

Chapter 23: Suspicions of Past Trouble

Ryvolim

I was in the middle of a pleasant conversation with one of Sanc's farmers, gradually plying information about the Birthing Grounds from him, when Raimie flat-out *sprinted* past us, moving as if monsters were on his tale. I was on my feet, reaching for a weapon, before he'd passed, same as the man beside me, but when nothing followed him, we both slowly relaxed.

"What... was that?" the farmer said. "Is he with you?"

He glanced at me, suspiciously squinting, and I moved away.

"I'm not sure what that was, friend," I said, "but I'm going to check on it regardless. Want to come?"

Snorting, the farmer retook his seat on his home's porch.

"Nah. You have at it," he said.

Perfect.

Lifting a hand in farewell, I started in a trot toward where Raimie had disappeared into a patch of trees nearby.

I almost missed him in there. No one was standing under these trees' protection, leaving the copse seemingly empty, and I saw no traces of my friend anywhere else.

So, I opened my senses: hearing, smell, and the more mystical ones as well. A pocket of distortion was sitting high in the branches of a tree beside me, and at the edge of my hearing range, I could hear a voice mumbling.

"We're ok. Not gonna get us up here. We're ok."

What the hell was Raimie doing up a tree?

Coming to a stop beneath him, I rested my hands on my hips.

“Raimie?” I called. “What’s going on?”

After a pause, my friend shouted back, “You... go away. You can’t get me up here, and *I’m not coming down.*”

What the...? Slowly, I took a step forward.

“Raimie. It’s me. Your friend,” I said. “Whatever’s going on, it’s ok. You’re safe right now, all right? Nobody’s going to hurt you.”

A pinecone flew from out of the tree to bounce off my head, and I stopped short with a yelp, rubbing at my scalp.

“GO AWAY!” Raimie roared.

And that raised, terrified voice pushed *so many* flashing memories, ones full of myself after a session with Reive, through my mind.

...Oh, shit. I might know what this was, and if I was right, it was *not* a good time for Raimie to experience it. I needed to get him down as quickly as possible.

“I won’t leave you here, Raimie. I would never do that to a friend,” I said, keeping my voice as soothing as possible. “Do you know where we are right now? This is Sanc, in Auden. Remember? We came here to resupply before moving on. We talked about that this morning. Right? You were being a lazy sod when the sun rose, kept asking for five more minutes in your bedroll, and I-”

“You smeared grass and soil all over my face to get me up, you asshole,” Raimie blearily said.

Oh, thank the gods.

I gave my friend a moment, waiting for him to speak again, and he did so within a few heartbeats.

“Why am I up a tree? I don’t... ugh, what happened?”

“I think I might know,” I called up to him, “but you’ll have to come down here before I can explain. I’m sure as hell not coming up to you.”

There was a beat of silence and then...

“Fuck,” Raimie muttered before raising his voice. “All right. Give me a second.”

With an abundance of noise, my friend slowly and clumsily climbed to the ground, which I watched with many a wince. Raimie was usually much nimbler than this, but then, I couldn’t blame him, if I was right about what had happened.

Turning to me, he brushed himself off before looking around.

“I was *just* beside Hadrion,” he said. “Where did that kid go? I was worried he was going to...”

He trailed off with his eyes going distant, and I hurried forward to rest my hand on his arm.

"It's ok," I said once again. "I'm sure Hadrion's fine, and so are you."

"Right," Raimie slowly said before shaking his head. "So? What in the *void* is going on?"

Oh, boy. Wouldn't that be a fun question to answer?

Before I could get started with that, though, a teenager trotted into view, releasing a held puff of air when he saw Raimie.

"Oh, good. You're ok," Hadrion said. "I wasn't sure. What happened? I've never seen someone take off so quickly before, and that's saying something."

"I..."

But Raimie said nothing more, looking increasingly confused and scared, so I patted at the air, getting his attention back on me.

"Don't worry, my friend," I said. "I'll still explain because Hadrion will most definitely understand what's happened here. He's the most kind and considerate kid I've come across in a while, matched only by you. Right?"

Huffing a short laugh, Raimie said, "Yeah. That's right. You want to come over here, Hadrion? I... I think I ran off on you. So, can I reassure you that I'm ok with story time between friends?"

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Hadrion grinned so damn wide, ambling toward us.

"Sounds great!" he chirped.

Finding a nice spot of earth in front of me, he plopped to the ground, but Raimie and I remained standing. I wasn't sure when my friend would calm down enough to relax like that, and I wouldn't make him feel awkward by leaving him the only one on his feet.

How did I start with this again? I'd had to have this conversation a few times in the past, unfortunately, and after the many times I'd done it, I'd come up with a great way of explaining something that most would consider unnerving, a way that wouldn't scare the listener.

Oh, right.

