

Chapter 12: Her Misconception

Raimie

I didn't stop for any other pleasantries with my family. Storming through the door, I was out of the house faster than I'd thought possible, fighting to keep my breathing under control.

Gods, why had that been so difficult?

You HAVE been avoiding even thinking about what happened at the fort, heart of my heart. Remember? Nylion said. And I do not think that the emotional fallout of Rhylix's death and everything else we experienced has finished settling as well. You have been acting... strangely today.

That was fair. Definitely fair. *Incredibly* fair.

Alouin, how did I stop my heart from beating out of my chest? Was this- was this a *panic attack*? Why would I-?

Did I not just answer that question? Nylion sighed. As for fixing it, you have one person who is good at calming you down. Yes?

Yes. Yes, I did. I should-

-go see Ren, Nylion said. Please, do that.

But where would she be?

How should I know? I am not usually around when you two are together. I do not...

A sigh rattled inside my head.

Where do you and Ren typically spend time together?

Outside Tiro. In the snow. Having snowball fights and taking walks through a deeply hushed wood. In her home, wrapped in our separate cocoons of blankets while our clothes dried by the fire. Sparring in Tiro's training yard. Drinking at Sigemond's-

That is probably the best place to start, yes? A tavern keeper is likely to know a city's latest news and happenings, after all.

...Not all the time, but Nylion was still right. The tavern wasn't a bad place to look for Ren.

Shaking myself, I oriented to where I was in Tiro. How had I gotten halfway across the city while I'd been stuck in my head?

My fault, Nylion whispered with his voice getting fainter. *Walking tends to keep you from getting buried deeper inside.*

I... had not known that.

But I had somewhere to be.

When I reached Sigemond's tavern, I'd started feeling less muddled. My head still had way too much fog in it, but I could actually register things in the real world again.

Hell. I hadn't gotten that drawn back into my own head since I was a little boy. Rhylix's supposed death must have truly messed with me.

Which made sense. Him 'dying' and me having to live the double life of that being both a truth and a lie was reminiscent of—

"Raimie! Gud to see yu!"

With a start, I located the man who'd been yelling for my attention, smiling when I caught sight of him behind his bar. As I came closer, Sigemond waved the rag that he'd been using to clean glasses over his head.

"Hey, Siggy," I said. "Have you seen Ren?"

"Oh, ho! Raid must have gone gud if first thing yu ask after is woman," Sigemond said, chuckling. "That's wut I hear tell anyway. Gud sign, taking a fort on yur first time out."

Flushing, I ducked my head.

"Thanks, I think," I said. "But what I was asking about. Ren?"

"Right, right," Sigemond said. "I seen her going to gate. She seemed... how yu say... upset. Might be careful seeing her."

Oh, damn. Had Rhylix not gotten to her in time?

Grimacing, I said, "Thanks."

I knocked on the bar top, meaning to leave, but Sigemond caught my wrist before I could go.

“Hurd tell also about yur friend,” he said. “So sorry, little Raimie. Drinks waiting for yu, next time you’re here.”

“...Thanks,” I somehow managed to say.

But then, I pulled away from an unwelcome grip, barely keeping from stumbling to the door. Once I was through it, I pulled Ele to me, *running* for Tiro’s gate. If Ren thought her brother was dead for even a single second, I didn’t know what I’d do with myself.

I reached my goal in record time, racing up the tower that housed the gate’s machinery. Gears and rods and pulleys passed by me in a flash, but once I’d reached the top, I had to stop short, nearly running into Rhy... Ryvolim.

With his attention fixed on something outside a nearby opening, my friend dragged his gaze toward me, and the horror in his eyes!

Swallowing hard, he said, “Help.”

When I glanced around him, I winced, knowing exactly why he seemed so distressed. Ren was sitting between the lip of Tiro’s concealing terrace and the edge of its great stone doors, near the crease where the two met. With a clay mug in her hand, she was drinking deeply from it, and as she tilted backward to get a last drop, she nearly tumbled off of her perch, which had Ryvolim making a pained noise.

I wasn’t as worried about Ren’s seeming unsteadiness. I’d been around her when she’d been drunk before, so I knew she wasn’t likely to lose her sense of balance to a little bit of alcohol.

Still, I was careful as I climbed through the tower’s opening, and as I tested my weight on the top of the doors, I firmly met Ryvolim’s gaze.

