

Chapter 84: All I've Wanted, Part One

Raimie

After a solid month of resting in bed, I was quite finished with lying around, thank you! Hand in hand with Nylion, I strolled to my next meeting while Thumb trailed me with a happy hum.

Of my injuries, only a slight limp continued to plague me, but I was beginning to think it probably would for the rest of my days. It was the price I'd pay for rushing home to arrive before the investiture.

If all I suffered from was a limp, the cost would have been worth it. Despite my complaints and dread, I'd discovered in the last month that I thoroughly enjoyed being king. Sure, the role came with immense responsibilities and headaches, but it had also let me help vast swathes of people. The moments when I could approve a plan to repair Auden's road system, knowing full well that doing so would provide jobs for thousands of displaced people, outweighed the drag of long meetings with Eledis beforehand, hours that we'd spent analyzing where we'd allocate the funds to pay for the project.

Take today for example. Yesterday evening, Rhylix had declared me fit for my first day of receiving supplicants. Despite the truly despicable people who'd been interspersed with those in need, listening to my subjects describe their troubles before asking for aid had been ridiculously energizing. Each problem had presented a new challenge, some of them easy and some difficult to solve, and where I couldn't come up with an immediate solution, I'd offered what help I could instead.

Today's final errand awaited me, and once it was done, I could move on to the day's personal task, the one I'd anticipated with both fear and excitement since waking up this morning.

I paused for a moment in front of my office's door, letting butterflies settle.

"What do you think? Still presentable?" I asked Thumb, waving at my body.

Looking me up and down, the spy shrugged.

"You look like a king to me, sir," he said, "or at least, your pattern of one."

So reassuring. Out of all the Hand, Thumb had never been the most proficient at echoing the sentiment that a moment might require.

“You look fine,” Nylion said, rubbing my shoulder. “Go on. Show them what sort of king we mean to be. Again.”

Taking a deep breath, I breezed into my office. Someone had returned my carefully organized book stacks to their shelves. My bedroll had long since been cleared away, and my desk had been pulled to the side, replaced by a short table and chairs.

At the table, two people were waiting for me. Eledis was sitting on the chair furthest from the window wall, unable to keep still as he darted glances at its glass. Next to him, Vasnavai Dyomina lounged with her feet on the table while tossing a knife, end over end, into the air.

“I hope I haven’t kept you waiting for long,” I said.

Hopping up the stairs, I ignored the dull ache in my thigh, and Dyomina clunked her chair’s legs to the floor, staring at me. I wondered what had caught her interest, but on seeing the placement for the last chair at the table, I almost laughed aloud.

Without hesitation, I trod onto the glass that made up half of the raised dais’ floor. At that, Dyomina’s mouth fell open, but she totally lost control of it when I raised a foot and smashed it into the glass, making Eledis flinch.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It’s stronger than it looks.”

Giggling, Nylion circled Dyomina, making faces that I barely kept from laughing at, and on taking a seat, I scooted forward until the table met my stomach with a mile-long drop yawning beneath my feet.

“I believe this is yours.”

Retrieving an ivory-handled, black blade from my belt, I offered it to the Vasnavai.

“When did you-?” Dyomina said.

“I stumbled on some free time while my healer thought I was sleeping,” I said with a shrug. “I thought you might need proof that I was the one who borrowed it last time, since I didn’t personally return it to you. Please. Take it.”

Dyomina hesitantly reached for the dagger, replacing it in the empty sheath at her back.

“I see I made right decision coming to dead city,” she said.

Ah, yes. The Matvai and their peculiar desire for nature all around them, even when they were sleeping.

“I trust your accommodations in the gardens have been suitable,” Eledis said.

“Indeed. Very much so,” she said. “Yu shuld congratulate yur gaardener. Did maegificent job.”

“I’ll pass your appreciation along,” I said.

Although doing that probably wouldn’t be fun. While he hadn’t been *hostile* toward me, Rhylix had been distant since the investiture, probably because of everything that had happened that night. Having heard about those events from both parties now, I’d decided that both Rhylix and Nylion had been idiots, meaning to ignore the conflict until the two decided to fix it for themselves, but that hadn’t made my friend comfortable when around me.

“Shall we get to signing?” I continued.

Eledis produced a stack of paper as if by magic.

“Here is the proposed treaty,” he said, sliding it to the Vasnavai.

She took her time with reading it, as she should. While she did, Eledis jittered his foot against the floor while darting glances at the sky, which was rude, but what was I supposed to do about it? For my part, I returned to the more complicated problems that today’s supplicants had brought to my attention.

