

Chapter 90: An Announcement

Rhylix

The tavern that Ren and Raimie had chosen for tonight's gathering was loud and boisterous, a complete change from our quiet meals in the palace's confines, but I supposed this change made sense. I'd caught my friend's recent restlessness, a sign that Raimie would soon make a late-night foray into the city. He'd trawl the streets and mingle in taverns, and of the taverns that Raimie visited, he returned most frequently to the lively ones, the ones most similar to Sigemond's bar in Tiro.

When a barmaid crossed in front of me, I caught her eye.

"I was told to ask for the dichotomy table?" I asked.

"Oo! The private one," she said, all bubbles and giggles. "It's in the far corner, by the fireplace."

Nodding my thanks, I pushed and shoved my way through the crowd in the indicated direction. When I broke free of the press of bodies, I stopped short at the sight of the table's single occupant.

"Hey, Rhylix," Kylorian drawled, raising a hand in greeting. "Figures you'd be here too."

Ren's adoptive brother had already started partaking of the evening's festivities, I saw. Why else would a half-empty mug be resting between his hands?

"Am I early?" I asked.

I slid to sit beside Kylorian, who snorted.

"No, they're late," he said, "but I think we can forgive them. Being king and queen would make anyone busy, and those two like to bite off more than they can chew. They've probably stumbled into a new charity project, even though today was supposed to be their day of leisure."

"Seems to me that you'd understand that, given your own proclivities for charity work," I said.

With a mild glare, Kylorian slurped from his mug's contents, leaving me with nothing else to say. Ren's adoptive brother and I had always had a shaky relationship, but it had gotten worse when I'd

dropped the Ryvolim disguise after Elisk's capture. Apparently, Kylorian didn't take kindly to being misled, and my deception had nettled whatever good will he might have harbored for me.

As for me, I'd never forgiven Kylorian for causing Raimie unnecessary distress. Despite my friend's insistence on their 'friendship', I couldn't bring myself to pardon him as easily for the years of rivalry and hostility. Kylorian always rankled my good mood when we were in the same room.

"How's the ministry job?" I made myself say.

"Busy," Kylorian said.

And the conversation seemed like it might end there, but then, he continued.

"During peace or war, keeping the streets safe is hard enough without added complications, so when the king issued that proclamation to the world, welcoming Esela to Auden, it made me cringe. Within a year of that announcement, a transient flood had settled in Elisk, and my job's difficulty has jumped a thousand-fold."

"I personally believe that opening the border to the Esela is an excellent idea, but the realm's human population isn't as willing to accept it. You have no idea how many crimes against the Esela I've processed in the last year. Every night, an excessive number of my officers patrol their city quarters to make sure no one hurts them in their sleep, and every day is spent handling their complaints of harassment or vandalism. Tell me. How am I supposed to protect Elisk when one problem binds up half of my resources?"

A hooded individual plopped onto the bench beside me.

"I suppose I should have consulted with my Minister of Public Safety before making that proclamation, then, huh?" he said. "Sorry to have made your job more challenging."

Jumping to his feet, Kylorian said, "Your Majesty!"

"Sit down!" Raimie hissed.

Waving at the other man, he scanned the tavern for heads that might have turned our way.

"I'm here incognito. Try not to make such a fuss."

Chastened, Kylorian slowly returned to his seat, and Raimie cocked his head.

"How are you, Ky?" he asked. "How's the family?"

"I'm fine," Kylorian said before his face creased. "The family, not so much. I've kept in touch with them, despite... everything."

He and Raimie shared a knowing look, and I wondered what I'd missed.

"Since your investiture, Dury's struggled with the idea that he'll be bedridden for life," Kylorian continued, "and he blames his predicament on everyone else. He faults you for holding the ceremony, me for moving to Elisk so I could work for you, and Ren for the marriage..."

He trailed off, leaving the table in awkward silence.

"My condolences to Eliade," I said, breaking it. "Marriage to someone that irritable must be a handful."

Raimie and Kylorian laughed, probably remembering a kindly woman with her home-cooked meals and ability to silence Tanwadur with a look.

