

Chapter 72: A Harsh Introduction

Raimie

Rhylix and I walked back toward the forest, all while I wondered if we'd have to move beneath its strange canopy. I'd rather not do that, if possible, but it would be smart, if we meant to stay unnoticed in this hostile-

Ahead of me, Rhylix grunted while throwing his arm behind him, and I gaped at the arrow shaft that had sprouted from his shoulder.

Where the hell had that come from?

Growling, Rhylix jerked me to the side, yanking me out of my shock—

“Run!”

—before shoving me toward the tree line. Dim was waiting there, just standing, which was weird. I'd have thought they'd be animatedly waving me forward, shouting insults as encouragement, but they weren't. I barely had time to consider this, though, before what was happening smacked me in the face, sending my thoughts into overdrive.

At any minute, I expected an arrow to drive into me, puncturing my heart or brain or, gods forbid, my neck again, and this made me fast. How many times could I expect Alouin to rescue me from death?

When the trees had hidden me, I spun to check on my friend, meaning to bolt once I had. Instead, I careened to a halt.

Rhylix was headed for me, but it was in a limping run. Behind him, several broken arrows littered the ground, presumably snapped by the dagger he was holding, which... *holy hell*, that was impressive, but even still, he'd taken two in the side and one in his leg. And that...

No, No, no, no.

Without thinking, I sprinted for my friend, distantly hearing Rhylix's shouted protest. Shrugging his arm over my shoulders, I reached for Ele to speed us to safety and found nothing waiting for me.

No source. How had I forgotten that Bright was gone?

Then, Rhylix pulled me to his chest while spinning. Something thunked into him, swaying us, and then, his weight was on me. I couldn't support him, long and lean as he was!

Staggering, I sank to the ground, barely rolling out from under Rhylix before he hit the grass, face first.

When I went to help him up, though, my world became the arrow embedded in my friend's back and the blood bubbling around its shaft. With part of me shrieking in my head, I pressed my hands around the wound, applying pressure, but blood just seeped between my fingers, staining them red.

No. This couldn't be happening! This-!

Shooting a hand up, Rhylix shoved my head down, right before something whistled through the air where it had been. Leveraging himself off of the ground, he coughed into the grass, sending flecks of red flying everywhere.

"Still an enemy out there," he gasped.

Oh, gods. He wasn't dead. Yet.

"What do I-?"

"Don't worry about me," Rhylix snapped. "Get into the forest, and run. Find help once you lose them."

Stubborn bastard. I wouldn't leave him here. I wouldn't!

But I didn't know how to move Rhylix when I couldn't even support his weight.

"I can't believe I'm doing this."

Dim stepped into view, snapping in my face.

"Use me," they said.

Oh. Right.

Setting my jaw, I drew from Daevetch and shoved my arms under my friend.

"What are you-?" Rhylix started. "Raimie, no!"

"Shut UP!" I growled.

With Daevetch's help, getting Rhylix into a stable position across my shoulders was easy, and as soon as that was done, I was sprinting into the forest, erratically moving while Dim kept pace at my

side.

“How in the void have I helped you save *him*?” they said with their nose wrinkled.

I just grinned at them, relieved to see them somewhat returned to normal.

Once I'd lost myself in the trees, I lowered Rhylix to the forest floor before collapsing beside him.

“You shouldn't have done that,” Rhylix said.

And hell, if he hadn't sounded cold.

Shivering, I said, “Done what?”

“Come back for me,” Rhylix said with each word bitten off. “I can handle myself.”

“What was I supposed to do? Leave you behind?” I said.

“Yes!” Rhylix snapped, collecting his strength before he could continue. “While in the Withriingalm, I told you that I couldn't see you on death's door for a second time, and it's already happened again. I can't do it a third time.”

Pausing in massaging my leg muscles, I straightened, eyeing my friend's trembling body. How much of that was caused by anger, and how much was the arrows jutting out of him?

“Rhy,” I said, firm and with no room for question, “you need to understand something about me. I appreciate the need for self-preservation. Trust me, I get it, but to me, some things are more important than my safety, including my friendships. You cannot ask me to leave you when you're hurt because I won't do it. It will never happen.”

I stopped for a moment, making sure I'd been heard, before waving a hand over Rhylix's body.

“Now, what are we doing about those things?”

Sighing, Rhylix said, “Pulling them out.”

Drawing back, I frowned at my friend.

“Isn't that the opposite of what you're supposed to do?” I asked. “Shouldn't we leave them in place until a healer can remove them?”

Giving me an odd look, Rhylix said, “In most instances, yes, but it wouldn't be wise now. How do you know about that?”

“You may not have noticed this yet, but I read a lot,” I said, “and I remember most of what I read.”

“...Interesting.”

Shaking his head, Rhylix grabbed the arrow shaft in his thigh, walking his fingers into his leg until he had hold of something deep in the muscle. Then, he ripped it free, hunching on himself with a hiss.

“You understand what I did there?” he said after a moment. “You’ll have to take care of the one in my back and quickly. We can’t know if or when our attacker might come looking for us.”

With a sigh, I said, “Fine.”

Shuffling across the forest floor, I got behind my friend as he started extracting the arrows in his shoulder and side.

While examining my current challenge, I said, “Why would you jump in front of me like that? At least I’m wearing armor, even if it’s just hardened leather. You only have your cloak.”

“And if the archer was using a long bow, who was wearing what wouldn’t have mattered,” Rhylix faintly said. “The arrow would have punched through your armor like it was cloth.”

Grunting, he yanked another arrow out of his body, dropping it on the first while clutching at his side.

After a moment, he continued, “It was a lucky shot anyway. From the arrows’ trajectory and how I was angled, I hoped that it would bounce off of Silverblade.”

He jerked his thumb to where a pommel was peeking above his thrown-back hood. Momentarily distracted by the sight, I gaped at it.

“You have my *sword*?”

“I paid well for it,” Rhylix said. “I certainly wasn't going to let it sink with the ship.”

“I thought you said we were unarmed,” I said, narrowing my eyes.

With an exasperated sigh, Rhylix pulled another arrow free before repeatedly slapping at the ground.

“A single dagger and a sword do *not* make one armed in Auden, merely... prepared,” he groaned. “Please, Raimie. Stop stalling. Get the arrow out of my back.”

Right. That. Rhylix had been acting so normally that even with him extracting arrows right in front of me, I’d forgotten he was injured. If our places had been reversed, I’d be incoherent with pain or flat-out dead to the world right now.

Given that, how was Rhylix so lucid?

Shaking my head, I got my hand around the arrow shaft before following Rhylix’s example to the letter, wincing all the while. When I touched metal, I tugged, grimly satisfied when the arrow

popped free of my friend's back.

Until blood started pulsing from the wound left behind.

As it splashed over my arms and legs, I bore down on my friend's back, searching for something to stem the flow of his blood. My abruptly gained detached state, one I was well-practiced in, fell apart when Rhylix collapsed into the grass without a sound.

His bleeding had slowed to a trickle, but in the short time that it had gushed from him, it had soaked my arms to the elbow. Gods, it was so. much. blood. and Rhylix was lying so still in the grass and leaves.

Before I could panic, white light flashed in the encroaching dusk, and Rhylix gasped, shooting upright.

Awkwardly rubbing at his back, where a patch of Ele now covered the wound, he said under his breath, "Damn it, I get it, Alouin."

And at my back, Dim growled, "That cheating bastard."

I barely heard them, too caught in the abrupt switch of my friend's state.

"Are you... ok?" I said.

With the barest tensing of his shoulders, Rhylix glanced back at me, grinning.

"For now," he said. "I'll need another healer soon, but Ele can sustain me until then. Thanks, Raimie. You did a good job."

"Really?" I snapped. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looked like I killed you."

"Well, obviously, you didn't," Rhylix said, rolling his eyes. "I told you about this Ele application, remember?"

Almost, I accepted this explanation, but when Dim started hissing at my back, I just crossed my arms, watching Rhylix. Curious if I'd get the truth.

Frowning, he said, "I also told you about how it only works for a short time period, so we should locate our friends as quickly as possible. Pretty sure that's the only place we'll find a healer."

So... that was a no, then.

With many a wince, Rhylix got to his feet before looking down at me, and gritting my teeth, I decided to drop it for now. I could always bring it up again once we were safe.

"So far, I don't like your homeland, Rhy," I said.

Chuckling, Rhylix said, "It's not so bad. I promise. The land itself is quite beautiful. It's the people who aren't so nice."

Glancing around the darkening forest, I shivered. How could a place like this be so freakishly still?

"Wait to make your final judgment about it until you've seen it in the light of day," Rhylix said, leaning forward to help me to my feet.

As he ducked, something flew over his head, and a throwing knife embedded itself in a tree behind him. For a moment, I lost track of time, but when I gained it again, I was plastered against a tree trunk with Rhylix copying me behind the tree at my side.

"Gods, I knew we were taking too long," he gasped, banging his head on the trunk. "Of all the poor luck, running into a patrol now."

He looked like he was about to try something stupid, so I preempted him.

"Uh-uh. You're injured," I said. "Give me Silverblade, and start running."

"Raimie-" Rhylix started.

"I won't do anything stupid! Just distract them for a bit before running myself," I hissed. "I'll be fine. Trust me, Rhy."

He didn't want to, I could tell, but something convinced him to do as he was told. Awkwardly, he unsheathed the sword hanging from his back before tossing it my way. I obviously didn't catch it—I'd like to keep all of my limbs, thank you—but once it had thumped to the ground, I scooped it up.

"You want the scabbard? You'll have to come get it," Rhylix said. "Good luck."

But then, he was off into the trees. Taking a calming breath, I found Dim and raised an eyebrow.

"Your enemy is to your left," they said. "Twenty yards and closing."

Back to subdued, huh? That was interesting. Given how antagonistic they'd been toward one another, I hadn't thought Bright's loss would affect Dim so much.

Gods, I could really use an Ele splinter right now. The forest had tipped over into night, but with no moon to provide illumination yet, I couldn't see shit. If Bright had been here, this wouldn't be a problem.

Yes, focus on that and not on how much it hurt that they were gone.

"Enemy in range," Dim said. "Preparing to round the tree now."