

Chapter 72: A Broken Tear

Raimie

Silently, I watched my friend climb a hill, on his way back to Qena. Sending him away with a lie had hurt, but I couldn't bear to see melancholy on Rhylix's face, not when it appeared there more often than it rightfully should. I wouldn't cause it again by bringing him with me to our destination, one of the dead Eselan cities he'd mentioned.

Beside me, Nylion said, "It is for the best."

You're sure you're ok with him knowing about us? I asked.

Because I had been and still wasn't sure.

"I am," Nylion said. "He is your friend. Eventually, I would like to meet him and make him my friend too. It would be best if he knows everything about us before then."

Taking a deep breath, I released my clenched hold of my chest, lowering an arm, and Nylion took my hand.

"Thank you for taking the risk," he said.

At the same time, Little said, "That was kindly done, sir."

"Was that a compliment, Little?" I absently asked, squeezing Nylion's hand. "I thought only snark could come out of your mouth."

"I believe it was praise, sir," Little said. "I'll avoid it in the future."

"See?" I said. "Much better."

Shaking myself, I turned to the spy and the real world that I inhabited.

"How much further to the tear, sir?" Little asked.

Dim? I said.

The splinter was staring off into the distance with their eyes glazed, which made me frown. I'd asked for Dim's attention because they could ignore their whole's pull, more than Bright could at least, but for today, Dim refused to follow the status quo.

Dim? Question for you, buddy.

Nothing came from them, and with that, I took a closer look at the splinter. Dim seemed fine, the same as always, except...

Were those *cracks* in their pretense of skin? Before I could confirm what I was seeing, something I'd said stirred Bright from their lethargic stare.

"What is it?" they slowly said, as if each word had required a great deal of concentration.

How close are we? I asked.

"To the ruins?" Bright said, slurring their words together. "A couple more miles. To the tear, a bit longer. It's in the middle of the former city."

"We're close," I told Little. "I'm not sure how much longer I can take the lead, though. My splinters aren't being very helpful right now."

"Aw, give Bright and Dim a break, sir. I'm sure they're doing their best," Little said with a smirk. "Besides, we can take over from here, so long as you give us a direction to follow."

"That way," I said.

I pointed toward where my splinters were avidly staring.

"Right. Our turn up front has come, people," Little shouted. "Let's go!"

Soldiers ambled to join the spy, checking their weapons as they did.

As we moved through the hills, the conversations that had rumbled behind me while Rhylix and I had taken the lead dwindled to nothing. I'd spent the last several months in cities and on busy roads, surrounded by people and their accompanying noise, so I'd missed this: the beauty of relative solitude, surrounded by nature, and for a while, only the sounds of said nature filled the quiet around us.

"Raimie," Nylion said.

After such a long time spent in relative silence, I almost pulled away at the sound of my name, looking over when my other half inched closer to me.

"I know you have already given your word about this to the Qenans and your splinters," Nylion said, "but will you promise me as well that you will not close the tear?"

Such anxiety in him! He was huddled on himself, jerking his eyes over the horizon, and I tugged on him to get his attention.

Why don't you want me to close it? I asked.

Almost immediately, Nylion flicked his eyes away from me.

"I have my reasons," he said. "They mostly involve avoiding pain and staying alive."

Staying alive?!

Nyl. Should I be worried?

With a half-smile, Nylion said, "So long as you do not close the tear, no."

You won't give me more than that, will you?

Of course, I didn't get a response, but for some reason, the lack of one didn't bother me as much as it had in the past. Maybe over the years, enough people had hidden secrets from me that I'd learned not to take it personally.

Accepting the same treatment from the one who was so thoroughly enmeshed with me rankled a bit more, but I gathered through our bond that this secret was something for Nylion and Nylion alone. Before our forcible separation, the concept that one of us could keep something from the other would have raised my hackles. Now, I understood, and when Nylion unleashed a torrent of reassurance on me, I let go of my worry. My other half would tell me if I had something to fear.

In the end, whatever Nylion's reasons were for keeping this secret, it was easy to say, *I promise*.

Topping yet another rise, we caught our first glimpse of man-made blocks in the distance. As we approached these, the terrain's inclines steadily decreased in angle to almost nothing, and before long, we hiked into the midst of crumbling buildings.

Mostly made of stone, these former homes looked almost identical to human buildings throughout the known world, save for the decorative streaks of obsidian that lined their window frames and sidings. Doors were practically non-existent, having succumbed to mold, mildew, and insects. Evidence of paving stones crunched beneath our boots, and exposed pipes, brought into the open by a natural disaster of some sort, glinted in the sunlight. Nature had long ago begun its reconquest of stolen territory with grass invading homes and vines scaling walls.

My regiment of soldiers twitched at every aberrant noise, and several had drawn their swords or army-issued pistols. The ruins made even my skin crawl, so I couldn't blame my soldiers for being cautious.

When we stumbled upon a square, replete with a well's remnants, I brought us to a halt. Good lines of sight, sufficient cover in nearby homes, and a potential source of water. It was probably the best place to set up a base of operations that we'd find.

"This is far enough," I said. "I'll go on alone."

The soldiers relaxed with their shoulders loosening, and nervous chatter quickly struck up. As they started settling in, Little pulled me to the side.

“You can’t continue by yourself, sir,” he whispered. “If he learns I let you, Middle will kill me.”

“Little. Come on,” I said, trying not to look down my nose at the spy. “We both know how this game goes. You protest. I propose a counterpoint. You agree with me, making me promise not to tell Oswin, and I don’t mention the lapse of protection the next time I see your spymaster. Can we skip it this time? When have I ever told Oswin about my solitary excursions?”

Deflating, Little made a sour face.

“As you say, sir,” he said. “Please, be careful.”

“I always am. Look out for them.”

I nodded toward the soldiers, who were already forming a loose perimeter.

“I will,” Little said.

Abandoning my retinue freed me to chase the unnatural sense of dismay seeping into my every pore, the one that had been afflicting me and my soldiers since entering the city. Within another quarter mark, though, I had no need to follow that feeling’s vague sense of direction, not with Bright and Dim shuffling in front of me like the dead walking.

From there, finding what I sought was easy enough. When my splinters abruptly stopped, I barreled through them, cringing before I remembered they were incorporeal. I searched for what had made the two halt so unexpectedly, quickly finding it.

Cracks, much like I’d seen around other tears, began appearing on my side of the buildings ahead, presumably the ones that were blocking me from the center of the city. While looking for an opening through this barrier, I ended up climbing through a particularly rundown building’s window. The second floor of this home had collapsed into the first, making a gashing rent in the wall that faced the city’s center, but I stopped short before emerging from the house’s shelter, struck dumb by what was waiting for me outside.

The hairline cracks from the other side of the buildings culminated in a network of widening fissures on this side. On top of this, the long-abandoned city’s citizens had constructed a thin platform.

The tear floated above this stone podium.

It was about six feet tall and four feet wide, but instead of the expected black center surrounded by wispy white, this tear jerked and twitched and frazzled. Its unnerving black interior bulged from its neatly contained center, and its white border reached with jagged tentacles to impale the buildings enclosing it.

The black part had almost entirely engulfed several disorganized tables, sitting on the platform, with wires and glass globes sprawled on top of them. I assumed that here, Qenan scientists had been laboring over their secret project before their tear had gone on the fritz.

While I watched, the tear distorted from its normal, elliptical shape into something that resembled a zig-zag but not—the otherworldly form was so bizarre that I could find no other words to describe it—before snapping back into place.

This was what the scientists of Qena expected me to fix. Holy godsdamned hell.

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