

Chapter 93: Field Trips and Massacres

Raimie

Three days after my fight with Ren, the primeancer students and I stood on Nephiron's dock. The journey to reach this place would normally have taken weeks, but fortunately, my companions and I were not normal people. On our trip, Ele had helped to speed most of the students along, and the rest had shade melded across the same distance in hops and skips. By using these methods, we'd cut our trip's length to a fourth.

The Daevetch students' addition to my roster had surprised me, but when asked about it, Nessaira had simply shrugged, claiming that her kids needed real-world practice as much as the Ele students did. I suspected that in actuality, Nessaira had needed rest. She'd been wan, pale, and twitchy, indicating a high probability that she'd ignored Rhylix's advice from days before.

I'd been more than happy for the Daevetch primeancers to join us. The challenge that Rhylix had prepared for his students would be relatively difficult, and extra hands would be much appreciated.

Unfortunately, their addition to the group was also giving me a headache.

"I won't have them aboard my ship," the captain in front of me said. "They're nothing but trouble, and if you keep them around for long enough, Your Majesty, they'll eventually go the way of our former Dark Lord."

Beside his five younger cohorts, Tejesper stiffened, ready to make a scathing comment about the captain's intelligence; I was sure, but I beat the teenager to the punch. Drawing Daevetch to a hand, I waved it in front of the captain.

"Then, I'd guess you don't want me on your ship either," I said. "We had an agreement, captain, but if you're unwilling to take us all, then we'll find another crew to sail us to the isles. Someone more willing to accept the throne's coin."

Coin that was steadily depleting. Light taxation and the sale of interesting items from Auden's tears could only do so much to mitigate the enormous cost of revitalizing a nation. It was a problem for another day, but for the captain's benefit, I flashed a peek of the gold chits filling the pouch at my waist.

"I'm sure we can work this out," the captain said, stammering. "If they stay below deck and out of the crew's way, I might tolerate their presence."

"I can promise that they won't interfere with your crew, but staying below deck will be quite impossible," I said. "Today's lesson will require open air. Unless you want us to accidentally sink your ship?"

The captain unhappily grumbled, but he nodded, holding a hand out. Reaching into my pouch, I placed a small pile of chits into his waiting palm.

"You'll get the rest once we've safely returned to Nephiron," I said.

"Welcome aboard," the captain grunted with his eyes fixed on the gold in his hand.

As we climbed the gangplank, I trailed the students with trepidation. I vividly remembered the last sea voyage I'd made as well as its miserable beginnings. Huddling in a corner and shivering from a cold sweat wouldn't help the appearance that I must maintain as strong, sure, and in control. I hoped my stomach wouldn't betray me on this short trip across the water.

At the top of the gangplank, Tejesper pulled me to the side.

"Why did you bargain with him?" he asked. "We could just as easily have shade melded to the isles and avoided these people's scorn."

"Careful, Tejesper. These people are acting out of fear. Let's show them that Doldimar's fate isn't the only end for those with a claim on Daevetch," I said. "As for why, do you think I haven't noticed? For the last two days, you six have sported the stains of foot travel when you've reached our campsite. I know how difficult it is to emerge from the shadows where you want to. I didn't like the idea of having to fetch one of you from the sea before we reach our goal. Besides, how many of you have sailed before? Look at how excited the young ones are."

Those five children giggled and shrilly chattered with one another, entangling their hands in the nearby rigging.

"What exactly is our goal?" Tejesper asked.

And my mood darkened.

"Why don't you gather everyone near the mainsail?" I asked. "I'll explain there."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Tejesper said.

As he trotted away to carry out his task, I contained my wince. After almost a year and a half as this nation's king, I still wasn't used to that honorific, but I was learning to accept it. Being 'Your Majesty' was simply an annoyance that I tolerated so I could focus on my passion: fixing this broken realm. Helping the people who called it home.

