

"If you would have done what I had told you, none of this would have happened." Rimelda glared at the prince.

Prince Ander clenched his jaw as he stared at the exasperating young woman. Her cheeks were flushed pink with frustration and her bright blue eyes flashed with intensity. Rimelda was a tall, slender woman. Though most women wore their hair up in fancy curls or tightly pinned upon their heads, her thick, dark hair spilled straight down her back to her waist. But what was most unique about her was that she was intelligent, mysterious, and commanding. No one ever spoke to the prince the way she did. No one ever dared!

"Your directions are always so vague," he huffed. "And most of the time, you are not even telling me the truth. How can I trust your instructions?"

She rolled her eyes at him and shook her head. "I always tell you the truth. You just misinterpret it."

"Now that we are in this situation, we must find a way out of it," Ander sighed.

Prince Ander and his unit of soldiers had been on their journey for several days when they found themselves in this predicament. They were on their way to visit the dragons, to inquire if they would join the fighting in defense of Nirine and Isian.

Prince Rogan of Nirine had declared war against his brother, King Garin, and anyone who was allied to Nirine. With the war raging on, it was crucial that they knew who their allies were. If they were to be victorious, it was important that everyone join in to stop the enemy from conquering.

Days before Prince Ander's journey, the new rulers of Nirine, King Garin and Queen Elani, had arrived in Camadia and asked for council. Prince Ander had joined his father and advisors in the council hall.

Ander was in the process of greeting the Nirinian royalty when Rimelda barged into the room. Everyone immediately fell silent. Ander was shocked to see her. She had never come to the palace. If she was ever needed, people went to her.

Elani bowed respectfully when the woman approached them. King Garin, confused by the intruder in commoner's clothes, raised an eyebrow in question. Prince Ander, though annoyed by the intrusion, was always the gentleman and bowed his head in greeting.

"I felt that I was needed," Rimelda stated.

"Uh—," Prince Ander was at a loss for words. "My lady," he said, turning to his friend, Elani. "I am sure you remember Rimelda."

"Yes, of course," Elani said. "I never had a chance to thank you. For everything. If not for you, I never would have found Garin."

"Yes, you would have," Rimelda responded confidently. "You told me once you would do anything for him. You would never have stopped searching. Without my help, it only would have taken much longer."

Elani smiled and grasped her husband's hand. "Garin, this is Rimelda. She is

the seer that helped me find you when you were being held by the dragons.”

Garin bowed his head to the woman. “Then I thank you as well.”

“She is also the one who told me to go to the looking glass in Isian,” Elani said.

A year previous, Elani and Garin had gone on a quest to look into the Magical Looking Glass in order to save the kingdoms. The looking glass had shown Elani what must happen to aid in preventing the approaching destruction.

Prince Ander turned to Rimelda and lifted his brow in disbelief. He had little faith in Rimelda’s powers. The information he had gleaned from her had often been faulty. His most recent quest found him and his men attacked by fairies and held captive for weeks. Oh, how he hated those wretched fairies! He still held some bitterness over that.

“Our alliances with Isian and Tandori have made us stronger,” Elani continued. Her sister, Princess Gabrielle of Isian, had recently married Prince Alec of Tandori, creating a strong alliance. Tandori was a powerful country. Their soldiers were fierce and skilled in weaponry. Their skill in combat combined with Isian’s knowledge of magic made them fearsome to their enemies. They were doing well at holding the enemy back.

“We have a great chance of being triumphant in this war,” Garin continued. “But we need more help.”

“We have sent many of our men to fight,” Lord Brannigan replied defensively. “What else would you have us do?”

Rimelda ignored the king’s advisor and answered. “I have seen darkness. Immense darkness that will cover the entire realm. War has come upon us and everyone must choose a side. If one kingdom falls, they will all fall.” She turned to Ander. “But I have seen hope.”

Ander felt a chill run down his spine as she stared into his eyes with such intensity.

Though Ander’s father, King Orvin, had his doubts about Rimelda’s abilities, he could not deny the accuracy of her declaration. Everyone in the meeting could feel the gravity of their situation.

“What would you have us do?” King Orvin tenderly repeated Lord Brannigan’s question.

“We have sent ambassadors,” Elani responded. “We implore you to do the same. Send ambassadors to the dragons, the giants, the centaurs. Anyone who would be willing to fight with us and not against us.”

“No,” Rimelda said suddenly.

They turned to her in surprise.

“You must go, Ander,” she said forcefully.

The king shook his head. “We will send ambassadors. There are more important things for the prince to be doing.”

