

Chapter 48: Infiltration

Rhylix

When next we meet, please kill me.

The next day, I was standing in the closest marketplace to the gate that I could find, waiting for Aramar.

I was exhausted. The energy drain for the magic I'd used this morning had been brutal, but it hadn't been so bad that I'd be out of commission. Not for a while, at least.

While scanning the crowd, all of whom were pointedly avoiding me, I caught sight of Aramar, only recognizing him because I'd expected him to be in disguise. It was amazing how a little dirt and a different posture could change a person.

Where I'd had to watch for my companion's arrival, Aramar didn't need to do the same for me, not when I was occupying the only bubble of empty space in the marketplace. As he approached, he glared at the humans giving me a wide berth with a wrinkled nose.

"I forgot about this part of living in a city," he said. "I definitely don't miss it."

I pointedly did *not* ask him what he was talking about. As far as I knew, Aramar had lived in a forest until his son had found Shadowsteal, only leaving it to visit Allanovian so he could maintain his family's alliance with the city.

Shaking himself, he said, "Right. What are we looking for?"

"Pickpockets or destitute children. Basically, anything that makes you uncomfortable," I said.

"Like... a seedy-looking man leading a woman into an alley?" Aramar said.

"Where?"

Frowning, I looked in the direction Aramar had indicated. That had been fast...

When I found what he'd been talking about, everything that was good in me was scraped free, replaced by something else entirely.

“Exactly like that,” I growled.

I stormed toward the alley, digging my heels into the ground with each step, while Aramar hurried to get in front of me. Once he had, he flipped to walk backward.

With a worried frown, he said, “Rhylix, what-?”

“Just follow me and stay back,” I snapped.

It was a testament to the other man’s trust that he didn’t demand an explanation from me after that. I knew what I looked like right now. It was a demeanor that sent people scattering before me until I’d reached the isolation found in the alley, and once there, I started running.

I barely stopped the aforementioned seedy-looking man from smashing a club into a young woman’s head, catching his wrist as he raised it. When I swung his arm around, pressing it against his back, he yelped, and jumping, the woman spun toward me, opening her mouth to scream once she’d seen us. Aramar was there to cover her mouth before she could.

“Will you take the young lady elsewhere, please?” I asked. “Explain what’s going on, if you will.”

Nodding, Aramar guided the woman away, already murmuring reassurances to her, and once they were out of sight, I threw my captive into a house’s wall. While he faced me, I plucked my dagger from where I’d hidden it.

“Hullo, Hux,” I said.

The other man froze, peering at me, and I stepped out of the shadows, hoping to speed up the identification process. Surprise flashed across Hux’s face before he started laughing.

“Well, if it isn’t little gray-eyes, all grown up,” he said. “Why are you back? No, wait! Let me guess. Your people’s filthy haven didn’t want you? Nah, nah, that can’t be it. Did you just miss me that much? Sorry to disappoint you, but I have another kid to torment now, one who actually shows a reaction when I’m hurting him.”

Without expression, I balanced my dagger’s point on a finger, watching the blade as I spun it. I knew better than to give this man the pleasure of acknowledging his taunts, no matter how much they might rile me up inside.

“Where’s Ash?” I asked.

“Oh... I see what this is about. I always knew you two had a thing,” Hux said. “Well, I’m sorry to say that she’s moved on too. She’s with some half-Eselan brat now. Honestly, I can understand most deviant behaviors, but people finding Esela attractive? It’s disgusting.”

He clicked his tongue, which almost had me bristling, but instead, I calmly stepped into Hux’s personal space, and I calmly rested my dagger’s edge on the bastard’s neck.

With a pleasant smile, I again asked, "Where's Ash?"

Scoffing, Hux rolled his eyes.

"You don't scare me, gray-eyes," he said. "You couldn't kill me back in the day, and I seriously doubt that's changed."

Removing my dagger from Hux's neck, I punched him in the face, hard enough that his head bounced off of the wall behind him.

"As you so poignantly reminded me when I lived under your care, there are worse things than death, things that I'm more than happy to inflict on you," I said. "Now, where the hell is Ash? I won't ask you again."

