... yes, a familiar distortion in reality was in front of me.

“Bright failed to mention that you’d learned how to manipulate your source,” I said.

Raimie reappeared with a pop.

“I asked them not to,” he said with a smirk. “Wanted to see the look on your face when you found out.”

That was concerning. A splinter had deliberately hidden something from me again, which was distinctly Daevetch in nature. To be fair, I hadn’t asked Bright or Creation about this bit of information but even still... two times?

“While this is good progress, I hope you’ve learned more than source manipulation in the last three months,” I said.

“Uh...”

Flushing, Raimie scratched the back of his head with one eye closed.

“I can talk to my splinters now?” he said. “Does that count?”

“Well, thank the gods. You’ve needed that for months,” I said. “How did you do it?”

We quickly devolved into a retelling of everything that had happened in the last few months. This took quite a while, and we got so engrossed in it that we didn't notice an unknown Zrelnach sticking her head into the tent at first. When we did acknowledge her, she tried to hold Raimie's gaze, but her eyes quickly slid to me. Unfortunately for us both, the Zrelnach would probably find me easier to address than him for quite some time.

"We're ready to head out," she said. "Your horses are ready."

"Thank you. We'll be right there," Raimie said with a smile.

As soon as she was gone, though, he dropped the expression, flinging his head back.

"Fuuuuck," he groaned. "I hate horseback riding."

With my lips twitching, I said, "Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

Raimie shook his head.

"Might as well get it over with," he said.

Before he left the tent, however, he glanced over his shoulder.

"Let's not do the whole being-a-nation-apart thing again anytime soon, yeah?" he said. "I didn't much like it."

"Don't worry, Raimie. We'll be stuck together for the foreseeable future," I said. "There aren't many hiding places on a boat, after all."

For some reason, this made Raimie groan even louder as he strode outside.

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