

Chapter 71: Catching Up

Rhylix

An hour later, I trudged out of the village of scientists, making for a cluster of figures huddled by the closest windmill. Hostile stares greeted me from unfamiliar faces, and I was momentarily concerned that I'd need to defend myself against Raimie's soldiers. Then, my friend bounced from out of their midst.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Despite fatigue hovering over me like a threatening raincloud, I knew I was. My quick bite to eat had revitalized me, and while I'd miss the prospect of a bed tonight, the sacrifice would be worth it if I was allowed an evening wandering the countryside with my friend. If I tried very hard, I could almost imagine that the unfriendly soldiers didn't exist.

"You mentioned that you were on a tight schedule?" I said. "Why is that?"

Why couldn't this trip wait until morning? Why had I only been allowed an hour's rest?

"The investiture has a date: a little over two weeks from now," Raimie said. "Seeing as how travel between Qena and Elisk takes almost two weeks, the problem with this tear must be promptly resolved if I'm to be back in time."

Folding his hands behind his back, he stared at the ground with his lip caught in his teeth.

"Who's to become the new king?" I asked, prodding my friend.

Please, please, say that he wouldn't speak Kylorian's name.

"That would be me," Raimie mumbled with a flush of color spreading across his cheeks.

"Oh, thank Alouin," I said in a rush. "Don't get me wrong. Ren's adoptive brother has many admirable qualities, but he wouldn't make a good king."

"And I'll be better?" Raimie said. "What will I do when people find out about Nylion, Rhy? And they will find out. Don't say they won't. Will they accept...me—"

Gods, how carefully that singular pronoun had been said!

“—when that happens, especially after everything that’s happened in the last few weeks?”

I *hated* it when this topic came up. That wasn’t because I disliked the idea of Nylion—given my experience with similar phenomena, I didn’t think that was possible—more that I had no way to relate, and that meant I usually couldn’t give my friend the advice or reassurance he needed. I ended up saying dumb things instead, like:

“What’s happened?”

Halfway through a step, Raimie scrambled to catch himself, nearly toppling in the process.

“Well...” he drawled, “he’s back in truth. No more hiding. And we’re... not... arguing.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I asked. “His absence has been one of the things that’s most distressed you over the last two years.”

Wincing, Raimie glanced to the side, probably speaking with the person in his head who I might never meet. I’d love it if that did happen, but given how much those two had been shamed and hurt over their ‘many in one’ status in the past, I doubted either of them was comfortable with being genuine around another person.

“It is,” Raimie eventually said. “A good thing, I mean. But it came with... developments.”

When he refused to continue, I said, “Like?”

After glancing back at the soldiers, Raimie was chewing the hell out of his lip when he faced forward again, and he’d knotted his fingers in his tunic.

“You... like me, right? As a person,” he said. “Is there... anything that you’d never forgive me for? Besides, you know, the obvious.”

...Where was this going?

“Like deciding to help Doldimar for some inconceivable reason?” I said. “No, I don’t think anything, besides the obvious, would stop me from being your friend.”

Raimie nodded to himself, taking a few deep breaths.

“I kissed Nyl,” he said in a rush, “and there’s been... more over the last two weeks.”

I stopped short with an invisible wall springing up from the ground to stop me. I- I-

“WHAT?” I shouted.

With a hurried glance over his shoulder, Raimie took my arm, pulling me along. That encouragement was the only reason that I could operate my feet right now.

Numbly, I heard Raimie speaking to me.

“Please, Rhy, you can’t act strangely. If the others or gods forbid, Little realize that something strange is going on, they won’t rest until they figure out what’s wrong. They’re just those types of people. Please, I need-”

Pulling away from Raimie, I said, “You *kissed* him? The other person in your *head*? What-? No. *How* did you do that?”

Raimie shrank on himself, even if he still clung to me.

“There’s a place in my head where I can go when I sleep,” he said. “It feels real, and... I don’t know. It’s hard to explain.”

