

Chapter 75: Reuniting with Her

Rhylix

I've even attempted suicide as my desperation has increased.

She was alive. Even as I watched her finish her meal across from me, I couldn't quite believe it. All these years, I'd thought her dead, another victim of the Kiraak and... me, but she wasn't.

I was curious if Creation had known she'd survived, but summoning them didn't seem like a good idea. Not only did they and Ren have a rocky relationship, but I'd rather not lose my temper with the nuisance right now.

Not when I was so light inside that I might float away. Gods, when was the last time I'd been so free of the guilt and self-loathing ever hovering over me? I looked at my sister and couldn't quite believe she was here because...

"How are you alive?" I said.

Pausing in licking her fingers, Ren grinned.

"I made new friends," she said. "What about you?"

With a small smile, I said, "I did as you told me. Ran far away."

"Since when have you done as you're told?" Ren said, crossing her arms.

"Since when have you been good at making friends?"

Ren raised a finger to object before blowing hair out of her eyes, which quickly had us dissolving into snickers.

Wiping my eyes, I said, "You've gotten pretty good at dodging questions."

"Thank you!" Ren said. "I learned from the best."

When she smirked at me, I rolled my eyes before falling into the grass, listening to the signature quiet of the Cerrin Forest. Nothing but trouble had dogged me since I'd dragged Raimie out of the sea, but even still, it was good to be home. I'd been away from this land for longer than usual this time, as evidenced by how many arrows had pin-cushioned me earlier, and in that time, I'd forgotten how much I missed it.

What could I say? Something about it just called to my essence.

"Your friend fell asleep," Ren said. "He said he'd keep the watch and *fell asleep* instead!"

With a fond smile, I closed my own eyes, resting them for a moment.

I wasn't sure what was going on between my sister and Raimie. In the past, I could judge how much she liked someone by how much hostility existed between them, but years had passed since then, and she'd grown up.

"I know," I said. "I heard his breathing rate transition to a sleep rhythm a while ago."

"Then, why aren't you scolding him for failing in his watch?" Ren snapped.

Ah, yes. That oddity of this land's people. Hell, Raimie and the others had quite the adjustment to look forward to.

"Raimie wasn't volunteering to take *the watch*. He was probably uncomfortable, using it as an excuse to give us space," I said. "Compared to us, he's lived a sheltered life. He doesn't yet understand how important the watch is."

While Ren digested this, I let my arms fall to either side before cracking my eyes open. Even partially concealed by the forest's canopy, a familiar configuration of stars shone down on me, and like I'd done in my youth, I marveled at their splendor, trying and failing to count them.

"Who is he, then?" Ren asked, breaking the spell. "Is he *the* friend? The one you were waiting for in the fairy tales you told when we were kids?"

Wincing, I said, "I should never have shared my story. It doesn't end well for anyone who hears it."

"Well, I'm fine. Maybe there are exceptions to your perpetual expectations of doom and gloom," Ren said. "So, spill it. Who is he?"

Sitting up, I crossed my legs.

"He's my ally, the one who'll get me close enough to do my job, yes," I said, "but he's also my friend. Really, truly my friend."

"But... you don't have friends," Ren said.

I shrugged in response. What else was I supposed to say?

When it became clear that she'd get nothing further without prompting me, Ren said, "So, where did you find your friend? Was it in the same place you've lived for this whole time?"

This conversation wasn't going in a direction I was comfortable wandering into. Not yet.

"It wasn't the same place," I said, "but we lived near one another for a time."

"And where was that?" Ren asked. "Was it far from here?"

Damnit, Ren.

"Yes, it was very far away," I said.

For a moment, Ren stared at me, unmoving. It made my skin prickle.

"Brother, don't forget that we grew up together. I know how to make you talk," she eventually said. "We may have gotten older, but I'm sure I can once more find the spots that made you scream with laughter before. Don't make me experiment until I do."

When I said nothing, hoping she was bluffing, Ren got halfway off of the ground before I thrust my hand out.

"That... won't be necessary," I said.

With a smug smile, Ren dropped into the grass.

"Good," she said. "Now, talk!"

Sighing, I said, "I've been to a lot of places since... that day, but I ended up in a city called Allanovian."

"I've never heard of it," Ren said, cocking her head.

"That's because..."

Groaning, I rubbed my face.

"Allanovian's not in Auden."

With her breath catching, Ren widened her eyes to an alarming degree.

"You mean...?"

"I crossed the sea to the land on the other side," I said, "but trust me when I say that it's not the paradise we always dreamed of. Not even close."

Deflating, Ren stared at her hands for a moment before swinging her gaze toward where Raimie was sleeping.

“That’s why you said he’s had a sheltered life,” she said.

And this was another step in a direction I didn’t want to take.

“Yes,” I said, hoping that would be enough.

But Ren looked at me with bright eyes, and I knew it wouldn’t be.

“Tell me about him,” she said.

See?