"I think we can all agree that bad things happen to people every so often, right?" I said.

While Raimie hesitantly nodded, Hadrion laughed.

"Yeah, of course," he said. "What about it?"

"Well sometimes, when that thing is so bad that a person doesn't know how to handle it, it gets stuck in the person's brain, like a splinter," I said. "It can remain like that, just sleeping, for

decades at a time. Sometimes, it's quiet for long enough that the person forgets it's there, but sooner or later, they'll stumble across something that reminds them of that bad thing.

"When that happens, the person will usually go through everything they were feeling in those moments of pain and fear again, and sometimes, the brain and body will remember what happened in perfect clarity. The person will react to a perceived threat, one that's very real to them, however they did before. All of which is a perfectly normal and natural response to the bad thing that happened to them back then.

"I think that's what happened here."

If anything, Raimie looked even more confused by my explanation, but Hadrion seemed to understand.

"Oh..." he said. "Yeah, that makes sense. I've had that happen sometimes. It's *not fun*."

Reaching out, he sympathetically patted Raimie's leg, even as my friend's brow crinkled.

"I understand what you're talking about, but... I'm not sure if that applies to me," he said. "I've never... those kids. I've never been in a situation like them. When I was growing up, I spent most of my time playing outside, so..."

I was a little lost, unsure what kids Raimie was referencing, but at this point, that didn't matter.

"Hmm," I said. "Well to me, it certainly looked like your body was reacting like I've explained. Maybe we can figure this out. Do you remember what you were saying when you were up in that tree?"

"Oo! Or did you see anything before you ran away?" Hadrion added.

When we both looked at him, he shrugged.

"What? Sometimes, I see things when I'm reacting to my 'brain splinters'," he said.

"As do I," I quietly said.

Although I refused to think about what those things were.

For a moment, Raimie chewed on his lip.

"I don't know," he drawled. "I..."

Shaking his head, he collapsed to a seat beside Hadrion, letting me sit as well.

"There was this little boy," he hesitantly said. "A group of people was chasing him. I think they were soldiers, maybe? I vaguely recall them wearing uniforms, but I'm not sure about that. Anyway, I knew... somehow... that he'd be in mortal danger if those people caught him, and he

wasn't running fast enough. So, I grabbed the little boy and ran for him. Got him somewhere safe. Or that's how I remember it, at least. Not sure how it applies to what actually happened."

Hadrion and I exchanged a glance, at which I shrugged. When I'd had to deal with my locked-tight memories, I'd never experienced anything quite like that, but I knew how varied humanity's reactions to trauma could be.

Fortunately, Raimie seemed too lost in thought to have seen our interaction.

"I don't see how that's related to me, though," he said. "It's just... it's just..."

He fell silent with his motions getting lethargic, which concerned me.

"Maybe this 'bad thing' was something that happened while we were traveling in Ada'ir?" I said. "Or you could have experienced something while here that could explain it. I'm not-"

With a hiss, Raimie jerked his head up. He fixed me with a fierce stare, even as he pressed one hand to the top of his forehead and groaned in pain.

"*Stop. Pushing,*" he snapped. "In the next few days, we will be going into combat, where we will all hover over a balance beam of life or death. It is an *exceptionally* bad idea to poke at these kinds of things right now. Or do you want... me to continue with these panic attacks and... 'reactions' over the next few days? Because that is all that will happen if you *keep pushing*. Gods. Why do I have to explain this to...?"

For half a heartbeat, Raimie seemed to space out, blankly gazing at me, before roughly shaking his head.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "My head is killing me right now. I'm not sure how what I saw is related to me or my past, but maybe we should leave it for now. We have to meet up with Ky and the spies before we can set up camp, and I need some rest soon."

He glanced at me with a hesitant smile, and I... needed to listen to my friend. When I'd encountered people who handled trauma in the way he was, letting them lead the way had always been best. So, while I wasn't sure why Raimie had reacted so fiercely to my final suggestions, I'd respect what he'd said about getting some rest.

"That's fair," I said.

While Raimie breathed out a sigh of relief, Hadrion hopped to his feet, resting one hand on his hip with the other pointed at an angle into the air.

"To find my brother, then!" he shouted.

Which only made me laugh.

As we climbed to our feet, he marched back toward Sanc, but before Raimie could follow him, I rested my hand on his shoulder.

“I promise I won’t push ,” I said, “but if you ever want to talk about this again, I’m open to it, whenever you’d like.”

With a crooked smile, Raimie said, “I’ll keep that in mind. For now, though, I think we have a kid to keep out of trouble?”

“Very, very true,” I said with mock seriousness.

I dropped my hand, letting my friend hurry after Hadrion, and if worry still clung to me as I followed in his footsteps, I refused to admit that out loud.

Revision #1

Created 9 September 2024 01:35:19 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable