

# Chapter 91: Delivering Bad News

Rhylix

*End my life.*

Hours had passed, and I was still awake, struggling to paste my mask back together.

That needed to happen before I left Tiro. If I failed to hide everything I was, I wasn't sure what the revelation would do to the people around me, especially those I cared for. Bad enough that it had shattered in front of other people tonight, if only for a time.

"I haven't seen you this upset in a while," Creation said from the foot of my bed.

They'd joined me quite some time ago, but I'd been ignoring them, too busy with my task to acknowledge their presence. Apparently, they wouldn't let me keep that up.

"It's been a while since someone's said something so upsetting to me," I said.

Snorting, Creation leaned back on their hands.

"Really?" they said. "In your life, you've endured so much torture and pain without complaint, but you fly into a rage about *this*? You must truly care about your ally this time."

Giving them a warning glance, I said, "I won't get into that with you."

"Yes, yes."

With an explosive sigh, Creation fell onto the bed, and as they bounced in place, a creak outside my window had me tensing. Could Tanwadur have sent someone to answer my earlier display?

"You're being paranoid," Creation said.

When my window started sliding open, though, they sat bolt upright.

“Hide!” they hissed.

At that, I rolled my eyes. Did they really think I wouldn't have drawn my source around me at the first sign of trouble?

When a figure clambered through the open window, though, I released my hold on it.

“Hadrion,” I said.

Jumping to his feet, the teenager scuttled away from me for a moment before freezing. Chuckling, he patted himself down while heading for my bed.

“Sorry. I didn't see you before coming in- Alouin, you're scary.”

Stopping at the end of my bed, Hadrion drew back, which made me raise an eyebrow, but with a short laugh, he climbed onto the mattress.

“By the void, that look is good! You'll have to teach me how to do it,” he said. “I'd love to cow Dury like you did-”

“Why are you here?” I interrupted.

After my performance at dinner, I doubted I could repair this boy's perception of me, not so soon at least, and I didn't have time to indulge anything else.

Giving me an odd look, Hadrion said, “I'm checking on you, of course. When you left the house, you seemed upset.”

Having settled on the bed, he was sitting in the middle of Creation's projected body, which forced the splinter to move. As they went, they made many a disgruntled noise, and this drew an unintentional smile to my lips. It certainly wasn't because of the concern Hadrion was showing me.

“That's kind of you but wholly unnecessary,” I said. “I'm fine.”

“Uh-huh,” Hadrion said. “Is that why you look like an animated corpse right now? Don't get me started on what the look in your eyes is telling me.”

Sighing, I returned my attention to reassembling my mask. What Hadrion had commented on? It was one reason why I needed the damn thing.

“This is how I am,” I said. “When I'm around other people, I hide it, but tonight, your father ripped that disguise away from me, unfortunately.”

I fell silent, hoping the teenager would get the hint and leave me alone, but he never moved, studying me while chewing on a lip.

“Well, that's just dumb,” he eventually said.

Jerking my eyes to him, I said, "What?"

If Hadrion had noticed how empty my voice had become, he didn't comment on it.

"You heard me," he said instead. "Hiding who you are is stupid. You shouldn't do it."

Oo, if hearing that didn't burn me, not least because he didn't know how much I was hiding.

Turning aside, I hissed, "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Hadrion said. "Sure, some secrets are best kept to yourself, but I doubt you have anything like that in your repertoire."

Mirthlessly, I chuckled.

"Really, kid," I said. "You have no idea."

"All right, then. Show me."

As I turned my head to Hadrion, it felt like someone had fused my spinal column together.

Again, I said, "What?"

"Show me these supposedly awful secrets," Hadrion said with an encouraging nod. "Bet ya I can take it."

As I considered this kid, my patience ran out. I had something to finish before I could get some sleep, and resting had been the point of staying here overnight. If I'd wasted time in getting disastrous news to Raimie with no benefit to me, I'd never forgive myself.

So, I turned to Creation, coming as close as I could to asking them for permission. The secret I shared with them would most likely send Hadrion away, but it was also the least damaging to me. He seemed too naïve and kind to spread a rumor that would get me killed.

I half-expected Creation to refuse me, so when they shrugged, it loosened my jaw.

"Do what you will," they said. "From what I can read of this boy's essence, I agree with your assessment."

Well, ok. That was different.

I wouldn't argue with it, though.

Fully facing Hadrion, I drew Ele to my hands.

"How about this?" I asked as it illuminated the room. "Sordid enough for you?"

As I curled my fingers into my palms, Ele's light dissipated, revealing Hadrion's bulging eyes and gaping mouth.

Licking his lips, he said, "You're a primeancer?"

I just *looked* at him, waiting for his inevitable reaction, but instead of running away or screaming bloody murder, he lunged my way. He was attacking-?

"That's so cool!" Hadrion nearly squealed. "I've heard the rumors and stories but..."