The students quickly assembled, at about the same time our transport weighed anchor and shoved off. For a moment, I rode a wave of seasickness, one that mirrored my dread, before wrangling it under control. It lurked below the surface, ready for a moment's lapse, but for now, I'd pinned it in place.

"We must commit this breach of trust," Nylion said. "It is for their own good."

He was leaning against the mast with a frown belying his words, but I didn't acknowledge my other half's discomfort, one to match mine. I simply nodded.

I know that, I said. Doesn't make this easier.

The students' eyes were shining; they were so eager to learn why they'd traveled across the realm for their field trip, and I swallowed, trying to clear the lump in my throat. I didn't want to destroy their excitement or be the one to steal the peace they'd recently found, but these people, children and adults, were primeancers. Theirs would be a life of strife and turmoil, rarely broken by times of tranquility. It was best to ease them into it as gently as possible.

"I know you want to learn why we've come to this far corner of Auden, and while I won't be happy doing it, I will answer that question," I said. "We're here to solve a problem. Over the last three years, some of you may have heard rumors about pirate attacks on our coastline. Recently, I've learned from the Hand that these cutthroats, the Serpent Pirate Crew, have established a bay on the northernmost of Nephiron's three isles. That island is our current heading."

Nervous mutters rose from the students, but I couldn't afford to let them speculate about what I'd said.

"I have an assignment for you," I said. "I require this Serpent Pirate Crew removed from Auden. To that end, I've brought you, my most qualified subjects, to drive them out. I'm not asking for a massacre!"

I had to raise my voice to be heard over their alarm.

"Although, if that's how you choose to take care of the problem, no one will stand in your way. Unlike their comrades, these pirates are the vilest of scum. They deserve whatever fate they receive. So, you may take any course of action that you wish to accomplish your goal, be that violent or not. That is why we're here. That is this field trip's purpose."

The students waited for me to continue, to laugh and tell them it was a joke, and when I didn't, protests rang out over the vastness of the open sea. I let their anger beat against me until one voice rose above the rest.

"Why would you do this?" Miranon cried. "I thought we'd be safe with you! That's what you promised us, and now, you'd push us into a *fight*? How will that keep us safe?"

"All of you have grown while staying with me. A pirate band shouldn't be a problem for anyone here to handle," I said before quietly adding. "I'll keep watch, Miranon. No one will be in real

danger.”

“That doesn’t-”

As her voice cut off, Miranon’s face went red.

“Children are with us!” she shouted. “Do you expect them to fight as well? How cruel can you be?”

The Zrelnach among them, Jeme, took a step forward, laying a hand on Miranon’s shoulder.

“He’s doing them a kindness, Miri,” she said. “You know the stories of our kind, the same as everyone else. We inevitably die young. Do you think any primeancers here can expect such a fate, simply because we lead peaceful lives now? The king is going out of his way to provide us with an opportunity to safely hone our skills. He’s doing this in the hopes that some of us will defy the odds.”

Miranon sucked in a breath as if to argue, but instead, she turned on her heels, stalking away. With a small sigh, Tejesper chased her, and the rest of the students stared at me with indecision rife on their faces. They wanted to believe that I, the man who’d provided them with a safe haven, had their best interest at heart, but doubt wavered in all of them save for Jeme. She alone gave me a nod of understanding.

I had no intention of soothing the students’ fear. I’d do what was required to prepare them, and they could judge my actions later.

“We’ll arrive at the isle by midday, so ready yourselves until then,” I said. “When we arrive, remember. I’ll be nearby, if you need me.”

Dismissing them, I marched to a nearby railing. Listening to the quiet conversation rising behind me, I stood firm until the students’ noise had faded to nothing before vomiting into the ocean. With many a comforting murmur, Nylion rubbed my back, there for me. As always.

In the end, the primeancer students didn’t need me. A single ship came from the isle to greet us, and the students took one look at the emaciated bodies and faces of the children working its lines before a spark ignited. Against fourteen Ele and six Daevetch primeancers, the pirates, both aboard their ship and ashore, didn’t stand a chance.

