

Chapter 81: What Are We Now?

Eledis

Why does the heart betray us so? Even when we know better, it returns, like a hopeless addict, to the one person we can never have.

At least it's good for business.

-Delia, Madam of The Innocent Angels, Misfar, minor Principality of the Southern Kingdoms

Someone had tried to kill us. Given that we'd survived the attempt, I should be grateful I was alive, but instead, the knowledge of an unknown person's deadly hostility had rattled me to the core.

The palace guardswoman in front of me asked me to again describe what I'd seen and experienced while within the hall of worship, and I shivered.

Fire spreading like a plague. Flesh melting beneath liquid flame's onslaught. Screaming, wild-eyed people, preparing to tear me apart. Kaedesa too far away to reach before the mass of peasants would descend upon her. Smoke building into a thick cloud, making my eyes water and lungs gasp.

None of which I could share.

"As I said, I found a corner to wait the chaos out in," I drawled before coughing. "I knew the king would save us."

After making some notes in her journal, the palace guardswoman snapped it closed.

"Thank you for your time, Chief Minister," she said. "We've prepared a place for triage in the formal dining hall. I'd recommend having a healer listen to your lungs. Your cough sounds serious."

Maybe if she hadn't delayed me for so long, it would already have been treated!

Hush, now. She was only doing her job.

“Thank you, mistress. I’ll do that,” I rasped. “Please, keep me updated on the investigation.”

As she saluted, I wearily shuffled into the palace. The formal dining hall wasn’t far from the ruined hall of worship, so my trip was rather short, a pleasant turn of events for once today.

I took a route that intentionally avoided the scene of the disaster. The fire had been so unanticipated that I’d lost all sense of control for a brief span of time, and I couldn’t dwell on that unexpected sense of helplessness.

When I reached it, the dining hall was bustling with activity. Tables and chairs had been pushed against the walls to make room for lines of bedrolls and blankets, and several healers, both human and Esela, treated soot-streaked people, some sitting when they could while others lay down.

I found an empty chair, ready to wait my turn, but as soon as I’d gotten settled, my throat closed and my hands started shaking while my eyes burned. Pressing my traitor hands to my thighs, I closed my eyes, the only way I could hope to keep tears from falling.

“What you’re feeling isn’t weakness. It’s your body’s natural reaction to shock.”

Jerking my head up, I gaped to find Rhylix standing over me, and at my discomfiture, his typically biting gaze softened.

“How are you alive?” I gasped. “I saw a bottle hit you! You went up in flames.”

Displeased with my outburst, my lungs sent me into a coughing fit, and I doubled over.

“Let’s get you looked at, old man,” Rhylix said.

When I could breathe again, he handed me a mug of water, which I gratefully accepted, downing it within seconds.

“I need you to breathe deeply,” Rhylix said. “If we can get enough clean air into you, the coughing fits should stop.”

Inhaling, I held it for as long as I could before letting air rush back through my nose.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I rasped. “How are you alive? Why aren’t you burned to a crisp?”

As if he hadn’t heard, Rhylix went to refill my mug.

“You’re lucky that only your lungs are plaguing you, Chief Minister,” he said when he returned. “Most of those waiting for a healer’s touch are suffering from severe lacerations, at the least, and trust me, you wouldn’t want to see those who were afflicted by liquid fire.”

Handing me the mug, he met my eyes.

“We moved them to another room to avoid further traumatizing our other guests.”

I chose to believe the water sloshing over my mug's rim was a sign of my recent shock and not any other type of fear I might suddenly be feeling.

"Have you considered how this disaster will reflect on your grandson yet?" Rhylix continued. "You'll have your hands full with spinning this investiture story into something positive. How will you twist it so that our new king's reign hasn't begun with fire and death?"

I pursed my lips. Much as I hated to admit it, the Eselan was right. This unmitigated catastrophe would require all of my political savvy if we wanted to start a new rule of law on the right foot, and I'd need to work quickly before rumors spread. Given that, I didn't have time to uncover the truth behind what I'd seen in the hall of worship.

"Don't think I'll forget about this," I hissed. "I will eventually figure you out."

"I'm sure you will," Rhylix said, curling his lips.