Grabbing my hands, he flipped them back and forth before meeting my eyes.

"Do it again."

More than a little stunned, I obliged the demand, and releasing me, Hadrion pattered his hands in front of his face.

"Oh, this is amazing," he breathed. "I never thought I'd meet one of the legendary-"

"Why?"

My voice had been so faint that I was surprised it had cut through Hadrion's chatter. When he looked at me questioningly, I cleared my throat.

"You should be afraid. You should be running for help, and I should be making my escape from Tiro," I said. "Why are you...?"

For some reason, this plunged Hadrion into somberness, and he hung his head.

"Don't you get sick of it?" he said before peering up at me. "All the hatred, I mean. I know I do."

Pausing, he clasped his hands together while holding my gaze.

"Look. I know the legends. Everyone does," he said, "but I refuse to believe that the past defines the future. Just because primeancers wrecked the world centuries ago doesn't mean they will now. I mean look at me! I'm a prime example of defying the expectations one should make from history. You know about the Birthing Grounds, right?"

Thrown by the change in subject, I could only blink for a moment before forcing myself to reply.

"Where the Kiraak are made."

Nodding, Hadrion said, "It's also inescapable. Well, guess what? *I grew up there.*"

For that last part, he'd dropped his voice to a whisper, but on viewing my incredulous expression, Hadrion started giggling.

"How are you sane?" I said. "No. Better question. How are you alive?"

Hadrion flapped a hand at me.

“A few years ago, Kylorian and Dury saved me from there, but that’s not the point,” he said. “Only Kiraak come out of the Birthing Grounds, and yet, here I am!”

Spreading his arms, he twisted back and forth.

“What’s happened in the past does *not* define the future.”

In the silence that followed, I could only gape at this teenager, and beside me, Creation shook their head.

“He reminds me of your ally,” they said, “if only in some ways.”

I had no response for that either, and after an interminable wait, Hadrion leaned toward me.

“So, promise me that you’ll work on dropping the mask, at least when it’s safe,” he said, “and show me what you did again!”

Laughing, I drew Ele to my hands once more, and while the teenager lifted them to nose level, I examined him.

“Hadrion?” I eventually said.

Pausing in his unceasing string of questions, the kid glanced at me, and I smiled.

“You can call me Rhy.”

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In the morning, Ren led me to Raimie’s encampment. It was a quiet journey, all told, but soon enough, tents came into view. We walked through them for a bit, wandering until we heard a group of people up ahead, and knowing we’d soon be occupied, I slowed down, pulling Ren to a stop.

“About what happened last night-” I started.

“I’m so sorry, Rhy!” Ren said, clasping my hands. “You have to forgive me. Dury overstepped, and I should have warned you about the animosity between him and Raimie.”

Snorting, I covered my mouth for a moment, shaking my head to reassure Ren that I was all right.

“I was about to apologize to you,” I said.

With her face going blank, Ren said, “Oh.”

Then, she doubled over, snickering, and I joined in with her laughter.

When I could, I asked, “Does that mean we’re good?”

With a final burst of giggling, Ren nodded, but she sobered when she saw how serious I'd turned.

"Of course we are, Rhy," she said. "What happened last night didn't even come close to upsetting me."

"Then, will you come with me?" I said, waving toward where we might find Raimie.

I could use her support.

"I don't know. If I'm to help you and Raimie in Tiro, I have things to tackle there."

Looking out over the camp, Ren bit her lip, but soon enough, a soft smile pulled it out of her teeth.

"But yeah," she said. "I'd like that."

With my shoulders loosening, I said, "Thank you."

Perhaps hearing the relief in my voice, Ren squeezed me in a hug before strolling toward the group, and I followed her, off to deliver news of deadly peril to my only friend.

We found him in the middle of soldiers. Zrelnach were scattered around the warriors from Ada'ir with one of them leading the group in a set of exercises. As we approached, I was surprised by what they were teaching. I'd thought the Zrelnach had considered that form a secret technique.

Raimie was participating as a student, of course. I was gratified to see him doing well, if not to the point that he stood out, and as we watched, I noted that Ren had seen him too. With an odd smile, she cocked her head.

"Is he wearing...?" she started.

I nodded, a little shocked myself. Where had Raimie found one of those uniforms?

Shaking it off, Ren continued, "Have you started teaching him this form? He shouldn't be doing so well with it already. They've only been at this for a couple of days."

"No, I haven't shown him how to do this," I said, "but that's just Raimie. He's full of surprises, sister mine."

She turned contemplative while the instructors led the group through the form's last few moves. Halfway through this, Raimie noticed us, and his natural proficiency increased tenfold. He flawlessly performed the exercises last few moments, which made me wonder if he'd been trying to show off.

Before I could think too hard about that, though, the group broke apart, and Raimie headed toward us.

Shit. Time to break the bad news.

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