

Chapter 102: Finding the Others

Raimie

When returning to the battlefield, I hadn't been sure what to expect, but it certainly hadn't been this. Save for notable exceptions, the scene was tranquil. Quiet. The only movement found here was in the sway of the nearby branches, the ruffle of tent cloth, and the bob of seemingly abandoned ships on the sea. I'd find it quite lovely if it weren't for the bodies littering every bit of the ground between.

This sickening addition, combined with the rank smell twining through the air, made me glad that I had yet to fight free of yesterday's detached state.

Beside me, Rhylix and my splinters were watching me with pinched eyes. Were they worried by my lack of a reaction to this?

What had they expected me to do? Lose what little of my last meal remained? Turn into a jittery mess and sink into the grass? Scream at humanity's callous cruelty?

How I'd like to do any and all of these things, but I couldn't let myself feel it now. I couldn't feel anything until I knew what had happened.

So, I picked my way through bodies to the pitiful remnants of my people's camp. What little tents had been left standing yesterday morning were half upright now, and so many firepits had been kicked into disrepair. I chose to focus on that instead of the familiar faces, screwed up from their final moments, that I passed.

On entering the camp, I turned in a circle before shaking my head.

"This doesn't look good," I said. "I'd hoped to find an indication of whether our people retreated but..."

There was nothing here. No clues to follow.

And I couldn't ask my splinters for ideas. I'd been avoiding acknowledging them since last night. If I thought about them, I also had to consider the threat that they'd placed on my life by proxy.

“Maybe if we visit Tiro, we’ll find friendly faces there,” Rhylix said.

Grimacing, I said, “If we do that, you’ll have to leave me far away from the city. Pretty sure its residents are still primed to kill me on sight.”

Which would be *wonderful* to deal with going forward.

“Our people won’t be pleased to see me either, what with the revelation of my primeancy,” Rhylix said. “Do they know about yours?”

“My family, Gistrick, and Marcuset do. Not sure about the rest,” I said, “but I wouldn’t be surprised if the secret’s out for me too. I wasn’t exactly subtle yesterday.”

“Great,” Rhylix sighed, “and the complications abound.”

With a smirk, I nudged him.

“Like that’s new to you,” I said.

Rhylix just blinked at me, which I could understand. Since his first life, had anyone been close enough to tease him like that?

Still.

“What do we do?” I asked.

As if you have a choice, Nylion whispered with a laugh.

Somehow, I kept from flinching. Grateful as I was for the recent change with my other half, his random comments did catch me off guard at times.

“First, we return to cover. This display of death will surely draw rogue Kiraak to it soon,” Rhylix said, “but then, we’ll start toward Tiro. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find signs of the others before then, but if we don’t, the city will be our best shot at locating them.”

That was about what I’d thought.

“Today will be *lovely*, won’t it?” I sighed.

Rhylix laughed at that, and as we returned to the tree line, I let that noise lighten my mood. As we got closer to it, though, my friend caught my shoulder, pulling me to a stop.

Drawing his sword, he said, “There’s movement.”

Just fabulous. We’d have to fight before getting anywhere close to our goal.

When I sought out the disturbance Rhylix had mentioned, however, I relaxed.

“It’s fine, Rhy. Just some fabric hanging from a branch,” I said. “In fact...”

Pursing my lips, I squinted at that distant, flapping motion before grinning.

“I know exactly what that is.”

In the last week, I’d seen it used often enough.

Not long after this, we were heading toward yet another strip of cloth, hanging from a branch, when someone stepped out from behind a tree.

“Oswin!” I shouted with my arms spread wide. “There you are. Knew you’d be around here somewhere.”

“Here I am.”

Striding to me, Oswin took hold of my uniform’s collar, pulling me so close that our noses almost touched.

“You are the most difficult charge I’ve ever had to protect,” he said before releasing me.

It was so sudden that I stumbled backward, only stopped when he dragged me into a brief, bone-crushing hug.

“I’m glad you’re ok,” he whispered in my ear.

When I was freed from this, he’d returned to his usual self.

“What’s the plan, sir?”

Still a little caught out, I coughed, giving myself time to gather my thoughts.

“That will depend on what happened here,” I said, inclining my head toward an abandoned battlefield. “How many of us got away?”

With a bright grin, Oswin said, “The majority, actually. It was strange. Not long after you left me, we started retreating, and soon after that, it was like the life drained out of the Kiraak. They stopped pursuing us, going dead in their tracks—”

“—and that’s where my people came in.”

Coming from the opposite direction as Oswin, Ren advanced on the three of us, almost in a swagger.

“I see you found him,” she said.

Nodding to her brother, she turned to me, and I wondered why I exhaled with relief at seeing her safe.

“I joined up with my neighbors shortly after Rhy and your volunteers finished their heroic stand. Apparently, Dury had sent them out shortly after changing his mind,” she said. “Some of us guided the volunteers to Tiro while the rest helped your army with clean up. Listless as they were, leaving no Kiraak standing was easy, and given their addled state, I have to ask. Is Teron...?”

When she lifted her eyebrows suggestively, I knew I was supposed to respond to her, but for some reason, I could do nothing more than stare.

Why was I so happy to see her? Sure, I’d been worried about her during the battle. Who wouldn’t feel like that about an ally? This reaction to her presence—my inability to tear my eyes off of her face—seemed excessive, though.

After an awkward pause, Rhylix cleared his throat.

“The Enforcer’s dead. Raimie killed him.”

That drew my gaze away. I most certainly hadn’t done that.

Rhylix, however, refused to recognize my incredulous stare, instead turning to Oswin.

“Let me fill you in on our side of the story while Ren finishes with yours,” he said.

Oswin did *not* like this idea—I could tell—but even still, he smiled.

“An efficient use of our time, I suppose,” he said. “Sir. Can I trust you to stay here and not get yourself in trouble?”

Here, he flicked his eyes to Ren, and I frowned. What sort of trouble could she cause?

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

With an explosive sigh, Oswin said, “All right.”

He followed Rhylix out of sight, leaving me alone with Ren. Meanwhile, she was looking at me with saucers for eyes, and I wasn’t sure why.

“You killed an *Enforcer*?” she nearly screeched.

Oh. That was why.

Did I dare refute Rhylix’s claim? What if he’d intentionally given me credit for the kill? I didn’t know why he’d have done that, but he must have had a reason.

To be safe, I shrugged one shoulder at Ren, sheepishly smiling, but I said not a word.

“That’s amazing!” she exclaimed. “Once news of this spreads, Dury can’t keep you out of the city.”

And now, I felt awful, although I was glad to hear that one of my future problems had already been fixed.

“It just happened. No big deal, and honestly, I’d rather not talk about it,” I said. “So, tell me what happened after you... cleaned out the forest.”

I knew the massacre had been necessary, both to maintain Tiro’s secrecy and to ensure my people’s safety, but that didn’t mean I was happy about the loss of life.

“Are my people safe?” I asked.

“Oh!”

Ren seemed confused about why I wouldn’t want the accolades for something she considered unbelievable, but fortunately, she left that alone.

“Yes, everyone who survived the battle is ok,” she said. “I led them to Tiro and- whoa!”

At the confirmation of their safety, I’d started swaying, and when my legs gave out, Ren rushed to catch me, which was strange. I welcomed her help, but hell, if my chest didn’t unpleasantly tighten at the contact of her skin on mine.

Also, why was I having such a strong reaction to the news she’d shared?

The soldiers... are like family, Nylion said. The one... we wanted.

Why did he sound so distracted?

Didn’t matter.

Hastily extracting myself from Ren, I cleared my throat a few times, brushing down everywhere she’d touched, and gradually, my heart rate slowed back down.

“Thank you for telling me,” I gruffly said. “I’m glad they’re ok.”

Ren was watching me with an odd look in her eye, one I didn’t know how to interpret.

“You truly care for them. I thought so before but this...”

As she trailed off, I cocked my head.

“Of course I do,” I said. “They are like- like family.”

Hell. Nylion had been right.

Now, I could read Ren’s expression. Her features had hardened into the most determined of lines, and before I could figure out why, she muttered.

“Fuck it.”

Then, she grabbed my shoulders while rising to my height, all while pressing her lips to mine.

If I'd had a strange reaction to her previous touch, this one was brutal. A hysterical shriek started in my mind, building until it was all I could hear, and my skin went cold and clammy while my stomach started bucking and-

As abruptly as these sensations had appeared, they vanished, leaving me... bereft, for some reason, and confused. What the hell had that-?

Wait. Ren was kissing me.

This thought permeated my mind as thoroughly as that strange shriek, and for a time, I could only look at it, turning it so I could see it from every angle. What... did this mean?

Before I could move beyond that question, Ren pulled away with a wince.

“Sorry,” she said. “I couldn't help-”

Reaching out, I tangled my fingers in her hair—gods, it felt as amazing as I'd been imagining—and leaned down. I wasn't sure what I was doing, watching myself move as if someone else was controlling my body, until my lips met hers, and after that, so much heat blasted through me that I couldn't give the conundrum conscious thought.

Not right now.

Gods, it wasn't enough. Releasing one hold on her hair, I laid my hand on the small of her back, tugging her close, and when she gasped, I took advantage, and hell.

