

# Chapter 68: The First of Them

## Rhylix

As Little and I made our way toward town hall, the other soldiers reluctantly let me through their line, staring at my gray eyes. Many of the people who'd enlisted into the army after Doldimar's disappearance had been Conscripted soldiers, people eager to cast off his shackles and the atrocities that had been forced from them. Once, they'd worked closely with the Dark Lord, and to them, gray eyes were a mark of madness and cruelty, or at least, that had been my experience among them to date. Little had greeted me as a friend, though, so no one protested as we slipped into town hall.

"What are you doing in Qena?" Little asked.

We were walking down a wide corridor, lined with tools and half-finished contraptions, and at the question, I bit my lip, considering how to answer.

"Same thing as ever. Looking for Doldimar," I eventually said. "Excuse me for a moment."

Spying a door ahead, I peeled off toward it before Little could express any doubt that he might have for my mission. I was sick of hearing people insist that Doldimar had well and truly left Auden. There was no need to listen to that derisive spiel from Little, a kid I'd grown close with in the years since the Dark Lord's disappearance. I might even hesitantly call him a friend.

So, I ran away from Little's reply, ducking into a room set up like a laboratory. Waist-high counters formed a ring around the room, topped with test tubes, beakers, and the fancy, gas-fed burners that the Qenans used. Only one bench was currently in use, and I snatched the wrist of the teenager sitting at it. With her brilliantly red hair dangling dangerously close to flames, she'd been poised to add her dropper's contents to the powdery substance dusting the beaker below her.

Glancing at me, the teenager raised an eyebrow.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Nodding toward her experiment, I said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you. At least not without proper protective equipment."

The girl's eyes flashed, although I couldn't say if it was with interest or anger. When I gently loosened my hold on her wrist, she set the dropper aside.

"Why would I need PPE right now?" she asked, tilting her head to the side. "I'm adding dirty water to crushed rock. I expect to see some fizzing, but no more violent of a reaction than that. I'm bored! The others won't let me work on their secret project, and I've been fiddling with the elder's 'safe' experiments for ages. I want to try something new."

Crossing my arms, I suppressed a smile.

"The liquid in that dropper is as much water as I am a human, and I think you know it, given how carefully you were handling it," I said. "From the color, I'd say it probably burned your skin when you took a sample. Am I right?"

"It might have stung a bit, yes," she said. "How did you-?"

"And I know that mineral. It's rather beautiful before it's ground up like this," I interrupted. "I've seen those two substances combined before, and the results weren't pleasant. People died. I'd rather not have a repeat of that accident, so please, at least wear a mask and gloves when playing with unknown substances like this."

My warning didn't seem to faze this girl. In fact, she scooted forward, cupping her chin in her hands.

"What happened?" she asked. "In your accident, I mean."

I flinched. That had been stupid. I should have known she'd want more information after I'd shared my experience. I'd have wanted the same at her age.

If I didn't give her an answer, I had *no* doubt that this teenager would finish what she'd started with even more eagerness than before. So, I carefully extracted the single memory that I needed from the container it rested inside, slamming the door shut before more could flood through.

"At first? Nothing," I said, distantly noting how detached I sounded. "The experiment was concluded without a hitch. The resulting concoction was spilled over the subject in question, but the mixture appeared to cause no reaction."

Councilman Reive had been furious about that, deliberately pouring greater quantities of the liquid over his test subject's body, but eventually, he'd let Eriadren go home to Lirilith, a mistake as it had turned out. She'd woken up to her husband dying in bed beside her.

"Within twenty-four hours, the subject developed severe burns where the concoction had touched his bare skin, to the point that it almost melted away. In addition, a persistent cough, fever, and chills afflicted him. He eventually died, choking on his own body fluids."

Stiffening, the teenager carefully slid the dropper and beaker away from one another.

“Gruesome,” she said.

That was an understatement. Reive might have been displeased on the day he’d tossed that acid over Eriadren, but when Lirilith had dragged her wheezing husband to the bastard’s home, he’d been *ecstatic*. The ‘quarantine’ that he’d enforced while his subject had been ‘in recovery’ had lasted for days. Long, uninterrupted days when Reive had gained easy access to Eriadren’s deathless body.

“Who are you?”

