

# Chapter 77: Back to Real Life

## Raimie

With a start, I woke to the forest's quiet. Sitting up, I gradually recalled where I was and what had happened last night. In a bit, I should find Rhylix and Ren, but for now, I wanted to sit and enjoy this sense of peace, one that was complemented by my surroundings.

How could a forest be this still? Back home, even when Nylion and I had gone exploring, birdsong and leaves had stirred in the fitful breeze, breaking the quiet. This place had none of that, just an unnatural stillness that was unnerving and beautiful in its own way.

Leaning back on my hands, I heaved a sigh before freezing solid. Had I-?

Holy shit. I had! Fighting a closing throat, I circled burgeoning knowledge until I was close enough to touch it.

And for the first time in nine years, I remembered who I was.

One of two, a half of a whole, Nylion and I were the same person but different in personality. I was... well, me, and Nylion was our quiet protector, contentedly waiting behind our eyes to save us.

While this epiphany was as much of a relief here as it had been in my nightmare realm, now that I was awake, I also found it disconcerting. On the one hand, I'd lived alone in my head for nine years, and in that time, I'd learned to appreciate the solitude of a seemingly natural state.

On the other hand, remembering Nylion was like coming home to warm companionship after a long winter in the cold.

I chose to focus on that while reaching deep inside of myself.

*Are you there?* I asked.

And from within, wellbeing and joy flowed forth to fill every part of me. Shuddering, I turned boneless, thumping into the fallen leaves. I slapped my hands over my mouth, covering my ragged gasps as tears streamed from my eyes.

*Nyl... this isn't quite perfect, I know. I don't remember what it was like before, but even still,* I said. *I- no. WE can communicate here now. That's something.*

Hell, if abandoning the singular, if only for a moment, hadn't felt amazing. I'd never noticed how much 'I' and 'me' had bothered me until I'd learned that I didn't have to use them.

As amusement echoed from Nylion, I wiped my face clean, sitting up. Much as fully reuniting with my other half was life-altering, blissful, the end of the conflict that had eaten away at everything for the last nine years, I could only sit here, reveling in it, for so long. As in all things, life moved on, and because of that, I should go looking for the similarly reunited siblings.

Huh. Interesting that both such circumstances had happened within the same day.

When I made my way to their encampment, however, neither of them was there. Frowning, I crouched, hovering my hands over an extinguished fire. A scuffle had recently taken place here.

As I followed a set of tracks away from it, I called, "Rhy? Ren?"

No one responded, not that I'd expected them to. I wasn't sure what had happened, but it didn't worry me. From what I knew of him, Rhylix had probably survived this attack.

Unless his injury, the one I was suspicious as hell of, had caused a problem.

"Anyone?" I called again.

I was about to ask for Dim, hoping they'd help me scout, when Ren appeared from nowhere, plastering her hands over my mouth.

"Why are you announcing our presence to the entire Cerrin Forest?" she hissed.

At her touch, something reached into my core, paralyzing me, and I could do nothing more than stare while she cocked her head as if listening. After a moment, she nodded, pulling her hands off of me, and I suppressed the trembling that had taken hold of my extremities.

"Well?" Ren snapped.

"I'm sorry. I saw there was a fight," I said. "Why didn't either of you wake me up for it?"

"We shouldn't have had to," Ren said. "Taking the watch includes a promise that you'll stay awake long enough to keep it."

Sneering, she shoved something into my chest before stalking off. I barely maintained my hold on this, keeping it off of the forest floor, and when I could examine what it was, I blanched. Hurrying after Ren, I extended Silverblade's scabbard toward her.

"Why do you have this?" I asked. "Where's Rhylix?"

"Gone," Ren snapped. "Off gathering intel for your war effort."

That sounded like Rhylix. Of course he'd run off for something like that. Could he have also been running away from me, avoiding the explanation he'd promised me?

Making a face, I shook my head. Months ago, I'd decided that I'd trust my friend. Why would I suspect anything malicious from him?

As Ren gathered things from the encampment, I asked, "So, what happened last night? I see evidence of a struggle but..."

"Four Kiraak attacked us," Ren said. "Rhy and I took care of it."

I glanced over the campsite, crossing my arms.

"Then, where are the bodies?" I asked. "Unless... are Kiraak incorporeal?"

