

Chapter 73: Enemy or Ally?

Raimie

Raising Silverblade, I caught the first blow on it. My attacker, small and lithe, sprang away before diving in with a series of strikes, ones I desperately dodged or blocked.

Even still, glancing blows got through my defense. While Dim's help was essential to staying alive, their whispered directions were nothing compared to seeing each jab as it came. Add to that the forest's tricky flooring, and I was soon flat on my back, rolling away from a chop at my neck.

I couldn't keep this up.

On my feet, I took off into the trees with my eyes closed. They weren't doing me much good right now.

Gods, I could use Bright.

Something snagged my foot, and I went tumbling, but before I could get up, footsteps caught up with me. Weight slammed into my lower back, making me eat dirt as I coughed.

Shit.

Something instinctual, built into the base of me, swelled at the risk to my survival, and this primal urge lifted a cry in my mind.

BRIGHT, I NEED YOU!

As a glow bathed the forest, someone coughed.

"I... exist?" Bright gasped.

No time to wonder at their appearance. As soon as I felt my Ele source, I pulled a sip of it to my hands.

Before I could fling my enemy off of me, though, they grabbed my wrists, pinning my hands between their legs and my hips, and cold steel was pressed against my skin. With nothing else, I stopped fighting, becoming a rag doll beneath this person who... wasn't killing me.

Huh.

“Who are you? How are you doing that?”

A woman?

...Why did that surprise me?

“Doing what?” I asked.

That had sounded muffled, even to my ears, and in response, the point, jabbing into my neck, dug deeper, drawing blood.

“Don’t play games with me, Kiraak. I’m not in the mood,” the woman snapped. “If you answer my questions without trouble, I’ll cleanly separate your head from your shoulders. If not, who knows? I can see little pieces of you scattered in the bushes and trees.”

What? Was she godsdamn serious?

Ok. Ok, ok. No panicking. I could do this.

“I’m not a Kiraak, whatever that is,” I said. “My friend and I have been separated from our companions. We were trying to find them when you... or I assume it was you, attacked us.”

“Right...” the woman drawled. “Because humans often wander through the Cerrin Forest alone.”

Uh...

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “I’ve spoken the truth. Why would I lie, given my position?”

While the woman considered that, I reached out for my Ele source only to find it missing again, which was concerning. I had heard Bright just now, right?

Also, where was Dim, and why hadn’t I accessed Daevetch in that moment of panic? It would have worked just as well. I wasn’t sure about using it now, not when I might be getting somewhere with this woman. From what I could tell, Daevetch didn’t discriminate when it came to keeping people alive, and I wanted no more deaths on my hands.

“Say I was inclined to believe you, *which I’m not*,” the woman said. “How do you explain your friend’s living, breathing state? I shot him through the heart, yet he lives. Only Kiraak can do that.”

They could? That was interesting. And a little intimidating.

Could I tell this woman why Rhylix was alive? It could get him in serious trouble.

Then again, perhaps primeancy wasn’t as reviled here as it was back home, and who knew? Considering the Kiraak thing, maybe they had a different type of magic here.

The sharp edge on my neck pressed down again, and I stiffened.

“Ok, ok! Gods!” I shouted. “My friend and I have magic, all right? It can keep someone alive for a time, no matter the injury, but the effect is temporary. If I don’t find Rhylix a healer soon, his hold on his magic *will* slip, and he *will* die.”

On top of me, the woman turned to stone, loosening her hold, while her weapon fell away from my skin. I wasn’t sure why she was reacting like that, but I took advantage of it anyway, ripping an arm free so I could blast her with the Ele I was still holding. As soon as her weight was lifted off of me, I jumped to my feet, scrambling for Silverblade.

Whatever came next, I’d be ready for it. I hoped.

Without Bright to help, I had to rely on the moonlight to see, but it did somewhat reveal my surroundings and my foe. She was already on her feet with her head cocked at me, and when I didn’t attack her, she lifted her hands into view before hanging her strange-looking weapons from her belt.

