

Chapter 81: The Heart of the Resistance

Raimie

As soon as we'd stepped through the widened crevasse into Ren's home, I stopped short.

A veritable city was spread before me. Not a village. A *city*. From what I could see of it, the place was cramped and not especially clean, but it was bustling with life.

In front of me, waddle-and-daub houses lined a narrow street, illuminated by lanterns hanging from poles, but this street wasn't the only one we faced. Many others branched into the city as well.

The city itself occupied a wide bowl, and every visible street converged on the sparse fields of grain growing in its center. High above, a rock shelf extended from the valley's other side, and a carefully crafted lattice was spread from the doors behind me to that shelf. Ivy grew along the lattice, enough of it to provide cover while also allowing sunlight through.

"Are you two coming or not?" Ren called.

Jumping, I nearly fell into Oswin before frowning at Ren. She'd stopped to give us a moment? Why?

She did seem pleased by our gawking. Maybe she'd wanted to watch the foreigners marvel at her home. Not that it was unworthy of said marvel.

As I trotted to her with Oswin on my heel, I couldn't keep my head from swiveling, taking in the new sights with a sense of wonder. How had humans contrived to create this?

"Not what you expected, is it?"

Ren's voice kept me from running into her, and this close to her, I swallowed hard, wondering why my mouth had gone dry.

"I... no. It isn't," I said. "It's wonderful."

Smirking, Ren said, "Oh, good. You can have a proper reaction, given the right stimulus."

As heat flashed through me, I drew myself up, but Hadrion cut off any reply that I might have made.

“You coming, Ren?”

“Right behind you,” Ren practically sang.

Tossing her head, she ambled toward the street Hadrion was standing in, and grumbling under my breath, I stalked after her, ignoring the frown that Oswin had fixed on me.

As we moved through Tiro, I noted with surprise how busy the city was. Granted, I hadn't visited many cities, just Sev and Daira, and my time in Ada'ir's capital had been spent entirely in the castle. Even still, this one seemed to be in an uproar.

With purpose, people ran down the street, and as we approached the city's center, blank-eyed families and individuals began filling its empty space. Bawling children clutched at their parents' hands while soot-streaked adults muttered to no one, stared into space, or rocked in place.

Hell. What had happened here?

Slumped on herself, Ren asked, “My intel about Lindow's Harvest was good, then?”

Biting his lip, Hadrion clutched his elbows.

“Yes,” he said.

Nodding, Ren said, “Is Ky back yet?”

Like a spring, Hadrion bounced back from the mournful expression he'd assumed to an air of mischief once more.

“Why?” he asked. “You worried about lover boy?”

Lover boy? Someone in this world had been brave enough to romance *her*?

Huffing, Ren said, “He's not-! We're not lovers. Why does everyone keep saying that?”

“Because you are,” Hadrion said. “You just don't know it yet.”

Sticking out his tongue, he ducked Ren's swipe at him.

“Kylorian's a brother to me, the same as you,” she said. “I'll never see him as more.”

“Whateeeeever you say, big sis.”

Gritting her teeth, Ren growled, “Is. he. back. yet?”

Hadrion shrugged.

"I don't think so? You know better than to worry about him, though," Hadrion said. "This is Ky we're talking about. He's one with the impossible."

"That's true."

So... she didn't have a lover?

"How did your thing go?" Hadrion asked.

"Better than expected."

Ren flicked her eyes over me and Oswin, and for some reason, this had my cheeks burning. Why the hell had I been speculating about her love life?

As the buildings around us switched from waddle-and-daub to stone, we skirted the fields at the city's center before plunging beneath lanterns once more. Soon enough, the roar of conversations ahead distinguished itself from the city's noise, and stopping, Hadrion swept a hand that way.

"What you seek, big sis," he said.

Clicking her tongue, Ren said, "You couldn't have just told me he was home?"

"No. Where would the fun have been in that?" Hadrion said. "Anyway, here's where I leave you. Oswin. Raimie. If you have time once you're done with Dury, you should find me. I'd love to chat."

The teenager started back the way we'd come, but before he could escape, Ren landed a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you avoiding dad again?" she asked.

"What do you think?" Hadrion snapped.

But then, he hugged himself.

"He'll put me in charge of the refugees again, and I... I can't. Their blank faces remind me of-"

With a gasp, he fell silent, and wincing, Ren patted his back.

"Then, maybe you should practice your sword forms more," she said. "Dad will never send you out with Kylorian until you've mastered them."

Hadrion sighed.

