

# Chapter 90: Meeting Her Family

## Rhylix

*I beg you, for the friendship we once shared, to do what must be done.*

The dining room was laid out in typical fashion. On the room's periphery, a few other seats surrounded a table and chairs, and the candelabra on top of this arrangement aided the fireplace in lighting the space. A man sat at the head of the table with his back to us, but when Ren and I entered, he swiveled to his feet, offering us a congenial smile.

"Ren! I wasn't sure if you'd join us," he said. "Who's your friend?"

He looked me over appraisingly while I tried not to squirm from any assumptions he might have made.

"It's not like that, Dury," Ren huffed, rolling her eyes. "Please."

But then, she turned awkward, biting her lip, and I stared at her. Had she not considered how she'd introduce me?

Jerkily stepping aside, Ren waved my way.

"This is... Rhylix," she said. "My brother."

Already moving to greet me, the other man paused to give Ren an odd glance.

"Your *brother*?" he asked.

When Ren nodded, he shrugged before dropping into a short bow.

"Greetings, Rhylix. It's good to meet you," he said. "My name is Tanwadur. Please. Join me."

Gesturing to the table, he took a seat, waiting for me and Ren to deposit our plates on the table and find our own chairs. I was surprised by how easily Tanwadur was taking the revelation of my

identity, but for now, I wouldn't question it.

Once we were settled, he rested his folded hands in front of him.

"I should probably stick with social niceties until my wife joins us," he said, "but there are certain items that we should discuss sooner rather than later. You are a full-blood Eselan?"

At the tail end of those words, he brushed his eyes over me, and I suppressed a sigh. Prejudice against the Esela was prevalent everywhere in our world, but given the special circumstances, I'd thought it might be longer before I ran into it here.

"I am," I said, dipping my head in acknowledgment.

Reaching over, Ren patted my thigh.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "He's not like the rest, only asking for your safety."

Tanwadur's eyebrows flew into his hairline.

"Indeed. My apologies if I indicated anything else," he said. "I wanted to confirm because if it is so, then you should make yourself scarce until Tiro's residents have gotten used to you, which I'm sure they'll quickly do. Free Esela are so rare nowadays, what with Doldimar killing them when he finds stragglers. I'm sure you can understand."

Oh, how well I did. Even still, I had to wonder if Tanwadur had brought up the question of my race merely with the intention of keeping me safe or if he was suspicious of whether I was affiliated with that evil overlord. After all, Doldimar also liked making Esela into Kiraak.

"I appreciate your concern," I said, "but I don't mean to stay in Tiro long enough for that to be a problem. As soon as I've gotten some rest, I'll depart your city, and what a fair city it is! I never thought to find somewhere so untroubled in Auden."

That probably hadn't helped with soothing Tanwadur's suspicions, but honestly? I didn't much care. I'd spoken the truth, and while I wasn't trying to make a bad impression on this man, I refused to put a full façade on with him. I'd done that long enough in Allanovian.

He, however, appeared unruffled.

"I'm glad you like it. Making Tiro safe has been a worthwhile endeavor," he said, "But given your appreciation, I'm surprised you want to leave us so soon. As Ren's brother, you have an open invitation to stay with us, and I'd think that after so long apart, you'd want to spend more time with your sister."

That made me wince. Yes, I'd love to catch up with Ren, and if circumstances had been any different, I'd do just that. As it was, I was uncomfortable with how long I'd already stayed here.

How did I relay that without sharing too much information, though?

Before I could answer the question, the door behind Tanwadur sprang open, and the woman from the kitchen hustled inside, burdened with more dishes.

“You’d better not be interrogating our guest already, Dury,” she said. “Come help me with these.”

Tanwadur and Ren leapt to their feet so they could assist, and I followed their example, if more slowly. When it was my turn to take something from this woman, though, she shook her head at me with a huff.

“You sit back down, darling, although I thank you for your kindness,” she said. “You’re our guest tonight, and that means we treat you as one, no matter how much my husband may like to forget it at times.”

Rolling his eyes, Tanwadur said, “I was only warning him to stay wary while he’s here, Eliade.”

“Which I am *sure* he already knows to do, as any proper Audish citizen should,” Eliade said.

But then, she lightly pecked Tanwadur’s cheek.

“Sit down, love,” she said. “It’s time to eat.”

Grumbling under his breath, Tanwadur did as he’d been told with the rest of us joining him, although Eliade stayed on her feet with her hands on her hips.

“Where’s Hadrion?” she said. “I swear. That boy’s sense of time...”

As if summoned, a plain-looking teenager burst into the room, hurrying for a chair and chattering all the while.

“I’m here! I’m here! No need to get upset!”

Sighing, Eliade shook her head, moving to a seat while Hadrion started serving himself from the food in front of him, never minding the stranger in his midst.

Meanwhile, I took this in with a bemused smile. It had been a while since such normalcy surrounded me, and I must admit. I’d missed it.

Lightly slapping her son’s hand, Eliade said, “Hadrion! Mind your manners! We have a guest tonight. Perhaps you should introduce yourself?”