“I don’t know much about Raimie from before we met,” I said. “Apparently, he and his family lived in the middle of nowhere for years, but during our journey to get here, I saw things that have led me to believe this may not have been the case, although I’m not sure how that could be. Raimie says he was born in a forest on the border of Ratchav and Ada’ir, two kingdoms across the sea, and I’ve never seen any reason to doubt that *in him*, but... I don’t know. Those are just speculations.”

Maybe said speculations would throw Ren off.

“Interesting,” she said. “How did you two come to meet, then?”

Well, that hadn’t worked.

“He was taken from his home. Nearly died during the incident,” I said. “Fortunately, I was there to save his life.”

Ren snapped her eyes to slits. Hell. She knew I was keeping something from her. It had taken her long enough to figure it out.

“And why were you there?” she growled.

Slumping, I said, “Because I was drawn there, both by him and- and another primeancer. Teron, to be exact.”

At that, Ren just blinked at me for a moment.

“Teron. The Enforcer for this region of Auden,” she said and when I nodded. “Why was Doldimar’s top Enforcer with your ally, Rhy?”

Pulling in on myself, I said, “He was trying to kill Raimie.”

“...Because?”

Godsdamnit, Ren.

“Because Raimie found Shadowsteal, all right?” I snapped. “Why the hell else would Teron leave Auden?”

After a beat, nervous giggling filled the space between us.

“You’re joking, right?” Ren said.

With a long sigh, I said, “It’s not a joke.”

Ren’s giggling cut off.

“You’re serious,” she said. “But... but that means he’s one of them! And you’re *friends* with him?”

Jumping to her feet, she took a step toward Raimie with her hand on the hilt of her *eshvik*, and if I hadn’t known my sister better—or thought I did, at least—I might have scrambled to my feet to stop her.

As it was, I folded my hands in my lap.

“I thought you’d be the last person to judge someone for their heritage,” I said. “When we were younger, you always hated how often people excluded you.”

“That’s different!” Ren hissed. “Because of mom and dad, another half-Eselan was born into the world.”

She jabbed at herself with a thumb before pointing toward Raimie.

“His family let countless people suffer and die!”

“And Raimie’s to blame for what they did?” I said. “As far as I’m aware, he’s never harmed a single person who didn’t deserve it. The night he first took someone’s life, he came to my clinic, drunk off his ass, and *cried himself to sleep*, it disturbed him so much.”

Ren had lowered her hand from her weapons, turning to face me, and certain I had her attention, I continued with something I’d been rehearsing for the last few weeks.

“Getting to know him as I have, I know that if Raimie had been king when Doldimar rose to power, that evil bastard would never have conquered Auden. He wouldn’t have let his allies fall, and he most certainly wouldn’t have let the Dark Lord into his domain. He can’t help it that the coward holding the throne at the time was his ancestor.”

Plopping beside the dying fire, Ren crossed her arms.

“I suppose I can judge him for myself before deciding whether to end him, then,” she said.

“That would be wise of you,” I said with a slight smile. “I’d hate to bring my own sister down.”

“What makes you think you could?” Ren said, smirking. “It’s been sixteen years, and I’ve been here while you’ve been relaxing on the other side of the sea. You may have always won our fights when we were kids, but do you really think you can take me after all these years?”

I'd stopped paying attention to her, though. With my eyes fixed on the darkness around us, I extended a hand to Ren.

"Can I borrow a blade?" I said.

Ren was already offering me the short sword strapped to her back.

"It's the only extra weapon I have. Sorry," she said. "You heard it too?"

"Mmhmm. A while ago," I said. "I was hoping they'd be smart enough to find easier prey."

Rocking to my feet, I swung Ren's blade before making a face. Its weight and reach were wildly different from my typical sword and dagger combination, but I'd adjust accordingly. I was a child of Auden, after all. Adapting was what we did.

"How unlucky for them that they weren't," Ren said. "Does your friend know how to fight?"

"He's getting there, but there's no reason to wake him up," I said. "I only count four. You?"

"The same."

On her feet, Ren kicked dirt over the fire before pressing her back to mine, joining me in scanning the trees.

It didn't take long for the enemy to emerge from cover, encircling Ren and I with many a sneer. In the limited moonlight, I could barely make out the black lines crisscrossing their bodies, which had me fiercely grinning.

Finally. I wouldn't have to hold back.

"Where's the fourth one?" Ren said. "I lost track of them a few minutes ago."

"He's watching us from between the trees," I said.

At that, two of the enemy hissed while the woman among them beamed.

"Esela!" she shouted. "Maybe we'll get to eat tonight, boys."

As the fourth of them ambled toward his comrades, Ren nudged me.

"How many do you want?" she asked.

"I *want* all of them, but I also don't want to leave you out of the fun," I said. "So, let's split. Fifty-fifty, yes?"

"Sounds good."

"Aw, would you look at that?" the woman cooed. "They think they can take us."

Lowering her weapon, she turned to the man beside her.

“We should end this quickly so-”

With a flash of light, the woman’s head tumbled from her shoulders.

Never let it be said that Kiraak had bad reaction times. As soon as I’d pulled from Ele, they’d rushed the ‘weakest’ of their prey.

What a mistake.