The question drew me back to the present, and I blinked. The teenager was intently looking at me, which was unnerving, but I answered her anyway.

“My name is Rhylix,” I said. “And you are?”

She didn’t seem to have heard me.

“Rhylix, Rhylix, Rhylix,” she said, sucking on her teeth. “Where have I heard that name before?”

She widened her green eyes.

“Oh, my gods, you’re the king’s pet primeancer,” she breathed.

Hastily, she rose from her bench, dipping into a quick curtsy, which... ok?

“I’d say we’re more friends than master and pet but-” I said.

She took hold of my hands with a painful grip.

“Can I trust him?” she asked.

What kind of question was that?

“Um. Yes?” I said. “Raimie’s one of the most honest men I’ve ever met.”

“That’s not what I mean,” the teenager moaned.

Rubbing her face, she ran her hands through her hair.

“I mean, can *I* trust him?” she says. “He’s aligned with both Ele and Daevetch, impossible as that is. I know he tolerates your presence, but what would he do with me?”

“What are you talking-?”

Oh.

“You’re a primeancer,” I said.

She frantically nodded, making light that I hadn't created flash in the room. An Ele primeancer, then. That was good.

"What's your name?" I asked.

Before, I'd only inquired about that out of politeness because I'd thought this would be a brief, random encounter, but the fact that she could access Ele changed things.

"Miranon," she said.

"Well, Miranon," I said. "If your splinter has taught you well enough that you can hide your abilities, it should have taught you the proper etiquette when it comes to greeting a fellow Ele wielder."

Flushing, Miranon said, "She. She taught me."

But she fluttered her fingers a little, and her twin appeared beside her.

"Now yours," the unfamiliar splinter said.

Creation wasn't really *mine*, but I couldn't share that fact with this new splinter. It didn't matter that she was aligned with Ele. I wouldn't reveal everything I was to relative strangers, so I asked Creation to make themselves visible.

"You are?" Creation asked of Miranon's twin.

"Creation," the other splinter answered, "and you?"

My constant shadow giggled, a bit manically.

"Eriadren, it's a female you, replete with the red hair, secondary green pigment, and defiant attitude!" they gasped. "She's even a scientist!"

I rolled my eyes while Miranon's splinter took a step back. There had gone the secret of my identity, at least when it came to the teenager's splinter.

"Eriadren?" both of them asked.

The other Creation splinter seemed to be hyperventilating, which was... interesting. Since when were splinters afraid of me? It was usually awe or a condescending attitude from them.

Also. Why the hell was my Creation still giggling up a storm?

"Stop it," I growled.

This, unfortunately, only made them laugh harder, and at that, the other Creation narrowed her eyes at us with a look of concern flashing over her face.

"You might want to consider returning to the whole at some point, aspect...?" she said.

“Creation,” my constant shadow gasped. “I’m of Creation too, but shouldn’t you know that, given who he-”

“I swear to gods, Creation,” I hissed. “Shut the hell up.”

My Creation clicked their teeth together, although their uproarious laughter never stopped.

“This is getting confusing,” Miranon said. “Are you satisfied?”

“Entirely.”

At our command, both splinters disappeared from the visible spectrum, returning to where only their primeancer could see them. Thank. the. gods. Why did dealing with anything Ele related *always* give me a headache?

“What now?” Miranon asked.

It was a good question. What should I do with this primeancer? I knew they’d started crawling out of the woodwork years ago, when Doldimar had still held power, but Miranon was the first one I’d run into. So, what...?

“Now, you come with me,” I said with a mischievous grin. “I’ll introduce you to my friend.”

I hadn’t thought it possible, but Miranon’s eyes widened even further than they’d been before. She meekly followed me out of the lab to where Little was leaning against a wall with his eyes closed.

“You done?” he said without opening said eyes.

“All finished,” I said. “Sorry for making you wait.”

Pushing off of the wall, Little warily glanced at Miranon after seeing her.

“You’ve acquired a stray,” he said.

“And you’ve gotten taller. Hooray for stating the obvious!” I said. “Still want to take me to Raimie?”

“As cagey and arrogant as ever, I see,” Little said with amusement. “I’ll take you to the king, but don’t expect me to stick around once we reach him. He’s in the middle of a meeting with a bunch of cranky elders.”

“Hooray...” I weakly repeated.

This would be fun.

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