

Chapter 67: The Aftermath- Small Scale

Rhylix

I've placed myself in harm's way more times than I can count.

"Raimie?" I said as I approached my friend.

When the kid didn't respond, I winced. This would be bad.

Stepping closer, I glanced at what was holding Raimie's attention, and on seeing the blood-soaked deck opposite us, I wanted to smack myself.

How many times had the kid mentioned his wish to avoid killing people? I'd known the desire would be untenable, especially in Auden, but still, I'd been dreading the day when my friend would have to take another life, and here it was.

Gods. How many people had Raimie cut down before he'd stopped the fight? And even the way he'd done that had required someone's death. What must he be feeling right now?

Remembering my friend's reaction to the first time he'd ended a life, I cautiously reached out to him.

"Are you ok?" I asked. "I understand if you-"

When I rested my hand on his shoulder, Raimie spun, swinging a shadow-coated fist at my face. Without thought, I pulled Ele to my feet, but before I could dodge the incoming strike, Raimie froze. As he narrowed his eyes, black streaks fled from his fist, although he left it raised.

"Rhylix?" he asked, as if unsure of who I was.

"Raimie, your eyes!" I gasped.

Grabbing my friend's head, I peeled back the lid of one eye, ignoring how much he'd tensed. I had more important things to worry about, like the fact that his pupils had dilated to the point that a

delicate ring of blue was rimming them. What could have caused this?

“That explains why you’ve unnerved everyone you’ve spoken with,” I said to myself before asking. “How do you feel?”

I released my hold on the kid, and he slowly lowered his fist.

“I am fine,” he said.

Well, that was obviously false, but maybe he thought it was true. Maybe...

He had hit his head pretty hard during the battle.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Maybe your ears are ringing? Or perhaps you’re nauseous?”

I really shouldn’t suggest symptoms to my patient, but I was fairly confident about my diagnosis, and if I was right, I needed to get Raimie into a bed. Now.

“I...” he started, screwing up his face.

He stumbled a bit, catching himself on the railing.

With a short laugh, he said, “I am a little dizzy.”

“I knew it! You have a concussion,” I said. “We need to get you below deck so you can rest.”

Raimie shook his head, swaying in place.

“I cannot rest, not when so much needs to be done,” he said. “I will not dump my responsibilities on others.”

“Trust me, Raimie, these people will understand if you leave the rest to them, especially once they learn you have a concussion,” I said. “Most of them are familiar with that state. They’ll know that if you’re to heal quickly, you need rest now.”

“I do not...” Raimie started.

But then, his sway got violent enough that he slammed into the ship’s railing.

Grimacing, he said, “Ok. I will be in my cabin.”

“And I’ll let everyone know what’s happened,” I said.

“Thank... you,” Raimie said with his face twisting.

He started for a ladder to the main deck, and I moved as if to steady him. When I touched his elbow, however, he recoiled several steps away from me, panting with wide eyes. With my hand still raised, I cocked my head while focus returned to the kid, and he swallowed.

"I do not need help," he said. "Please, let me do this on my own."

Lowering my hand, I said, "O... k...?"

I watched Raimie retreat until he'd disappeared. What had that been about?

Really, I shouldn't let my *concussed patient* wander about on his own, but considering how many allies were surrounding him here, I'd be shocked if lasting harm came to him on this ship.

Still.

"That was strange," I said to myself.

"Excuse me?"

Jumping, I spun, reaching for my sword until I recognized the man in front of me. Captain Oswin watched me with a laugh in his amber eyes.

How had he snuck up on me? That hadn't happened in... I couldn't remember the last time it had happened.

"Yes?" I said, trying to slow down my racing heart.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," Oswin said. "I just wanted to ask after... Raimie. Is he ok?"

Odd. Not even Aramar had checked on his son yet.

So, why was this random soldier concerned about him? Then again, he'd been the one who'd saved Raimie's life. He'd probably seen how hard the kid had been shoved into the pirate ship's mast.

"He'll be fine eventually," I said. "No need to worry. He just has a concussion."

"I see," Oswin said.

Frowning, he looked at his feet, and if I hadn't known better, I'd think the conversation was over, but as I'd suspected, Oswin soon lifted his head.

"If I may... when you were examining him, his eyes..."

Licking his lips, he looked away, folding his arms behind his back.

"Were they more black than blue?" he asked.

"They... were extremely dilated, yes," I said. "Why do you ask?"

Shaking his head, Oswin slowly took a breath.

"It's not important," he said. "I saw something during the battle... I just wanted to confirm. Thank you."

"No problem."

Lost in his thoughts, Oswin wandered away, muttering under his breath, and if I weren't so focused on him, I might have missed what he said.