While the pirates’ former slaves boarded my hired vessel, I waded through corpses. Within their base, the pirates had held so many children captive that the poor things had filled our ship to the brim.

Its captain had *not* appreciated the unexpected influx of passengers, as evidenced by his whining, somehow still buzzing in my ear now. In the end, the man had insisted that with the children occupying so much room aboard his ship, none remained for me or the primeancer students.

With a shrug, I’d relinquished the second half of the captain’s gold, and on hinting at significant compensation for a task well done, I’d extracted a promise from the man to return the children to

their homes.

As for me and the students, we'd find another way to the mainland, even if I must individually shade meld the Ele primeancers to its shore.

For tonight, however, we'd rest, recuperate, and celebrate, such that we could. I meant to make the night as lively as possible, driving memories of killing and death out of the students' minds. Before disembarking the hired ship for a final time, I'd persuaded its captain to leave us a barrel of rum while retrieving the fireworks bundle that I'd been toting around since Elisk, all in anticipation of this outcome.

While we waited for nightfall, I had the students exploring the isle's beach with no other instruction, save for to keep an eye open for trouble. As I lifted a last body over my shoulders, screeches, laughter, and splashing drifted over the ridge, and I smiled. My plan seemed to have worked as I'd hoped. No one could resist the ocean's pull for long, not when friends surrounded them.

"We should have gone with them," Nylion said, standing on the ridge.

With his hands on his hips, he looked down on the students, and I shook my head at him, huffing as I took the last few steps to my corpse pile.

I don't think they'd have appreciated my presence, I said. It will take them time to work through what I did to them, and before you ask, NO. I don't hate myself for doing it.

Glancing back at me, Nylion said, "Liar."

Godsdamn bond.

Ok, fine. I feel a LITTLE guilty about it, I said. Better?

"Much."

With one final heave, I completed a corpse pile, stepping back to view it with a strange mixture of pride and melancholy. Pride at the efficiency and skill of my fellow primeancers. Melancholy that these pirates had chosen a course that had led to their elimination.

I felt no regret for their deaths, despite how I felt about making the students do the deed. Slavers who specialized in children were a plague upon the world, one that needed to be seared from existence.

Speaking of which. Casting about for a source of flame, I found none in my immediate vicinity, which elicited a groan. We'd made camp far from the battle site, and when I'd returned to the scene of carnage earlier, I'd failed to bring a striker with me. Stupid. How else would I take care of so many bodies?

Coming to join me, Nylion said, "We could let them rot."

And waste this perfectly fertile soil? I said. *I'm sure Nephiron would appreciate the additional farmland, considering how often their mayor complains about food shortages. The city won't want to wait while the elements reduce these bodies to plant food. No, we'll burn them. Which means we'll hike back to camp.*

"Fine," Nylion drawled. "I simply wish to be done with this, both with the bodies and distracting the students. Come to our shared dream space tonight? I-"

"Need a light?" someone behind me asked.

Jumping, I whirled toward the noise while Nylion grumbled about the interruption. Leaning a shoulder against a nearby tree, a blonde-and-blue haired man was intently peering at me with gray eyes, angling his slender body away from the tree's trunk with his arms crossed, and on seeing the stranger, the splinters at my side recoiled.

"Raimie, run right now," Dim whispered in a trembling voice. .

The splinter's tone stirred similar emotions in me, but I couldn't do as Dim had said. The sound of the students' carefree conversations was still rising, indistinguishable, over the ridge. I couldn't leave them here, not until I'd assessed the threat. *If* there was a threat. It seemed like that was the case, but... I'd always found it better to give people, including those who snuck up behind me and freaked the hell out of my splinters, the benefit of the doubt.

...Maybe I wouldn't, though, just this once.

Resting a hand on Silverblade's hilt, I tried to appear relaxed, even as I made ready to flee at the slightest sign of danger.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

"Oh, I've been watching you for quite some time," the stranger said. "Wasn't sure when I could safely approach, considering how many people your friends slaughtered here but..."

