

Chapter 30: First Half of the Truth

Rhylix

Since our disastrous experiment, I've been trapped in Corruption's sway.

The morning's march was slow and hard. As we traveled through the forest on this side of the Fractured Peaks, those injured beside the tear required a languid pace, and from little I'd seen of him, Eledis seemed incensed by this slowdown, snapping at anyone who spoke to him.

Conversely, Aramar acted as if something horrific would appear at any moment, but whenever an argument broke out about our speed, he always sided with the healers' expressed desire to keep the wounded stable.

Even with him trying to hide it, I knew he had his own reasons for this, namely that his integration with the machine from the tear wasn't going as well as we'd hoped. After seeing Aramar wince throughout the morning, I'd had to bite my tongue when I was around him. I couldn't keep questioning my patient every time he stumbled or his arm flailed out of his control. No, what I really needed was to have him sit down, long enough for me to adjust the machine.

The only other reason for our slow pace kept confounding the people helping him, but for the most part, those same people seemed to expect that when it came to Raimie, they'd be living with befuddlement now. After last night, most people in the group had accepted that the kid just wasn't normal. I wasn't sure how well Eledis and Aramar's story about Raimie's 'speech' had sold, but *no one* had spoken a word about it this morning, nor were they avoiding him. Considering how he'd been acting, this was good.

I'd never seen such wild fluctuations in someone's mood or energy levels before, not in such a short time period at least. In one moment, the kid was absolutely *manic*, jittering and chattering so fast that it made my head hurt, and in the next, he was sluggish, sniping at people and barely holding it together. At one point, he'd been so drained that two Zrelnach had had to carry him, like they had between the tear and the forest.

Considering how Raimie had closed the tear, I was pretty sure that his behavior was related to that, but I hadn't gotten the chance to question him about it yet.

Right now, Raimie was sitting with his family, eating the midday meal, with the plains we'd recently entered stretching on all sides. Watching them, I absently nibbled on a piece of flatbread, ignoring the tense atmosphere hovering over the rest of the group.

The first of those people was lounging a few paces away from me. If a conflict erupted, I should be able to reach the kid's side before anything could hurt him. Everything should be fine.

Right?

A shadow fell over me.

"May I join you?"

Never removing my gaze from Raimie, I said, "Of course, Ferin."

Snorting, the commander of the Zrelnach flopped to the ground beside me.

"It's creepy that you do that, you know," she said. "How do you always know who's sneaking up on you?"

"Practice," I said. "In Auden, you're dead if you don't learn that skill early on."

Ferin was quiet for a while, long enough that I started ignoring her, but eventually, she spoke up.

"Are you sure you want to go home?"

Freezing halfway through a bite, I turned to her at the speed of a glacier, moving across the waters of the northern Narrow Sea.

"Do *not* ask me that," I said.

Softly laughing, Ferin settled back on her hands.

"Should've figured you'd answer that way," she said.

I narrowed my eyes. Withdrawn and melancholy? These weren't Ferin. She was cheery and brash, a ray of sunshine when around people who didn't irritate the shit out of her, and so godsdamn canny at times that it scared me. Besides occasionally pushing me for sexual favors, she'd been nothing but pleasant company since I'd arrived in Allanovian, so what was this? Was she already missing home?

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

Rubbing her face, Ferin said, "No. It's just stress, Rhy. I promise."

Slapping her hand to her leg, she faced me.

"Trainee Dath told me about how you wiped the forest floor with him last night," she said.

I squeezed my eyes closed, deflating as I returned to watching the kid.

"I had to," I said. "He's a possible threat to Raimie, and Raimie is my-"

"I know what the kid is," Ferrin interrupted, "even if that fact has yet to penetrate *his* thick skull. In his mind, he's still a peasant boy."

"He has time for it to sink in," I said. "Auden is far from here."

"Mm."

Together, we watched Raimie laugh at someone's joke, throwing his head back until he fell into the grass.

"So, him and Dath," Ferin said. "You mean to teach them together, even if my trainee might be a threat?"

"I'm hoping it'll bring the boys together," I said. "Both of them are hurting, and Raimie desperately needs a friend."

"From what I hear, you're his friend."

Making a face, I said, "He needs a friend who can relate to him more than I'll be able to."

Ferin blew out a slow breath.

"Ok," she said in a small voice before clearing her throat. "Ok. That makes sense. You do realize that Raimie is my student too, right?"

"And you can teach him all the subjects that I refused to study during Zrelnach training," I said, "but I'm the better fighter of us, Ferin, and he needs the best."

Even watching Raimie nod along with his father's words, I could feel Ferin glaring at me.

"*Fine*," she growled. "You're right, much as it galls me to admit it."

From out of nowhere, genuine laughter slammed into me, and no matter that it was soft, I marveled at it. An honest noise like this hadn't come from me in... I didn't know how long.

Ferin didn't notice. Considering I'd perfected the art of faking emotions long ago, this didn't surprise me. It did make my chest tighten, though.

"So, did you only come here to ask about the brats we're responsible for?" I eventually asked. "Or is there more?"

"There's more, and you know it," Ferin said. "Throughout the morning, Eledis and I have been discussing our path, now that we're free of the Fractured Peaks."

"Mm. That's good," I said. "We have several options for reaching Sev so... I'd guess we're heading for the closest town first, right? Hopefully, we can resupply there, or do so as much as we can, at least."

Nodding, Ferin said, "That's the plan. But after that... Rhy, Eledis wants to take us through the Withriingalm."

"He wants to WHAT?"

At the outburst, several people, including Raimie, jerked their heads toward me and Ferin. Frowning, the kid said something to his family before getting to his feet, and I flipped to face the Zrelnach commander.

"That's a bad idea. You have to make him see it," I said. "Yes, the route would probably keep Doldimar's minions off of our trail for a while but—"

"I know how dangerous that cursed swamp is, Rhy," Ferin said. "I'll do everything I can to convince him to choose a different path, but I wanted to warn you in case... in case I can't."

Staring at her, I tried to clear the fist in my throat. Normally, I wouldn't find traversing the Withriingalm that concerning. Most of the 'danger' associated with it was mere superstition, but I was traveling with an ally who'd proven that he *attracted* danger. Adding more of it to what he'd already face seemed unwise, to put it kindly.

"You ok, Rhy?"

I looked up at Raimie, taking in the concern radiating from him, and I knew that somehow, I was going to get this kid killed.

"I'm fine," I said. "Why do you ask?"

When Raimie shifted his gaze to the woman at my side, I relaxed a little. I'd forgotten how much Ferin disgruntled my friend. Considering I'd never told him how close I was to the commander, he probably thought she was harassing me. Ferin must have come to the same conclusion because with a chuckle, she got to her feet.

"I'll let you two talk."

As she left, I realized that I was alone with Raimie—or as alone as one could get out here—for the first time since leaving Allanovian, and I was abruptly grateful that I'd chosen to eat so far from the group.

"Will you join me?" I asked, extending a hand in front of me.

While Raimie made himself comfortable, I nibbled on the remains of my flatbread, wondering how I'd go about having The Conversation with this latest, utterly perplexing ally.

But perhaps that one could wait. Perhaps instead, I should explain a truth that had become a death sentence more often than not in recent years.

Crossing his legs, Raimie clasped his hands in his lap.

"So?" he said.

Taking a sip of air, I said, "So, what?"

"So..." Raimie said, leaning forward. "Will you answer my question about Silverblade? Or did you think I'd forgotten about that?"

There. That was a good place to start from.

"Somehow, I doubt you'd forget a question like that," I said, chuckling. "But in answer, I had Silverblade made for you because in the future, you won't be wielding Shadowsteal much. Except for in special circumstances, that is."

Motion fled from Raimie while that same dangerous aura from our first meeting crept into him.

"What do you mean?" he stiffly said.

Ah. So, he knew about Shadowsteal. Poor boy probably thought I was about to call him crazy or something equally as bad.

"Hey."

Carefully, I laid a hand on Raimie's knee.

"You don't have to be afraid of me. I am your friend, and you can't know how sacred I find that bond. I will never intentionally hurt you. You're safe here."

Bit by bit, Raimie relaxed, and animation returned to him.

"Ok," he said. "My question?"

"Well... have you touched Shadowsteal?" I asked. "Aside from during your first trial, of course."

I still wasn't sure how he'd used the blade like a normal person would during that fight.

Frowning, Raimie said, "Yes, and it was *weird*. When I touched it, the world went all... wonky."

"That's because Shadowsteal isn't a normal sword," I said. "A certain type of person is meant to wield it."

Sucking on my teeth, I considered how to phrase my next words. They would change Raimie's life, and if history was any example to go by, it wouldn't be for the better.

"What type of person?" Raimie drawled.

No. This revelation needed further background information before I could explain it. The kid might not believe me otherwise.

"A bit of a subject change but I swear it has something to do with your question," I said.

When Raimie nodded, I scooted closer, leaning forward until our heads were almost touching.

"How did you close the tear?" I asked.