Before I could scathingly retort, a hush fell over the dining hall, save for the clack of wood on tile. From the far side of the room, Raimie limped toward us with ash dusting his hair and face. Those white and gray particles had ruined whatever Ring had done to improve the boy's countenance. Now, his pale skin and the contrasting web of blue beneath it had been revealed for all to see. He was leaning so heavily on his crutch that I worried it might snap from the pressure, and he was so completely out of breath that it took him a few heartbeats to speak after he'd stopped.

"Is everyone all right?" he wheezed into the silence with genuine concern in every syllable.

I almost laughed out loud, covering it with a cough at the last second. Of all the people gathered here to see a healer, Raimie might need one the most, but for some reason, no one else seemed to be sharing my amusement. Wide eyes stared at the kid with something bordering on awe.

Trotting forward to rescue his friend, Rhylix helped him to a chair, and as soon as he'd sat down, the Eselan had his hands on Raimie, placing the back of one on the kid's forehead while resting the other on his injured leg. Rhylix's strained voice was raised in volume, and as if prompted by the noise, the dining hall filled with conversation once more.

Curious, I sidled closer to the young people, hoping to catch some of their conversation.

"-needed to see it for myself," Raimie was saying. "I'm amazed they saved as much of it as they did. I thought for sure the hall of worship would be a smoldering ruin by day's end."

"You should have stayed with the group, not wandered off," Rhylix said. "I went looking for you after I finished pulling the wounded out of the flames. Imagine my fear and total lack of surprise to learn that you were nowhere to be found."

"What was I supposed to do?" Raimie said. "Let the Enforcer who started the fire go unchecked?"

Enforcer? One of Doldimar's top lieutenants had been on the palace's grounds? Where?

“Did you kill them?” Rhylix asked.

He wrapped a blanket around Raimie’s shoulders and at the kids’ weak protests, yanked it closed in front of him.

“Take it,” he snapped. “You’re shaking like a leaf. How you’re not out cold is beyond me.”

Raimie made a face.

“Yes, healer,” he said. “In answer to your question, the Enforcer’s alive, well, and leading us to Doldimar. I destroyed her Daevetch splinter, though, which should make you happy.”

So, Raimie had no proof of this ‘Enforcer’s’ existence.

“Which way did she go?” Rhylix said. “Maybe I can catch up before-”

“Rhy, one of the Hand is managing it,” Raimie said. “Tracking the Enforcer was a last-minute idea anyway. I need you here, helping me with the real plan.”

The ‘plan’, meaning something in reference to those two’s ridiculous belief that Doldimar would eventually return? I shook my head at that foolishness.

As the years had passed, I’d thought Doldimar’s return had been increasingly unbelievable. At the time of his disappearance, he’d had more than enough strength to wipe us out. Given enough time, Raimie and his army could have chipped away at the enemy’s overwhelming numbers until the kid had held the upper hand, but he’d insisted on bringing the game to an early conclusion. Again, the Dark Lord could easily have countered us in taking Elisk, but he’d inexplicably allowed it.

When the capital had changed hands, Doldimar had presumably had the same number of Kiraak as he’d had before Raimie’s assumption of control. If he’d attacked while the realm had still been in disarray, he would have, again, crushed us like bugs, but every year, the people of Auden gained strength. I found it unlikely that Doldimar would strike now that his former subjects would fight tooth and nail for the taste of freedom they’d enjoyed.

“Did you make a visit to the hall of worship after your Enforcer detour?” Rhylix asked.

Shaking his head, Raimie said, “Kaedesa caught me after that. We talked.”

I went very still with my heart thrumming in my chest and short breaths flicking through my nose.

“Did you tell her about Ren or... the other one?” Rhylix asked.

“About Ren, yes,” Raimie said with a grimace. “She made me.”

And?

“What did she say?” Rhylix asked.

From his blanket cocoon, Raimie looked up at his friend with the most radiant smile I'd seen from him in a while.

"She broke off the engagement," he said. "I'm free, Rhy."

The room's motion slowed down as my eyes widened. Forgetting to breathe, I scanned faces, and failing to find the one I sought, I drifted out of the dining hall in a fog. I traced a familiar route until I stopped inside of a long hall with a high ceiling and frescoes painted on its plaster walls. Glass doors in a far corner stood open, and edging onto the balcony outside, I chewed at the inside of my lip.

