

# Chapter 35: Changing Relationships

## Raimie

At the end of my next weapons training session, I made my goodbyes while accepting Dath's offer of sharing a drink later that evening. The invitation ignited a glow in my belly. Could I find another friendship with him? I knew how contradictory that possibility seemed, given our past, but even still, I couldn't help my excitement at the idea.

Once Dath had gone, however, I was left alone with Rhylix. He was quickly collecting his things, so gathering my courage, I strode to my friend.

"Rhy. I need to say something."

Shooting upright, Rhylix nearly smacked the back of his head into my face before spinning toward me.

"Of course. I'm happy to listen."

And Rhylix gave me a grin, so eager to please that I almost swallowed my tongue.

Mentally cursing myself for being such an ass, I said, "About the last few days. I'm not angry with you, and I still consider you my friend. I haven't spoken to you because I'm sorting through everything you told me, which has been... difficult. I hope you can forgive me for being an idiot."

Cocking his head, Rhylix said, "You're doing that thing where you apologize for expected behavior again."

He didn't say anything for a while, which had me shifting in place.

"I'm... sorry?" I said.

"Don't be! I was only explaining that I'm not upset, but I suppose that's not how it sounded."

Pausing, Rhylix tapped his fingers in a flutter against his lips.

“In any case, I understand why you’ve needed space,” he said. “I don’t know if it’ll help, but you don’t have to avoid me. If you feel like talking about what I shared, I’ll happily do so. If you want me to show you what you can do, I’ll help as I can, but until you want these things, we don’t have to speak about our shared curse, and in the meantime, I can keep you safe from any mistakes that you might make with it.”

Chuffing a laugh, I said, “You offer me support when I’m the one who’s wronged you. You’re a good friend, Rhy.”

The saddest smile I’d ever seen bloomed across Rhylix’s face.

“I’m not so sure about that, but I’m glad you think so,” he said. “Now, don’t you need to catch a drink with Dath? He didn’t look especially patient tonight.”

“Shit. You’re right,” I said. “Thanks, Rhy! I’ll see you tomorrow.”

My friend’s farewell barely reached me as I raced away.

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Several days into the Withriingalm, its mists grew thick enough that the group could no longer travel safely. While we waited for conditions to clear, I was forced into a day of lectures with Ferin, and the promise of a lesson with Rhylix later was all that dragged me through it.

Normally, I’d find the chance to learn something new enthralling, but my enthusiasm was mitigated not only by who my teacher was but also the subject matter that she’d chosen for today. At the moment, she was taking care of an emergency, leaving me with a thick tome on etiquette to read.

As I paged through it, I tried to keep my attention on the polite mode of address when speaking with the Little Lord of the Zariya Principality, but the people on all sides were distracting me. Sitting on the back end of a wagon, I kicked my foot against marshy grasses while running my finger under lines of text.

“I don’t understand why I’m studying this,” I said under my breath. “What’s the point of learning these stupid rules?”

Beside me, Bright leaned forward as if examining the book.

“Well, let’s consider what Ferin likely wants from you,” it said. “I know you don’t like the idea, but we can speculate, right?”

Making a face, I nodded.

“High society holds having manners in high regard,” Bright continued. “If you become the rightful ruler of a kingdom, you’ll need to know these ‘stupid rules’ in order to deal with other nations.”

Loudly groaning, Dim launched itself out of the wagon, landing in a twirl.

“Manners be damned!” it said. “Become powerful enough and you can do whatever the hell you want.”

With a small smile, I said, “Dim has made a good point, Bright. Not that I’ll ever be powerful enough for other kingdoms to take me seriously, not without conforming to their societal rules first.”

Dim started preening while Bright beamed at me, but when they caught sight of their counterparts, they froze, probably realizing that I hadn’t agreed with either of them.

Then, they glowered at me. Bright did so with a tinge of righteous indignation while Dim just looked gleeful, and I burst into laughter.

“Glad you find my choice of reading material amusing.”

Gliding into view, Ferin plucked the tome out of my lap, and caught off guard, I sputtered.

“I’m- You- Give that back! I was almost finished.”

Ferin stopped short, turning to me.

Lifting the thick tome, she said, “You read all of this in the short time that I was gone? Are you sure about that?”

Usually, questions like this would have me bristling, annoyed by the other person’s preconceived notions about my abilities, but there had been such skepticism in her voice that I flinched, fixing my eyes on the ground.

“Most of it, yes,” I said.

“All right, then.”

I heard pages flipping.

“Tell me about Chapter Ten: On the Intricacies of the Kreati Principality’s Culture,” Ferin said.

Oh, I knew this. Recitation. It required proper posture and pose, and for some reason, I was compelled to follow this standard today.

As I hopped into the mud, I caught sight of my teacher, leaning against the wagon opposite me with the book beside her. Clasp my hands behind my back, I cleared my throat, bringing up page two hundred and eighty-six from that book’s portion of my mental index.

“The Kreati are known throughout the civilized world as the most affectionate of people. Strangers to their cities should know that they may be stopped in the street for an embrace. Before coming to the principality, visitors should examine the differences in their greetings. For instance, one between close acquaintances will look like what’s shown in Diagram 10.1—”

I copied the illustration further down the page as best I could.