I didn’t return the courtesy.

“Good reflexes and instincts,” she said. “Ok, possible Kiraak. Where’d your friend run off to?”

With a snort, I controlled my snickering until I realized she was serious.

“I’m sorry. Why on earth would I tell you that?” I snapped. “You attacked us, and I have no idea who you are. For all I know, you’re one of these Kiraak that keep getting mentioned.”

Softly laughing, the woman said, “Come on. If I were Kiraak, you’d already be dead. You know that. Although...”

She tilted her head the other way.

“If you *are* Kiraak, that begs the question of why you haven’t come howling for my head yet. The lack of visible Corruption could mean that you control the bloodlust, though,” she said before shaking her head. “In any case, if you need a reason to lead the way, would it help if I knew a healer who might look at your friend?”

It would certainly help me with listening to her. Sure, a civilian who’d accompanied us, Chela, was a decent enough healer, but I wasn’t sure if Rhylix and I could reach her in time, especially in the dark. When weighing his probable death against possible danger, which won out?

“How do I know you won’t attack us when we’re together?” I asked.

Shrugging, the woman said, “You don’t.”

Great...

Well, now that I had some sense of my opponent, I thought Rhylix and I could take her, even if he was injured, and since I’d have time to prepare, maybe I’d remember to use Daevetch this time.

Where the hell was Dim?

"I don't know where Rhy was going. We didn't get a chance to discuss it," I said, "but I know which direction he took from the last place I saw him."

"Better than nothing. I can take it from there," the woman said. "Tracking you here was easy enough. You left quite the trail."

At that, I tensed. I'd figured it was the case when she'd said she'd shot Rhylix but...

"You *did* attack us on the cliff," I said.

"Mmhmm," she said, "and I'll apologize for it once I'm sure this isn't another Enforcer trick. In the meantime..."

Stepping to the side, she beckoned for me to take the lead, which I did with my skin prickling. Having a potential enemy at my back was not a pleasant sensation.

Fortunately, after I found where the confrontation had started, our positions switched, but then, I ran into another problem. In the light of day, I'd have had no trouble with hiking through this forest, could even have helped the woman with tracking, but in the dark, I was struggling to stay on my feet.

"You're very loud," she said after a while.

"Forgive me for my lack of night vision," I said.

I couldn't give her more than that, concentrating on foot placement as I was.

"You made light appear before," the woman said. "Why not do it now?"

"I can't," I said. "Something's wrong with Bright."

The woman gave me a momentary break from splitting my focus, but it didn't last long.

"What's Bright?" she asked.

Tripping over a root, I barely caught myself before making a face. Getting another mouthful of dirt around this quasi-hostile woman would be embarrassing.

"Who, not what," I said. "Bright's a splinter of... Order is what Rhy said. They're my source to--"

Cutting off, I stopped short.

"Why am I telling you this?"

"How should I know?" the woman said. "Maybe you don't find me threatening."

She crouched to inspect the forest floor.

“Oh, you’re plenty threatening,” I mumbled before raising my voice again. “Do you have a name?”

Well, that had been a dumb question. Of course she had a name. Everyone had that.

Rising from the ground, the woman dusted off her hands before glancing at me.

“Do you?” she said.

She walked off, leaving me tripping over myself to keep up. Should I answer that question?

Why wouldn’t I, though? Nothing bad could come of it. Right?

“I’m Raimie,” I said.

Glancing over her shoulder, the woman shook her head.

But she said, “Ren.”

Why did that name sound familiar? I could have sworn I’d heard it before. Recently.

I chewed on this for a while, blindly following the woman. Giving her my trust was probably a bad idea, but what else was I supposed to do? I didn’t know this forest, which meant I couldn’t easily walk through it at night, and sitting around until daybreak didn’t seem wise.

Slowing to a stop, Ren turned in a circle while scanning the ground, and I carefully watched her.

“The tracks are muddled here,” she said. “I can’t tell which way he went unless...”

With a pop, Rhylix appeared beside Ren in a wash of light.

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