

Chapter 101: You're WHAT Now?

Rhylix, Raimie

Rhylix

"...might become a problem," I finished with nary a flourish.

When Raimie stared at me without comprehension, I sighed.

"I'm stuck in a cycle, one that follows the same routine every time," I said. "In each of them, I'm born into a new family, one that's inevitably murdered. I find Arivor, kill him, and return to the bedrock of reality, the front for Ele and Daevetch's Eternal War. Sometimes, I can find Arivor before he falls to Doldimar, and sometimes, as in this cycle, I arrive to find out that bastard has held sway for a while instead."

With my words stolen from me, I clenched and unclenched my hands a few times before clearing my throat.

"He and I have done this... I don't know how many times. I've lost count," I said. "After a while, the years started blurring together, and frankly? For the last dozen cycles or so, I'd given up hope of fulfilling my promise to Arivor. I thought we'd never see an end to it, but then, you came along."

I didn't know what else to add, so settling into the leaves, I waited for Raimie's reaction. I'd hoped to never have this Conversation with him... or at least, to be a lot vaguer with it, but Teron had started bearing down on him, and I couldn't see a way to save his life without revealing myself.

"And here we are," Creation said.

Yes, here we were again, although the circumstances were different this time. Usually, Creation was much more resistant to me having The Conversation with my ally, and I wasn't sure why that had changed with Raimie.

Usually, my ally and I weren't sitting near a cooling corpse either, but given our states of relative exhaustion, I hadn't thought we could do much better than this.

“That explains what happened in the forest, when you were shot full of arrows,” Raimie said. “It means I killed you.”

“Technically? Ren killed me,” I said, “but yes, pulling the arrow out of my back did hasten that death along. Remember, though, that I asked you to do it.”

“Uh-huh.”

With nothing else, Raimie returned to contemplative, and I was left wondering when he’d express his outrage. Always, *always* my allies found offense in how much I’d hidden from them, not that I could blame them for it. They had a right to their anger.

Tapping his fingers on his lip, Raimie drawled, “So... have I been using the wrong name for you this whole time? Should I call you Eriadren instead?”

He was thinking of *my* comfort?

With a cough, I said, “No, Rhylix is fine. My name isn’t as important to me as it is to most people, although I appreciate you asking.”

And again, with the silence! I tried to fight through it, to give my friend the time he’d need, but eventually, I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Please, say something,” I whispered.

Glancing at me, Raimie shook his head.

“Honestly, Rhy, I have a lot of questions for you, but I don’t know where to start,” he said. “For instance. Is this what you meant when months ago, you said you wished Ele’s version of healing worked differently? That’s close to what you said, at least.”

I... barely remembered that conversation. It had taken place so long ago, and when I’d said what Raimie was referencing, I’d been in a highly emotional state, but that didn’t matter. I knew what he meant.

“You want me to explain Letting Go?” I asked, just to be clear.

When Raimie nodded, I looked away with a sigh.

“It’s an extension of the healing application you already know,” I said. “At times, an Ele primeancer can assume someone else’s wounds, but unlike with me, it takes a great deal of concentration and will for them. Also, if they do it, the transferred injury won’t heal like it would for me. That’s the singular benefit of my cursed existence.”

“I see,” Raimie said.

After a pause, he gestured at me.

“And I’d guess it’s still painful. The assumed injuries, I mean.”

With a smile at his awkwardness, I said, “Unfortunately, although that doesn’t bother me anymore. I’ve developed a high pain tolerance.”

Clicking his tongue, Raimie waved my reassurance away.

“Yeah, sure. I get that. Sometimes, I can ignore pain too, not that I’m trying to compare us,” he said. “That doesn’t make the pain just vanish, though. It has to go somewhere. All of which is to say that I can see why you wouldn’t want to use this power.”

Blinking, I tried to understand everything Raimie had said but... no. It wasn’t processing. Ignore pain? Not many people knew how to do that.

Perhaps it was best if I replied generally.

“Yes, that’s one reason for it,” I said, “but over the years, I’ve also learned that if I take someone’s injury from them, it inevitably leads to consequences for them. Save for rare exceptions, my patients die shortly afterward, usually due to something far worse than the malady I assumed from them.”

“That makes sense,” Raimie said. “Such powerful magic would have to come with a cost.”

Then, he swallowed hard, visibly summoning his courage.

“That’s why you haven’t fixed my dad’s paralysis, though, right?’ he asked.

Oh. Of course he was asking about the healing side of my story first.

“That’s right,” I gently said. “I’m sorry.”

Nodding to himself, Raimie abruptly stood. He cleared his throat, looking anywhere but at me.

