

Chapter 69: Reunion

Rhylix

When we stepped into the meeting room, several voices were clamoring to be heard, and Raimie was slouched on the other side of a long table, a perfect picture of misery. He nodded at Little, but when he saw me, he shot to his feet with his chair clattering to the floor behind him.

The room's other occupants turned to inspect the person who'd so thoroughly surprised their guest, and at their stares, Miranon hid behind me, biting her lip.

Interesting... Why was she so nervous about being around these people?

Vaulting over the table, Raimie pulled me into a hug.

"Thank the gods you're here," he frantically whispered. "You *have* to save me."

I had to *what now?*

"Who's this?" the wrinkly woman behind him asked.

With a long sigh, Raimie faced her, clapping my shoulder.

"This is my friend, Rhylix," he said.

"Wait. I know you," a woman further down the table said, cutting off anything else Raimie might have meant to say.

She inched forward with her eyes narrowed.

"Yes!" she said. "You're that lunatic who set off into the Wastelands a week ago. Didn't you say you meant to venture past the tear? You can't go into the Wastelands like that without risking a storm. I thought we'd seen the last of you which... how are you alive?"

Little, who had yet to depart despite his earlier assertion, glared at his charge.

"Past the tear..." he murmured before snapping his gaze to Raimie. "I thought you said this mission wouldn't be dangerous!"

A distraction! Counting my luck, I held perfectly still, letting attention drift back to my friend. I probably shouldn't be doing that, but... keeping attention off of myself would be preferable, at least

for the moment.

“It won’t be dangerous!” Raimie said. “The tear’s not that far into the Wastelands-”

“You didn’t answer my question, young man,” the middle-aged woman interrupted, glaring at me.

Rapidly blinking, I hoped that my luck-

“Miranon, dear, what are you doing here?” a thin, reedy voice asked from the grouping of elders.

Oh, good. It looked like chaos *was* about to ensue. Once this was over, maybe I should thank Raimie’s Daevetch splinter for this host of distractions instead of my luck.

“You failed to mention that this quest would require traversing the Wastelands,” Little hissed before hastily adding. “Your Majesty.”

“Did you disturb these two gentlemen, Miri?” the reedy voice said, echoing Little’s displeasure.

Miranon further slunk into my shadow, and seeing her timidity, I groaned. I knew Raimie could handle these people but Miranon? I wasn’t so sure. Plus, I’d brought her in here, drawing attention her way.

So, I called to the Ele in the room, and it responded with a blinding flash. The floor, the people, and the air itself blazed bright white.

As the light faded, I shouted, “Everyone *hush!* I can’t hear myself think.”

As requested, quiet reigned supreme for a moment with every eye on me until Raimie couldn’t control himself anymore. He rushed out of the room, but the walls and a closed door between us didn’t stop everyone in the room from hearing his delighted laughter. Rolling his eyes, Little followed his charge, leaving me with the Qenans.

“So, that’s how you survived the Wastelands,” the old woman said. “You should have said something the first time you passed through. We’d have sent you out there with equipment to take storm readings for us.”

“I’m not fond of scientists as a general rule,” I said with a tight voice. “They frequently dissect primeancers, in an attempt to replicate our powers for themselves.”

“If you decide to donate your body to Qena when you die, then of course the scientists here would be more than happy to break it into pieces,” the old woman says. “What else would you expect us to do with it? Let such a precious sample become worm food?”

She hadn’t even considered trying to experiment on me while I was still breathing.

There it was. Every time I started to despair, it came like a breath of fresh air: a reminder that not all was hopelessness and misery. Good existed in the world.

With a flushed face, Raimie slid back into the room, leaving Little outside.

“Apologies, sirs, madams, and individuals. I suddenly had a need to examine the fascinating flying machines that you have stored in the hall,” he said.

He flashed a cheeky grin at the room, daring the others to contradict him, before continuing.

“What were we discussing?”

Before the room could devolve into a shouted cacophony again, I said, “I need to speak with you. Preferably alone.”

“Of course, Rhy,” Raimie said. “Is there a room we can borrow?”

...I hadn't meant *right now*, but I supposed my friend had mentioned an eagerness to get out of whatever conversation he'd been having before I'd interrupted it.

Turned to the elders, Raimie folded his hands in front of him with a smile. He received a lot of eyerolls and huffing in response, but soon enough, the old woman stepped forward.

“Take this one,” she said. “I’m sure us Qenans would rather return to our projects than repeat our request. Unless you need another recap?”

“No, I understood it after hearing it the first time,” Raimie said. “Go to the tear. Figure out what’s wrong, and fix it. Only close it as a last resort.”

“Good to know our future king can use those enormous ears to listen to his subjects,” the old woman said, “but remember, this isn’t a local phenomenon. Several other towns have come to us, asking for help with their smaller tears. So, this problem is one for all of Auden.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

While the elders shuffled out of the room, Raimie glared daggers at their spokesperson, only relaxing once the room had emptied.

“I’m so glad to see you, Rhy,” he said. “It’s been, what? Four months since your visits to Elisk matched up with mine? Please tell me you’ve found something in that time.”

“Not a trace of a whisper,” I said with a grimace. “What about on your end?”

“Nothing since we last spoke. Doldimar didn’t keep records while he was in power. I’ve trudged through several years’ worth of documentation made by the Enforcers who were inclined to do so in his stead, but I haven’t found anything useful yet. Just a disgusting number of reports that tallied the babies born each year versus the death toll in each region,” Raimie said. “Doldimar held dominion for almost three centuries, though. I’ve barely scratched the surface.”

“At least you have open avenues of investigation,” I said. “I’ve run out of ideas for where he might have hidden.”

“There is that.”

Raimie blew out a long breath before grinning at me.

“Gods, I’ve missed you,” he said. “It’s good to talk about this without someone looking at me with pity or worse, like I’ve gone insane.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Groaning, I lifted my face toward the ceiling with my hands on my hips.

“I’ve tried asking townsfolk about unexplained deaths or wanton destruction after I arrived at each one, but as soon as I told them why I was asking, they’ve laughed at me.”

“I think you may have gotten your revenge just now,” Raimie said, chuckling. “That was a neat trick with the light. The looks on their faces were priceless.”

How was it that my friend could so easily distract me? I’d come here with a purpose, and it hadn’t been one that involved our shared project of finding Doldimar.

“Speaking of Ele, I’d like you to meet someone,” I said.

I beckoned the wide-eyed teenager, still trying to hide in my shadow, forward.

“This is Miranon, aspect Creation. Miranon, my best friend, Raimie, aspect Order.”

Nervously dipping into a curtsy, the teenager clasped her hands in front of her while Raimie shifted in place.

“Er... hello,” he awkwardly said. “I’m pleased to meet you?”

When he glanced at me, I bit back a laugh. Damn, Raimie’s social awkwardness came out at the most hilarious of times. I should probably help him out.

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