

# Chapter 13: Her Brother

## Raimie

The world had taken on a slight haze. At my side, Ryvolim was happily chattering about our initial adventure in Da'kul, and I half-listened until he started raising his volume.

"And then- then, this asshole asked for my lock picks-" he practically shouted.

And I drove an elbow into his side, unsure if something with less force would shut him up.

"Maybe we should keep it down about that part?" I softly said.

After all, *Ryvolim* hadn't been the one who'd helped me crack Da'kul open. That had been Rhylix, and after the hell my friend had raised about making sure Oswin and I maintained his cover, I wouldn't let him blow it on his own.

Ryvolim merely smiled at me.

"Good point," he said.

I couldn't tell if he was actually drunk or not. Every so often, he pulled stupid shit like this, but I'd seen a few glimpsed clues that his drunken behavior might be an act. When Ren had nearly fallen on her face while bringing us drinks earlier, Ryvolim had been there to catch her before I'd even noticed that she'd tripped, and when someone had come lumbering over, as if to provoke us into a fight, my friend had fixed them with a stone-cold look, making them hastily retreat before Oswin could move to intercept.

Whether he was drunk or not, my friend was concerning me in other ways. Ever since Da'kul, he'd been chipper, which was strange. Other than the first conversation I'd held with him, back in Allanovian, Rhylix had always been somber, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

And this was not reflected in Ryvolim's recent behavior.

Had his last death affected him that much? Or was this a mask he was raising to support his cover?

I was considering this, wondering whether I should get Nylion's opinion on it, when someone with their face wrapped in cloth strips entered the tavern. As soon as I saw them, I huffed, barely keeping from rolling my eyes.

I'd seen these people often enough in the last few months, and always, they'd come to retrieve Ren at the most inconvenient of times. I assumed they had something to do with her job in Tiro, but to date, she'd been cagey enough about that to keep me from learning what it was.

Even reluctant as I was for this person to interrupt our celebration, I nudged Ren, nodding toward them. Whoever they were, they'd come over here soon enough, and I'd learned it was best if I didn't delay that from happening.

With a groan, Ren raised a hand to get the stranger's attention, and they headed toward us. Once they'd gotten close enough, they leaned down to whisper in Ren's ear, which quickly had her stiffening.

"Really?" she said, jerking her head toward the stranger. "He's back?"

At the stranger's nod, Ren grabbed her drink, knocking it back.

"Sorry, you two," she said. "Something's come up, and I should take care of it."

"Anything we can help with?" Ryvolim asked before I could.

Chuckling, Ren gathered her things while scooting to the end of our bench.

"I doubt it, but don't worry," she said. "My friend here has told me that Kylorian's come home, so I'm going to say hello. That's all."

Kylorian. Since the battle on the beach, I'd heard a lot about Ren's adoptive older brother, all of it good, but I had yet to meet him. Before I'd arrived in Tiro, he'd left this place, off on a goodwill mission across Auden. I wasn't sure what the specifics of this mission were, but given what I'd heard about his exploits—things like rescuing people from towns slated for Harvest or helping villages gather supplies for Doldimar's 'tithes'—I knew that he'd been doing impressive work over the winter, wherever he'd been.

In the days since the snow had started melting, I *might* have been anticipating a meeting with this vaunted figure.

Maybe.

So, as Ren got up to leave, I lifted a finger off of the table.

"Any chance I could come with you?" I asked.

Pausing, Ren looked back at me with a frown.

"Hmm, I don't..."

But she must have seen how much I wanted to meet her brother because she grimaced.

“Yeah, ok,” she said. “But you can’t breathe a word about your family, Raimie. You have to promise me. Kylorian probably won’t hate you for it, but there are things about who you are that might bother him. We have to be careful with how he learns about it.”

Interesting.

“I can agree to that,” I said.

“Then, let’s go,” Ren said. “Rhy, can you settle our tab?”

Slowly blinking, Ryvolim glanced over the cluttered table before pulling out his empty pockets.

“With what coin?” he drawled.

Rolling her eyes, Ren retrieved a few chits, slamming them on the table, but she had no further words for her brother. Gesturing to me, she led the way outside.