It seemed like a legitimate question, considering I knew nothing about these mysterious enemies, but from Ren's derisive snort, I gathered that it might have been more foolish than I'd thought.

"Incorporeal," she said, shaking her head. "No. I moved the bodies. Wasn't sure how you'd handle them."

With an eye twitching, I said, *Well. That was mildly insulting.*

Something that might have been laughter burbled inside of me, which was enough to soothe my hurt feelings, but then, Ren turned on me.

"Rhy claimed you're not from Auden," she said. "Is that true?"

He'd told *her* that?

Of course he had. She was his sister. That didn't mean, however, that I was ready to share my secrets.

Gods, I wished I could call on Dim right now. Their ability to detect ill will in others had been of enormous help recently, but if I asked for them now, Ren would see them, which she wouldn't take well. I'd have to rely on my own judgment.

"That's right. I'm from Ada'ir," I said. "Why?"

"Just trying to decide which direction to head in," Ren said, unsheathing a knife. "If you're from across the sea, you and your people came here in boats. There's only one cove nearby where they could have made landfall, so we'll go that way."

Approaching a tree, she scored a mark in it, all while I watched, before striding into the trees. I followed, keeping my mouth shut until she marked another tree. She was leaving signs for her brother.

“So. How long will reaching this cove take?” I asked.

“Several hours,” Ren said. “Will that be a problem?”

Hell, she had such scorn for me.

“No, of course not,” I said. “I just wanted to know.”

“And I want to travel in silence,” Ren said, pointing her knife at me.

Gulping, I lifted my hands. I’d faced down a queen who’d thought I was a rebel and a monster with battle magic, but something about this woman intimidated me, even as it stirred my curiosity. She was confident and poised, spurning masks, but at the same time, she’d shown competency with violence, which made me certain I didn’t want her as an enemy.

*What do you think of her, Nyl?* I asked.

Cautious intrigue welled up in me, nearly matching my assessment, and I smiled at the proof that our opinions still aligned.

As I followed Ren through the forest, I found that Rhylix’s claim from yesterday was true. In the light of day, I did like what I saw of Auden, even if it was only a sample of a forest on the kingdom’s shore. It was much too tropical to be *my* forest, but even still, it was nice. Having leaves overhead was comforting, something I’d missed over the months since leaving home.

When I paid attention, even the stillness that I’d found so unnerving was broken by the occasional noise. A rare breeze rustled the leaves, coming less often than I was used to. So far as I could tell, no birds had made this place their home, but if I listened hard enough, I could hear the buzz of insect wings.

Ren set a backbreaking pace through the woods, seemingly surprised when I kept up without a problem. She had no way to know this, but I’d grown up walking through terrain like this. Picking my way over roots was second nature to me, especially when compared to dragging my legs through the tall grass of the plains or pulling my feet free of a marsh’s mud.

From what surfaced from Nylion, I gathered that my other half didn’t find it nearly as natural as I did, although I wasn’t sure why. As kids, we’d spent so much time exploring the forest. Why would this one make him uneasy?

When Ren called for a halt, I wasn’t sure who she was doing it for. I was slightly out of breath while she didn’t look the least bit tired, but when she handed me a strip of dried meat, I understood. It was time for the midday meal.

Once we’d settled on the forest floor, I cleared my throat.

“Don’t suppose you have any water to go with this, do you?” I asked.

Rolling her eyes, Ren retrieved a waterskin from her belt, and after I was finished guzzling from it, we started on our meal.

Ren finished first, and after some fidgeting, she started pacing. Good gods, she was impatient to get rid of me. In a fit of spite, I savored each bite of my flavorless meat, taking my time with it.

My willingness to hurry wasn't helped by the pleasing picture in front of me. Wearing a loose tunic, ankle boots, and leggings, Ren walked the line between concealing her body and revealing it, which was fascinating for me.

Fortunately, that sensation was negated by the weapons on her. A bow and its quiver hung from her shoulders while various knives were strapped to her arms, and a sword and dagger, as well as two strange weapons, sat at her waist. In the light of day, I could see these odd weapons more fully, and looking at them, I wondered why someone had modified iron knuckles so that a blade had replaced what covered the wielder's fingers.

And that face! Gods, she couldn't hide a thought to save her life, but in a way, I found that... cute, something Nylion agreed with. That was directly contrasted by the unease I felt with every disgruntled look she sent my way, of course. She'd pulled her hair out of her face, binding it into a ponytail, and that black mane bounced with every step she took.