"Eliade's adapted well to the situation," Kylorian says, "but I'll pass on the sentiment."

"Good! She deserves every kindness she receives," I said. "Now, Raimie. Where's your wife? We only need her to get the evening started."

"She'll be along shortly, I'm sure," Raimie said. "She was visiting with Chela this afternoon, and you know how that healer can be."

"Healer?" I asked. "Is she sick? If she is, why hasn't she come to see me?"

"Calm down, Rhy. Ren's perfectly fine," Raimie said with a laugh. "Just keep a lookout, all right? She'll be here soon."

I did as he'd asked, scanning the tavern, but worry was distracting me. Ren only visited healers when she was extremely sick. She'd rather court death than go near someone who claimed to heal for a living with too many traumatic experiences as a child prompting her visceral fear of them.

Well, fear of all of them but me.

Raimie insisted that Ren was fine, but... she'd fooled other people before him. Learning that my sister had duped her husband wouldn't surprise me in the least.

Despite my worry, one person did catch my eye, slouched by the tavern's door as he was.

"Did you mean to let Pointer follow you here?" I asked Raimie.

Most escapades beyond the palace wall first involved a long game of 'losing the bodyguard'.

"This dinner was sanctioned," Raimie said. "By which I mean I told Oswin we'd hold it without his knowledge if he said no, and he promptly agreed to it."

"He didn't insist on joining you himself?" I asked.

Raimie shook his hood in a negative.

"Too busy planning security for the ball."

“Ah.”

Of course the spymaster of Raimie’s Hand would take charge of that duty. The Anniversary Ball would host thousands of people from multiple realms. On that night, the risk to the royals would be great, meaning Oswin and his spies would be extra vigilant throughout the ball’s festivities.

The ball...

I couldn’t decide what I think of the Audish people’s frantic abandonment of their watchfulness. On the one hand, I approved of their revelry in freedom and life, but on the other, I feared what would happen when Doldimar made his return. Each year without the Dark Lord built the Audish people’s vineyard of hope, so when the inevitable occurred, it would crush them like grapes beneath a vignerons’ feet.

Casting aside my fears, I returned to my inspection of the tavern. After the entry and departure of several other patrons, two women strolled inside, arm in arm and laughing at an unheard joke. Recognition failed to register for a moment, but when it did, I smiled.

Since the official wedding ceremony fourteen months ago, Ren and Ring had become fast friends. In the weeks after her ascension to the role of queen, my sister had been miserable, bogged down by other people’s expectations and judgment. She’d especially hated the necessity of a bodyguard and had mercilessly tormented the men of the Hand when they’d served in that role but with Ring...

For some reason, the two had clicked. Ever since then, Ring had become the queen’s permanent bodyguard, excluding the times she was required for other, undisclosed missions.

Tonight, the two women were glowing with happiness. Ring was gorgeous, as always, but Ren... something about her outshone the other woman. Perhaps her beauty stood out like a bonfire in a room of candles because I’d only sporadically seen her in the last few months, too preoccupied with the primeancer school to devote time elsewhere. Perhaps it was her clothes: her favored leggings and a tight tunic rather than an all-enveloping gown, or... or... maybe it was neither of those.

The ladies stopped beside our table, and was that a...? Yes, it was. Ren had a tiny bump where a flat stomach had rested not five months ago.

“You’re with child,” Kylorian hollowly muttered with wide eyes.

“You’re WITH CHILD!” I shouted.

Jumping to my feet, I twirled my sister before holding her at arm’s length.

“How many months along are you?” I asked. “Who knows? Do you have a due date yet?”

“Slow down, Rhy!” Raimie said. “Let her sit down first.”

My friend was on his feet too, and his hood had fallen back, and look at that beaming face! I grabbed Raimie, pulling him close, and let happy tears flow free. Many cycles had come and gone since... this. A creation of new life between two of my loved ones. I wanted to climb on top of the table, shout the news, run down the streets while screaming it at the top of my lungs. My friend and my sister were...