We were quiet as we strolled toward Tiro’s gate, although Ren grabbed my hand at some point. For once, I didn’t mind the contact, enjoying the sway of our joined hands between us. I could even ignore Oswin, skulking in our wake.

When we arrived, the stone doors were already opened with a handful of people trickling through them. Seeing this group, I slowed down, releasing Ren as she hurried forward.

Something about these people... it made me so sad, although I didn’t know why that was the case. Maybe it had to do with their hanging heads or how wearily they trudged down the street or how much their bearing screamed of defeat. I wished I could help them, but I wasn’t sure I could.

When Ren picked up her pace toward the gate, it pulled my attention away from that depressing sight. Shrieking with laughter, she rushed at the man who’d most recently stepped through the stone doors, and at her impact with him, he rocked back before wrapping his arms around her and burying his face in her hair.

Was I allowed to interrupt this greeting? Oswin had disappeared, so I couldn’t ask him. Instead, I hovered in place, unsure of what to do, until Ren pulled away, waving at me.

As I started toward the two, I took in the man’s dark hair and blue eyes, noting a well-defined physique and the stiff way he was holding himself, and something about the sight sparked recognition in me. It wasn’t the same burst of *knowing* that I’d had about certain people or places in the past, but still, something about this man seemed familiar.

*Where have we seen him before?* Nylion said in a rush. *I could swear...*

He stopped for a breath before ruefully continuing.

*I see why your strange spats of recognition from before have been so disconcerting.*

*It's weird, right? I said. I'm glad you're here, though. What do you think? Anything I should be looking out for with this one?*

After a pause, Nylion said, *I am not sure. Maybe you should have your Dim-*

But it was too late for him to say anything more.

With an uncertain grin, the man said, "And who's this, Ren?"

Chuckling, Ren pulled herself out of his hug, although she left an arm slung around his waist.

"This is Raimie," she said. "My new... friend."

*Friend? Nylion said, almost incredulously. Since when have your varied activities with her been considered merely friendly?*

My own, planned introduction got wiped away, and I barely kept from frowning.

*...What else would we be, besides good friends? I said.*

*Friends who KISS? Nylion said. That is... gods, I cannot keep avoiding having That Conversation with you, can I? Damn our father for not doing it himself.*

*What conversation? I said.*

"Good to meet you, Raimie."

As the new man smiled at me, I forced myself out of my thoughts, remembering at the last second to keep my hand lowered. People in Auden didn't do handshakes.

"Same to you," I said, unsure if I should add anything else.

After an awkward pause, the man said, "Well, I'm Kylorian. Ren may have told you about me?"

That made me laugh.

"Yeah, her hero brother may have come up on occasion," I said.

Rolling her eyes, Ren backhanded my chest.

"Ignore him, Ky," she said. "So? Do I get to know how your last few months have gone?"

"Yes... at some point," he said. "When we're a little more secluded, perhaps?"

Almost unintentionally, he darted his eyes my way, but I didn't let his rather apparent suspicion phase me. The man had just met me. Of course he didn't trust me with the results of his 'secret mission'.

"I can go?" I hesitantly said.

Half-turning away, I jerked a thumb over my shoulder.

"I'm sure there's something that requires my attention," I said. "Besides, you two haven't seen each other in a while. It makes sense that you'd want some privacy. I only came with Ren to introduce myself. I've been wanting to meet you for some time now, but now that that's done, I should probably let you two talk."

"That might be best, yes," Kylorian said. "Sorry for the imposition. And thanks!"

He shot a sheepish grin at me, which had the same sense of familiarity punching me in the face.

"Maybe we can have a more in-depth conversation later, though? As you probably know, Ren doesn't make friends easily, so anyone who's caught her fancy is someone I'd like to know," he continued. "We could get a drink, if you like, and maybe Had-had and Ren could join us."

What a nice idea. There was far too much warmth building in my chest at the idea, so I hoped I wasn't gushing as I said.

"That would be lovely. We should work out the details later, though. I don't want to take up more of-"

Before I could finish with my goodbye, Ren huffed.

"Seriously, Ky?" she says. "Raimie's completely trustworthy. I can guarantee that, so whatever you want to tell me, you can say in front of him too. Promise."

Um. That had been... abrupt. And a little out of the blue.

Unexpected. I didn't like it.