Trade between Auden’s many towns was currently scarce to nonexistent because no one could agree on a standardized price for everyday goods. I didn’t want to stifle free trade, but I wasn’t sure what else a monarch could do to alleviate such a problem, besides setting the price by law.

Economics had never been my strongest subject. I’d received a thorough education in it, but something about the way money worked on a macro scale soared over my head. Perhaps this problem was best relinquished to Eledis, who could discuss economic theory with gusto until someone stopped him.

Then, there was the pirate problem, raised by representatives from coastal villages. Apparently, pirates had been raiding along the coast for the last six months, flying black and green colors. They’d taken their attacks a step beyond the typical pillaging that pirates reveled in—which could be horrible enough when taken too far—going so far as to kidnap young, healthy children from their homes. If these pirates were the infamous Serpent Pirate Crew, as I thought they were, then I had only one guess about what had happened to the children. That Crew was renowned for its ample supply of merchandise, all to serve the Southern Kingdoms’ slave markets. I’d hoped I’d seen the last of them during our brief battle with them while making the crossing to Auden

Several parents had come with their towns’ mayors to appeal for my aid. They’d cried for their lost children, begging for someone, anyone to bring their loved ones home or if possible, to avenge them.

I wanted to answer their pleas, but what could I do against pirates? As of yet, Auden had no navy. The ships that I’d taken from Ada’ir had long since been returned to their rightful owner. While I

might have an army to guard coastal towns with, it wasn't expansive enough to accomplish that duty while also patrolling the roads, fighting bandits, and searching for Doldimar, along with every other task I'd assigned them.

"You could always handle them yourself," Nylion said, circling me to perch on the table.

With a faint smile, I subtly walked my fingers along the tabletop until they were tangled with Nylion's. His suggestion was wise, but I didn't know how I'd execute such a plan. The pirate's point of origin was unknown, and I didn't own a boat.

"You are the king of Auden, heart of my heart," Nylion said with a laugh in his voice. "Commandeer one. As for the pirate base's location, it cannot be far, considering how often they are raiding. The only landmasses that are large enough to sustain the settlement they would require are the three islands not far from Nephiron. The pirates could also be sailing from beyond the mountains, but I find that scenario unlikely. Nothing but frozen wastes lie to the north."

Could what seemed like a complicated problem have such a simple solution? I couldn't wait to find out. If this one had been unraveled so easily, perhaps others would be too, given time.

"Quill," the Vasnavai said, breaking my reverie.

"Everything is in order?" I asked.

"Am asking for quill to sign with, nu?"

"Fair enough," I said with a laugh.

Eledis presented the requested item, and after signing the bottom of the treaty's final page, Vasnavai Dyomina slid it to me. I followed suit and in so doing, opened a trade avenue for Auden as well as linking my people with the Matvai.

"If finished with strange Audish custom, may we drink?" the Vasnavai asked. "Would like to celebrate our agreement by sharing glass of vodka."

"Forgive me, Dyomina, but I must beg off," I said with a grimace. "I have a personal matter to take care of this evening, but perhaps we can drink tomorrow."

"I'll hold you to it, King Raimie," Dyomina said.

When she stood, I followed her example, bowing as she made her exit.

Once we were alone, Eledis asked, "So, you remain intent on this foolishness?"

"I haven't changed my mind since the last time you asked," I said.

"This is a mistake..."

Gods, to be done with those ominous warnings. I knew how risky what I was doing tonight would be.

"Thank you for your opinion, Eledis," I said, "but I believe I'm late for my next appointment."

With Nylion laughingly sprinting ahead of me, I raced out of the room, forcing Thumb into a run. I hadn't been lying to my grandfather. My presence was required in the gardens by sunset, and the Sun was steadily approaching the horizon.

I wasn't so far behind schedule, however, that I'd use Ele for speed. Not only would that be a waste, but it would leave Thumb behind, something I wasn't the least bit tempted to try tonight.

I needed to make one stop before heading to the gardens. Taking a slight detour, I noisily rapped on my intended door once I'd arrived, and Ring soon answered, temporarily returned from her tour of Auden. She yanked me inside, slamming the door in Thumb's face.

"Clothes off," she demanded.

Already tugging on my jacket, she pulled me further into the room, and I slapped her hands off of me, skittering away from her.

"What are you-?" I said, blushing. "Ring, I don't think-"

"Oh, Alouin, he's modest. Of course he is," Ring said under her breath. "Don't worry, sir. You're not my type. Please, take your clothes off. I need you in there."