"I'm going to be an uncle," I whispered, aghast.

Hands helped me get back on the bench, and I thumped into its wooden seat.

"What's wrong with him?" I heard Kylorian ask. "You've brought us fantastic news!"

More jostling on the bench indicated that the others had settled around me.

"Give him a minute, Ky. He needs to process," Ren said somewhere nearby. "Let's you and me talk, brother. How've you been?"

Their voices merged into useless mishmash.

An innocent baby directly related to me. When Doldimar found out...

The child hadn't even been born yet, and it was doomed. Ren's continued survival was a miracle that I blessed and feared every day. Daily, she defied the cycle's grind, daring it to crush her. Thousands of lifetimes and every family member murdered. All but her. Could I trust that a baby would be added to that count?

A mug and dish filled with mouth-wateringly aromatic potatoes and meat were slammed in front of me, and a rough voice commanded.

"Drink first. Then, eat."

Raising the mug, I sipped at its foam, making a face at its horse-piss taste, but the brew was enough to drag me out of my fog, at least partially. I faced Raimie, who'd failed to draw his hood back up.

"Did that help?" my friend asked, nodding to the awful ale.

"Enormously, thank you."

Despite its terrible taste, I swallowed another draught of the stuff before descending on my meal like a ravenous beast.

"My child will have the best protection that she can get," Raimie said, interrupting my attempts to inhale mashed potatoes. "She'll have an army to guard her youth, a school to teach her if she attracts a splinter, a dual primeancer father to guard her sleep, and the Champion of Ele to watch her when her other protectors can't. Doldimar won't touch her. If I have any say in the matter, she'll never even *hear* of him."

“She?” I asked, crooking a strained smile.

Flushing, Raimie dove into his mug.

“I’ve always wanted a daughter,” he told its contents.

We silently drank and ate, watching Ren, Ring, and Kylorian excitedly chatter on the table’s far side and yet, a world away. Raimie might be confident in his ability to protect his child, but I couldn’t say the same. His brash overconfidence... it wouldn’t end well.

“It won’t be enough,” I said.

“Maybe not,” Raimie said, “but I can’t live in fear of Doldimar. Not anymore. I will always stay vigilant for his return, but I won’t obsess anymore. You should do the same.”

“Maybe,” I muttered.

The barmaid brought another round of drinks to the table, shooting a strange look at Raimie before leaving. Her brief interruption gave me enough time to finish my meal.

As the contentment of a full belly spread through me, I let it brush aside terror and rising despair. Disaster wasn’t threatening anyone *tonight*. I’d enjoy that while it lasted.

“How far along is she?” I asked.

“Somewhere between four and five months,” Raimie said. “We’re not sure.”

“How are you not sure?” I asked.

If Ren had been keeping track of her bleeding sequence, timing how long she’d been with child should be easy, but again, Raimie blushed, ducking his head.

“Things have been rather... animated in the bedroom, and running a kingdom has kept us reasonably busy outside of it,” he said. “When she gave me the news, Ren told me it had been two or so months since the last... bleeding.”

He shuddered.

“Ah.”

Yes, vibrant intimacy and a lack of free time would account for their uncertainty. As if fueled by awkwardness, our second round disappeared faster than the first, but the barmaid was attentive to our needs, pushing through a crowded room with a third round almost as soon as we were finished. When she deposited our drinks, she leaned closer to Raimie, squinting.

“I could swear...” she said.

Shifting beneath her attention, Raimie reached for his mug, and that movement shifted his collar to reveal a pair of circles, black and white, on a navy-blue collar.

“Alouin, you are,” the barmaid breathed with her mouth forming a little ‘O’.

Turning, she inhaled to yell until Raimie snatched her wrist.

“Please, don’t,” he said.

“But... you’re the king,” she whispered. “You should have the nicest table in the place, the best ale-”

“I don’t want any of that,” Raimie said. “I want a quiet night in a regular tavern with my closest friends.”

The barmaid pursed her lips, thinking.

“If you want me to keep your secret, you’ll have to pay me,” she said.