Rimelda kept her eyes on Ander as she spoke. "Ander is respected by all he meets. There is no better ambassador for your kingdom than your son. Do you not agree?" She finally turned to face the king. Her bluntness caught the man off guard and he could not deny her claims.

Ander felt the truthfulness of her words. Gaining allies was a great responsibility and he could not leave it to anyone else.

"If you must go, take a company of men with you," the king instructed.

Rimelda quickly interjected, "You should take only your most trusted men."

"Take Baterick," Lord Stewart suggested. "He is a brave warrior."

"And the Stonebrook boy," Lord Seng added. "There isn't a more talented fighter."

"And take Brannigan's son. He will be a great asset," the king said.

Taking their words into consideration, Ander immediately selected a small party, consisting of nine of his best knights, to go with him on his journey. Rimelda had suggested going to the dragons first. On the day they were preparing to depart, she invited herself along, claiming they may need her help deciding where to go next.

They were only days away from reaching the dragons when they fell into an ambush and were captured. The enemy was making bold movements to stop their opposition from uniting against them.

When a small band of men came upon their group, Rimelda, claiming she had seen a vision, told him to put away his weapon and negotiate with them. Refusing to negotiate with enemies, and distrusting Rimelda's so-called visions, Ander told his men to draw their swords and defend themselves. Thinking the fugitives would be frightened by the sight of their weapons, seeing that they had none of their own, he thought they had a good chance of overcoming them. But the men began to laugh, as Ander and his men were attacked from behind. What he had first thought was a small group of unskilled renegades turned out to be a large band of enemies with weapons. Two of Ander's men had been killed before the rest of his group was seized and bound with ropes.

"Who is to say they would have been open to us if I had tried to talk to them instead of fight? They would have taken us captive anyway," Ander defended himself.

Rimelda shook her head and sighed. "It is true they would have taken us captive, but we would not have been treated so badly. And your men would have been spared."

Ander's black eyes flashed in the firelight and his jaw clenched in determination.

"Since you are the all-seeing one here, you tell me how we get out of this situation."

Ander was surprised they had not been killed on the spot. He figured they were being kept alive to be used as ransom. Each of them were bound back to back and tied at the hands and ankles. They were being held beside the fire in the middle of the sleeping

camp and two men stood guard nearby.

“You know it does not work like that,” she replied defiantly.

“Of course not,” he sighed.

Ander had plenty of reason to doubt Rimelda, with how many times he’d been led astray on a quest. And yet there was something intimidating about the woman. She was not to be taken lightly.

“You need to stop doubting, Ander,” she grumbled.

“No disrespect, sire,” Eiden spoke up from behind them. “But I think she is right. We would do well to trust her.”

Eiden was the captain of Ander’s soldiers, as well as his best and most trusted friend. Ander respected him, just as he respected the others in the group. He could not be upset with them for expressing their opinions concerning their survival.

“Forgive me, Eiden. I will try harder to be in better spirits. Do not worry, men. We will get out of this,” he reassured.

Rimelda’s eyes sparkled with mischief and he could tell she was resisting a mocking grin.

“Silence!” one of the guards hissed at them.

The group fell silent and the night was filled with a disjointed melody of sporadic snores from the rest of the sleeping enemies. It wasn’t long before Ander began to dose off but was startled awake by a low humming sound.

“Do you hear that?” Rimelda murmured.

Ander nodded. The humming turned to a deep, throbbing sound like whipping wind and seemed to be getting closer.

The two guards who were standing watch at the edge of camp suddenly became alert.

“Dragons!” they yelled as they rushed into camp.

“Men! Ready yourselves!” the leader of the soldiers yelled, rousing his comrades to defend themselves against the incoming dragons.

The soldiers stumbled toward their weapons and shields in their panic, preparing for the attack.

Rimelda frowned. “It will do them no good,” she said and shook her head out of pity. “Their shields were not made to defend against dragons.”

The fire in the middle of the camp went out with a great whoosh of air, enveloping them all in darkness. The commotion suddenly became silence.

An ear splitting scream rent the air. Then another. And another.

Although Ander had suspected what would happen when the dragons arrived, the sound of crunching bones still made him sick to his stomach. He focused on taking deep breaths.

Suddenly, Rimelda gasped. Ander yelled to her over the sounds of screaming and commotion.

“Rimelda!”

When she did not answer, Ander began to panic.

“Curse this darkness!” he cried. The ropes around his hands prevented him from feeling around to see if Rimelda was there. He strained his eyes, but he could make out nothing in this darkness.