She pointed at a large tub, lugged from somewhere else in the palace and filled with sudsy water. Bent almost double, Nylion was snickering beside it with one hand covering his mouth.

"Please, this reluctance cannot be because of me. I have seen your every scar, heart of my heart," he said. "And you should know that Ring does not want you in that way. She has ever been like our sister, in a way."

I know that, I said. I can't be sure if she does, though.

"A bath?" I asked Ring. "You want me to take a bath?"

But I must have already known the answer, given how I was fumbling with my jacket's buttons.

"Trust me. It'll be appreciated," Ring said.

Thankfully, she faced the wall while I peeled off my uniform. I wasn't exactly self-conscious of my body, but... there were parts of it that were less than ideal, through no fault of my own.

As I climbed into the tub, I made a face. Its water was lukewarm, a testament to how long my duties had run over today, but despite that, I sank in with a sigh.

“You can work your magic now,” I called.

Rolling up her sleeves, Ring strode toward me, soon sopped my hair with suds while I scrubbed my body down. Once I was finished, I climbed out of the tub, dripping water everywhere, and after I’d dried myself off, Ring handed me my new uniform. As I dressed, I noted the changes made to it.

On the collar, two embroidered dots—one black and one white—sat on the uniform’s midline. For years, I’d fought to have no insignia assigned to me, despite how much that might single me out at the same time, and while it couldn’t be helped in some cases, such as when a realm forced its throne upon me, I’d refused to accept visible symbols of my unique position.

I’d set aside my personal feelings about this, however, after my first meeting as king with my new ministers. During that meeting, I’d revealed my intention to organize a primeancer school, which had not gone over well. In the end, my ministers had made me agree to a single stipulation before approving my plan: a uniform and unique insignia to distinguish the school’s students from the average Eliskians and palace residents.

I despised the idea of differentiating people I’d promised safety to, especially when they already faced a constant threat of violence. Why make them stand out to norms who might harm them? But I couldn’t otherwise convince my ministers to finance and support an institution that I hoped would one day become a primeancer haven.

Singling out my fellow Ele and Daevetch users while concealing myself, however, had turned my stomach. So, when the next opportunity had come to have a new uniform tailored for me, I’d asked to have the primeancers’ insignia added to it.

I’d thought it would be big and gaudy, something to draw the eye, but this—I touched the bumps at my neck—I could live with this. Small, subtle, ignorable unless one knew what to seek, they could easily replace the lack of insignia that I’d grown fond of over the years.

The other change came in my weapons. My ragged belt had been replaced with freshly oiled leather, and my swords’ scabbards also shone as if recently fashioned. A line of obsidian ran down their bodies, glistening against leather, and caps of solid silver covered their chapes.

Yes, that was right. Scabbards, as in more than one.

“Why is this here?” I asked, dangling Shadowsteal between two fingers.

“Because it is ours?” Nylion said. “And we should be wearing it now.”

As she straightened my jacket’s hem, Ring said under her breath, “It was requested, sir, and we wouldn’t want to disappoint, would we?”

Making a face at them both, I buckled the cursed sword to my hip, trying to ignore the feel of it adding to Silverblade’s weight.

I knew what came next, so it was without prompting that I carefully folded into a pulled-out chair. Ring took a razor to my hair, smoothing it back with syrupy paste once she'd finished cutting it. Coming around to face me, she retrieved a kohl pencil, and I winced. I tried very hard not to blink or flinch while she lightly darkened my eyes' outer corners before brushing the pencil's tip across my lashes. Leaning back, she pursed her lips.

"Best I can do," she breathed, slapping her knees. "Get out of here, sir, and good luck."

"Thank you," I said through a suddenly dry mouth.

I left her room in a rush, brushing past Thumb.

"You certainly smell nice, sir," he said with a smirk, "and you're carrying Shadowsteal. How delightful!"

Whirling, I poked a finger in the spy's face.

"I will have you assigned to the most boring guard detail I can find if you don't *silently* follow me to the gardens," I said. "Am I understood?"

If anything, that widened Thumb's smirk, but he nodded his acceptance.

And what do you think? I breathed.

I'd noticed Nylion eyeing me since I'd dried off, so I was more than a little nervous that my other half found something about this new ensemble off-putting.

"I think..."

Hurrying along the corridor, I glanced at my other half, confused about what I was feeling over our bond. With unfocused eyes, Nylion grinned at me.

"I think that I have never wanted a man but you..."

Sighing, Nylion hugged himself.

"You look nice, heart of my heart."

And I smiled.

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