

Chapter 78: So... I'm Not Dead

Raimie

As I approached a familiar head of hair, I stayed behind him, and I must have done it well because no one had noticed me by the time I was in position.

Clearing my throat, I said, "Hey, dad. I'm back."

My father faced me so quickly that I was afraid he'd fall from dizziness, but before I could steady him, I was engulfed in a hug. As I raised my hands to pat his back, a spike of heated dislike flared from the depths of me before receding.

Nylon? I asked. *What was that?*

But I didn't receive an answer from him. To be fair, it was probably too complicated for emotions alone to convey. I couldn't ponder this for long, though, because my father released me, and as he did, something walloped the back of my head.

Hissing, I rubbed the impact site. Had that been one of my father's new tics? It didn't look like it, considering he was glaring at me with his arms crossed. Why-?

"You *do not* lock me in a room before running into a life-or-death fight alone," he said. "I am your father. My job is to protect you, and when I can't do that, I'll help you through your difficulties. *Do. not. ever.* think that *you* should protect *me*."

Wow. I'd known he'd be pissed about that, but this was a little extreme. I thought. Was it?

"Now, who's the girl?" my father said, jerking his chin over my shoulder.

He wasn't giving me a chance to apologize? Fine by me.

Stepping to the side, I threw a hand toward the newest person in my life.

"This is Ren," I said. "Ren, this is my father."

Pursing her lips, Ren looked my father over before dismissing him.

Turning to me, she said, “You said we were getting provisions, not introducing me to your family.”

“We will. I just had to...” I started before clicking my tongue. “You can’t give me a moment to handle a personal matter?”

“I did, and now, it’s over,” Ren said, crossing her arms. “Get me what you promised, or I’m leaving. Now.”

Oh, my gods. She was impossible! Once again. Why the hell had I brought her with me?

“May I ask why my son has promised you anything?” my father asked.

When Ren stared at him instead of replying, I stepped in.

“She got me safely through the forest,” I said, jerking my thumb toward distant foliage.

“So, she *is* Audish?” my father asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“And Rhy’s sister.”

My father’s eyes popped as he shifted them to Ren, who was drumming her fingernails on a weapon’s hilts.

“Ah. I see. That’s unexpected. I thought...” he said before shaking his head. “Where is Rhylix anyway?”

“Off scouting,” I said. “He should be back soon.”

“Maybe even before you get me my food,” Ren said under her breath.

Huffing, I turned to escort her along when a familiar voice rose above the surrounding conversations.

“Your... Ma... jes...ty!”

Great... Well, if Ren hadn’t known who I was before, that was about to change.

Stumbling to a stop, Oswin leaned on his knees, panting so hard that his hair bounced on his head. After a pause, he gulped before straightening.

“Forgive me... sir,” he gasped, “but we’ve been... looking for you. Someone... came to tell us... that you’d arrived and...”

He shrugged, and when I glanced at my father for clarification, he followed the captain’s example.

“Who’s ‘we’?” I asked.

“Oh!”

Grimacing, Oswin fanned his face, which seemed warranted given the sweat dripping from his temples.

“That would be myself, the commander, and a few others, sir,” he said. “He wants to speak with you. The commander, that is. I gather it’ll be quick.”

...Shit. Marcuset. I’d forgotten about our last conversation. Given that, I badly needed to oblige the man but...

I glanced at Ren, who looked ready to explode. Why did I still feel the need to keep her close by?

“Oswin, can I ask a favor from you?” I said.

Crinkling his brow, Oswin said, “Technically, sir, if you need me to do something, you can order me to do it, but sure. I’ll do you a favor.”

When I rested a hand on Ren’s shoulder, she bristled, but I ignored that.

“This lovely woman helped me find my way here,” I said. “Can you make sure she’s properly rewarded for that?”

Stiffening, Oswin saluted.

“Certainly, sir,” he said. “What about the commander?”

“I’ll speak with him. Don’t you worry,” I said with a chuckle. “Where is he?”

“Um.”

Glancing about, Oswin pointed, and when I caught sight of Marcuset, much closer than I’d expected, I nodded.

“Thank you.”

I didn’t wait for a reply, taking off through the soldiers around me, but I needed that speed. Not only would my father, who must remain ignorant of my primeancy, be right behind me, but I didn’t know how long it would take Oswin to get Ren her ‘reward’. Before she left, she and I should speak once more. Best to end things on a good note between us.

As I stormed toward Marcuset, something shifted on his face, but I didn’t stop to read it, assaulting him with words instead.

“About what happened on the boat-” I started.

Lifting a hand, Marcuset shook his head.

“I don’t care,” he said. “Whatever special abilities you may have don’t matter to me, and I will never speak of them unless you allow it first.”

I slowed down with him having stolen my thunder. He was just ok with the fact that I was one of the reviled primeancers?

“Oh. Ok, then,” I said. “If I may, how long have you known?”

With an enigmatic smile, Marcuset said, “Long enough.”

“And you’ve said nothing for that entire time,” I said, frowning. “Why?”

Picking up on my skepticism, Marcuset rested his hands on his hips while staring at the ground.

“For many reasons,” he said before glancing up at me, “but the biggest of those is that I truly don’t care what you are. Not three hundred years ago, primeancers were revered, the only humans who could use magic. Given that, why wouldn’t people somewhere in our wide world be indifferent to them?”

...Should I believe him? His claim sounded reasonable, and considering I hadn’t been murdered when I’d stepped into camp, Marcuset might actually keep his mouth shut about this.

But now, he knew a secret that could see me dead, if he leaked it, and my subject or not, I hardly knew this man. Could I trust him?

What do you think, Nyl? I said.

I never caught his response as my father soon ambled to a stop beside me.

