

Chapter 95: Questions for a Friend

Rhylix

Stop the misery that I may, in my insanity, wreak upon the world.

As the older gentlemen happily set upon Raimie's plan, intent on improving it, I touched the kid's elbow.

"May I borrow you for a moment?" I asked.

After checking that Aramar had heard the question, Raimie nodded, soon leading the way out of the tent.

"How did it go?" Ren asked once we were outside.

"About as well as I expected."

Stretching his arms overhead, Raimie yawned.

"All right, Rhy, let's chat. Oswin, you can follow at a distance," he said before glancing at Ren. "Will you stick around? Once your brother's done with me, I'd like to rehash a few details of *our* plan."

"I'll be here," Ren said with a smile.

Again, I noted the easy companionship that had grown between my sister and my friend. I wasn't sure what to think of it.

Of course, I was glad they were getting along. When I'd left Raimie in Ren's hands, I'd been concerned about how I'd manage their relationship dynamic, and it was good that they were enjoying one another's company now.

Still, I couldn't help but be wary of it. Perhaps this caution was only due to my belief, engrained by past experience, that no good thing could last for long. I hoped that was it. In this, I'd love for my beliefs to be wrong.

Raimie led the way out of camp, somehow knowing that we'd need privacy for this chat, but I supposed that wasn't so surprising. He probably wanted to tear into me about the many things I'd been hiding from him, which was concerning. I wasn't sure how I'd once more avoid making those revelations while also insisting on the thorough interrogation that I needed to make of him.

When we reached the edge of the forest, my friend motioned for me to continue without him, staying behind to have a word with Oswin. Whatever he said to the man left him in place while Raimie joined me where I was standing, deeper beneath the trees' canopy, which was good. Considering how attached Oswin had become to my friend, I hadn't known how to approach the topic we needed to discuss without endangering him.

"What do you think?" Raimie asked as he came closer. "Could we begin our ambush from here, or should it be further up the hill?"

"A little further up," I said. "The trees are more densely packed there, which will make it easier to conceal so many people."

With his hands on his hips, Raimie surveyed our surroundings.

"Yeah, that makes sense," he breathed. "Hell, getting everything into place will be a pain."

After turning full circle, he raised an eyebrow at me.

"Well?"

Sighing, I said, "I know what you want to ask me about. I can't talk about it, Raimie."

"So, I was right," he said. "You're hiding something from me."

Gods, he'd sounded so detached while saying that, and hearing it, I winced.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have avoided this," I said, "but I've kept this secret close to heart for so long and talking about it has been so dangerous in the past that even acknowledging it exists is..."

Blowing out a breath, I hugged myself.

"It's hard. I look at it, and it's like an unscalable wall that you might order me to climb. I... I don't know if I can, whether now or at any point in the future."

Drawing his eyebrows together, Raimie frowned.

"All right..." he drawled before cocking his head.

Shit. I'd been right, if not about the topic that I'd been considering at the time. All good things ended, including this friendship. Raimie wouldn't be able to handle me keeping secrets from him, as had happened with so many other people, and he'd reject me because of it. Knowing him, he'd be polite with this, but I'd know what it was. I couldn't hear those words.

“You don’t have to say anything,” I blurted out. “I know how uncomfortable I make people. It’s fine if you want me to leave you alone for a while.”

To my great surprise, this made Raimie snort before he burst into laughter. It was so loud and intense that he stumbled sideways to support himself, and in the distance, Oswin glanced at us, as if to ensure that everything was all right.

I could only stare as this fit ran its course. Had I said something funny?

Eventually, Raimie collected himself, wiping his eyes as he gasped.

“You were right before when you commented on how similar we are, months ago,” he said. “I couldn’t tell you how many times I’ve parroted something nearly identical to what you just said in the past.”

What was that supposed to mean?

Glancing at me, Raimie snorted once more.

“What I’m saying is that I understand where you’re coming from, and it’s ok,” he said. “I don’t have to know everything about you, Rhy, but you can’t expect me to read your mind. You want me to stop poking at one of your secrets? You have to tell me that. Otherwise, I won’t know to quit it.”

...Oh. Um...

“Please, stop poking at this secret, then,” I said. “When I’m ready to share, if that time ever comes, I’ll tell you.”

I couldn’t stop myself from voicing that as a question. After all, I couldn’t believe that Raimie meant what he’d said, but he just nodded at me with only seriousness on his face.

“In that case, it’s settled. I won’t bring it up again,” he said, “but that’s not why we’re out here, is it? What did you want to talk about?”

He was serious. Hell. Raimie actually meant to give me space with this. That was...