Nodding along, I thought I said something—

“Lucid dreaming. That makes sense.”

—but I was having trouble with wrapping my mind around this. It- it was making my head hurt. That combined with my fatigue and-

“I need to sit down,” I said.

Swallowing, Raimie said, “Ok.”

He turned toward the soldiers.

“Little, hold here, please. I’ll be right back,” he called. “*I’m not going far. You can stay put.*”

Something like an affirmative drifted to us, and rolling his eyes, Raimie led me a little further along, muttering under his breath. I got the feeling he was using his near constant annoyance with the Hand’s hovering to hide his anxiety.

When we reached the top of a nearby hill, Raimie sank to the ground, and as soon as he gestured, I collapsed beside him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I didn’t mean to hurt you in any way. I-”

“Raimie. I’m not upset. At all,” I said, “and what you’re talking about isn’t bad or wrong. It’s only... this is...”

With a timid smile, Raimie said, “A lot?”

I nodded.

“It’s a shock, even if that shock is mild,” I said. “Just give me a minute to think.”

Falling back, I threw my arms overhead, doing my best to fit this into what I already knew about Raimie.

“So, does this mean you’re attracted to men?” I asked. “Nylion is male, right? I think that’s what you’ve said before.”

“That’s right, but.... no. I don’t think so, at least,” Raimie said. “If I’m right about what the word ‘attraction’ truly means, then I have never, ever been attracted to men. Not once. Except with Nylion, but I don’t think what’s going on between us is because of ‘attraction’. I think...”

He fell silent, letting me watch wispy clouds float across the sky without distraction. They were so carefree with nothing to weigh them down or snarl them into knots, and when their time was done, they dissipated with nothing holding them in place. It would be an envious existence, if, you know, they were sentient.

“Have I told you about my bond with Nyl?” Raimie asked.

Still set adrift by my friend’s revelation, I could only lazily answer, “No.”

“Hmm.”

Something drummed beside my head, probably Raimie’s fingers.

“Ok, so we have this bond, like I said,” he said. “It’s like a... river? No, that’s a terrible analogy because it implies everything flows one way. Maybe... an extension of self? A continuation of existence? I really don’t know how to explain it.”

“That’s ok. I probably wouldn’t get it anyway. It sounds like one of those concepts that’s only understandable to those who’ve experienced it before,” I said. “Why is it important?”

“It lets me... be Nyl, if only in a way,” Raimie said. “I can hear what he’s thinking, feel what he’s feeling, all of the time... when it’s active. Given that, I think it was only inevitable that I ended up feeling... things for him.”

Frowning, I said, “I’d think that it would make you hate him. Having someone constantly nattering in your head? That sounds-”

I shuddered.

“It’s not like that!”

The frustration and stress in that explanation was enough to peel me off of the ground. When I sat up, I found Raimie curled on himself, tangling his fingers in his hair, and the part of me that had become exceedingly accustomed to my friend’s oddities sighed. I peeled Raimie’s hands off of his head, holding them together much like I held his eyes.

“It’s ok,” I said before repeating. “*It’s ok.* Calm down. I’m not going anywhere. You haven’t lost me. I’m only trying to understand. That’s all.”

Taking small sips of air, Raimie gradually unfurled from his ball, and after a moment, he nodded for me to release him.

Rubbing his wrists, he said, "I'm surprised you focused on the gender side of things rather than the obvious."

"You mean that you're kissing a part of yourself, no matter how separate he might be?" I asked. "Honestly, Raimie? If I were you, I'd be doing the exact same thing. You are... *the* most honorable person I've met in my long life. It's ok if you love yourself a little."

Raimie gave a tiny laugh before hugging his knees.

"Love," he breathed to himself. "Is that what this is?"

I chose to ignore that comment, waiting for my friend to collect himself instead. When he glanced up, Raimie looked a bit less haunted, if still fearful.

"So, you're still my friend?" he asked.