“That Ren girl is a piece of work, Raimie,” he said. “How did you come across her? And why bring her here when she clearly wants to be gone?”

Ah... the question I’d struggled to answer since leaving the forest. I opened my mouth, meaning to say that I had no clue what I’d been thinking, but different words spilled from me instead.

“I mean to accompany her home. Unless she’s living alone, I’ll find other Audish citizens there, people who could be our allies,” I said.

Of course, that was why I’d kept Ren with me! It was so logical, unlike some of the other, *completely ridiculous* reasons I could think of.

“We should learn if we have common ground. Plus, I’d like to know what they need from us, although our ability to help strangers would depend on our stores. A lot of our supplies must have gone down with the flagship. Do we have anything left?”

Humming to himself, Marcuset said, “For now, we have enough to share, depending on these allies’ needs. After Teron’s magic dissipated, the Zrelnach quickly came to our aid. We transferred most of the ship’s cargo before it sank.”

“That was good of them,” I said.

Maybe it would bridge the gap between the Zrelnach and the soldiers from Ada'ir. Alouin knew we couldn't afford any division in the ranks right now. In fact...

"Commander, would your people let the Zrelnach train them?" I said. "They *are* the best warriors from back home, and we'll need every advantage that we can get."

With a smile, Marcuset said, "That's a wonderful idea, Your Majesty. Now that we're on solid ground, I meant to start the process, but if my orders had your weight behind them, the soldiers would more easily accept them."

"Then, do that," I said. "Anything to get us prepared for what's coming."

"Wait. Can we go back a few steps?" my father said. "You've just returned to us, and you're already planning on leaving again? You haven't even shared what happened with you and Teron!"

"He's still alive," I said, "but that's all I'll say on the matter."

Hell if I was telling my father that I'd died this morning.

"I only lured Ren into camp so I could keep an eye on her while looking for you or Eledis," I continued. "I figured you'd want to know I was ok."

While Marcuset had turned contemplative, my father had started sputtering.

"Of course we wanted to know you were ok!" he managed.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes.

"Raimie. You need to stay. You can't go gallivanting off on an adventure when there's so much for you to do. We have to get settled, take stock of our surroundings, send out scouts--"

"All of which we can do without him," Marcuset said, inclining his head to me. "We'll need allies, Aramar, and there's no better person to make contact with them than their rightful king."

At that, I fought to keep my face blank. Even weeks after accepting what others expected of me, I hadn't made a decision about the whole 'king' business, but other things, like getting established in enemy territory, had always seemed more important.

Groaning, my father passed a hand over his face.

"Fine," he said, "but someone should go with him so they can watch his back."

He gave Marcuset a significant look.

"Are you sure now's the best time?" the commander asked.

When my father nodded, Marcuset set his jaw before facing me.

“You know Oswin, yes?” he said.

Raising an eyebrow, I said, “You just sent him searching for me.”

Where was this going?

“He wasn’t the captain of your ship by chance,” Marcuset said. “I placed him there to keep an eye on you... after he requested it.”

And I was lost. Why would Oswin have done that? Before the night we’d fled from Daira, he and I hadn’t known each other, and besides that, he didn’t seem important enough to request a position from the commander of Ada’ir’s armed forces.

Huffing, my father rolled his eyes.

“He was—big emphasis on the past tense—the Middle of Queen Kaedesa’s Hand,” he said. “He’s a spy, Raimie.”

For a split second, I forgot how to breathe.

But then, I was shouting, “What?!”

Queen Kaedesa’s Hand. The top five spies in Ada’ir, a kingdom renowned for its intelligence network. Other nations, namely the principalities of the Southern Kingdoms, had Hands, but none of them compared to what was found in Ada’ir. Having one of them defect to us was quite the acquisition.

Still.

“I can’t believe it,” I said.

“Which is the point,” my father said. “You want to run into the unknown? Bring him with you. It’s the only way you’re leaving this camp without a fight.”

Still reeling, I lifted my hands.

“Sure. No need to get hostile,” I said. “Bringing someone with me seems reasonable.”

“All right, then,” my father stiffly said. “Let me know when you get back.”

And he walked away. Had I upset him somehow?

“Nicely done, convincing him,” Marcuset said. “Now, you’ll have to do the same with her.”

When he nodded behind me, I glanced over my shoulder and winced.

Ren looked *pissed*. Oswin... the godsdamned spy—how had I not noticed it?—was chattering at her, skipping backward as he led her along, and at the sight of this, a confusing mix of nostalgia and

irritation rushed from Nylion.

“Good luck, Your Majesty,” Marcuset said.

I whipped my head toward him in time to catch him merging with the soldiers around us.

Helpful. So helpful.

Making a face, I rushed after Oswin and Ren, and when I caught up, she watched me catch my breath.

“Did you get what you needed?” I asked.

“Yes. Your... friend—”

Hell, that had been disdainful.

“—was helpful in that regard,” Ren said. “I’m going home now. Over the next few days, I’ll check whether Rhy’s made it back, but when I do, I doubt we’ll see one another. This is goodbye.”

As she turned away, I said, “Actually, I was wondering if we might join you.”

Still facing away from me, Ren said, “We?”

“Sure. Me and Oswin,” I said. “I’d like to meet your people. See if I can help them.”

Ren held still as she considered this, and watching her, I ignored Oswin’s intensely pointed gaze, resting on me.

“Fine,” Ren eventually said, “but don’t expect me to slow down for you.”

She hurried in the direction of the forest, leaving me shaking my head. This would be such a pain in my ass, wouldn’t it?

“Sir...” Oswin said beside me.

Did he know that I’d learned what he was? If he somehow did, it wouldn’t surprise me, but right now, I didn’t have time to learn one way or the other.

“Later, Oswin,” I said.

And I took off, chasing after a woman I’d rather never see again.

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