He shrugged.

"You look like you're finished, only sticking around to burn the bodies. So. Need a light?"

"If you have one, I'd appreciate it," I said.

As the stranger moved toward the corpse pile, I eyed him, taking several silent steps away. Something was severely off about him, besides the fact that he'd appeared from nowhere. He was Eselan, which wouldn't by itself ring alarm bells in my head, but combined with the continued rarity of the Eselan race in Auden, I found it somewhat unsettling that this stranger had popped from thin air in this out of the way corner of the realm.

And of course, Dim's warning and both splinters' readily apparent fear were rattling me. They'd retreated as far from the stranger as they could while still remaining within my reach.

Nylion, hovering closer to the stranger, abruptly straightened. He strode my way, steps eating the earth in his haste to reach me.

"I think we should follow Chaos' advice," he said. "Better to be wrong and look foolish than to be dead, if that is who I think it is."

And who do you think it is? I asked.

The Eselan conjured fire to his hand, and as he reached to let it catch on the pile, I took notice of how badly deformed that appendage was. Nylion's answer to my question went unheard, and all thoughts of danger slipping from my head as I rushed forward.

"Your hand!" I said.

Crouching, I clutched the Eselan's wrist, inspecting the damage.

"Good gods, what have you done to it?" I breathed, horrified. "Come with me. I have a salve that might help, and maybe my friend will look at it too. We can--"

The Eselan doubled over with laughter, nearly toppling me. Hiccups interrupted his giggling's wide range in pitch, which might have been more unnerving if I hadn't been itching to reach camp and treat his wound.

"I'm sorry," the stranger gasped. "You're exactly like everyone says you are. The ally has never been so genuine before. No wonder E likes you."

"Would you *please* let me help you?" I asked.

I tugged at the Eselan's wrist, but he merely ripped it out of my grasp.

"You can do nothing for my hand," he said. "The damage was done years ago."

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry if I've offended you."

The stranger cocked his head with a fascinated smile quirking at his lips, and only then did I register Nylion. My other half was pulling on my shoulder as insistently as I had been with the Eselan while the blue of his eyes was lost in white, and his breath hissed between clenched teeth.

"-NOW!" he was saying. "Heart of my heart, *listen* to me. We need to go. *Please*, get up and get us out of here. Gods--"

Ok. I hear you, I said. *We're going.*

Clearing my throat, I said. "My work here is done."

I gestured at the fire, which was already gaining purchase on the pirates' bodies.

“Thank you for your help,” I said. “Will you join me and my students for dinner? I’m sure we have rations to spare.”

I didn’t wait for an answer. Once I was upright, I started in a casual stroll toward camp, praying I wasn’t showing how much my skin was crawling. I hoped the Eselan would leave well enough alone, even knowing that would never happen—the man hadn’t shown up here for no reason—but if he insisted on following me, I’d be leading him to friendlies: twenty powerful primeancers who could help when this situation turned to shit.

Behind me, the Eselan said, “You don’t want to make that offer.”

Or the man could decide to tumble us into a confrontation now. Slowly, I faced the Eselan, instinctively reaching for Nylion’s hand.

“I am here,” my other half said. “No matter what happens, I am here.”

I know.

With a brittle smile, I asked, “Why is that?”

Shaking his head, the Eselan rose from his crouch with firelight sending faint glimmers over the black leather wrapped around him.

“Gods, boy. You haven’t even asked who I am. Is exchanging names not considered proper etiquette in this day and age?” he said. “I know you’re Raimie, king of Auden, and here’s where you ask...”

He fluttered a hand toward me while I narrowed my eyes.

“Who are you?” I asked, already certain I knew.

Grinning, the Eselan pressed his ruined hand over his heart, bowing to me.

“Doldimar, Dark Lord of Auden, formerly known as Arivor, at your service.”

That was what I’d thought.

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