“—whereas one between family members—”

“Stop!” Ferin said.

With an odd look on her face, she turned to an earlier section of the book.

“Start from page... thirty-seven.”

I furrowed my brow. The requested page was one of those that I’d glossed over. Still, I recited what I could.

“-strong belief in morality. In fact, during ancient times, the Audish king was considered an avatar of their god, Alouin, pure in every aspect of his life... and then, there’s something about striking down evil and protecting the innocent at some point further down the page.”

I lowered my head with heat burning in my cheeks.

“My retention isn’t what it used to be.”

After a moment, Ferin crossed to me, dropping a hand on my shoulder, and again, I flinched. She didn’t notice, too busy nudging my chin up until I met her eyes.

“You, Raimie of the line of Audish kings, are a wonder,” she said.

But then, she took a firmer grip of my chin, shaking my head back and forth.

“Are you telling me that you’ve had a memory like this for the entire time I’ve been teaching you? No wonder you’ve been breezing through my lessons,” she said. “I’ll have to modify my teaching schedule.”

Releasing me, Ferin stepped to the side, rummaging in the wagon’s bed behind me. She returned with a few books piled in her arms.

“Here. Busy work for you: useful information that’s also not particularly necessary,” she said, handing them off. “You don’t have to go through them by tomorrow, seeing as how Rhy gets his turn with you soon, but look through them when you can. Now, get out of here! I need to think.”

Licking my lips, I backed away from Ferin, who was muttering under her breath. I didn’t know why I considered her a threat right now, but I didn’t turn my back on her until I was a good distance away from the wagon.

With freedom unexpectedly mine, I trotted through camp with Dim and Bright following me. When I reached them, Rhylix wasn’t with his belongings, but I hadn’t thought he would be. My friend was always out, doing Alouin knew what throughout camp. This, however, was where we met for every training session, and when we started tonight, I’d rather be waiting for him than the other way

around.

So, I found the driest patch of ground nearby and settled in to read. I'd gotten through two books before someone plucked one from their pile.

*"The Many Rules of Penumbra and How to Play,"* Dath said. "The hell are you reading this for?"

Chuckling, I raised a hand for the book.

"It's at your commander's behest, if you must know," I said.

"Ugh. Your lessons with her must be awful if she's having you study that stuffy game," Dath said before pausing for a moment. "Come on. I have something better for us to do."

Snapping my current volume shut, I set it aside.

"Thank Alouin," I said. "I was about to go out of my mind with boredom. What are we doing?"

Biting his lip, Dath glanced around.

"Raimie... do you trust me?" he said, meeting my gaze. "I did a lot of stupid shit in Allanovian, sure, but I hope the last two weeks have proven to you that I'm not the hateful person you met."

Regarding the trainee, I compared the man I'd grown to know with the boy I'd met in Allanovian. Those two versions did seem anathema to one another, which made sense given the stories I'd heard about Dath's recently deceased partner, and if I was aware of one flaw in my character, it was that I always believed the best of people. I always insisted on offering a second chance.

Getting to my feet, I brushed myself off. I took a deep breath before firmly holding my companion's gaze.

"I trust you, Dath," I said.

For a breath, the trainee looked both stunned and relieved before he pulled himself together and took a step closer.

"Then, I need to ask a favor of you. I need you to come with me beyond our camp's boundary, and you'll have to leave your visible weapons here," he said, lowering his voice toward the end.

This had my eyebrows shooting for my hairline. I might believe the best of people, but Dath was asking a lot from me with this request.

With an intense look of concentration in place, Bright left my side, circling the trainee.

"From what he's radiating, I believe he's sincere with his words," it said. "It's difficult, though. Something's off about him."

"I'm not sure about him either," Dim said. "He smells amazing, which isn't a good sign for you, but he also rankles me."

Great...

As if sensing my indecision, Dath quietly said, "Please, Raimie."

And that did it for me. Unbuckling my belt, I set Silverblade aside, leaving my bow and arrows beside it.

Gesturing toward the mist, I said, "Shall we?"

In silence, Dath led us through the marshland until mists had hidden the camp, and every step I took had my skin crawling. This, *all* of this, felt like a trap, although I was unsure who, besides Dath, might want to hurt me.

"If worst comes to worst, you can always pull from me, like you did in that second trial," Dim said. "As long as I'm around, you're never unarmed."

Jerking my head to the splinter, I hissed, "*What?*"

"What, what?" Dim asked.

But I could say nothing more without drawing Dath's attention.

The second Zrelnach trial. When my fists had caved a man's face in.

Alouin, I hadn't thought about that for weeks. Dim had been involved with it?

If so, then... yes. I had a powerful weapon at my disposal, a secret card to play, or I would save for one fact. I'd been a dumbass, avoiding everything that might help me 'pull from Dim'.

As it was, the power to smash in someone's skull was walking beside me, and I couldn't use it. Once we returned to camp, I should ask Rhylix to skip weapons training so we could talk about primeancy, if only for tonight.

How idiotic was it that I'd needed something like this to make up my mind about my gift?