Hadrion never stopped shoveling peas onto his plate, although he honored me with a gap-toothed grin.

“Hullo. I’m Hadrion,” he said. “Sorry for being so rude, but I’ve been busy today. I’m starving.”

“You’re always hungry, Had-had,” Ren sighed.

When she snatched the serving spoon from him, he made a face, and I did my best not to laugh.

“No apology necessary. I know what being hungry is like,” I said. “My name’s Rhylix.”

While Hadrion screwed his face up, the rest of his family started serving themselves, but I waited my turn. The food in front of me smelled to die for, especially after weeks of nothing but hardtack, but I was perfectly aware of the impression I should make on these people. Even if I refused to fully hide myself, I could still exercise my manners.

“Rhylix,” Hadrion said, tapping on his chin. “Where have I heard that name before?”

“He’s my brother,” Ren said. “Yes, the one from my stories.”

While Hadrion’s eyes went wide, Eliade softly chuckled. Tanwadur stayed notably silent with no expression on his face. What was he thinking?

“But... aren’t you supposed to be dead?” Hadrion blurted out. “It’s been so long-”

Cuffing the back of his head, Eliade snapped, “Hadrion!”

Squinting, the teenager rubbed his scalp while I grimaced.

“No, please. He’s right to ask that,” I said. “It has been a long time since I last saw my sister, and because of that, I must thank you all. You’ve provided Ren with a loving home, something I could only dream of doing, and I’m grateful to you for it.”

“Oh, aren’t you sweet?” Eliade said. “But really, Ren’s been a blessing to us, and I thank Alouin for every day she’s stayed in our lives.”

Ren blushed at that, and keeping my lips flat, I nodded to Eliade before tucking into my meal and gods...

Groaning, I let my eyes flutter closed while leaning back in my chair.

“You like it?” Hadrion asked.

“This meal is the most delicious one to pass over my tongue in a long while,” I said before meeting Eliade’s eye. “My compliments to the chef.”

With her lips twitching, Eliade said, “Thank you, but it wasn’t just me in the kitchen, you know.”

“Don’t let her modesty fool you. My wife is an excellent cook,” Tanwadur said before turning to said woman. “I’m lucky to have her.”

“Aww...” Eliade murmured.

She laid a hand over his while Hadrion gagged and Ren snorted, and I took the opportunity to fully indulge in my fare. Once conversation resumed, who knew when there would be another break in it?

So far, this had been going better than I'd expected. I'd thought for sure that these people would express hostility toward me, but perhaps that was perceptions from my past coloring my view. Perhaps I should learn that not everyone would automatically hate me. Raimie had certainly proven that point over the last year.

I should get back to him.

Not quite yet, though. How many times must I remind myself that he could wait until morning?

After quite a while of companionable silence, Tanwadur cleared his throat.

"So. Rhylix. Why don't you tell us about yourself?" he said. "I must admit. I was quite shocked when our little bird told me she'd run into you last week. Such good fortune didn't seem possible, and yet, here you are."

And we'd moved back into a tricky topic. How did I explain myself without alienating these people?

"Trust me. I know how unbelievable my reunion with Ren must seem. I still find myself questioning it," I said. "You must understand. For over a decade, I thought Ren was dead. I was doing my best, trying to live with... what I did to her."

Abruptly, Eliade reached for me.

"You did the only thing you could," she said. "If you'd stayed with our little bird, you'd likely have died, and no one here would have wanted that."

The others at the table nodded or mumbled their agreement, although Tanwadur seemed more hesitant about it, and Eliade continued on.

"Besides, you gave us the opportunity to raise a wonderful young woman, a task that I've not once regretted doing. She's a good daughter and an amazing sister."

"Maybe to Ky," Hadrion grumbled. "She can be an absolute pest with me."

Ren stuck her tongue out at him while her adoptive parents laughed, and I rapidly blinked, trying to clear my misty vision.

"I wish I could have been here," I said.

Clicking her tongue, Ren grabbed my arm, hugging it to her.

"From what you've shared, that would have been quite impossible," she said, "so stop beating yourself up for it."

Like that would ever happen.

“Yes, what was it you’ve shared with her, or have you forgotten my original question?” Tanwadur said. “Please. Tell us about yourself. I’d like to know which of my daughter’s incredible stories about you are true.”

I quirked an eyebrow at Ren—how much had she shared?—but she shook her head. I took that to mean that any secrets she knew were safe.

That was good. I wouldn’t have to explain my way out of possible tales of primeancy.

“What would you like to know?” I asked.

“Oo! Ren says you’re a master with the sword,” Hadrion said. “Could you teach me?”

That wasn’t a question I’d been expecting, which had me shifting in my seat.

“Perhaps. As I’ve said, I plan to leave Tiro in the morning, and my situation may delay any return I might make,” I said. “Besides, I’m sure Ren’s exaggerated my skill. I wouldn’t want to disappoint you.”