But Hux wouldn't stop groaning, clutching at his face, and I was done with accommodating him. Pinning the bastard with my dagger, I magicked a knife into my hand, lowering it to rest on the most sensitive bits of human anatomy.

"I will *maim* you," I growled.

Sucking in a gasp, Hux frantically nodded.

"Butcher's district, portside of the city," he said. "The old safehouse there."

Was he telling the truth? Probably. The bastard wouldn't lie in a situation like this. He was too much of a coward.

So, the question became what to do with a man who'd tormented me, so many years ago? He had so much innocent blood on his hands, but Hux had been right about one thing. I couldn't kill him. I just... couldn't.

I could, however, pin his hands to the wall before sending the city guard looking for him. I could *hurt* this man if I so chose.

I wasn't sure if Aramar would understand that, though. So, I sent Hux into a deep sleep and waited for my companion's return.

It didn't take him long.

As Aramar turned the corner, he asked, "What was that about?"

But at the sight of Hux at my feet, he went quiet.

"He's alive. Don't worry," I said. "As for your question, he's the leader of my old thieves guild. I was hoping to contact an acquaintance from that time. If anyone knows where Raimie is, it'll be her. Fortunately for us, Hux has given me her location."

I couldn't help kicking the unconscious man, and watching this, Aramar frowned.

"I'm guessing you don't like him," he said.

"Well, the bastard used to starve me when I lived here," I said. "That, plus the fact that he's... abused, we'll say, and murdered at least a dozen women leads to an extreme dislike, yes."

"I see," Aramar said while his face went unreadable. "And why is he still alive?"

That was an odd question, coming from whom it had. Aramar had always seemed like a compassionate fellow.

And I was unwilling to lie to him. He trusted me, even though I was a primeancer, so I resorted to half-truths in my answer.

"He should face justice for what he's done," I said. "If he died now, his victims' families might never know what happened to their loved ones."

For several heartbeats, Aramar stared at me before releasing a quiet sigh.

"All right. I'll take him to a lockup while you get the initial negotiations with your contact out of the way," he said. "Where should I meet you when I'm done?"

"Telling you a location won't be helpful if you're not familiar with Sev," I said.

Snorting, Aramar said, "Oh, I'm plenty familiar with this city. Just give me directions, please."

So, I did, although I was a little curious how Aramar knew a Robzul city state as well as he'd claimed. I didn't ponder the question for long, though. After rounding onto a busy street, my full focus went to my upcoming reunion.

It had been years since I'd been in this city, years since I'd seen *her*. After weeks of abuse and hunger, she'd been the first friendly face I'd found on this side of the Narrow Sea, and I'd left her here without saying goodbye.

She was going to kill me.

The butcher's district smelled *delightful*, as always, and as I wandered past identical homes, all neatly ordered in rows, I relived memories I'd rather forget. They were nowhere near as bad as the ones I kept locked tight in my heart, but they still hurt, making it a relief when I reached the safehouse that Hux had mentioned.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped up to the door, knocking on it in the guild's old pattern. It took a while, but when the door eventually opened, it was only by a crack.

"Whatever you're selling, we don't want it," a familiar voice snapped. "Go away."

She tried to slam the door in my face, but I slapped a hand on it, stopping her.

“Ashella!” I hissed. “It’s me, Rhy.”

When she didn’t respond, I removed my hand...

And the door slammed shut.

Gods damnit. It looked like she was going to be difficult about this. When several minutes passed with nothing more happening, I spun in place and folded to the ground, leaning on the door.

With nothing to occupy me, I couldn’t keep my fears at bay anymore. What would I do if my ally had been dragged to Daira, a city almost as far from here as Allanovian?

What if Raimie had been taken there for execution? Could I reach the capital in time to stop it? If I couldn’t and Raimie died, this struggle would have been for nothing.

I couldn’t touch the idea of what Raimie’s death would do to me personally.

With Raimie gone, what would my next steps be? How long would it take before another ally was found?

Grimacing, I called for Creation so we could discuss these possibilities, and my back support gave way, sending me tumbling to the ground. Lying in the house’s threshold, I blinked up at a red-faced woman with frazzled hair floating around her head.

With a weak grin, I said, “Hey, Ash.”

“Don’t you ‘hey, Ash’, me, you delinquent guild rat,” Ashella snapped.