As it was...

"Has he forgotten me too?" Oswin said to himself.

And once he was gone, I was left alone on the quarterdeck, once more plagued with far too many questions.

The next day, I accompanied a rowboat to another ship in the fleet. I was hoping one of the people quartered there could help me with my quandaries. At the least, she could consult with me on Raimie's concussion.

When I was finished climbing to the main deck, however, Gistrick waylaid me before I could find Chela.

"Welcome aboard the *Second Chance*," he called.

I raised an eyebrow. The Zrelnach had given their ship a name?

"It had a queen's given name before," Gistrick said in answer to the unspoken question, "but we thought a new one was in order, especially given who's quartered here."

That made sense. Since our departure, the Zrelnach had been separated from the soldiers who came from Daira. It seemed little trust had grown between the two groups, despite Raimie's best efforts.

"It's a good name," I said. "You don't know where Chela is, do you? I'd like to speak with her about a few of Raimie's symptoms. Nothing bad! Just a little outside the norm."

"From what I hear, outside the norm is normal for that kid," Gistrick said, "but I was hoping to speak with you, actually. Do you have a minute, or do you need to see Chela now?"

I'd prefer to see her now. I didn't like being this far from Raimie, given how much he attracted trouble, but staying on the Zrelnach commander's good side was for the best.

When I nodded, Gistrick led me to the captain's quarters. Inside, several bedrolls and jumbles of cloth had been jammed into corners, speaking to the close quarters found here. Fortunately, none of those spots were currently occupied.

Still, I was grateful the windows had been opened, otherwise the smell of so many people living together would have been overwhelming.

Gistrick stopped in front of those windows, biting his lip as he stared out over the sea. After a while, I decided to break the quiet first.

“How did your first battle in command go?” I asked.

Shaking himself, Gistrick turned toward me.

“It went well. We took minimal losses: three dead and a handful wounded,” he said. “You could take a look at them while you’re here, if you like.”

“Why would I do that?” I asked. “Chela should be more than enough for them.”

Shrugging, Gistrick said, “It was just a suggestion. How did your ship’s crew fare? Any casualties?”

“None,” I said.

When Gistrick’s eyebrows rose, I huffed before leaning out a window.

“Look. What can I tell you?” I said. “Raimie distracted them, long enough that our people boarded the enemy ship with minimal resistance, and when he refused to fall by their blade, the pirates lost their nerve. Many of them abandoned their own ship. Strategy-wise, what he did wouldn’t have worked in a real battle, but with how small-scale this conflict was, Raimie could have taken the ship by himself, if he wanted.”

“Does that mean the rumors are true?” Gistrick said. “He leapt across the gulf between the ships?”

Glancing at the Zrelnach commander, I frowned at his shocked state.

“Yes, he did,” I said, “but it wasn’t that wide of a gap. I jumped it right after him.”

“You’re an Eselan, though. You could have shape changed as needed,” Gistrick said. “Raimie is decidedly human.”

Something brushed the back of my neck, making me slap at it. A bug this far out at sea? How had that happened?

“Gistrick. Why does it matter?” I snapped. “Raimie is Raimie. What he is has no import. Who he is and how he acts are the qualities that you should consider.”

Gods, this was taking too long. I needed to speak with Chela so I could return to my friend. Knowing him, he’d probably stopped resting, insistent on helping his people in some way. I had to make sure that didn’t happen.

Slowly breathing out, Gistrick rubbed his face.

“You’re right, of course,” he said. “It’s just... I can’t help but think about the possibilities. Hell, if I’ve sworn my loyalty to a primeancer...”

With a short laugh, I said, “Then, Alouin help us all, yes?”

Again, fingers brushed the back of my neck, rifling through my hair, and I straightened.

“Are we done?” I said.

But Gistrick was paying me no mind, staring toward the Tear’s ever-present storms, and when I joined him in his inspection, a breath of fresh air smacked me in the face.

“A breeze...” I said.

Spinning, Gistrick marched toward the door with me hot on his heels.

“Release the sails, and raise the anchor!” he shouted once outside. “And someone raise that rowboat.”

As Zrelnach scrambled to follow orders, I grabbed Gistrick’s arm.

“I should return to my post,” I said.

With a sympathetic look, Gistrick said, “I’m sorry, but standing orders are to take advantage of the wind when it returns. You’re stuck with us.”

Shaking me off, he raced into the crew’s bustle, and I threw my head back with a groan. Of all the people to be trapped with for the rest of this journey, it had to be men and women who’d once despised me.

Even knowing this, I hurried to help them. The sooner we reached Auden, the sooner I could be with my friend again.

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