She was leaning on the railing with her back to me. A breeze swayed her hair to and fro, and even though I knew the sun still reigned supreme in the sky, a mirage of her in a stunning gown, silhouetted by moonlight, filled my mind.

But no, she'd changed into her typical jerkin and leggings, and the sun was beating down on her with sweat soaking her clothes.

"I hear the wedding's canceled," I said.

"Mm," Kaedesa hummed. "You were right. Marrying Raimie would have been wrong."

I waited for more, for some sort of explanation, but nothing was forthcoming.

"Does that mean you'll soon leave for Daira?" I said with a dry mouth.

"I'll stay for the royal wedding that's sure to come," Kaedesa said, "but after that, yes, it's back to court."

No. She couldn't go back. I needed her here.

"I suppose that means I won't get those promised meetings between the queen and her Chief Minister," I said. "Does your engagement's end suggest that Auden should start looking for new trade partners?"

When she heard that question, Kaedesa's shoulder started shaking, my only clue that she was restraining laughter. Or perhaps tears?

"The alliance is as strong as ever, Eledis," she said. "Now that I know Raimie doesn't hate me, as I feared, I'm more determined than ever for his infant kingdom to succeed. He's a sweet kid."

She faced me as the wind picked up, whipping her hair around her face, and my breath caught.

"Don't you worry," she said with a beatific smile. "We'll have plenty of meetings still."

Twitching, my lips tilted upward of their own volition, and I struggled to contain my surprise. A genuine smile? After so many years? How was it that she could still do this to me?

“How did you find me, Eledis?” Kaedesa asked. “Even I didn’t know where I’d end up when I started wandering. I was trying to get lost.”

Swallowing hard, I lied, “I don’t know. Maybe I wanted to get lost too.”

I joined her at the balcony’s railing. From here, one could see Elisk in its entirety as well as the plains that filled its hill, and far distant, haze obscured the mountain ranges that shielded the city from storms.

“What a beautiful view,” I said, leaning on the railing.

From the corner of my eye, I watched Kaedesa lean over as well, and we silently enjoyed the view for what seemed like mere seconds. I wanted it to last for hours, for this moment to stay forever fixed in time, but Kaedesa wouldn’t allow it.

“I’m going to tell you a secret, Eledis, because I expect that you’ll keep it,” she said, breaking the spell. “For some unexplainable reason, I know you’d never intentionally harm me.”

Shrinking away from her, I yelped, “Never!”

“That’s what I just said,” Kaedesa said with a chuckle.

She bit her lip with her eyes growing distant.

“I have a secret affliction, a malady that plagues me with every passing day,” she said. “I struggle to remember... well, everything.”

Oh, Alouin. Was she really doing this? She was opening up to me again, which was... fucking wonderful, but about this?

“I live only in today with my yesterdays wiped away when I sleep,” Kaedesa continued. “As you can imagine, this doesn’t wear well on a queen, so I’ve learned to adapt. In our time together, you may have seen me writing in journals? Those books are my memories, and I keep them close to heart.”

She withdrew a slim, leatherbound journal from beneath her jerkin’s collar, which made my heart twist.

“I record what I can during the day, setting aside the journals that I believe will be most relevant for the next before bed, and in the morning, I read them. Sometimes, memories return when I do this, but more often than not, I must trust that what I’ve read is factual.”

“Unfortunately, this system has its problems. I constantly question whether my enemies have tampered with my writings, leading me to wonder if my ‘memories’ are true. Also, keeping my memories bound in paper presents a host of additional difficulties. Individual journals can get lost, dropped in water, or otherwise destroyed, but the number of those lost in these ways has never been significant, even if it does occur.”

"The reason I'm giving you such a sensitive secret is because recently, I've concluded that at some long-forgotten point, I knew Raimie, his father, and you. I want to know how."

"I won't ask Raimie about this. He'd never betray me, but I don't want my secret to taint any advice that I might give him. I can't ask Aramar. No one's seen him for over two years. That leaves you."