"Gods, Raimie. I told you. You'd have to do something *seriously* terrible to make me stop being your friend," I said. "As I've mentioned before, I am, frankly, *glad* that you have someone like Nylion in your life. He seems to have been a good influence on you."

But I refrained from saying anything about a potential meeting between us. If that was ever going to happen, I wanted it to be on both of their terms.

"I am a bit curious as to why you told me about this, though, much as I'm glad you did," I continued. "It would have been easier to keep it to yourself."

Shifting in place, Raimie picked at the grass around him.

"You may have been practice for someone else," he said.

"Really?" I said with a laugh in my voice. "Who?"

Tightening on himself, Raimie said, "Ren."

And I was quiet for a long time. I had many questions, namely what Ren had to do with anything. She was no longer in a relationship with Raimie, or that was what I'd thought, at least. I also wasn't sure how his relationship with Nylion might have affected the one he'd once had with Ren. I only said one thing, though.

"Tell me everything."

So, I learned about how Kaedesa has returned to Auden and what that meant for Raimie's betrothal. I learned about my friend's reunion with my sister, including Kylorian's involvement with it. I learned that Raimie had told my sister about Nylion.

I learned about how Raimie had been agonizing over this, all of it. How he'd resolve his betrothal to Kaedesa while possibly renewing his relationship with Ren. How he'd share everything about Nylion with her. How every spare minute in the last two weeks had been spent thinking about this.

"Damn, Raimie, your last two weeks have been hell," I said when he was finished.

Shrugging, Raimie said, "It hasn't been so bad. I crossed paths with my best friend, so you know. That helped a lot."

Falling back on my hands, I stretched my legs in front of me, wiggling them with a grin.

"Glad to have helped," I said.

Snorting, Raimie said, "I don't suppose said friend has any advice for me?"

Humming to myself, I contemplated the many problems on my friend's plate for a moment.

"Be honest with her, whether that be Ren or Kaedesa," I said. "Always be honest and tread carefully. Trust me. Ren will be patient. She probably understands the situation she's put you in and will wait to see if you can get out of your promise of marriage or not. As for the Nylion thing..."

Pausing, I sucked on my lip.

"I honestly don't know what to say, Raimie," I said. "You need to tell whichever woman you end up with as soon as you possibly can, but besides that, I have nothing to give you."

"You've already given me more than I expected," Raimie said. "Thank you, Rhylix."

"You're welcome," I said.

I waited for a moment, watching for the sign that my friend was about to do his inevitable scramble for a new conversation topic before continuing with.

"Your Majesty."

Sucking in a gasp, Raimie play-smacked me.

"No. No, no, no," he snapped. "I told you years ago. I don't need your deference. Don't you ever call me that. Not again."

"All right, all right!" I said, laughing. "Stop slapping me, and maybe we can continue toward the tear. Still needs fixing, yes?"

"Unfortunately," Raimie grumbled.

Springing to his feet, he offered me a hand up, and we rejoined the rest of the group. Once we'd walked for a good long while, long enough for me to start digesting everything my friend had shared, he spoke up again.

“What have you been up to for the last four months?” he asked. “Looking for Doldimar, I know. I’d like to hear about the specifics, please.”

Smiling to myself, I scanned the horizon again. Trust Raimie to continue on as if he hadn’t shared one of his deepest secrets with me not a quarter mark before.

“Since you’re so eager to know…” I started.

I shared my experiences while exploring ancient Lyzencroft’s ruins and how nothing had come of it. From the graveyard of Auden’s sister kingdom, I’d made a circuit of the realm, starting to the north. I’d wandered through the woods that the Matvai claimed as their own, venturing for a time into the tundra beyond the northern mountains.

After a week of frozen hell, I’d made a brief stop in Nephiron, but I hadn’t bothered with searching Auden’s west coast. Since the realm’s liberators had made their first landing on the Outskirts, it had remained firmly under Raimie’s control, watched and monitored by trusted officials and allies from Tiro. Supplies from Ada’ir often entered the kingdom at Nephiron’s port, and large swaths of Raimie’s armed forces patrolled the main roads from the coast to the capital.