Suddenly, several lights illuminated the sky. Ander squeezed his eyes shut, stunned by the sudden brightness.

“Ander,” Rimelda breathed. “Look.”

Grateful to hear her voice, he opened his eyes and looked around in search of her. “Are you all right?” Ander asked, looking Rimelda over. Although she looked pale, she seemed fine.

She nodded hesitantly. “I saw—.” She cut off and shook her head. “Never mind.”

Before he could ask any further questions, his attention was drawn abruptly back to the dragons. They were breathing fire into the air; a sign of triumph. He was grateful that their surroundings were not covered with half eaten bodies and spilled blood. The dragons had eaten their prey whole.

“Your Highness,” a deep voice murmured and suddenly the giant eyes of a dragon were focused on Ander. “Our captain heard you were captured and ordered us to help you. He knows why you have come and offers our allegiance to your cause. We will fight with you.”

Feeling relieved that the dragons would be their allies in the battles ahead, Ander accepted their allegiance graciously. “We thank you for your help today. And we are grateful for your alliance.”

The dragon nodded and took a deep breath. Before Ander knew what was happening, a bright blue flame was coming towards him. Astonished, he squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for flames to consume him. Instead, he felt the bonds around his ankles fall away. He glanced down and saw that the ropes had been burned to ash.

“Do not fear our flames, Your Highness,” the dragon said, noticing the relief on Ander’s face. “We will protect you, not harm you.”

“Forgive my fear,” Ander apologized and held out his bound hands to show his trust to the dragon.

The dragon blew a concentrated stream onto the ropes and they fell away in pieces.

“May I ask you a question?” Rimelda spoke up.

The dragon nodded his giant head and blinked at Rimelda.

“I had a vision that we should speak to the dragons,” she said.

Ander heaved a deep sigh.

“So that was why you suggested we meet with the dragons first?” he mumbled.

She frowned at him and then returned her gaze to the dragon.

"Yes," the dragon rumbled. "Our captain has a message for the prince."

Ander blinked in surprise. Could it be that Rimelda's guess had been accurate this time?

"He had a vision that Kidrik, the centaur, would help Prince Ander fulfill his destiny. You must find Kidrik," the dragon instructed.

Rimelda frowned and chewed on her lip. Ander's eyes were wide with confusion. His destiny? What was he talking about?

"Kidrik?" Rimelda repeated. "Are you sure?"

The dragon nodded and then prepared to take off. The other dragons followed his lead and quickly darted into the sky with a great gust of wind.

"Who is Kidrik?" Ander asked, turning to Rimelda. "And what did he mean by my destiny?"

She lifted her shoulders innocently.

He stared at her, waiting for an answer. When she remained silent, he asked, "What aren't you telling me?"

"How could you not know who Kidrik is? You don't do much studying, do you?" she said.

He frowned at her, knowing she was trying to change the subject.

She sighed. "There is a prophecy."

Ander waited for her to continue.

"About a Camadian prince ending the war of darkness."

Ander looked skeptical.

"It is about you," she finally said.

Ander chuckled. "Why would you think that?"

"I have visions," she explained. "About your future."

At this, he narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

She continued. "I had one only moments ago. A vision of you in a great battle."

When she saw that he did not believe her, she quickly added, "And I was visited by a powerful witch who told me I should help you find out how to accomplish this."

Ander doubted the truthfulness of her words, but asked the next question on his mind. "Why would a dragon have a vision about me?"

"There are many magical creatures who have visions," Rimelda answered. "Not all visions are given to one being. Sometimes we need to search out our destiny and gather bits and pieces along the way."

Though he doubted her, he wondered about the dragon's message. "Who is Kidrik? And where do we find him?"

Rimelda again looked concerned by the mention of the centaur.

"What is it?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Kidrik is a six-hundred year old centaur that has not been seen since the great war of Nirine and Camadia over three hundred years ago," she breathed.

“Wonderful,” Ander said sarcastically. “How do you propose we find him?”

“I must think,” she said, closing her eyes and pressing her fingertips to her temples.

After several moments, Ander began to grow impatient.

At last she opened her eyes. “We should go to the centaurs.”

“The centaurs?” Ander repeated. “How will we find them? They travel from place to place, never settling down.”

Rimelda nodded. “That is true. But they know when they are needed. If we are meant to find them, we will.”