Making a face, Raimie released her before digging through his pockets.

“Very well,” he said. “I think I have some spare chits somewhere.”

“Not with money, silly,” the barmaid said, giggling. “With a kiss. I’ve always wanted to kiss a king.”

She leaned forward invitingly.

“Oh!” Raimie stammered, flicking his eyes around the table for help. “Uh...”

And I snickered. I couldn’t help it. This scene was straight from one of those horrible fairy tales that my friend loved, and he’d fallen right into the middle of it.

“Hey, wench!” Ren snapped, struggling to reach her feet. ‘That’s *my* husband you’re propositioning. Hands off!’

The barmaid whipped her head toward the noise, taking in Ren’s apparel with a sneer, but the ugly look dropped when she met my sister’s gray eyes.

“You’re the queen,” she whispered.

A throwing knife had appeared in Ren’s hand, and she tumbled it between her fingers.

“Yes,” she growled, “and this queen will filet you like a fish if you don’t STEP the HELL away from my husband.”

Without another word, the barmaid fled.

“Thank you, love!” Raimie gasped.

The socially awkward fool probably would have gotten himself in enormous trouble if his wife hadn't been here to save him. Reaching over the table, Ren yanked Raimie's hood up.

"Keep it on," she snarled.

Then, she gracefully sank to the bench and resumed her lively chat with Ring and Kylorian.

"She'll be fun to deal with for the next four-ish months," I said.

"I'm already terrified," Raimie said.

Reaching for his third drink, he downed it in one go.

Someone else brought the next round, which was a wise decision on the barkeep's part, all things considered. Ren, Kylorian, and Ring's animated chatter eventually drew me and Raimie into their circle, and soon enough, our table was roaring with laughter and spun tales.

At some point, I gave up on keeping track of these delightful hours, instead indulging in a contest with Ele over whether I could escape sobriety tonight. When I achieved my goal and the room started to fuzz over, I stopped drinking, and soon after, the king and queen made their farewells with my friend leaning on my sister as they left. Two spies silently followed their path, keeping to a much straighter line than their charges did.

"I think I'll go too," I said with my words slightly slurred. "You?"

"I'll stay for a little while longer," Kylorian said.

He looked so melancholy that I was reluctant to leave him alone, but I had an early morning lesson planned for my students as well as a field trip at week's end. I should sober up and rest beforehand.

"Rhy," Kylorian said, snatching my sleeve, "keep them safe."

"That's what I do," I said.

But I also cocked my head. Was Kylorian *that* concerned about the royal couple?

Releasing me, Kylorian slowly nodded before returning the full weight of his attention to his mug, and frowning, I decided not to pressure him. Gods, he looked miserable enough right now without his sister's full-blood brother getting in his face.

"Good night, Ky," I said.

But then, I was out the door. The outside air was crisp, one of fall's signals that it would soon turn to winter, and I headed for the palace, absently humming to myself. Alcohol's pleasant buzz added a skip to my step, especially considering how rare this feeling had been for me to achieve throughout my life.

I took a detour through one of Elisk's few remaining abandoned districts, examining a wall of stone with a fierce glare. For years now, I'd wanted to climb the cliff face that the palace rested on, and the warmth in my belly had given me the courage to try. I was sure I could handle its height so long as I didn't... look... down.

I slowed to a stop. Something felt off, but I couldn't put my finger on what. It tickled at my awareness, setting my nerves on edge, but I couldn't-

"Really, E. I thought you'd have noticed me by now."

That voice, emerging from the night like a wraith, made me bristle. It was so familiar, almost as recognizable as my own. Who...?

Turning toward the voice's origin, I stumbled with the world violently spinning.

"Are you... *drunk*? That's priceless!"

Manic laughter filled the air, and hearing it, I knew who was speaking. I reached out for my source with panic swimming in my veins, but it chose not to respond to me in this, the moment of my greatest need.

"Draw from me, Eriadren," Creation snapped, appearing beside me.

I was already doing that, pulling enough Ele to myself to banish intoxication's effects.

