

Chapter 83: Maintaining Potential Allies

Raimie

When I stepped out of Tanwadur's study, I slumped before crossing the three steps needed to reach the other side of the hall. Once there, I thumped my forehead on the wall. After a busy night, I'd come here in a last-ditch effort to reason with that stubborn man, but of course, I'd left with nothing but frustration as a reward.

"You've still got a head, I see."

Jumping, I spun to find the speaker. Hadrion grinned at me with a shoulder propped on the wall.

"You're lucky," he said. "Dury tends to bite them off when he's in A Mood."

For some reason, this made me chuckle, which I'd needed.

"Hello, Hadrion," I said. "You weren't waiting for me, were you?"

Rolling his eyes, Hadrion said, "No, I'm just standing in a hallway that I rarely visit by chance."

Oo... had I made this member of Ren's family angry too? That would be unfortunate. Even if I couldn't associate with Tiro, that woman would be a part of my life for a while. How could it be otherwise, given that she was Rhylix's sister? It was one reason I'd braved the angry bear of Tanwadur.

"I'm sorry. I should have found you earlier," I said. "You said you wanted to speak with me, and I just ignored that."

Wrinkling his nose, Hadrion said, "Why are you apologizing? I heard you were pretty busy last night, and I've been asleep since then. I'd have been pretty pissed if you woke me up to talk."

Or my personal insecurities might be raising their head again.

"Nah. I just wanted to catch you before you left," Hadrion continued. "Ren's looking for you, and she seemed ready to get you out of here."

With my face souring, I said, "Oh, goodie..."

Facing Ren when I'd had no sleep didn't sound fun.

"She's been mean to you, I'm guessing?" Hadrion asked with a smirk.

"You could say that."

Crossing my arms, I started for an exit from the house. Better to be looking for Ren when she ran into me than to be 'idle'. Once we rendezvoused, we could find Oswin together, if he didn't find us first.

Keeping pace with me, Hadrion said, "That's good! If she's mean to you, it means she likes you."

I drew away from Hadrion, throwing an incredulous glance at him.

"Really."

With a nod, Hadrion said, "Yeah. It's a defense mechanism, I think. She's half-Eselan, you know, so the people she likes don't usually accept her."

As I drifted to a stop, I cocked my head. How the Esela were perceived here hadn't even occurred to me, which had been silly considering a large portion of my own people were part of that race, but even if I had thought of it, I wouldn't have connected the concern with Ren. When thinking of her and everything she was capable of, her heritage never crossed my mind.

Wait.

"Your sister *likes* me?" I squeaked.

The amusement that crawled onto Hadrion's face rose from Nylion as well, which I found interesting. My other half couldn't have picked up on a social nicety like that, considering how awkward and oblivious he'd always been about such things, but maybe his reaction was in response to how surprised I was, not what I was surprised about.

"I'd be shocked if she didn't. You seem straightforward, not conniving at all, which is her type of people," Hadrion said. "Why?"

"It's nothing," I said. "I was almost certain she hated me."

Shaking myself, I dragged my feet through something similar to mud, wondering why Hadrion's revelation had relieved me as much as it had. Maybe it was because with it, she wouldn't become a source of conflict between Rhylix and I?

Yeah. That must be it.

As he followed me into the square outside, Hadrion kept quiet. Sunlight had started fighting through the ivy and lattice above the city, and looking over the bowl that contained it, I found myself biting my lip.

My people and I would find allies elsewhere. We had to, but still, I wished it wasn't necessary. Something about Tiro's citizens called to me.

Their ingenuity in the struggle to survive. Their refusal to give up. I admired these things, and they made me want to help these people. Badly.

"Raimie?" Hadrion said. "I heard something last night, a rumor about who you are and why you're here. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

I nodded. How could I not know? While wandering around the city last night, I'd heard the same rumor, and although I wasn't sure how the news of my identity had gotten out, seeing how Audish citizens had reacted to it had been enlightening, if not in a pleasant way.

"Is it true?" Hadrion asked. "You're not from Auden, and you... found Shadowsteal?"

Sighing, I hung my head.

"Yes, it's true," I said. "Unfortunately."

Now, the teenager would spit at my feet and walk away. It had happened often enough last night.

When Hadrion rested his hand on my shoulder, I glanced up at him, furrowing my brow when I saw sympathy blazing from him.

"I'll help how I can," he said. "Most people won't be happy you're here, but give them time. With that and me doing what I can for you, they'll come around."

That was the opposite of what I'd expected, and it made my voice thick as I said.

"Thank you."

"Sure!" Hadrion chirped. "Now, I believe that's Ren, arguing with your friend on the other side of the square."

When I looked where he was pointing, I winced.

"It is," I said. "I should break them up before they get into a fight but first..."

I clapped the teenager's arm, squeezing it.

"Seriously, Hadrion. Thank you," I said. "I thought I'd never find a friendly face here."

Grinning, Hadrion said, "Well, we exist! I promise. We're just rare."

He brushed my hand off of him.

“Would you go calm my sister down? She looks like she’s about to murder someone.”