But I was glad that Ren thought I was trustworthy. With a hesitant smile, I reached over to squeeze her hand, which had Kylorian raising an eyebrow. So, I quickly let go.

"It's fine!" I said. "Really. I have a few things-"

"Much as I might trust your judgment in a lot of things, Ren, your assessment of *people* has always been a little... subpar," Kylorian said. "Or are we forgetting about Josenik?"

What... or I supposed *who* now?

Also. What was it with this family and interrupting me? First, it had been Ren and Ryvolim earlier, and now, it was these two.

*Did- did you not hear what he said about your 'friend'?* Nylion whispered in the back of my head. *His tone, heart of my heart... that was not meant to be read as kind, no matter how gently he is*

*smiling now.*

It hadn't been?

Narrowing my eyes, I ran them over Ren, noting how much she'd shrunken on herself, and realized that Nylion had been right. As usual.

Seeing a chastened state on her stung. Could I do anything about it?

Hesitantly, I coughed into a fist, quirking a nervous smile when both of the siblings snapped their gazes to me.

"Look. It's truly not a big deal for me to leave," I said. "You two obviously need to talk, although..."

For a moment, I teetered in uncertainty before heaving a big sigh.

"I'm not trying to intrude with this. Maybe I'm even wrong to bring it up," I said, "but Kylorian? I may not have known your sister as long, but in my experience, she's always been an excellent judge of character. Whatever mistakes she's made in the past shouldn't reflect on her actions now, especially if she's learned from them. But again, I'm not trying to judge or be an asshole. I'm simply making an observation."

Kylorian had stiffened with his gaze turning sharp, and as he opened his mouth to reply, I winced in preparation of scathing words.

It was to my relief, then, that a familiar voice drifted to us from further down the street, turning us to it.

"Your Majesty!"

Except... oh, shit. Why *the hell* would Oswin have called me that? He'd been close by when Ren had told me not to talk about my family when around Kylorian. Shouldn't he know better than to shout my *annoying as hell* title from the metaphorical rooftops?

But as the spy came to a stop beside us, puffing up a storm, I watched Kylorian's hand slip off of his sword's grip while a potently dismayed and confused look took hold of his face. Had he been about to *attack me*?

*It is possible,* Nylion said. *I certainly sensed hostility from him for a moment, which confuses me. Up to that point, he seemed somewhat safe. But you should pay attention to Oswin, heart of my heart.*

Yes, I should, preferably before my distracted state made me look like an idiot.

"What is it, Oswin?" I said.

Gasping to catch his breath, the spy rested one hand on his hip, flapping the other one at me.

“Nothing too serious,” he said, “but something *has* come up. I thought you’d like to address it before it becomes a problem.”

Really? Something had come up now, when I’d most needed help?

Gods. Sometimes, I almost *wanted* to kiss that spy. How did he always know which times were the best ones to step in?

Time to make my escape, though.

“All right. I’ll do that,” I said. “Thank you for bringing the issue to my attention.”

Turning to Ren and Kylorian, I bobbed into a short bow.

“Forgive me, but it seems I’m required elsewhere,” I said. “It was nice to meet you, Kylorian. I hope to see you again soon. Ren, we should talk later, yes?”

As she slowly nodded, Kylorian shook himself, as if to break free of shock.

“Yes, until next time,” he uncertainly said.

But then, I was free to follow Oswin. As soon as we’d rounded a corner, I released a held breath, slumping.

“I have no idea what just happened,” I said, “but it felt *extremely strange*.”

“Mm,” Oswin said.

We walked in silence for a while before I nudged him, forcing him to give me his attention.

“Thanks for getting me out of there,” I said.

“Of course, sir,” Oswin said. “It’s my job to get you out of any sticky situations you might fall into.”

He might have said that with the most sarcasm possible, but it only made me laugh. Unlike with Kylorian, I knew that Oswin’s criticism had come from a good place.

Unlike with Kylorian...

*What do you think of him?* I asked Nylion.

*Unclear,* Nylion said. *We need more information.*

And hopefully, we’d be able to get it soon. For now, though, my slightly tipsy self should probably find a bedroll before I could create another mess tonight.

As I quickened my pace, I passed Oswin, jostling him as I went, and when he yelped at me, I grinned, pulling Ele to me so I could leave him in my dust.

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