"So, tell me, Eledis. Am I wrong? Did we meet before converging in that shabby inn in Sev?"

Oh, 'saya. If she only knew. Alouin, how my heart ached.

"Following our exile, the monarchy of Ada'ir harbored the Audish royal family for generations," I said, "which means that Raimie, Aramar, and myself did enjoy your hospitality at one point, as you might expect. In exchange for that safe haven, we became your eyes and ears. Shortly after King Belqarim's death, Aramar served you as your Hand's spymaster, as I did for another king, and before we left Daira, Raimie was training to take on the role, but something... happened that forced us away."

"When we disappeared, you made no mention of us. Ada'ir's court must have assumed that we'd earned your displeasure somehow, angering you enough to earn banishment. After all, you were quite vindictive toward the start of your reign, Kaedesa. After our disgrace, your nobles acted as if we'd died, never mentioning us, which came as no surprise to me. That behavior had heavily factored into our plans. So, you forgot us."

This news didn't seem to shock Kaedesa. If anything, she looked pleased with herself for recalling people that sleep should have erased.

"What happened?" she asked. "Why did you leave?"

That answer would require a complicated answer. I'd have to tread carefully.

"Circumstances changed," I said.

Nylion had become a problem.

"We needed to disappear and couldn't have you pursuing your negligent spymaster once we had."

Because if she'd done so, Nylion might have woken up.

"Aramar and I knew about your malady."

Best not to mention Marcuset at this point. Aramar could take the hit for something he'd never participated in. If he hadn't wanted that to happen, he should have resisted when his son had sent him away.

"We scoured every journal from your archives about us, removing every scrap of that information, and burned it all."

I'd never regretted something so much in my life, or in this part of my life, at least.

If the first revelation had done nothing to Kaedesa, the second one ruffled her composure.

"Is this why I wanted to murder you the first few times we met?" she asked. "Since Sev, I mean."

No.

"Yes," I said.

"What about Raimie?" Kaedesa asked. "Did he participate in this... *violation*?"

"No. Even if we'd asked, he wouldn't have. He was very fond of his Auntie," I said with a grimace. "Besides, even if he *had* joined us, Raimie would only recently have remembered it. He has his own set of problems, ones that would have temporarily concealed knowledge of the act from him."

"Interesting," Kaedesa said, obviously latching onto a potential subject change. "Two monarchs with memory problems have somehow gained power in their separate nations."

"I never said that Raimie was cursed with memory problems," I said. "Just that he has his own set of challenges to face."

"And I assume you won't share what those are," Kaedesa said.

I shook my head, but she'd understand why I'd refused her. Revealing the secret of Nylion would be like presenting the bullet needed to assassinate Auden to her on a silver platter. Never mind that it would be a breach of Raimie's trust. I wouldn't threaten the realm's security like that.

I'd answered her questions as truthfully as I could, and now, I needed only wait for her pronouncement. Years ago, Marcuset and I had betrayed her trust, burning away knowledge of dear friends and family members. Would those actions ripple to the present to wreak their consequences?

"Did the need to disappear manifest because of a threat to your family?" Kaedesa asked.

She looked thoughtful, which was a good sign. Maybe she wouldn't murder me?

"Yes. Most definitely, yes," I said. "We'd never have left otherwise."

Nylion continued to threaten us to this day.

"Then... I suppose I can't fault you for what you did," Kaedesa said, "although I wish you'd taken the journals you burned with you instead of destroying them. That way, I could read them, now what I know who you are to me, but I guess we can always make new memories."

Hell. In all the times I'd imagined this moment, I'd never thought this would be the outcome. It had been my secret dream, the one I'd never let myself think about, but here it was. Here she was, and

she didn't hate me. For now.

"There you go again, assuming the men in this family have brains," I said.

Giggling, Kaedesa covered her mouth with one hand, and I found myself genuinely smiling again. She knew. I didn't need to feign distance with her. What a weight dropped from my essence.

"So, what were we back then?" Kaedesa asked when she could. "Monarch and vassal? Friends?"

Such a good question. What had we been? At one point, we might have been tightly entwined, but I didn't know if that closeness held true to this day, so I decided to give her the most honest answer that I could.

"The greatest of allies."

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