“I may be going first,” I said, “but you’d *better* be coming right after me.”

He silently nodded, and releasing a heavy sigh, I faced a wonderful wreck of a woman. When I reached her, she glanced up with tear tracks glistening on her face.

“Is it true, Raimie?” she softly asked. “Is my brother dead?”

Godsdamnit. I’d *really* hoped to keep this from happening, but I supposed that hope wasn’t to be.

How did I fix it?

“There was an... incident,” I started, “but Ren-”

With her face screwing up, Ren flinched away, slapping her hands to her mouth to cover a sob.

“Alouin, I knew it!” she cried. “He is... was always so *fucking CLUELESS* when it came to his own safety. I knew you’d need me in Da’kul to help with that but no. I had to stay here, being absolutely

useless.”

“Don’t you dare say that,” I said. “You’re anything but useless, Ren. I needed you here-”

Having seemingly not heard a word I’d said, Ren jerked back toward me with her teeth bared.

“Did you kill the bastards who hurt him?” she snapped. “Tell me you made them suffer.”

Damnit. Damn, damn, *damn*.

“They’re gone, yes,” I said. “Ren, please. I need to-”

“Good!” Ren shouted. “I’m *glad!*”

For the love of the gods, I knew this woman was hurting. I knew that was partially my fault, but if she’d let me *explain myself*, maybe I could ease her pain.

“Ren,” I firmly said. “I need you to meet someone. This is Ryvolim.”

As I waved my friend forward, Ren made a face.

“I’m not up for meeting strangers right-” she started.

“Listen to me,” I said. “This is Ryvolim. *Ryvolim.*”

Blearily staring at me, Ren tried to take another swig from her drink, glaring at it when she found it empty, but as soon as my words actually registered in her head, she lost her grip on the mug. It splintered into pieces on the ground while she scrambled to her feet.

“Ryvolim?” she breathed. “Are you telling me-?”

Reaching around me, Ryvolim laid a hand full of light on his sister’s cheek, and after a shocked beat, she burst into tears.

“Hey, hey!” Ryvolim said. “It’s ok! I’m ok.”

“You big *jerk!*” Ren said, smacking his arm. “I thought you were *dead!*”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Ok...

“Much as I’m happy to see you two reunited, can we put this greeting on pause for a moment?” I said. “I’d rather not get stuck between you when you eventually decide to hug.”

Laughing, Ren swiped at her face.

“That’s fair,” she said. “After you, dead man.”

When she waved at the tower that Ryvolim and I had left behind, he snorted, starting back toward it, but before I could follow, Ren caught my wrist.

Glancing up at me, she said, "You kept him safe?"

With a half-smile, I gently finagled my wrist out of her hold.

"I don't know about that," I said. "Your brother's pretty good at keeping himself alive."

True. Technically true.

"Always so modest," Ren softly said.

She reached up to brush my jaw before slowly leaning forward, giving me time to prepare. It was a dance we'd learned well over the last few months, so when she eventually touched her lips to mine, I was ready for the brief wave of revulsion and too-tight-skin that rolled over me. I could endure it for the two seconds it took to fade before leaning into the kiss.

Gods, this was everything I'd ever wanted from her. She was warmth and light and comfort and *safety*, and kissing her always felt so *good*. Right.

But she had a brother, briefly thought dead, to greet.

When I pulled away, I took her hand, squeezing it to let her know we were all right, before getting us back to somewhat stable footing. As soon as I was through the tower's opening, I stepped aside, letting Ren collapse on her brother, and while watching them hug, I noted my return to a clear-headed state. How did Ren always manage to do that for me?

Well. She almost always did that. Sometimes, I got weirdly antsy around her, and that could summon mind fog and other disorienting sensations, but *almost* all of the time, she'd been a calm harbor in the storm my life had become.

And I'd only known her for a few months. Shouldn't reaching such a sense of security with her have taken longer? I tried not to think about that for very long.

Soon enough, the siblings pulled apart, and meeting my eyes, Ryvolim... wiggled his eyebrows at me. Which was weird and distinctly not like him.

"Shall we get drinks?" he said. "Celebrate our victory?"

"And you not being dead?" Ren said. "That sounds great."

It seemed I'd been overruled without once stating my preferences.

But I was ok with that. I liked the idea of being with my friends while they celebrated Ryvolim's survival.

Smiling, I gestured toward the tower's stairs.

"After you."

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