Ren met them with a laugh, dancing between their attacks. Landing blows on two of them, she let the third sprint into the woods, leaving him for me to handle.

I, however, delayed in doing that. Not only would that Kiraak be easy to track, but my sister was putting on quite the show.

Flinging a knife into one enemy’s eyes, Ren leaned away from the other one’s slash at her abdomen, following up with a swing that removed several of his fingers. Roaring, the first Kiraak yanked the knife out of his eye before throwing it back at its owner. As he charged after it, Ren snatched the knife out of the air, bending under the poor man’s sword before swinging at his ankles. He collapsed to his knees while she faced her second opponent.

Clutching at his fingers’ stumps, he spit at her feet, and glancing at this with distaste, Ren tossed her recently caught knife into his open mouth. Choking, he clawed at it, and this last display had me smiling despite myself. These Kiraak couldn’t help what they’d become but even still...

“Stop playing with them, Ren,” I said.

Rolling her eyes, Ren groaned, “Fiiine...”

Lifting the sword, she twice hacked it through the choking man’s neck before doing the same to the second one. Not once had she touched her favored weapons, her *eshvik* hanging at her hips.

“What happened to your second plaything?” she asked while cleaning her blades.

“He’s running back to his masters, *which is what I wanted*. Gods. Do you think I’m an amateur?” I said with a huff. “My allies have no idea what to expect here, what with the decades-long communications blockade. I plan to remedy that, and considering I’ll get a more complete picture from the enemy rather than your friends, I’ll track our escaped Kiraak to his handlers, where I can get answers.”

With a dubious look, Ren said, “Are you sure that *you* should follow him, given your injuries? You say that you’re fine, but I know what I saw. My arrow came close to piercing your heart.”

Came close. *Ha*.

“If that were true, I wouldn’t be breathing right now, would I?”

Kneeling beside the dead woman, I inspected her weapons, hoping to replenish my own.

“Besides, don’t you remember how little I was hurt while growing up? Did I ever need a healer then?”

Taking the Kiraak’s sword, I tested its edge against my thumb, wincing when it broke the skin.

“No,” Ren said.

Giving her a significant glance, I hung the sword from my belt before moving to the downed men.

“I’ll be fine,” I said while retrieving another dagger. “Can I borrow some throwing knives?”

After she handed me a few, I shrugged off my cloak, unstrapping Silverblade’s scabbard from where it had rested between my shoulder blades.

“Will you give this to Raimie when he wakes up?” I asked, extending it to her.

Snorting, Ren said, “I’m sorry. What makes you that I’m staying here? I’m coming with you. Someone has to watch your back.”

“I don’t need that,” I said. “I need you to escort Raimie to his people.”

Swallowing hard, I lifted my gaze to the stars above.

“I shouldn’t ask this or anything else of you. When I ran away, I failed you and our family. I left you to die.”

With great difficulty, I met my sister’s eyes.

“I’m asking this favor because I have no one else.”

Wrinkling her nose, Ren snatched the scabbard from me.

“What should I tell him when he wakes up?” she snapped.

“The truth.”

Which was more than I’d given Raimie today. As I stripped off my salt-crusted tunic, Ren turned her back to me, and I hastily scavenged armor pieces from the dead Kiraak.

“I don’t like this,” Ren said. “I just got you back. What if...? I was looking forward to introducing you to my family.”

“And I look forward to meeting them,” I said as I pulled my cloak back on.

After a brief pause, Ren clicked her tongue.

“I don’t know if I can keep a soft human safe,” she said.

“You’ll do fine,” I said, chuckling.

While passing her, I hugged her head to my chest, kissing the top of it.

“I’ll be back in a couple of days,” I said. “I’d appreciate it if you left me markers.”

“Of course I’ll do that, you dumbass,” Ren said, hugging herself.

Hell, she’d sounded stressed.

Tugging her hands into mine, I said, “Hey. I’ll be fine. You’ll be fine. We survived sixteen years apart and with no one watching our backs. We can make it for another couple of days.”

Hooking my finger under her chin, I nudged her head up.

“And once I’m back, you can tell me about your new family and the many adventures you’ve had since we last saw each other. Maybe you can teach me any new combat forms you’ve learned while I’ve been gone.”

Smacking my hand away, Ren laughed.

“Like you don’t already know them,” she said. “Get out of here, Rhy. I’ll see you soon.”

With a salute, I drew from Ele before leaping in the direction that the last Kiraak had fled in.

Leaving Raimie with Ren made me cringe. I knew she could take care of him. That wasn’t the problem.

I’d lied about why I’d left this Kiraak alive. Gathering information for the war effort was a happy side benefit, but it hadn’t been my primary purpose.

I needed to get away from Raimie for a little while. In a single day, he’d come far too close to a truth that I must keep hidden, but now that he’d smelled a mystery in me like a shark would with blood, he’d circle and poke at it until it was solved. I wasn’t ready for my secrets to be laid bare.

So, I ran away, hoping that time and distance would cool off his curiosity. It was foolish, and I knew it, but what else was I to do?

Rather than thinking about it, I focused on tracking my prey, grateful for the distraction.

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