

Chapter 67: Searching

Rhylix

A powerful gust of wind knocked me sideways, lifting my feet off of the ground. Before the storm could send me tumbling, I called to the Ele beneath me, attracting it to what was found within my feet. Landing with a thud, I blasted a spray of light in front of me to correct my fall. After so many hours beneath thick cloud cover, that light blinded me, and blinking stars away, I released the Ele binding me to the earth, preparing for another burst of flight.

“Duck!” Creation yelled, clearly audible over the storm’s howling.

I dove forward as something—a boulder? a wood beam?—whistled by overhead before rolling to my feet. Sprinting forward, I was startled when I stumbled upon the dark splotch that I’d spotted before the storm wall had hit.

I could only guess how these ruined walls had survived within the Wastelands for as long as they had, and with a roof no less. However this shelter had managed to stay upright, I was grateful for it. Slumping in the corner furthest from the wind and rain, I shivered, longing for a fire or even better, a bed piled with blankets.

“Remind me why we’re out here again?” Creation said.

I tried to answer them, but even at my loudest volume, I couldn’t compete with the screaming winds around us. Instead, I met Creation’s gaze and expansively shrugged. Hugging my arms around my bent knees, I hunkered down to outwait the gale, silently praying to gods I didn’t believe in.

When calm descended once more, it took me by surprise. For hours, the wind had been weakening. What might have tossed me around like a rag doll before had died down to, if not a gentle breeze, at least something that couldn’t cause me harm, and the sheets of rain that had shot from the sky like a curtain of icy needles had slowed to a lazy drizzle.

Considering my legs had cramped while waiting for this change, I stretched them in front of me.

“I thought I’d find Doldimar here,” I said in answer to Creation’s earlier question. “The Wastelands seem like a paradise for him. Since it’s constantly barraged by monsoons from the Accession Tear, I thought the maelstrom would attract him like a bee to pollen.”

“If he took refuge here, where would he have hoarded his Kiraak army?” Creation asked. “As a rule, he may not care if they live or die, but without a constant stream of humans to transform, he’s forced to conserve the ones he controls.”

“See? This is why every once in a while, we should work together,” I said, peeking around my shelter to scan the sky. “If you’d made that point before we left Qena, we might have avoided spending so much time in this desolate land.”

Clicking their tongue, Creation looked away from me.

“You know I can be useful to you,” they said. “Why do you refuse my help so often?”

“Because in general, you’ve been an ass,” I said. “Now, which way to the tear?”

Creation grimaced, but in answer, they moved in the direction opposite the one I’d been planning to head in.

“You know, for a long time, I found you intolerable as well,” Creation said with their arms crossed. “You had this insufferable air of righteousness about you, and when it came time to kill Arivor, you’d refuse your destiny. Every damn time. It frustrated me to no end, and... I didn’t understand.

“So, I forced you to kill your friend because I thought I knew best, what with you being a limited, mortal being. I resigned myself to an eternity of verbal abuse from you, but somewhere between cycles two and three hundred, you gave up. Something broke in you, and I couldn’t figure out what had caused it. I found that I missed the defiant spark I’d found so incredibly frustrating at the beginning.

“I’m glad it has returned.”

For a while, I trailed behind Creation with pursed lips.

Eventually, I said, “Well now I feel like an ass.”

“Why?” Creation said, chuckling. “You were right, after all. In most instances, I do act in an ass-like manner, but Eriadren, you’ve kept me away from the whole for longer than usual this cycle. Some of your traits have rubbed off on me, and I haven’t had the time or inclination to wash them away in the whole yet.”

“Huh,” I said. “I’ve always wondered why you splinters become more tolerable the more time you spend with your primeancers.”

Cocking their head, Creation said, “Why didn’t you ask me about it?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

As the first caresses of sunlight pierced through dissolving clouds, I lifted my face to them.

“Maybe my responsibility for Arivor stole my focus away from other questions I had. Maybe my guilt over the experiment that started this cascading disaster wouldn’t let me indulge the scientist within for a while. I know that at one point, I just didn’t care, eliminating everything in me except for what was needed to kill Doldimar. Perhaps I should have figured out how the forces that underpin our world work before now, but too much has been working against me for that to be possible. Until now.”

Creation didn’t have a reply for that confession, which was a perfect happenstance for me. I was finished sharing with them. This camaraderie with my ‘babysitter’ was still new, even years after it had started, and while it was intriguing and worth pursuing, I couldn’t bring myself to trust it.

So, instead, I turned my attention to my surroundings, curious to see the aftermath of the storm.

There wasn’t much to see. Without a mountain range to break the hurricanes’ fury, this narrow strip of land on Auden’s southwestern border endured wave after wave of stormy destruction. The Wastelands were devoid of life, besides grass and tough, low-to-the-ground plants. Wood beams and ship masts were littered across the ground, an oddity considering my current distance from the coast, and here and there, boulders from the tiny to the huge haphazardly sat on a green carpet.

Occasionally, miraculous ruins would rise from the earth to stand tall and proud against the fury of wind and rain, but these lone warriors were the last of their kind. In general, the Wastelands was exactly that: a verdant, green land of rubbish.

The last few days, spent traversing a windswept landscape, had been incredibly lonely and taxing for me, so I was looking forward to my return to civilization. For the moment, though, I was still in this desolate place, but at least the sun had shown its face once more.

“I’m sorry,” Creation said.

They’d been walking ahead of me with their chin tucked to their chest, and on hearing those two words, I stumbled to a stop.

“You’re... sorry?” I repeated, unsure if I’d heard them correctly. “For what?”

“For what we did. We never should have claimed you. After your first round of death, you should have stayed dead,” Creation said. “I hope you can understand. What we did was instinctual. My whole doesn’t have logic behind it. It does as its nature prescribes. We splinters who are active on the physical plane try to influence it, but our effort don’t count for much when dealing with something that’s equivalent to gravity or heat. The whole is a force. So, when the enemy claimed Arivor, gaining a gateway to the physical plane, we reacted by latching onto you.

“That doesn’t mean that we made your life easy. I’m sorry. I wish it had been different.”

My mouth had been left gaping. I knew this, but I couldn’t seem to close it.

What was *wrong* with this cycle? First, a dual primeancer. Then, Ele’s retreat from the physical plane and now, this? How the hell was I supposed to respond?

“All right.”

With nothing else, I started walking again.

“All right? That’s it?” Creation said. “The force that composes all of reality’s positive traits apologizes to you, and you say, ‘all right’.”

Glancing at them, I half-smiled.

“Sorry I made you mortal, if only for a moment,” I said.

Growling, Creation marched ahead of me until they were out of hearing range, which only made me smirk. They’d begun to act like a living, breathing physical being. What other emotional reactions might I pull from Creation in the future?

On considering that, I realized my life had suddenly become much more interesting.

When Qena’s distinctive windmills appeared on the horizon, I nearly cried with relief. Two more storms had blown overhead while I’d made my way to safety, and during one of them, Ele had responded to my call more sluggishly than it usually did. If I hadn’t found a patch of tall grass to sink my fingers into, the winds might have carried me gods knew how far before releasing me.

It had been almost two years since Creation and Order had told me that Ele was abandoning me, two years that had felt ten times longer. The unexpected days when I’d woken up and could barely get out of bed, so disconnected had I been from *me*; the growing fissure of gaping wrongness that had widened with every passing day. Each of these had plagued me with increasing frequency over the years.

At times, I wished that the splinters had never told me about Ele’s abandonment. It was petty, I knew, but sometimes, I wondered if I didn’t know why these misfortunes had afflicted me, whether it would hurt quite so badly or whether my ignorance would somehow dull what was wrong. Thank Alouin, today was one of my good days, one where I almost felt normal.

Qena was in sight, which meant the storms’ frequency should slow to near nothing now. The tiny village rested between the two mountain ranges on Auden’s southern border, separating that realm from the Wastelands. These mountains shielded Qena from most of the hurricanes that plagued its barren neighbor, but every couple of decades, one would make its way far enough inland to funnel into the pass, temporarily increasing in strength until it could peter out on the other side.

Only the craziest of people would want to live in a location under constant threat of destruction, but that was Qena for you. They were an eccentric bunch, to say the least.

The village had originally been founded to study the nearby tear, the largest one in Auden, but out of necessity, that study had branched into other disciplines as well. For example, when Doldimar had demanded more provisions from the Qenans than they could provide at the time, they’d

created windmills, mechanisms that harnessed the pass's constant wind flow to quickly grind grain into flour.

People whispered that once, when this region's Enforcer had slated Qena for Harvest, its villagers had concocted contraptions that could hoist people into the air so they could rain death on the hostile Kiraak. Recently, rumors about the town had gone quiet, but a silence like that usually meant the bizarre villagers were in the middle of developing something big, something that would again rock Auden with its audacity.

As I approached the windmills, I considered how I felt about Qena, quickly settling on unsure. On the one hand, a town of scientists, working together to discover the world's natural properties and laws, would have enamored Eriadren, but on the other hand, I was terrified that if these people realized who and what I was, they'd hack me into pieces to figure out how I ticked. It had happened often enough before.

No matter how I felt about the village, I'd never had any doubt about entering it again. I'd exhausted my food supply days ago, and while Ele refused to let me starve *to death*, starving by itself seemed acceptable to it. Plus, after the week I'd had, a night in an actual bed sounded glorious.

"Afternoon!" said a man from atop the fence that hemmed Qena's border. "Never thought we'd be seeing you again."

"What can I say? Mother Nature decided she didn't like the way I tasted."

Stepping around the fence, I hurried for the town's decrepit inn as quickly as I could. I was hoping to draw as little attention to myself as possible, although upon approaching town square, it appeared that task might not be as daunting as I'd thought.

Qena had a large town hall replete with windows, an odd display of prosperity in such a remote location. Considering this building was where the Qenans taught their children, performed experiments, and worked on community projects, town hall's status as the finest building in a village of scientists and engineers seemed only natural. To them, it was comparable to a hall of worship.

A contingent of soldiers had formed a ring around the hall, dressed in the buttoned jackets and loose slacks of the military uniform, and around them, a crowd was watching, all alight with hope and eager devotion.

I wandered toward the back of it.

"You're back," a young voice piped up beside me.

When I looked down, I smiled at the child gazing back at me. She shoved her thumb into her mouth, clutching her patched, stuffed bear more tightly.

Such a strange sight, a child. In Allanovian, children had been kept separate from the rest of the community to keep them safe, and since leaving that metaphorical prison, my circumstances hadn't exactly been conducive to meeting one.

Crouching, I told this wondrous little girl, "I am. I said I would, didn't I?"

Thoughtfully considering me, she popped her thumb out of her mouth.

"Will you do another light show for me?" she asked.

Snorting, I pressed my palm to my mouth. Gods, I'd forgotten what children could be like.

"I can't right now, sweetling," I said before leaning in conspiratorially. "There are too many people around, but maybe I can later, all right?"

She nodded as if I'd asked the most solemn of favors.

"Do you know why the army's here, little one?" I asked, gesturing toward the soldiers.

"They're here to protect someone, I think," she said. "They're going to fix the tear for us."

I couldn't help it. I tried to restrain the noise, but a laugh flew out of me like a bird escaping from its opened cage, and I rocked in place. With her brow crinkling, the child frowned at me.

"Did I say something funny?" she asked.

"It wasn't you, sweetling. Just a funny set of circumstances," I said, patting her head. "Do you know where your parents are?"

Vigorously nodding, she pointed at a couple who were each raised on their tiptoes to get a better look at the soldiers.

"Make sure you stay with them, otherwise I might not be able to find you for your light show," I said.

Her eyes widened, and without another word, she scurried to join the couple. After watching to make sure she'd reached them, I pushed through the crowd, using gentle shoves and short bursts of Ele to clear a path. On reaching the front of it, I scanned the soldiers' faces, confident that one of the Hand would be here, and sure enough, there he was.

"Hey, little soldiers!" I called over the crowd's heads.

Hopefully, that wouldn't distinguish Little too much from his comrades. At the greeting, the spy snapped his eyes toward me, resting a hand on the hilt of his sword, and I waved.

Little burst out laughing, making the other soldiers uneasily stare at him. The spy's scars made it difficult to find him anything but unnerving. White lines ran in no discernible pattern over his face,

and his mouth was unnaturally deformed, all of which lent Little a discomfiting presence.

In past conversations, Little had shared how much he both delighted in and hated the changes to his features. I wasn't sure why he was so dead set against romantic prospects that he was grateful to be this scarred, but I did know that he didn't like how much attention they drew his way.

As soon as I broke into the space between the crowd and the soldiers, Little pulled me close, pounding on my back.

Holding me at arm's length, he said, "It's good to see you, Rhy! What a coincidence!"

"There's no such thing as coincidence. Not in our world," I said, even as I grinned. "I hear Raimie's come to Qena. I guess that's why you're here too."

"Someone needs to watch his back, whether he likes it or not," Little said. "Come inside. I can't wait to see the look on his face when you walk into the room."

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