

# Chapter 80: Why Didn't You Tell Me?

## Raimie

Ren was determined to lose me and Oswin in this strange forest. In the short time we'd been following her, I'd lost sight of her a handful of times already.

Considering night was quickly falling, this didn't surprise me, even if it was concerning. If Ren shook us off her tail, I couldn't find my way back to camp.

Perhaps I wouldn't have to, though, given who was at my side. A spy from a Queen's Hand could definitely backtrack along the progress we'd made, right?

Then again, I was skeptical that Oswin was what my father had claimed he was. Since shortly after we'd entered the forest, he'd been puffing and panting beside me, not that I could blame him. Ren was taking us through a different section of the forest, and while its terrain was similar to before, we'd been traveling at a swift, climbing rate, which given the mountains looming ahead of us, we should have expected.

Still.

"You're out of shape for a spy, especially one from a Hand," I said.

Licking his lips, Oswin shot a pointed glance at me before fixing his eyes ahead.

"So, they finally told you. I wasn't sure," he said. "I'm sorry to have kept it from you, sir. Before they'd let me help, I had to agree to that stipulation."

Finally? Meaning Oswin had wanted me to know about this for a while? If that was the case, why hadn't Marcuset or my father let him share?

"As for your question, I've been stuck in Daira, mired in paperwork, for the last year or so," Oswin continued, "and that hasn't been conducive to staying in shape."

Snorting, I shook my head, letting a smile crawl across my face. I hadn't expected an answer to my original question, using it to broach the subject instead. Still, I wasn't upset to have one.

With the subject addressed, though, I wasn't sure how to continue. On the journey to Auden, I'd grown fond of Oswin. He'd been the only member of the crew that I'd found approachable. Add to that the strong sense of familiarity I'd always felt around him, and I was left with an easy companionship forming between us.

Now, though, I knew he was a spy, and because of that, I had to wonder if he'd faked the friendliness between us. I'd even dismiss the nagging familiarity I'd felt around him as a manufactured emotion if I hadn't run into it before meeting him.

And of course, there was the question of his loyalty.

Rubbing my face, I said, *I don't know what to do, Nyl. What do you think?*

Nylion would have a plan for this. He always did.

If this was so, however, he couldn't convey it with emotion alone. I got a sense of reassurance and a surge of warmth, but that was it, and I wasn't sure what either feeling was supposed to mean.

"Sir? I didn't mean to distress you," Oswin said. "Do you need a minute? I can stop the girl if you like."

When considering how Ren might react to that, I winced.

"No, I'll be ok," I said. "I'm just..."

Sucking on my lip, I scanned the trees ahead of us, wondering if we'd lost our guide. I didn't see her nearby.

"It's a lot, all right?" I eventually continued. "For one thing, how can I believe you've truly defected? No member of any Hand, especially not Kaedesa's, has ever broken faith with the monarch they serve, and yet, here you are."

I waved a hand over Oswin, frowning when I saw his rueful smirk.

"What?" I snapped.

Shaking his head, Oswin fixed his eyes on the ground.

"Sorry, sir. I'm not laughing at you. Your question is more than reasonable," he said, "but technically, I haven't broken faith with the person I serve. I inherited my position in the Hand, and at the time, Kaedesa didn't take my oath of loyalty. In fact, she never has. So, while I served in her Hand, I may have advanced Ada'ir's interests, but my loyalty has always remained with my king: you."

Freezing up, I nearly tripped over myself before I could force my body forward again.

Him too? Good gods, how many people wanted something from me that I could never give?

Despite my quick recovery, Oswin must have seen my stumble, considering how hard he'd pressed his hand to his mouth. He was acting in an exceptionally callous manner toward the man he professed to serve.

After a moment, he got a hold of himself, clearing his throat.

"Forgive me. Did you have other concerns?" he said. "I'd rather address them now than when we're surrounded by possible hostiles."

Much as it galled me to admit, he was right. I would much rather ignore the spy, his flippancy, and the conundrums he represented, but like he'd said, I should address the issues between us while we had peace.

Even knowing that, I was reluctant to mention the chief of these. Could I tell Oswin about how I'd seen him in Daira and felt like I'd known him for my whole life?

*He'd think I was crazy, wouldn't he?* I said.

Surprisingly, Nylon responded to this with another surge of reassurance. He wanted me to talk about it?

"I..." I said before sighing. "Back in Daira, do you remember how strangely I acted when we met?"