"Oo! Neat trick! Can't wait to try it on Corruption."

"Why are you here?" I shouted.

Making a circle, I scanned vacant windows and doors, soon coming up empty. Where in the void was the bastard?

"I hear congratulations are in order. You're going to be an uncle, E! How sweet."

He wasn't hidden *in* a house. He was *on* one. The rooftop to my left, in fact.

I leapt and lurched until I landed on the home's pinnacle, and there he was, the voice's source.

"Answer the question, Doldimar," I said.

My enemy (friend) made a face.

"You're no fun, but if you insist, we can commence with our business," Doldimar said. "Have you noticed how different this cycle's been? Of course you have. You sent me that note. Your messenger's fine, by the way. He's one of my newest Enforcers."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. When I'd caught that boy stalking me after Teron's death, I'd sent the kid running with a message for Arivor, but turning the boy into an Enforcer hadn't been the end

that I'd hoped for him.

"What do you *want*?" I snapped.

"You're always so bitter, E," Doldimar said, "It's almost enough to hurt my feelings."

And he almost looked like he was hurt, the bastard. I hated it, hated what Daevetch had made of my oldest friend, hated all the atrocities that he'd committed, the ones I'd have to help Arivor deal with once this cycle ended.

Fuck this curse.

"Are you planning on harassing Raimie again?" I asked.

I didn't expect an answer, but I had to get my mind off of the cycle. Off of Ele and Daevetch.

"I won't let you hurt him or the baby—"

"Hardly," Doldimar said, inspecting his fingernails. "My plan for the upstart king is already in motion."

I became a man-shaped carving with my thoughts the only part of me to stir, skittering against the ice of my skull. Returning to the palace would be my first course of action, obviously. I'd have to warn Raimie before taking him and the family somewhere safe, somewhere they could hide and wait. Make a plan to—

"No. I'm here for you, E," Doldimar continued.

Snapping my head up, I looked—truly looked—at my adversary (comrade). Doldimar's full lips were curled into an eager smile, and despite the night's weak light, his eyes were twinkling.

Damnit.

"Are you here to kill me?" I asked.

If he wanted to eliminate the Champion of Ele before the opposite could occur, tonight would be the best chance he'd ever stumbled upon. Before I'd left for dinner, I'd stored my weapons in my room. Without them, I could put up a decent fight, but Lighteater was hanging on Doldimar's hip. With it there, the fight's end was already determined.

"I'm here to extend an invitation," Doldimar said, dashing my guilty hopes. "Since this cycle has diverged so significantly from those of the past, I thought we might visit a long-abandoned home before we cut to the end game."

"Did you know it's still there? The little cottage, the paintings, the garden. It's all preserved. I thought that since this has a high chance of becoming our final cycle, we should go to the city Lirilith loved."

I took a step forward without thinking.

“You don’t say her name.”

Shrugging, Doldimar backed into the shadows cast by a chimney.

“I’ve extended the invitation. You can choose to accept. Or not,” he said. “Our home city is where I’ve been hiding for the last four years: scheming, gathering troops, and turning ordinary Kiraak into Enforcers. Meet me there and see. Maybe if you’re fast enough, you can stop me from inflicting the tragedy that I have planned for poor, tormented Raimie.”

Making a mockingly sympathetic face, he vanished.

“No!” I shouted.

Sprinting along the rooftop’s length, I shoved a hand into the shadows, casting out for the dispersed particles of my enemy (friend), but Doldimar was gone. I screamed my frustration, punching the chimney’s brick, and the resulting sharp pain in my knuckles served as another reminder that I was the weakest I’ve been since the disastrous experiment that had poisoned me with Ele.

Hissing, I sucked on my hand. My course was clear. I could stay here, follow the plan, train primeancers, and prepare for an inevitable assault but...

Doldimar had something specific planned for Raimie. He’d been so confident that he’d accomplish it, but I knew where he was, meaning I had a chance to stop this supposed tragedy before it began.

I didn’t have much choice in the matter, even if it was most definitely a trap. I’d go home and end this cycle.

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