Emotions flurried over Raimie's face, settling on disconcerted confusion.

Worrying at his lip, he said. "I... don't know. I..."

He met my eyes with such fear behind his own, and I bumped his forehead with mine before retreating.

"It's ok," I said.

Raimie took a few deep breaths, but then, he set his mouth into the firmest, most determined line I'd seen in a while.

"I pulled energy to me. I don't know what else to call that strange substance," he said, "but it's lying there, under the world's skin, and I can still feel it, even if I can't touch it anymore. Anyway, I pulled two types to me, forced them together, and fed the resulting creation back to the tear. That blend of energy is what closed it, I think, but I don't remember what happened after the last of it drained from me."

Fascinating. They could be merged? That was... If I hadn't seen it done, I wouldn't have believed Raimie's story.

"Good," I said. "Now, this sensation, the two energies you mentioned. Have you felt it before?"

Shifting, Raimie tried to move his gaze away from me, but with us so close together, it could only settle on his hands in his lap.

"Maybe," he said. "Once."

Once? I'd seen Raimie using that energy more than once, but that was a topic for another day. After all, I'd reached the most critical juncture in a conversation like this.

"Did it perhaps come from an invisible... someone?" I asked. "Someone who looks like you maybe?"

Sucking in a breath, Raimie shot backward, tangling his fingers in the grass.

"How did you...?" he said.

With a lopsided grin, I said, "I have one too."

I turned to the side.

"You can show yourself. Unless you want him to think I'm crazy."

As bidden, a figure appeared beside us, but this one wasn't cloaked by an Eselan guise. It was a faintly humanoid shape made of white light, and before I'd registered what I was doing, I'd shot to my feet, blocking the path to Raimie.

"What in the void are you?" I growled.

"Um. Don't you know," Raimie said. "It... huh. It looks kind of like-"

"*Raimie*. Shut up, and stay still."

Surprisingly, the boy did as I'd asked, leaving me to focus on the unknown splinter.

"You may call me Purity," it said with laughter rumbling in its voice.

"Where's Creation?" I snapped.

"After detecting the possibility of corruption, they have returned to the whole for correction."

Right. How had I forgotten about that?

"Send it back," I said.

I didn't care what Creation wanted. I needed a splinter that I knew nearby when introducing the concept of them to Raimie.

"Quite impossible, I'm afraid," Purity said. "If your piece of Creation is right, now might be the only time to correct them."

"*I don't care.*"

Something in my tone had Purity leaning away from me, but I didn't take the time to consider it.

"Return to the whole, and tell it to send my splinter back," I hissed. "Remember. You need me more than I need you."

Seconds ticked by, seconds where I was afraid I'd pushed too hard, but Purity straightened.

"As you say," it said.

When it vanished, another figure replaced it, one wearing a guise I knew, and seeing it, I gasped. The cracks across Creation's form had spread, and it had shrunk, leaving the top of its head at my waistline.

Swaying in place, it croaked, "What have you done?"

I'd returned it to the physical plane, obviously, but I wasn't sure why. I'd thought I wanted a known splinter on hand while explaining them to Raimie, but now, with my heart in my throat because of Creation's state...

Was I *worried* about the splinter?

"I... don't know," I said.

As if blind, Creation drunkenly reached for me, although its hands passed through the support of my offered arm.

"The balance!" it cried. "The balance has slipped so far!"

What was that supposed to mean?

"Hey," I said, snapping my fingers in Creation's face. "It'll keep for a while longer. You rest. Fix what's wrong with you."

"I-"

After choking on itself, Creation nodded, and a pop preceded its disappearance.

Only then could I focus on my surroundings. Not as many Zrelnach were staring at me as I'd expected, but still, I spun on Raimie.

"I need you to get us moving," I said.

Completely white in the face, Raimie couldn't do much more than flap his jaw for a moment, but soon enough, he regained control of himself.

"What was that, Rhy?" he asked.

"Something I'll explain later tonight, along with everything else," I said. "For now, please distract the people around us so they don't figure out what we were doing and decide to *murder me*."

"O-ok."

Leaping to his feet, Raimie shook himself.

"Later tonight?" he asked.

After receiving a nod, he trotted off, and I could consider what Creation had said.

The balance had slipped? I wasn't sure what that meant but if it had to do with the Eternal War...

Did that mean the enemy was winning? It would make sense, considering how long Doldimar had remained in power, unchecked, but...

Damn. This cycle was rapidly becoming a difficult one.

Thankfully, Raimie was quick to rally the group, and we resumed our slow plod, taking the worry of death via a comrade's blade off of my plate for the moment.

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