Glancing toward me, Oswin said, "Yes...?"

Oh, this was a bad idea. I opened my mouth anyway.

"I-"

From out of nowhere, Ren stepped in front of me.

"I agreed to take you to my home, not to lead you along at a leisurely pace while you yammer nonsense at each other," she hissed. "The only reason I haven't left you behind is because my brother would be pissed if I did."

She distinctly ignored the blade that Oswin was holding a breath from her skin, although he lowered it when I glared at him. Gods, for a moment, I'd forgotten how frustrating this woman was.

"So... shut up and pick up the pace?" I said, lifting an eyebrow.

"No," Ren said. "Shut up and don't move while I prepare a few things."

She stalked out of sight while I exchanged a glance with Oswin.

'Where'd you find her?' he mouthed, pointing after Ren.

Rolling my eyes, I turned aside.

*Why did you want me to tell him about that weird sense of familiarity I keep having? I said before wincing. No, don't answer that. I shouldn't have asked it here. It can wait until I return to my nightmare realm, although... it's not truly a nightmare anymore, is it? Not with you there.*

What else could I call that strange place, though? As I shook my head, Nylion leaked affection to me, and I made a face, although it wasn't directed at him.

As absolutely glorious as I found communicating with Nylion to be, it was quickly losing its charm in the face of its limitations. How I wished that I could hear his voice like I had when we were kids!

That wasn't what we had now, though. No, we had weak swells of feeling, ones that could only convey vague meaning. It was better than nothing but...

Sighing, I rubbed my eyes.

Speaking of invisible companions, I should probably check on Dim while Ren was busy. When I called on them, however, they failed to appear, which had me frowning. Curious, I reached out for my source, found it, and pulled the tiniest sliver of Daevetch to me.

So, Dim was here, if hidden behind the physical plane. Were they avoiding me?

Our last conversation had ended on a weird note. By the time we'd finished speaking, they'd seemed... afraid of me, which was troubling, and I'd sent them away after that. I could see them acting petulant enough to 'punish' me by withdrawing.

Before I could again call on them to test this theory, Ren stepped into view with several strips of cloth in hand, and as she came closer, Oswin and I gave her our attention.

"My home's not far from here, and because of that, I'll need to blindfold you for the rest of the trip," she said, raising a hand when Oswin started to speak. "You can keep your weapons. I'm not trying to defang you. It's just that keeping my home safe requires secrecy. We do the same thing when escorting survivors from Harvested villages into town."

Even with the explanation, Oswin looked unhappy with the idea, but while I didn't like it either, I extended a hand for the blindfolds.

"Whatever makes you comfortable," I said.

Nodding, Ren handed a cloth strip over, and I wrapped it around my face before tying it off. She checked my work before taking my hand.

Which meant she was *touching* me.

As soon as that registered, I was rooted in place, fighting off a vivid sense of petrification from myself and Nylion. How easily this woman could hurt us, slap us, use any of her weapons to end our life. What had we been thinking? We should rip this blindfold off and run...

Ren pressed my hand into Oswin's, taking the pressure off of me, and while I was still doused in a cold sweat, I had enough clarity to wonder why I'd had such a visceral reaction to her touch.

Unfortunately, when she tugged on my other hand, I still wasn't completely free of it. Reflexively, all of me tightened, including my grip on Oswin, and he cleared his throat.

"If I may, you should use me as the middle link while leading us along," he said. "My king would prefer to keep one hand free, the better to help if we're attacked."

Was that why anxiety was making my skin crawl?

"...Smart," Ren said.

She released me, erasing the ants skittering over my skin.

"You don't have the same preference?"

"I don't need free hands to help," Oswin said.

Even blindfolded as I was, I could see his damn smirk. Somehow, I kept my resulting laugh contained.

"I... see," Ren said.

She had nothing more, and after two heartbeats, the pull of Oswin's hand propelled me forward. For this part, Ren was kind enough to take it slowly, calling out when we encountered obstacles. Those warnings, along with the noises that Oswin and I were making, had me wincing, partially in reaction to the expressions of displeasure that I could only imagine were crossing Ren's face.

The incline we'd been climbing steepened until I was using my free hand to traverse it, although this didn't last for long. Before I could ask for a break, the ground leveled off, and for a time, Ren led us through a place with much crisper air. There was more ambient noise here—leaves rustling and water trickling—than we'd found at a lower elevation as well.

Soon enough, though, she stopped.

"You can remove the blindfolds," she said.

