

# Chapter 66: The Aftermath- Large Scale

Rhylix

*But you're the only one who can end me.*

Something was wrong with Raimie. While sailors and pirates alike watched a bloodied head soar overboard, I couldn't take my eyes off of the kid, too busy figuring out what was wrong with him to do otherwise. It was only as my friend made for an access point below deck that I noticed Dim alone was trailing him.

"Oswin! Line the prisoners up, and gather their weapons, please," Raimie shouted. "I will return in a moment."

As he slid down the ladder, Dim caught my eye. Surprisingly, the Daevetch splinter didn't recoil from me or act as if it was disgusted. It stared at me, and if I didn't know better, I'd think the splinter was silently begging me for help.

After a moment, it slumped, shaking its head, before jumping into the hole after its human.

"Has Raimie chosen a side?" I said under my breath.

"I'm not certain," Creation said, "but he has vehemently rejected doing just that several times. Plus, such a significant change should have rippled through the whole to me."

Humming, I chewed on my lip for a moment.

"Then, where's Bright?" I asked.

"Hence, why I'm not certain," Creation said.

Someone climbed over the railing beside me, and I stepped aside to give him room. Leaning on his knees, Eledis fought to catch his breath.

"Frustrating child," he gasped. "What was he thinking, running into a fight alone like that?"

"I'm not sure he was thinking," I said. "After I pushed him toward the enemy ship, he seemed to be running on instinct."

Slowly, Eledis straightened, staring at me with cold eyes.

"You pushed him," he said.

Nodding, I said, "Anyone who was watching could see that he wanted to help, but he needed someone to nudge him into it, which I did. He was never in any danger. I had my eye on him throughout the fight."

That wasn't strictly true. My heart still stuttered when I remembered watching Raimie lose his hold on his Ele source. It was a rookie mistake for a primeancer to make, one that wasn't often repeated, and seeing it happen then, surrounded by people who'd been out for his blood, had almost had me fully revealing myself.

Fortunately, I hadn't needed to intervene. Our ship's captain had appeared from out of *nowhere*—most people couldn't sneak up on me like that—to save Raimie.

Mentioning that near disaster to Eledis wouldn't be a good idea, though.

"I won't touch on why you thought that you alone could protect Raimie on a *ship full of hostile pirates*," Eledis said. "Instead, you can tell me why you 'encouraged' him in the first place."

"Oh, that's easy," I said. "I wanted to improve his standing with the soldiers."

Giving me a blank look, Eledis said, "What?"

Huffing, I waved a hand over our surroundings. Around us, sailors and soldiers, those unoccupied with watching prisoners at least, were whispering and chattering with one another.

"What do you suppose they're talking about?" I asked. "I'd guess it's the royal who led the charge, distracting the pirates so they could safely board. The royal who danced with his enemies, using a simple length of wood. How much more do they respect him now, do you think?"

Eledis opened his mouth, probably to make a scathing comment, but thankfully, Raimie jumped above deck at that moment, interrupting him. Bending down, he extended a hand to help the people coming after him.

They emerged into the sunlight, squinting and furiously blinking, with scabs circling their wrists and ankles where shackles had once chaffed their skin. Although their arms and shoulders were well-defined, as one would expect of galley slaves, their gaunt faces and stomachs told the truth of their treatment. Where rags didn't hide their skin, welts from the lash covered it, and it was so pasty that it made the tans of sailors and pirates look much darker than they were.

After the last of them was standing on deck, Raimie made his way to the confiscated weapons, picking through them, while the sailors shot questioning glances between themselves. Meanwhile,

the former slaves held themselves perfectly still, as if unsure what to do.

After selecting a few blades from the pile, Raimie turned his attention on the people around him, although he solely addressed his new prisoners.

“You have been found guilty of piracy,” he said.

Drawing a dagger, he discarded its scabbard before offering the weapon to a former slave, a spindly man who hesitantly took it.

“But worse, I find you guilty of enslaving others, people who no doubt have friends and family back home.”

Raimie handed a sword to a woman with frazzled hair and tears streaming over her cheeks.

“By doing this, you have uprooted and destroyed their lives, but my hope is that having been freed of your clutches, they will take this chance at making new lives for themselves.”

As he gave a man another weapon, he smiled before gesturing to the weapons he’d left behind. Haltingly, the former slaves armed themselves, which banished a measure of their skittishness. While they made their choices, Raimie stood between them and their once masters, turning such a stern countenance on the latter that a chill crept into my core. What was he doing?

“By maritime law, I am within my rights to leave you in a rowboat until the closest authority retrieves you for sentencing,” Raimie said, raising his voice. “This will sure lead to a slow and lingering death as the closest authority at the moment is Doldimar, and I doubt he cares what happens to you. Fortunately for you, I will not be the one deciding your punishment, as I can assure you that death by dehydration is the kindest one I am inclined to give. No, I will leave choosing your fate to your victims.”

Deadly silence followed this declaration, one that I found appropriate. What had gotten into the kid?

As they shifted in place, the sailors seemed to be asking themselves the same question, but they’d face another conundrum as well. Would they let Raimie decide the proper punishment for their prisoners?