“Gods, you trust me too much,” I said under my breath.

With a frown, Raimie said, “Sorry. What was that?”

And I had to wave off the inquiry. I had to get control again, not that I blamed myself for losing it. With the way my life had been, it didn’t come as a surprise that other people’s kindness could shock me so badly.

Given Raimie’s reaction, though, maybe I *could* tell him this secret, if not now. He was already in mortal danger from the consequences of my past actions, taken to save his life. What was one more drop added to that vast lake?

Like I'd said, though. Not now.

"I wanted to ask about your splinter, actually," I said. "You may already know this, but we primeancers can keep tabs on each other through reports, relayed by our splinters, and while I was away, that's how I kept track of you. I apologize if that overstepped your boundaries, but with us being in Auden now, I was worried."

Having pulled away, Raimie had his nose wrinkled.

"That is disconcerting, yes, but I can understand it," he said. "Just... next time, let me know you're doing it beforehand. Ok?"

"I can do that," I said with a smile, "but the reason I'm bringing it up now is because in the last week, my updates on you went through a brief hiccup. I was hoping to talk about that, either with you or Bright, if they're willing."

"Ah."

Raimie turned inward, which made me wonder. Did he already know what I'd been referencing? I'd thought he might be in the dark about it.

He chewed on his lip for a while before vaguely gesturing at me.

"We can talk about... that, if you want, but I'm not sure how much good it will do," he said. "I don't know what happened. Neither does Bright, I don't think, but we should ask them about it instead of speculating."

So, he did know what I'd meant! Interesting.

At Raimie's wave, a new figure joined us, someone so nondescript that I had trouble focusing on them, and I quirked an eyebrow. Was this change in appearance because of their temporary destruction or because Raimie had gotten sick of looking at a copy of his face?

Clutching at the hem of their tunic, the Ele splinter uncertainly said, "Hello."

Which threw me off. A being so connected to Ele should act haughty and full of themselves, not like this.

So, I turned to Raimie.

"Why don't you start by telling me what happened?" I said. "Your splinter can chime in when they deem it appropriate."

"Ok. That makes sense," Raimie said.

Blowing a strand of hair out of his eyes, he stalked to a tree so he could lean against it with his arms crossed.

“You remember how Teron attacked the fleet’s flagship and slit my throat, yes?” he said.

“Unfortunately,” I said. “Keeping you alive was a near thing.”

For a moment, Raimie eyed me with an unreadable expression in place, making me wonder what he was thinking, but soon enough, he moved on.

“Well, the bastard had a massive sword with him at the time. Dim said it’s called Lighteater? I don’t know what to think of having so many named swords in my life, but that’s a subject for another time,” he said. “Teron stabbed Bright, which shattered them. I know how unbelievable that sounds-”

“How in the void did *that* happen?” I muttered.

When Raimie frowned at me, I grimaced.

“Sorry. What you’re saying makes perfect sense, mechanically. I know what Lighteater can do to an Ele splinter,” I said, “but I find it hard to believe that Bright let themselves get hit like that. Just touching an Ele splinter can be close to impossible at times.”

When Raimie and I turned our gazes on Bright, they shuffled in place.

“I was distracted, if you must know,” they said, “which is perfectly understandable, given that Raimie had just...”

Trailing off, they licked their lips before holding my gaze with a fierce intensity.

“Rhylix. He resonated with the whole.”

My mouth dropped open. I knew this had happened, but I couldn’t reverse it as I processed what I’d heard.

“What?” I eventually said. “I thought that was...”

“An exceptionally rare ability?” Bright finished for me. “It is. Even still, Raimie can do it. That’s not the most unbelievable part of this story, though.”

Before I could respond, Raimie lifted a hand.

“Wait. What’s ‘resonating with the whole’?”

Right. We had a relatively uneducated primeancer with us.

“That’s a difficult concept to explain,” I said. “Resonating with the whole is when a person... aligns, is the best way to put it, with the essences of Ele and Daevetch, respectively. When someone does that strongly enough, it can have unpredictable consequences in the physical world.”

Instead of looking confused as I’d expected, comprehension dawned on Raimie’s face.

“And that’s what caused those strange things on the ship?” he asked Bright.

The Ele splinter hesitantly nodded, which had Raimie tapping on his lips.

“Interesting. I wonder if I could do it again.”

Clicking their tongue, Bright said, “How about we return our focus to the story instead of considering such an unlikely possibility?”

There was a glimpse of what I’d expected from a splinter like them. For some reason, this example of normalcy relieved me.

“Fine,” Raimie said with tight lips. “Where was I?”