In an abrupt about-face, she took off inside, leaving me lying on the floor, and I scrambled to follow her.

The house was strangely empty. No small ones were running about the place, and seeing this, I frowned. Was something wrong in the guild?

Throwing herself into a shabby chair, Ashella propped her feet up on a table, looking down her nose at me. She said nothing, and after a moment, I shifted in place, which was what she’d been waiting for.

“Well?” she drawled.

After a beat, I realized that I was supposed to answer.

“Well, what?” I asked.

Folding her hands on her stomach, Ashella said. “Will you give me your report for the last ten years, you *delinquent guild rat*?”

Oo, she was mad.

"I don't have much to report," I said. "After I left Sev, I made my way to Allanovian, like we always talked about. I was living there until a friend asked for my help, and that brought me back here."

"You. Made a friend."

Ashella said the last word as if she'd consumed something distasteful. Before she could continue, I rushed to finish.

"He's actually why I was looking for you," I said. "I need your help with finding him."

"My help," Ashella echoed. "Don't you mean the guild's help?"

Wincing, I said, "I meant the small ones. Are you still in charge of them?"

Ashella rolled her eyes.

"Of course. Who else has the patience to deal with them? Hux?" she asked with a snort. "And he's the reason I can't help you. If he learns that I did, if he even learns you were here, he'll take it out on my kids, and I—"

"He won't be hurting anyone ever again, Ash," I said.

Ashella blinked once before her feet slipped off of the table, thumping to the floor.

Clearing her throat, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"I finally made good on my promise to you," I said. "I'm sorry it took so long."

Slowly, Ashella got to her feet, pressing her fingertips into the table.

"He's gone?" she said in a small voice.

Nodding, I said, "He's in the hands of the authorities as we speak."

With a choked sob, Ashella vaulted over the table, running to me, and at her impact with my body, I rocked in place, awkwardly patting her back as she soaked my tunic with tears.

Gods, saying that after all these years had felt good. Finally, I'd fulfilled my long-held promise to her. I so rarely got to do that.

When she pulled away, Ashella wiped her eyes before softly laughing.

"Been a while since I lost it like that," she said. "So. You need help with finding someone? Can I get a description?"

Straight to business, huh? All right.

“His name’s Raimie, and an older man would have accompanied him,” I said. “As for a description, he has a plain face with a large nose. Middling height. The most drab, brown hair. *Large* ears. Really, he’s quite average in general, except that he has the most piercing, blue eyes I’ve seen on someone in a while and... Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Oh, Rhy. Honey.”

Sighing, Ashella circled the table to retrieve her chair.

“Sit down,” she said.

As comfortably as I could, I settled into the chair, dreading what Ashella meant to tell me.

“My small ones saw the man you described on and off yesterday, but they didn’t pay him much mind, thinking he was a tourist,” she said. “That opinion changed when Queen Kaedesa revealed herself to him that afternoon. She took him and the older gentlemen with her, and Rhy? Her ship left last night.”

Well, damn.

“That’s... disappointing,” I said.

I wasn’t sure what else to add. For now, Raimie was well and truly out of my hands. I couldn’t catch up with a ship, for gods’ sakes, and when rescuing the kid, I most certainly couldn’t take on a capital full of soldiers alone. I’d need help with such a dangerous undertaking.

So. First thing’s first. Aramar needed to hear what had happened to his son, and then, we should gather Gistrick, Aya, and—please, gods—Dath to discuss our options.

And while doing that, I’d contemplate plans of my own. I’d think of something. I always did.

I refused to consider what might happen if I couldn’t this time.

“Rhy?” Ashella cautiously said. “If there’s anything I can do to help-”

“There is, actually,” I said. “I’ll have some friends joining me shortly. Can we stay here for a couple of nights?”

Grinning, Ashella said, “You can stay for as long as you need. Anything for our delinquent guild rat.”

I returned her smile.

“Thanks, Ash,” I said.

I wouldn’t give up. If Raimie could keep himself alive while in Daira, I’d save my friend from a violent queen.

TTS Chapter Forty-Eight

Revision #2

Created 22 August 2024 01:06:10 by FatalisticFable

Updated 26 March 2026 03:13:23 by FatalisticFable