"Yeah, I know," he said before brightening. "Thanks, sis!"

Spinning, he hugged Ren before taking off. Ren shook her head while watching him go, and summoning my courage, I cleared my throat.

“He’s your brother?” I asked. “How does that work with Rhy...?”

Unsure how to finish that, I wildly flailed, and Ren chuckled.

“He’s my adoptive brother, same as the Kylorian we mentioned,” she said, “and you’re about to meet the man who’s become my father.”

I waited until Ren was out of earshot before muttering the only response I could have given to that.

“Oh. Goodie. Just *great*.”

As Oswin snorted, I resigned myself to meeting the man who’d guided Ren into the woman she was.

We found him in a square, one that was packed full of people. Rather than push through them, Ren climbed on top of a merchant’s booth, offering me a hand once she was there. We surveyed the crowd, although it quickly became obvious which of these people was her father.

Standing on a building’s stoop, a kindly-looking man was addressing the crowd.

“-understand your discontent! We already have too little room to share and too little food to go around, and here comes another group of refugees, looking to take a chunk of both from us. Of course you want them gone!” he said. “But please. Remember your compassion, and have patience in this trying time.

“Each of you has been where the people from Lindow are now, running from a Harvest or the Birthing Grounds. Some of you found us after losing everything, and some were brought here, but all of you know what it’s like to need aid. You were lucky enough to receive it. Now, I hope you can give Lindow’s survivors that same kindness.

“As for the concerns you’ve raised, I assure you. I’m working toward a solution for our food problem, but it will take time before it comes to fruition. In the meantime, please. Once more open your doors to people who need it. Let’s refuse Teron and his ilk total victory in Lindow!”

As the crowd’s murmuring got louder, I glanced down at Oswin, wondering if he’d know the question I wanted to ask. They had a food problem. Could we help with that?

With his arms crossed, Oswin looked just as skeptical as the people in the square, but when he noticed me watching him, he shrugged.

‘Maybe,’ he mouthed. ‘Need more details.’

Yeah... that was what I’d thought. Still. I was glad to know that helping these people wasn’t off the table yet.

Patting at the air, the man on the stoop paused as his eyes caught on Ren. She flicked two fingers in a wave, which made him smile.

“You know how this works,” he shouted over the crowd’s grumbling. “Come to my home so Eliade and Hadrion can help you draw lots. If we do it quickly enough, we should have these people in homes before sunset. Spread the news, please! All of Tiro should join together for this.”

He stepped off of the stoop before another thought occurred to him.

“Oh! And town meeting in two days. We can more fully discuss the problem at that time.”

Then, he was pushing through the crowd, and Ren jumped to the ground, greeting him with her arms spread wide.

Before she could speak, he boomed, “Ren! You’re back! I was getting worried.”

As I hopped off of the merchant’s booth, he hugged Ren, squeezing far too tightly, and I lifted an eyebrow when she just laughed, patting his back.

“I was only gone for a day,” she said. “I’ve stalked Cerrin Forest alone for far longer than that before.”

“Maybe. Doesn’t make me worry any less.”

The stocky man released Ren, brushing her cheek, before turning on me and Oswin.

“Who are the bedraggled misfits that you’ve brought with you this time? I could swear I recognize one of them.”

As I opened my mouth to answer the question, Ren overrode me.

“Not people you should worry about. They’re here to discuss business with you.”

With his eyebrows raised, the stocky man said, “Something we’ll need privacy for?”

Ren nodded.

“I thought we could use Ky’s home, since he’s not here to protest it.”

“A good idea,” the stocky man said, snorting a laugh.

He ambled toward a smaller house while I struggled to contain my irritation. I knew this was Ren’s home, but that made her speaking for me no less annoying.

As I silently growled, amusement bubbled up from Nylion, and almost, this tipped me into petulance’s grip, but with a calming breath, I let it soothe me instead, entering the house when we reached it.

The building’s interior was surprisingly bare. Its only furniture was a chair and table combination on one side of its room and a pile of blankets on the other. A waist-high partition blocked one corner from sight, but besides that, everything lay out in the open.

“Every time I come here, I remember how badly Kylorian needs more furniture,” the stout man said. “He should at least have another chair. Where are his guests supposed to sit?”

Chuckling, Ren said, “When does he ever have those?”

She plopped into the chair while the stout man shook his head.

“I swear. That boy...” he breathed.

Then, he turned on me, and the concern he’d been showing disappeared beneath a mask of formality.

All right. It seemed I'd finally get the answers to the questions I'd come here to ask.

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