Oswin released my hand, and I joined him in pulling cloth off of my face, wincing when I rubbed it. I'd tied that too tightly.

When I lowered my hands, I sucked in a gasp. By an unknown magic, I'd been transported across the sea to the forest of my youth, even if this one was overshadowed by mountains.

Despite that, I couldn't stop my vision from fuzzing while my throat worked. Gods, it felt like home.

I'd never have that again.

“Sir?” Oswin said. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I said. “A piece of the past just caught up with me.”

“I see.”

Shaking myself, I glanced about the clearing with a critical eye. It seemed ordinary, outlined by trees that quickly thickened into a true forest. A cliff face, hidden by the branches and leaves to either side of it, rose into a promontory before swooping into a larger mountain. Ivy clung to portions of this cliff, nearly concealing the crevasse in its center.

With glinting eyes and a pleased smirk, Ren fluttered her hands while bowing.

“Welcome to Tiro,” she said.

Glancing at Oswin, I raised an eyebrow. Was I missing something? I saw no signs of civilization here.

Before I could ponder the question, a *crack* split the air, and the cliff face... moved.

With Nylon’s upsurge of glee making my eyes pop wide, my mouth dropped open. What on...?

As the crevasse in the cliff face gaped wider, lanterns and buildings and *people* peeked out from between it, and one of those people lowered their hands from their hips before striding toward us. I didn’t pay them much mind, too occupied by everything else I could see.

A village! The cliff face had been hiding a *village*.

Was this Ren’s home? Gods. I had more to learn about the Audish people than I’d thought.

“Did you pick up some strays again, Ren? That won’t make Dury happy.”

The person heading for us—a teenage boy, it turned out—stopped nearby while crossing his arms. As he cocked his head, his sandy hair tumbled to the side, and the mischievous grin that he showed us had Ren clicking her tongue.

“They’re guests, not refugees, Had-had,” she said. “Once they’ve spoken with Dury, they’ll keep to themselves until they can leave in the morning.”

Pouting, the kid said, “Aww... I was so looking forward to seeing you get chewed out! Although... you do have Dury wrapped around your little finger. You’d have to mess up much worse than this before he’d yell at *you*.”

“Brothers,” Ren said under her breath before gesturing to us. “Want to introduce yourself to our guests?”

The kid made a face before turning to us, but before he'd pivoted, I'd already had my hand out, ready to shake.

"Hello! My name's Raimie," I said. "It's nice to meet you."

Giving my hand an odd look, the kid said, "Likewise. I'm Hadrion."

I got the most brilliant smile before Hadrion turned his attention to Oswin.

"Who're you?"

Did they not shake hands here? From how furrowed Ren's brow had become, I'd say that they didn't. How odd.

Lowering my arm, I flexed my fingers while watching Oswin ooze charm at the teenager.

With a courtly bow, he said, "I am Oswin, good sir. If I may ask, how do you know our fair guide?"

Pulling back a bit, Hadrion glanced at Ren, who shrugged.

"She's my sister," he said. "Ren, where did you find these two?"

"I'll tell you later," Ren said.

Catching Hadrion in a side hug, she rubbed his arm while he wrinkled his nose.

"For now, where's Dury?" she said. "I'd like to finish this chore so I can return to something useful."

Despite myself, I bristled while my tongue ran away with itself.

"You know... you didn't have to bring us with you. Sure, I asked for this favor, but you could have easily said no."

Freezing, Ren glared at me with her grip on Hadrion tightening, but he didn't notice, glancing between us instead.

"I like you," he soon said. "Not many people have the balls to talk to my sister, the great Terror of Da'kul, that way."

While speaking the title, he'd wiggled his fingers, and dropping his hands, he grinned at me until Ren lightly smacked the back of his head. Then, he rubbed the injured spot with one eye closed.

"Where's Dury, you ass?" she snapped.

"I could tell you," Hadrion said, "or I could make you follow me to him. I choose option two."

At his wide grin, Ren glowered.

“I hate you,” she said.

Clasping his hands together, Hadrion said, “Aw, I love you too, Ren.”

Turning on his heel, he started toward the cliff face... gate... or maybe doors?

He started for the village with a whistle, and growling, Ren strangled the air while following him.

Seemingly forgotten, I said, “Have I made an enormous mistake, Oswin?”

“I don’t know, sir,” Oswin said with a laugh in his voice. “Have you?”

Rolling my eyes, I hurried to catch up with the Audish natives.

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