Her mysterious and vague answer bothered him. He was deeply disturbed by the war and was eager to help bring it to an end. Ander remembered the tales of his power-hungry ancestors, always waging wars against other kingdoms. But Ander was a man of peace, just as his father was. They were determined to put to right all of the misdeeds of their ancestors. Since Ander’s father, King Orvin, had come into power, the kingdom had begun to flourish once again and the people knew peace and prosperity.

Now their peace was being threatened. His soldiers were fighting against the enemy, trying to keep them at bay. But he did not know how long it could last. It seemed that the enemy was gathering allies by the day.

Ander and his men gathered supplies from their attackers’ camp and mounted their horses. Traveling in the direction of the nearest village, Ander hoped to gather information concerning the centaurs’ whereabouts.

Litt, one of Ander’s men familiar with this area of the kingdom, announced that it would likely take them all day and into the next before they arrived at the village. Trusting Litt’s knowledge of the land, the men made camp that evening.

Ander and Gavin inventoried the supplies and discussed the need for hunting while Peter and Eiden prepared supper. A fire broke the darkness and the men began to chatter raucously.

“Andrew’s horse needs its shoe repaired,” Ander said to Gavin.

Gavin nodded, but before he could respond, shouts and laughter filled the air. The circle of men parted, allowing Ander to observe what was happening. Scudder had Eiden in a headlock.

Ander turned to Litt. “Wagers?” he asked knowingly.

“In Scudder’s favor,” Litt shrugged, not taking his eyes off the fight.

Ander smiled and put his hands on his hips as he watched the match.

“My wager is on Eiden,” he said without hesitation.

“Sire?” Litt said in surprise, finally tearing his eyes from the fight.

Gavin also looked at the prince with astonishment. “Are you sure? Scudder clearly has the upper hand!”

The three men turned back to the fight and saw that Eiden was swaying on his feet and was about to topple.

"Absolutely," Ander replied with certainty. "Do you wish to accept my wager?" Gavin chuckled and accepted.

The men cheered their comrades and watched as Scudder beat Eiden near to unconsciousness. Scudder was a tall man with thick arms and legs and a neck just as wide. He towered over Eiden and his muscles rippled. Eiden was not a small man. He was tall and muscular, but he was dwarfed by Scudder's mass. It was well known that Scudder could win almost any physical match. But Ander knew that what Eiden lacked in strength, he made up for in skill and he had no doubt that Eiden would come out the victor in this match, just as he had in every match before.

It was therefore no surprise to Ander when the match abruptly turned in Eiden's favor and he won within a matter of moments. Some men cheered in awe while others gave a collective groan as they realized they now owed their comrades.

"I can not believe you wagered against Scudder!" Litt cried out.

"Ha!" Crowe rejoiced, clapping Litt on the back. "It seems you now owe me, my friend."

Litt frowned in annoyance, then his frown abruptly turned to a smirk. "Just wait until Scudder finds out you bet against him," he said under his breath.

Crowe heard the comment and glanced at the massive man who lay unconscious on the ground in front of them. "How about we just keep this little wager to ourselves."

Litt's brows rose in amusement. "Of course, we can! We can pretend that it never even happened!"

Crowe frowned, realizing that though he had won the wager he was to receive no compensation from Litt.

"I, however, do not fear Scudder's wrath at my having bet against him," Rimelda spoke up. "So it seems you owe me something."

Litt's face fell. He had momentarily forgotten that he had wagered against two different people.

Crowe burst out in laughter at his friend's misery and clapped him on the back.

Scudder was now regaining consciousness and Eiden knelt down to help him to his feet.

"How did you know?" Gavin asked, turning to Ander.

"I learned a long time ago never to bet against Eiden in a hand to hand combat," Ander answered.

As the men dispersed, Ander and Rimelda stood watching the fire.

"You were wise to bet on Eiden," Ander said, breaking the silence.

Rimelda laughed. "I used more than wisdom."

Ander waited for her explanation.

She stared at him, as if waiting for him to understand.

He frowned. "You mean you knew he was going to win," he finally responded.

She nodded. "Of course, I did. But I could not tell anyone or they all would

have bet against Scudder and there would be no wager.”

“You are so sure that everyone would believe you?” Ander said.

“You are the only one who does not. And I already knew you would wager on Eiden.”

Rimelda smiled and abruptly left.

Ander watched as she walked away. The sudden feeling of loneliness surprised him. For a brief moment, he contemplated going after her, but changed his mind when she joined a conversation with Gavin and Andrew. Ander shook his head quickly, confused at his reaction to her leaving. Her presence always left him confused and anxious and he was glad to be rid of her. So why did he continue to watch her?