After a brief respite in the newly revitalized port city, I’d traveled south to Qena, beginning my search of the Wastelands.

As I wound down from my last tale, Raimie chuckled.

“So many times, we barely missed one another,” he said. “I was treating with the Matvai’s Vasnavai only a few weeks ago.”

“I heard rumors of your visit while scouring their forests,” I said. “I considered coming to see you but thought it best to keep from causing a diplomatic incident. The Matvai…”

In the dense mountain forests of their Homeland, the Matvai had a tradition of hunting Esela for sport, but I didn’t think sharing that fact with my friend was wise. If Raimie discovered the clans’ mistreatment of the Esela, he’d cut all ties with them, and while I hated what the Matvai had always done to my people, I also understood how important friendly relations between Auden and the clans were.

So, a half-truth instead.

“The Matvai aren’t fond of Esela, so I stayed away from them as much as possible while I was in their territory.”

With a fierce grin, Raimie said, “You couldn’t have made more of a mess than I did. The Vasnavai tried to kill me toward the end of our negotiations.”

“She did?” I said, laughing. “Well done, you! She must have liked you.”

“The knives she forced me to dodge would disagree with you,” Raimie said, “but back to your tale. Where were you headed next before our chance meeting?”

And I tasted ash in my mouth. Slowing down, I hugged myself.

“My final destination was the remnants of the Eselan Haven, although frankly, I’m glad you’ve given me an excuse not to go,” I said. “I wouldn’t care to see the shining cities of my youth in their state of destruction. I especially don’t need a visible reminder that my race has lost such strength and power that we must bow to humanity’s ‘superiority’. Yes, the Esela may soon cease to exist in the world, but reminders like the Haven are a slap in the face, an addition to the sting of our slow extinction.”

Raimie was quiet, silently moving his lips while he decided what to say, but I was happy to wait. My friend could take all the time in the world to reply, if that was what he needed. I’d rather if he thought out his response instead of blurting what first came to mind, as such thoughtfulness would save him from a lot of embarrassment once he was sitting on the throne.

“You should return to Qena,” he eventually said.

...What? Had I offended my friend somehow? I’d thought that after everything we’d spoken about, our relationship had grown, something I hadn’t thought possible before taking this *delightful* walk.

“Tired of my company already?” I lightly asked.

“What?” Raimie said, whipping his head toward me. “No, Rhy! I realized how silly we’re being. We decided to establish a primeancer refuge today, and after doing that, the first thing we did was charge off into an adventure. You should have stayed behind with Miranon and Tejesper, working on logistics. While on the journey home, we’ll have time to catch up. We don’t have to do it now.”

With a flat stare, I said, “You want me to work on *your* project while you’re off adventuring?”

“Can you manipulate tears?” Raimie asked. “Because unless you’ve developed that ability in the last four months, we can’t switch places, and trust me. I’d much rather tackle the task I’ve asked from you.”

That... was a good point. I wasn’t sure I’d want to do my friend’s job, even if I had his ability.

“Fair enough,” I said. “What should I do in Qena?”

“Mostly keep watch on our first two students and make sure they’re ready to leave soon,” Raimie said, “but come on, Rhy! You’ve seen a lot over the years. Surely you can think of a few issues we’ll face before we can establish a school.”

“I can think of a few,” I said, making a face.

“In that case, I’ll see you by morning,” Raimie said.

Stopping, he extended a hand, and taking it, I shook it, unable to break through the foreign feeling of the gesture. Ada'ir and its bizarre customs would never feel quite right to me.

Releasing my grip, I said, "Be careful, Raimie."

My friend gave me a secret smile, like we were sharing a joke, and looking back on all the times that Raimie had run off to complete a task like this on his own, I shivered.

"I will," he said.

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