As for the pirates, they were, understandably, terrified.

“You said you’d let us live!” one shouted.

“No. I said that I *might* let you live,” Raimie said, lifting a finger, “and that is true. These people you have abused *might* show you the mercy that you never gave them. Then again, they might not. It is up to them.”

With a fierce grin, he strode to starboard, where the ships were aligned against one another. Every eye followed him, and once he was balanced on the ship’s railing, he paused as if a thought had

just occurred to him.

“Now that I think of it, the closest authority is not Doldimar, is it?” he said. “That would be me.”

Slowly, he turned his smile on the sailors, Eledis, and finally, me. When our eyes met, that smile faltered, but Raimie quickly shook it off.

“See it done,” he shouted.

Then, he started the perilous crossing to our ship.

The soldiers standing guard exchanged glances before stepping to the side. Some of them stayed where they were, presumably to ensure that no harm came to the former slaves, but most sheathed their weapons, ignoring the pirates’ disbelieving cries.

“That was... well done,” Eledis said. “Extremely unlike Raimie but... well done.”

“You sound shocked,” I said.

Casting a sharp glance at me, Eledis said, “And you’re not?”

No, I very much was, but it wasn’t at the outcome of the afternoon’s proceedings. I’d watched scenes like this unfold too many times to count, but I’d never expected something like it to happen while in Raimie’s company.

Ignoring Eledis, I turned my back on the former slaves, who were still struck immobile by their change in fortune. Intimately aware as I was of what was about to happen, I didn’t want to witness the coming violence.

Instead, I focused on my internal conflict while transferring ships. Everything Raimie had done was perfectly legal by all of the known kingdoms’ laws. I’d even argue that my friend’s decision had been the right one.

Slavers on the Narrow Sea were the scum of the earth, subsisting on the pain and suffering of others. Raimie’s prisoners were lucky that he’d shown such restraint, as most crews would have executed them without question.

Even still, I didn’t know what to think about leaving the pirates’ fates in their victims’ hands. Those people had suffered enough, and while some of them would never question the chance for justice that they’d been given, a few would agonize over taking a life once their blood lust left them.

Then, of course, there was the fact that the behavior I’d seen in my friend didn’t fit the Raimie I knew.

After reaching the other side, I headed for the quarterdeck, pausing once there. Raimie was speaking with Commander Marcuset, and I didn’t want to interrupt them.

“-sure they are treated for malnutrition and dehydration,” my friend was saying. “They may choose to join us or go free, and any of them who decide to leave will be given what they need to start their new lives from their former masters’ property.”

Clearing his throat, Marcuset said, “That’s a noble gesture, Your Majesty, but what about us? We need the supplies that the pirates will leave behind, and their ships could save us from this becalming.”

“We will, of course, take what we need from the ships’ holds, leaving the rest for their new owners,” Raimie said before cocking his head. “As for the ships themselves, do you really want to cram our soldier onto our newly commandeered, *small* ships? You will have to explain your reasoning for this suggestion, as I find it impractical at best.”

Furrowing his brow, Marcuset said, “I-”

“I thought not,” Raimie interrupted. “What we will do instead is send a unit of your men with these ships when they depart. They will get help from anyone, and I do mean *anyone*, who would choose to assist us. Do you have any further questions or comments?”

As Raimie cocked his head to the other side, I shivered. Cold. He was *so. cold.*

Bowing, Marcuset said, “No, Your Majesty. By your leave, I will ensure that your orders are carried out.”

“See that you do,” Raimie said.

Finished with the commander, he strolled to the portside railing with his hands clasped behind his back.

Marcuset shook his head, rising from his bow, and when he spotted me on the sidelines, he made a beeline for me, which had me shifting. Since first seeing the commander outside of Sev, I hadn’t spoken to the commander, too uneasy to stay in his presence for long. Even weeks later, I wasn’t sure why he screamed wrong to me, but I’d avoided him precisely because of it. Now, though, I could no longer stay out of his way.

“You’re his friend, right?” Marcuset said when he’d come closer.

“To my continual surprise, yes, he claims me as such,” I said.

“Good. Maybe you can help.”

Marcuset glanced at Raimie with his face pinched.

“That battle hit him harder than I thought it would,” he said before meeting my eyes. “Have you seen much combat?”

A flood of unwanted memories rushed through me, making me wince.

“More than I’d like,” I said.

Nodding in understanding, Marcuset said, “Then, you know what it’s like. The aftermath of a fight, I mean. He needs a friend right now. Can I trust you to help him?”

I fully faced the commander, holding his gaze.

“I will always do everything in my power to help and protect him,” I said.

A deep anxiety in Marcuset relented, and he slowly breathed out.

“Good,” he said. “That’s good! Thank you, Rhylix.”

“Of course.”

“Now, I have to help my men give away supplies that are rightfully ours,” Marcuset said before shaking his head. “Alouin, that kid... that kid...”

With nothing else, he left to follow his orders, leaving me with Raimie. I approached my friend, wondering what I could do to help him.

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