All in all? A nice distraction

Wait. Only black in her hair.

"Forgive me for presuming, but you are Eselan, yes? You have to be if you're Rhy's sister," I said. "I shouldn't ask you that but..."

I shrugged as Ren stopped short, turning fiery eyes on me.

"If you must know, I'm a half on both counts," she said. "Half-Eselan: my father was human and my mother Eselan. Half-sister: I only share a mother with Rhylix. When Mativon fell, Rhylix's father died. Our mother met my father years later."

"I see," I said. "I'm sorry to hear of your troubles."

Crossing her arms, Ren glanced to the side.

"Then, you shouldn't have asked such a sensitive question," she said.

"Perhaps not," I said.

And perhaps I should feel worse about discomfiting her, but she hadn't gone out of her way to act kindly toward me. Although...

Now that I looked at it, I typically didn't antagonize people like this. Why did I have that urge with her?

The rest of the day went by much the same as the first. Blindly following Ren through the forest, I prattled far too much at Nylion, to the point that he might have wished I'd stayed ignorant of him. In response to that thought, he sent a swell of biting petulance through me, which only made me smile.

When considering today—how easy had it been, having Nylion in my life once more?—I found myself looking at the last nine years as if through a fog. That person, wandering through his life so utterly broken? That couldn't be me. Could it? In a way, those years feel like a separate life, even if its events weren't all sapped of vibrancy.

As the sky turned orange and purple, the trees started thinning, and when we stepped onto a field of grass, sloping down to a mass of tents ahead, I blew out a slow breath. I hadn't thought Ren would hurt me, but leaving my life in an unknown's hands hadn't sat well with me.

"Aaaand I've completed the favor for my brother," Ren said. "Unless you need an escort for the rest of the journey?"

Her mocking tone soured the good mood that I'd gained over the last few hours.

"I'm good," I said, crossing my arms.

"Wonderful! Good luck with your... whatever this is."

Throwing a hand toward my people's camp, Ren stalked toward the forest's embrace, and watching her go, I found myself opening my mouth.

"Wait!" I called.

...What in the void had that been? I'd almost been done with this frustrating woman.

Stopping, Ren glanced over her shoulder, and I cleared my throat.

"Come into camp with me," I said. "Let me get you some supplies as way of thanks. You're running low, aren't you?"

I wasn't sure where I was going with this. Had my subconscious recognized an advantage in helping Ren? Had Nylion nudged me into speaking up?

When I checked, though, only bewilderment rose from my other half.

Bewilderment that Ren matched.

"All right," she cautiously said. "I'll never turn down an offer of free food, not from a non-Kiraak at least."

And there was another mention of Auden's mysterious monsters. When would someone explain what they were to me?

“Follow me, then,” I said.

As I hurried down the slope, I mulled over why I’d asked Ren to stay with me, but by the time we’d passed into camp, I had yet to decipher an explanation for it.

Things were chaotic here. Around us, soldiers were scurrying from place to place, although a few had huddled around campfires. With pots strung over the flame, they picked at their food, occasionally chatting.

I knew none of them. Besides a brief morning outside of Sev, I’d only interacted with the people stationed on the same boat as me over the last few weeks, and that group had only been a fraction of the army.

Even still, some among them knew me. Pressing their fists to their chests, they bowed, and noting this, my cheeks burned. What must Ren be thinking after observing this?

Wait. Did she know who I was? Would that be a problem here? After all, the Audish people had been living in the nightmare of Doldimar’s reign while my family had sat in comparative luxury across the sea.

At the same time, I was supposed to herald their oppressor’s end. How would they receive me?

However that turned out, I was grateful that most of the soldiers ignored me or outright stared as we passed. I understood why they did that. Ren made an impressive picture, and I was...

Hmm. What words best described me? Maybe plain?

In any case, I hoped these people’s wariness would offset any shows of respect that Ren might see.

Since I had no idea where to find provisions, I wandered through camp until I spotted a well-known face ahead.

“Give me a minute,” I said in Ren’s direction.

I barely noticed her huff of irritation behind me as I raced toward the person I’d most wanted to find here.

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Revision #3

Created 26 August 2024 04:17:40 by FatalisticFable

Updated 7 September 2025 21:25:51 by FatalisticFable