“You’ve given me much to think about, and a lot of it makes me question if I even know you,” he said. “It’s a lot, as I said, so... I’m going to take a walk. Clear my head. While I’m doing that, though, you should get some rest. We’ll sleep here tonight, considering how little we could help the others right now. Taking some time to recover would be better for us, and we can figure out what happened with the battle in the morning.”

He paused, and with a heavy heart, I gave my friend the answer he was expecting.

“Sounds good.”

Slowly breathing out, Raimie jerked his head in a nod.

“Good night, then.”

He wandered into the trees as if in a daze, and while I'd like to follow so I could keep an eye on him, I stayed where I was.

"Give him time," Creation said. "You know him. With time and space, he'll understand."

"I certainly hope so," I said.

Because I didn't know if I could bear to lose the only friend I'd made in millennia.

Raimie

"Do you get why I hate him now?" Dim asked. "By *me*, he's such a cheater."

With a frustrated growl, they reached out as if to strangle the air, and I sighed.

"Dim, please keep your opinions to yourself, just for a little while," I absently said.

I couldn't have them influencing me right now. To my great surprise, they didn't protest my request, even if they made an ugly face at me.

That was one splinter taken care of.

"Why didn't you tell me, Bright?" I asked, half-expecting they wouldn't reply.

Boy, if they didn't surprise me.

"It wasn't my secret to tell," they said. "Given what my whole..."

They paused to take a deep breath.

"Given... everything, letting him choose when and how to tell you seemed the least that I could do."

An acceptable answer.

I didn't know why I felt so cast adrift right now. I hadn't been this detached in ages, and reaching a clear state was giving me much more trouble than usual.

Some small things were helping. The rustle of leaves in the breeze. The clean smell in the air. The colors that the sunset was painting across the sky.

When I'd woken up this morning, I hadn't thought I'd see another of those. By now, I thought I'd be long dead, and a huge reason I wasn't was because of Rhylix.

Why was I having such trouble with his revelation? This didn't feel like a betrayal. I'd asked him to explain himself when he was good and ready, and once he'd given up the illusion that I was still in the dark about his secrets, he'd been nothing but honest with me about why he hadn't wanted to

share.

So, when he'd told me his truth, why had it felt like the ground had fallen out from beneath my feet? Was it the enormity of what he'd shared? *Champion of Ele*? How could I relate to a man who'd been fighting an unseen war for millennia?

Why did part of his situation resonate so highly with me? I wasn't sure what that part could be. Maybe his despair at feeling trapped? That could relate to my situation with having the responsibility of ruling a kingdom forced on me, but... it didn't feel quite right.

When Rhylix had shared about the pain that Reive had perpetrated through his sadistic experimentation, a part of me had cried kinship, which only confused me. I'd never been hurt like that. Never. Before finding Shadowsteal, my life had had the typical ups and downs, but besides those, it had been perfect.

So, maybe I related to fighting an invisible war, although that also didn't fit. When it came to the Eternal War, I'd refused to choose a side.

Like I'd said, I didn't know what the problem was. I looked at this dissonance in me, all raised when Rhylix had shared his secret, and had to wonder if he'd been right all those months ago. Maybe I did have a secret of my own, one I'd hidden from myself-

Does it matter? came from the depths of me.

And I stopped short, kicking up the leaves around me.

"...Nyl?" I said. "Is that you?"

As soon as the questions had left my mouth, I wanted to take them back because as I'd feared, my splinters turned toward me with concerned expressions in place. I waved for them to relax, all while cringing inside. It seemed a little strange that I'd care whether my *invisible* sources to Ele and Daevetch thought I was crazy, but... I did.

Once they'd returned to aggressively ignoring one another, I turned inward.

If that is you, Nyl, are you ok? I asked. *Back with Teron, you seemed... upset.*

I was aware of how much of an understatement that was, but I didn't know how else to put it.

Can you blame me? came a grumble from inside.

It was him!

Suppressing a chuckle, I resumed my hike through the forest.

You didn't answer the question, I said. *Are you ok?*

For the most part, Nylion said. Given time, I will stabilize again.

I bit off my questions about how I might help with that. Nylion had never liked me noticing when he was in pain.

How did communication between us open up again? I said instead. *I thought getting to this point would require more internal work. Not that I'm complaining! Hearing directly from you again is wonderful.*

I am enjoying it as well.

A wash of relief followed that statement, and we took a moment to revel in it before Nylion moved on.

In answer to your question, I am not sure. You are quite detached right now, so maybe that allowed me to break through the barrier. Is the cause important, though? Much as I understand your hesitancy about your friend, I would prefer it if you returned to him soon. In this place, he is the greatest source of safety that we will find.

That was a good point. Frowning, I made myself turn around so I could head back.