It still wasn't enough.

Then, Ren's hands were on me while she kissed me back, which only made this hunger worse. Damn, it was strong, and I didn't know how to satisfy it. I didn't-

Raimie, please! came a wail from deep inside.

Nylion's voice froze me solid, which Ren noticed. With her face entirely red, she backed off while I touched my lips. What had that been?

“Damnit. You *do* like her.”

Spinning fast enough to make myself dizzy, I found Oswin at my back, looking at me like I was a disobedient puppy. When had he snuck up on me?

Crossing his arms, he said, “I told you not to cause trouble.”

“I... I don't-”

I didn't know what to say. What had just happened? Why had it felt amazingly, wonderfully *right* and yet, oh so wrong?

"Oh, give him a break. He didn't start it."

Flinching, I said, "Rhy. Hell. I'm..."

I'd just repaired my relationship with him, and here I went, messing it up again by kissing his sister. That was considered a violation of our friendship in this context, right?

Laughing under his breath, Rhylix raised a hand.

"It's fine. You and Ren are adults, perfectly capable of taking care of yourselves," he said. "Besides, she seemed to like it. Isn't that right, Ren?"

The three of us turned to her, although I was cringing while doing so, and at the attention on her, Ren drew her parted mouth into a thin line while the distraction in her eyes relented to a glare.

"Not that it's any of your business, but... yes."

For that last bit, she glanced at me, which had heat rising in my face, and I couldn't stop it. Why couldn't I stop it?

"There we go. A delightful outcome all around," Rhylix said. "Ren? Don't you have something you should be doing? Maybe let Tiro know why the army of Kiraak at their doorstep fell to pieces? That might make our welcome there a bit... warmer, so to speak. I can lead these two to the city, taking the long way around."

With a cough, Ren said, "Right. Yes. I- I'll see you all later?"

But the question seemed mostly directed at me. I mutely nodded, freeing her to melt into the trees, and I only found my voice again once she'd left.

"What the hell was that?" I harshly whispered.

That question had been meant for myself, but Rhylix lifted an eyebrow at me anyway.

"You... kissed her," he said. "Pretty self-explanatory."

"Yes. Of course. *That part* is," I said, rolling my eyes, "but why would I do that? I don't understand what came over me. Why...?"

Now, Rhylix was frowning at me with his eyebrows drawn together.

"Have you never...?" he said as if to himself.

Never what?

Fortunately, Oswin didn't find this confusing, although he still looked upset.

Sighing, he said, "Sir, you *like* her. Really, truly like her. As men sometimes do with women and occasionally, other men, Alouin, this'll make things so much more complicated."

I still didn't understand. Of course I liked Ren. She was smart, could defend herself, and kind, once you got past her abrasive outside. How did liking her lead to kissing?

A loud, internal groan rattled through my head.

Please, do not fret too highly over this, heart of my heart. I will explain everything later, Nylion said. For now, let us focus on getting somewhere safe. Yes?

That was right. I needed to get back to my family, both the old and the new.

"I'll have to take your word on that, Oswin," I said. "In the meantime, we should head for Tiro. I still need to take stock of everything. So?"

When neither of my friends moved, I scowled at them.

"Rhy...?" I drawled. "You need to lead the way?"

Shaking himself, Rhylix glanced at Oswin.

"I need to ask you some questions later," he said.

Fortunately, though, he didn't delay further, setting off into the forest. I should follow him, but before I could, a temporarily forgotten worry came to mind, and I wanted to smack myself for letting it go for so long.

As Oswin passed me, I grabbed his wrist with my throat working.

"Oswin," I said, "about the primeancy that Rhy and I displayed..."

I glanced toward my rapidly disappearing friend while the spy removed my hand on him.

"Not to worry, sir. While you were gone, me and my people worked our own kind of magic," he said, "although those efforts were greatly helped by everything you two did during the battle. Not many people are willing to rip their saviors apart, no matter what they might be. For now, the soldiers will give you the benefit of the doubt, although you'll need to keep an eye on Tiro's citizens. So, please. Until this situation dies down, no more running off on your own, and... no more trouble. Understand?"

That I was walking on precariously thin ice right now? That I needed to avoid Ren like crazy for a while?

"Yes," I said.

As Oswin released a held breath, Nylion laughed inside.

So... life will continue as normal, with its constant peril and all, he said. How gratifying to see that nothing changes.

Much as I wanted to click my tongue at him, I ignored him instead, hurrying after Rhylix. Together, he and I had far too much work to do, but I wasn't worried about it. For once, I had the resources and abilities to face life's challenges with confidence.

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