“Teron destroyed Bright,” I said.

Which begged the question of how they were standing in front of us right now, but I supposed we’d get to that soon.

“So, after that, you saved my ass again, Ren attacked us, and I sent you running because you’d been injured,” Raimie said.

When he glanced at me, I was certain he’d break his word and ask how I’d so quickly recovered from a debilitating wound, but instead, he moved on without comment.

“Once you’d gone, Ren and I fought, although it quickly became apparent that I was outclassed,” he said. “*Hell*, she’s fierce in combat.”

“That she is,” I said, chuckling at the faraway look in my friend’s eye.

With a pointed glare, Raimie said, “*Anyway*. I ran away from her or tried to. She caught up with me, and in my desperation to escape, I called out for Bright. Perhaps I instinctively reached for them as a source to Ele. I’m not sure, but whatever the case, they came when I called, briefly flashing into being.”

When I moved to ask Bright for confirmation of this impossibility, they were scowling at Raimie.

“I don’t remember that,” they said.

Shrugging, Raimie said, “And yet, that’s what happened. It’s what got Ren to back off, and I saw neither hide nor hair of you for about a day. It was like you died again.”

Bright wrinkled their nose.

“I am a piece of Order, a splinter of an all-powerful whole,” they said. “I don’t just up and... die.”

“Whatever you say,” Raimie said with an eyeroll. “What matters is that after about a day, Oswin came looking for me, hoping I’d fix a problem for him. He led me to where I’ve been sleeping

recently, and there, we found Bright, pacing and acting quite unlike themselves.”

“Hang on,” I interrupted. “How did Oswin know to find *you* for this problem?”

“That’s right! I didn’t tell you.”

Shifting against the tree, Raimie shot a cautious grin at me.

“Oswin knows I’m a primeancer, him and a few other soldiers.”

Instantly, I jerked toward the mentioned man, reaching for Ele. I wasn’t sure how I’d fix this breach in my ally’s security, but it needed to happen.

“How does he know this?” I growled.

And... why hadn’t he tried to kill Raimie yet?

“That’s the other thing I forgot to mention,” Raimie said. “Oswin’s a spy. Until recently, he was the Middle of Queen Kaedesa’s Hand.”

That...

“Makes a lot of sense, actually,” I said. “It would explain how often he’s snuck up on me. I’ll need to watch out for him in the future.”

And if he was an accomplished enough spy that he’d been a part of Hand, he could have assassinated Raimie a thousand times over by now. Why hadn’t he?

At my pointed glance, my friend shrugged.

“I truly have no idea,” he said. “He and the others seem to consider my primeancy as an asset, oddly enough.”

Ah.

“That fits for one such as him,” I said.

Slowly, I relaxed before raising an eyebrow at Raimie.

“Well? Will you continue with your tale or not?”

Best not to consider how quickly this secret was leaking. I wasn’t looking forward to what would happen once it was common knowledge, something that was soon to come if history was anything to go by.

Snorting, Raimie shook his head.

“There’s not much more to the story,” he said. “When we got to Bright, they were shattered into pieces, and I put them back together. I’m not sure how to describe what I did, though.”

“Try anyway?” I suggested.

So, Raimie did, and by the end of his explanation, I was more confused than I had been before. When I looked to Bright for clarification, they lost their newly regained self-assuredness, fixing their eyes on the forest floor.

“I don’t have much to add,” they said. “For me, I went from an excruciating moment of destruction to addled existence. I was again where I was supposed to be—with my human—but then, something unknown overcame me. I’m still struggling with it.”

I had my own ideas about what that might be. What happened to any being when a firm sense of security was ripped away from them?

“If you like, I could ask Dim for their perspective on this,” Raimie said. “They were there too, you know.”

After exchanging a glance, Bright and I both drawled, “No...”

“I don’t think that’s wise,” the splinter continued.

Why did they look embarrassed by the idea?

“All right, then. There you have it, Rhy. A long-winded answer to your question,” Raimie said. “Was there anything else, or can I get back to battle preparations?”

Excuse me? This kid had just described a phenomenon that had, as far as I was aware, never happened in all of existence, and he wanted to leave it at that? How could he be so unconcerned about this *gigantic* abnormality?

Then again, he and his army were currently facing certain death right now. It was only fair that that would take precedence.

“No, that’s all,” I said. “Good luck with the ‘cranky elders’, as you put it. Unless you still want me with you, I’ll get started with my own preparations.”

“Sounds good. We’ll talk later, Rhy.”

With a winning smile, Raimie started his return trek.

I let him go with nothing further. We could reexamine how much he’d broken reality later.