Laughing, I hurried to do as the kid had asked, waving goodbye over my shoulder.

I hoped I’d get to see him again. He was a ray of sunshine in this otherwise dark place.

The trip back to camp took much less time than last night’s journey. Sure, I was having this feeling because I was familiar with the terrain now, but even still, I wondered if on our first foray, Ren had taken the long way out of spite.

Whether she had or not didn’t stop me from bowing to her when tents, the sea, and several ships come into view.

“Thank you for providing us with safe passage,” I said. “You didn’t have to go out of your way like that, but I’m grateful that you did it anyway.”

“It wasn’t as much trouble as you might think,” Ren said. “I need to finish the scouting run that you and Rhy interrupted yesterday, and this beach is in my assigned territory so...”

She shrugged, and as I straightened from my bow, I considered what I should say next. It would have to be short and sweet. I should report what I’d learned to Marcuset and Gistrick, so I didn’t have time for anything more, but with such constraints, how could I alleviate the tension between me and Ren?

“Listen,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck, “about what happened with your father-”

Ren shot a hand up, shaking her head.

“Let’s not go there. In fact, we should pretend it never happened,” she said. “Everyone’s tempers were raised, so we all did and said unwise things, including me. So...”

Turning her head aside, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“You’re Rhy’s friend, and even when we were kids, my brother was a good judge of character. I should trust him when he says you’re a good man, especially after hearing that you went out of your way to ask my people how you could help last night,” she said. “I know I can be a little abrasive at times but...”

She kicked at the dirt before meeting my eyes.

“Can we put yesterday behind us? I’d like to start fresh. Try to get along, at least.”

My chest felt so warm and fuzzy that I had to smile, even as I wondered if the sensation was coming from me or Nylion.

"I'd like that," I said before pressing a hand over my heart. "I'm Raimie, just a simple boy who once had a simple life, and now, I'm supremely lost in a complicated land."

With a beaming smile, Ren said, "Well, I'm Ren, and I call this 'complicated land' home. Maybe I can help you adjust to it."

"That would be nice."

I glanced toward the beach before smirking at Ren.

"I'd invite you into camp again, but I don't think you'd want to come."

Snorting, Ren covered her mouth, although her eyes twinkled above her hand.

"No, I have things to do, and once I'm done with them, I should go home," she said. "Someone has to talk Dury into working with your people, after all."

"Ha! Good luck with that," I said. "I understand how impossible that might be after apologizing to him this morning."

Ren went still, even as she lowered her hand.

"You *apologized* to him?!" she said.

With a nervous laugh, I shrugged one shoulder.

"Sure. It seemed the right thing to do, and I thought it might make things easier between us," I said. "Should I not have?"

"No! That was... good. Yeah. Good," Ren stammered with her face turning pink. "You didn't have to-"

Coughing, she pounded on her chest for a moment before jerking a thumb over her shoulder.

"I'm leaving now," she said. "When I can over the next few days, I'll return with updates."

"Sounds good," I said. "Good luck today, Ren."

With a look of supreme confusion, Ren said, "Thank... you?"

Then, she ran into the forest, and cocking my head, I stared at where she'd disappeared.

What was that about? I asked. *I've never had someone go so quickly from hostile to flustered around me before.*

I couldn't fully comprehend what Nylion sent back to me. The best I could do was translate it as a shrug, although that didn't seem exactly right.

“From how horrible that woman was treating you last night, you forgave her quite easily,” Oswin said. “Can I ask why?”

That was a good question, one I wasn’t sure how to answer. This morning, Hadrion had primed me for easy forgiveness by revealing the reason behind his sister’s antagonistic behavior, but there had to be something more to it as well.

“She’s Rhy’s sister and the daughter of an important town’s leader,” I said. “Keeping our relationship amicable seemed like a good idea, even if I’ll never get anywhere with Tanwadur.”

That was a reasonable explanation, right?

“Makes sense,” Oswin said. “And there’s nothing else?”

Clicking my tongue, I broke off from staring at the forest, glaring at him instead.

“There’s nothing else,” I said. “You planning on telling me what you learned last night?”

I might have caught a flash of worry on the spy’s face before his expression returned to neutral, but if I had, it had been such a short glimpse that I immediately doubted what I’d seen.

“Certainly, sir,” Oswin said. “Would you prefer an oral report, or may I have time to compose a written one?”

If allowed to read the report, I could add it to my mental index, whereas something spoken would only stick with me for a few hours so...

“Write it up for me, please,” I said. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

Giving me an odd look, Oswin said, “It’s no trouble at all, sir. I’ll bring it to you later. I’m assuming that you mean to find your family now. Let them know you’re safe?”

Right... I should probably do that.

“First, I have to speak with the people in charge of those soldiers,” I said, waving toward camp, “but yes, that’ll be next. Why do you ask?”

Smirking, Oswin said, “I can’t watch your back if I don’t know where you are, can I?”

As he ambled toward camp, I frowned after him. Why would he think I needed an extra set of eyes when among my allies?

Did that really matter, though?

I hurried after the spy, soon entering camp.