"I need your help."

With difficulty, I focused on the trainee in front of me.

"I've gotten myself involved with something wrong, something deadly," Dath continued. "I want out, but... I can't do it alone."

Shit. I'd known coming out here had sounded like a bad idea.

But I couldn't refuse to help someone, especially not someone who could be my friend.

“Ok. What are you involved with? Or maybe you can share why you want out?” I asked. “Actually, just give me any and all detail that you can.”

Glancing over his shoulder, Dath said, “The reason I want out? It’s you, Raimie. Over the last two weeks, you’ve shown me that you’re a better person than this world deserves, and I can’t let you die, which is what they want.”

Halting, I was peripherally aware of Bright and Dim going defensive, but most of my attention went to my companion, who’d turned my way.

“What?” I said with my voice dead.

Dath opened his mouth to reply, but something flashed in his eyes—panic maybe?—and he leapt forward. He jerked me to the side, sending me tumbling to the ground, but not before heat lanced through my arm.

“*Shit,*” Dath hissed. “Stay down.”

He took off, and rolling to my back, I slapped at my shoulder. When I pulled my hand away, my breath caught on seeing blood coating it.

Dath had wanted me to stay down?

“No way in hell,” I breathed.

I had to get away. *Fast.* So, I gathered myself and sprang to my feet before shooting into the mist.

The ground was moving far too quickly beneath my feet, zipping by at an incredible speed, but perhaps that was a battle rush talking. It didn’t explain the puffs of white light that were bursting beneath me with every step, though.

I’d taken maybe two dozen strides before the world around me skewed, dangerously tilting. Following its new angle, I was soon stumbling, and not long after that, my foot got stuck, refusing to lift out of the mud. Gritting my teeth, I jerked and yanked on it, but when my struggles only saw this mud rising to my ankle, my heart stuttered.

Sucking mud, one of the Withriingalm’s most notorious hazards. Without several people to haul me out of it, this patch of ground would pull me in until I suffocated. If I was remembering that correctly, of course. My only choices were to hope someone found me before I vanished beneath the surface or to hurry along my demise. That was all fighting to escape would do.

Well. No one was coming for me, and I wasn’t one to surrender quietly.

So, while the world warped around me, making me dizzy beyond measure, I tried everything to pull my foot free. My efforts had only sucked me in to the knee, leaving my legs painfully sprawled, when motion made the mist swirl.

Disoriented, I drunkenly patted down my body until I found a knife, tucked into my free boot. I held it ready, feverishly scanning the perimeter of what I could see, and when Dath came into view, I almost threw it. Only the arrow that he was holding in place at the join of his shoulder and neck stopped me.

“Raimie! Thank Alouin. You’re alive.”

When Dath staggered closer, however, joy dropped from his face.

“Shit,” he said. “Hell, what do I-? Ok. First.”

Dropping to his knees, he ran a hand over my body, and weakly, I slapped at him.

“The... *fuck*, Dath?” I mumbled.

“Sorry. I thought we had more time. They were supposed to be further out,” Dath said. “I have to know if they got you. It’ll tell me my timeline.”

Roughly, I shoved him.

“They?” I snapped.

Looking away, Dath said, “Two people, part of the group I wanted to leave. I was supposed to lead you into an ambush today, which I apparently did.”

A crazed giggle spewed from him before he shook his head.

“It wasn’t supposed to go like this. When I made my decision to leave, I didn’t have time to change their plans. I hoped that you’d help me fight them, and we could go from there but...”

Shuddering, Dath rapidly blinked before continuing.

“I knocked them out, so they won’t be a problem for...” he said before cocking his head, “two or three hours, if we’re lucky. I’m more concerned with poison. Did their arrows hit you?”

Oh. Oh, this was a mess. But maybe we could fix it.

Absently, I brushed my arm.

“Is that why I’m seeing two... no, three of you?” I asked.

Sitting back on his heels, Dath slapped his palms to his face.

“*Fuck!*” he shouted into them. “Alouin *damn* this shitty hell.”

“S’bad then?” I mumbled.

Popping into being behind Dath, Bright shrieked, “Yes, you dumb...”

Red in the face, it repeatedly bit its tongue.

“MARVELOUSLY INCOMPETENT human,” it continued. “Stop sending me away, and *take from me.*”

Giggling, I pointed at Bright.

“You’re worried,” I said.

“*Of course I am-*”

“Seriously? You’re making me tell you to calm down?”

That last part had sounded like Dim, but I was much more concerned with the fact that Dath had drawn a knife.

“I’m sorry. I have to knock you out. It’ll slow the poison down,” he said. “Hopefully, I can retrieve the antidote as well as some help before that—”

He glanced behind me.

“—sucks you in.”

“Wow,” I said, slurring the word. “That’s a good plan, coming from someone who left a sword in-in...”

A smile twisted Dath’s face.

“Yeah, well. Consider this *payback* for our first trial.”

He slammed his knife’s pommel into my temple and-

## **TTS Chapter Thirty-Five**

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Revision #3

Created 21 August 2024 00:01:09 by FatalisticFable

Updated 18 March 2026 22:01:10 by FatalisticFable