All true. Ren had likely embellished what she believed my skill level to be, and given that, those exaggerations might be uncomfortably close to the truth.

Making a face, Hadrion nodded acceptance of my words while his father drew breath to speak, but Eliade stepped in before he could.

“You’re gracious with him, considering that his question was quite rude. You barely know one another, Hadrion!” she said. “Perhaps something a bit more polite should come next. So, tell us, Rhylix. What is it that you do to survive in our kingdom?”

While that was indeed a polite question, it made me no less uncomfortable. The question would require me to tell a half-truth.

“I’m a healer,” I said. “Some find my skills useful enough to provide me with what I need to live.”

My confession had Ren snorting into a glass of water while Eliade raised an eyebrow, but I couldn’t blame my sister for the reaction. Healing hadn’t been my focus when she’d known me.

“That’s wonderful! Healing’s such a rare trade to claim!” Eliade exclaimed. “You’re lucky to have those skills!”

“Yes, indeed,” Tanwadur said. “I’m curious where you could have learned them, though, or learned them well enough to make a living at least. As my wife said, that knowledge is rare.”

Eliade swiped at his arm, but I waved away the apologetic glance she directed my way.

“It’s a fair question,” I said. “In answer, good sir, I’d tell you that I didn’t learn my healing skills in Auden. In fact, since shortly after losing Ren, I’ve been living... elsewhere.”

I wasn't sure if my sister had told them about my affiliation with Raimie, although I'd be surprised if she hadn't. Still, it was why I'd hedged, even knowing such an effort would likely gain me nothing.

As I'd thought, Ren's adoptive family had paused in their meal while she'd buried her face in her hands, and in the resulting silence, I took another bite, keeping my chewing quiet.

"I take that to mean you're one of the rabble who's poisoned our land," Tanwadur eventually said, "which also means you've allied with *him*. Have you no sense of decency or pride in your homeland?"

As I cocked my head at him, Eliade gained a white-knuckled grip on her husband's arm, and both Hadrion and Ren tried to disappear into their chairs.

After taking another bite, I said, "I'm not sure what you're insinuating, but yes. I've returned home with a group of soldiers from across the sea, people whose only intention is to help Auden."

Please, say that Tanwadur would keep his cool. I'd like to finish this lovely meal without interruption, and I wasn't sure what would happen if he continued with this hostility.

Unfortunately, he was visibly seething at me now, and seeing this, Eliade faced him.

"Dury, love-" she started.

"No!"

Throwing her hand off of him, Tanwadur banged a fist on the table.

"I won't hear of this! How can you think of protecting someone who'd support him?" he spat. "That boy doesn't deserve to breathe Audish air, much less help us. Fat lot of good it'll do, I'm sure. I'm having a hard enough time with my family singing his praises. I won't have one of his supporters at my table. How weak of a mind must you have, sir, to be taken in by someone so duplicitous, so cowardly, so evil-"

"ENOUGH!"

As that roar echoed in the room, I realized I was on my feet with my chair on the floor behind me. The insults hurled at me had raised nothing from inside, but when this ignorant idiot had started in on Raimie...

I didn't know what had come over me. White-hot heat had flashed through me, melting each of the masks I typically wore, and I didn't know why.

Perhaps it was because of who Raimie had become to me. Months ago, when I'd shared how important I found friendship, I might have underplayed my convictions about it. If my past had taught me anything, it was that the people who called you friend were the most precious in the world, only overshadowed by whoever became your family.

So, if Tanwadur wanted to throw insults at me? Let him. I'd endured far worse. But Raimie...?

Leaning forward, I rested my fingertips on the table, letting Tanwadur catch a rare glimpse of everything that lay behind my masks, and he flinched.

"Raimie is a good man, one of the best I've ever known. He possesses something near unheard of in this day: an innate sense of decency and the drive to see his end goals done. Do not let your fear of him blind you to everything he truly is," I said. "I am Audish, and despite my absence from this kingdom, I have endured the suffering that's inherent for one such as us. I have just as much of a right to disdain Raimie, but having come to know him, I can say without hesitation that I will never hate or judge him. He is the only one who might free this land from the true evil it faces. Perhaps you should do the same before you reject him or defame his character as much as you have with me."

Pausing, I watched Tanwadur, making sure he'd heard me, but when he took a breath to speak, I turned to Eliade, dismissing him.

"I must thank you for the superb meal, Mistress Eliade. You have been a gracious hostess," I said. "Unfortunately, my fatigue has caught up with me. With your permission, I'll take my leave to address that problem."

Hesitantly, Eliade nodded at me, and even with the ice that had me in its grip, I internally winced. I hadn't meant to scare this family.

"My thanks," I said.

With a final sip of water, I left the table, storming out of the dining room, and behind me, a chair scraped across the floor while someone mumbled probable excuses.

When she caught up, my sister said, "Rhy..."

"Not now, Ren," I said. "I'm sorry, but not now."

Thankfully, she gave me space. In silence, she followed me to her home, speaking not a word when I entered my room and shut the door behind me.

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