What do you think about all of this? I asked. *Am I overreacting?*

Nylion was quiet for a while, leaving me wondering whether our ability to communicate had suddenly failed. I was also curious why I'd asked for his opinion on this. He was my other half, yes, but even still, this problem didn't seem like something I should bother him with.

I think...

When Nylion broke off, it brought to mind an image of him sucking on his lip, which had me softly laughing. He was always so hesitant and cautious when answering my questions, especially those that were sensitive in nature.

I think that long ago, you chose to be Rhylix's friend, and that is not a decision you would have made lightly, he eventually said. *So, while your discomfort about this is understandable, it is not what you should focus on. Instead, ask yourself. Do you still want to be his friend?*

As Nylion had finished speaking, I'd stepped into the clearing that Rhylix had earlier led us to, and glancing over it, I approached him on silent feet. He'd fallen asleep, as I'd suggested, softly snoring with the tension that he normally carried wiped away.

"No nightmares tonight," Bright said beside me. "That's a relief."

Eyeing them, I asked, "Why's that?"

"He used a large piece of the whole today, and you heard what he told you. I'm sure you've surmised how highly connected he is to the state of the whole," they said. "Spending as much of it

as he did today... he'll need to recover, which he couldn't do with his typical nightmares interrupting his sleep."

And he'd done all of that to keep those volunteers alive.

Would you look at that, Nyl? I said. *As usual, you're right.*

He didn't reply, but that was ok. As I sank to the ground beside a man I could never hope to understand, I smiled.

"I am honored to call Rhylix my friend."

Rhylix

When next I woke up, it was because someone was jostling me, and with a decidedly inelegant snort, I shot upright with my hand on my sword's hilt, scanning for danger. A glance around me revealed no threats, although it was bright beneath the forest's canopy.

It was morning, which meant I'd gone an entire night without nightmares. How was that possible?

The wonder of this impossibility was pushed aside, however, in the face of the soon-to-come consequences of last night's choices.

Standing over me, Raimie had his hands on his hips with his foot rapidly tapping.

"Finally," he said. "Gods, you sleep like the dead, Rhy."

I laughed at that, although I disguised it as a cough, and Raimie rolled his eyes.

"If you're awake now, we should get going," he said. "We have a lot to do today."

Hell. He'd chosen rejection.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I breathed through my nose, releasing the pain that I felt on the exhale. I'd gotten well-practiced with this routine, although it was only used for the most extreme of things.

When I opened my eyes, Raimie had turned away, pacing across the clearing, and I watched him for a moment.

Then, I said, "I'm sorry to have distressed you. I will endeavor to remain in the shadows going forward, but unfortunately, I can't remove myself from your presence. I-"

"Why would I want that?" Raimie asked.

Never having stopped pacing, he looked at me with a wrinkled nose, which was... odd.

"Because..."

Must I spell it out?

“Because you consider our friendship over, which is understandable,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to be friends with me-”

Raimie interrupted me again, but it was with a laugh this time. Slapping a hand to his mouth, he struggled to control himself, all while I tried to figure out what this was.

“Oh, Rhy... you think I hate you?” he said. “No! I could never do that. Last night, I just needed a moment to clear my head, and I took it. That’s all. You and me? We’re good.”

With a sharply indrawn breath, I just blinked at this unbelievable kid, and while I considered what he’d said, Creation leaned into view.

“I told you he’d understand,” they said.

And then, to my utter embarrassment, my shoulders started shaking, and I collapsed on myself, sobbing into my hands.

“Hey, hey, hey!”

Crashing through the leaves, Raimie rested a hand on my knee.

“It’s ok!” he said. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m sorry.”

“No!”

My face might already be coated in tears and mucus, but still, I lifted it to him.

“You don’t understand,” I said. “Countless times, I’ve told my story, and nobody, fucking *nobody* has-”

I cut off with a gasp, and with a lopsided smile, Raimie applied slight pressure to my knee.

“Accepted you or your reality?” he said. “Yeah. I gathered that, and it’s awful. I’m so sorry about that and every other horrific thing you’ve endured.”

This, something I’d always longed to hear, only made me break down further, and I didn’t know how long I lost it like this, but through it all, Raimie stayed with me, occasionally patting my knee.

When I eventually calmed down, scrubbing my face, Raimie rose to his full height, offering me a hand.

“Are you ready to go now?” he said. “I’d like to know how yesterday’s *gloriously delightful* events ended for everyone else.”

Thank the gods that he wouldn’t dwell on what had just happened.

With a manic giggle, I accepted Raimie's help up.

"Yes. Let's find out what sort of mess we need to clean up."

With nothing further, I followed my real, honest to gods *friend* into a new day.

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