

# Chapter 96: Home

## Rhylix

'This is impossible.'

As I dazedly wandered down the streets of the city I'd once called home, this was the only thought that occupied my mind. The structural damage from Doldimar's first successful military campaign had been erased with no half-collapsed buildings or shattered cobblestone anywhere in sight. Beautifully familiar homes and intervalled braziers dotted the hill I was climbing, all exactly as my carefully constrained memories insisted they'd once been.

The memories that were now threatening to break free.

*It really is too bad about the coin purse. With it, I can pay you, and I was looking forward to doing the same by treating you to dinner.*

A flash of bewilderment and intrigue.

*Will you need that help, once we're alone tonight?*

Anticipation and excitement.

*We... we're having a baby?*

Yes.

The tinkle of laughter, accompanied by joy.

*Uncle Eri?*

Despair and hopelessness.

*I would love to answer that question, just like I need to know what happened to you, but Arivor needs you right now.*

Gratitude to her and anxiety for what comes next.

*I'm so sorry. I should have been-*

*Were doing what... needed.*

A hole in my heart and DEVASTATION.

I struggled to bury my memories and their sharp spikes of pain beneath the weight of my thousand past lives, and with a gasp, I ended up clinging to a brazier's pole to keep from sagging. Once control had reasserted itself, I continued down the street with my feet unconsciously walking a path they'd trodden many times before.

Maybe it was time to face those memories instead of running from them. Time to sort the grim from the good, time to confront the trembling mess that the ghastly ones made of me.

But not here, not now. Not in this well-known city, coated by a thin film of Ele. Not while I was surrounded by fidgeting, muttering, twitching Kiraak.

My control of my invisibility bubble hadn't dropped with the past's violent attack on my mind, thank Alouin, and the black-vined people around me continued to aimlessly amble or lounge nearby, undisturbed by the cessation of my quiet, hitching sobs.

Swallowing hard, Eria- *I* tried to get my bearings once more. With my ingress delayed for a day by Ele's reluctance to come at my call, I'd only set foot in the city a few moments ago. I'd entered through the east gate, which made this... the slums. The place I'd come from. I hurried down the street, pushing aside fleeting images of neighbors, lifting their hands in greeting.

Soon, *not soon enough*, I blew into the merchant's district. Glass and obsidian shops replaced wooden homes, and the street widened into a large square, occupied by a single, massive oak tree. The pathway narrowed on the other side of the marketplace. It would continue to enlarge and constrict—to breathe—until it smacked into the line that divided the merchant's district from the district of the divine, and there, it would die, once more becoming a smooth, inanimate path.

My destination didn't lie that way. Instead, my feet took me to the side, along an artery that funneled the people—the city's lifeblood—into its lungs.

I encountered little pressure while striding away from the city's heart. My old hometown was long dead, and parasites infested its corpse. The further from the marketplace that I traveled, the fewer of those parasitizing Kiraak clogged the streets until I realized I hadn't seen one for at least a mile.

Unease bubbled in my gut, slowing my feet, as I halted in front of a two-story cottage, marked with a modest supply of obsidian trim. Home. I reached for the door with a shaking hand and gently pushed it open, soon greeted by the shadows within.

Checking that no Kiraak had snuck up on me, I dropped my bubble of invisibility, pulling Ele through my source to make a torch of my hand. Taking a deep breath, I plunged inside.

*Close the door behind you, Eri. You're letting the cold inside.*

Numbly shutting the door, I glanced around an empty living room. It was exactly as Doldimar had described, exactly as I remembered it from that last, awful day. The paintings on the wall, the small dresses mixed in with tossed-aside laundry. *Yellow, the color of happiness.*

Sharply sucking in a breath, I ran to the back door. The fire that had eventually consumed the garden had left no trace of its passage. Trees and flower bushes flourished, blossoming in the same spots where they'd been planted long ago—*Look, Eri, this dress is ruined! I'll never get the dirt out*—and an assortment of pots that should have been shattered was precariously balanced by the door instead. Only three new plants invaded the scene of an undisturbed, happy past: an azalea bush, a squat apple tree, and rarest of them all, an Eselan-crafted iceflower.

I approached the apple tree first, ignoring the other two. Resting my palm against its trunk, I opened my mouth before shaking my head.

"I'm sorry, Rafe," was all I managed to say.

Letting my hand slip away, I trudged to the other two.

"Hey, girls," I said on standing between them. "Sorry I've taken so long to visit since I... buried you. Arivor's kept me busy with fixing my mistake, with—"

I choked on the lie. Slowly, I folded to the ground before I could lose my balance.

"I'm a coward," I said. "I was afraid of what a visit would do to me. My solitude is bad enough without a reminder of what I once had. I miss you two so much."

I trailed my fingers through the azalea's leaves before crawling to the iceflower.

"I've made a friend, Lirilith," I said. "I think you'd like him. His compassion and disregard for society's rules remind me of you. He's helping me with healing."

Closing my eyes, I entertained the pretense that my wife was nearby and watching.

"I don't know if this would come as a comfort or a betrayal to you, but Arivor and I... no enmity lies between us anymore," I said. "My argument rests with Doldimar, the bastard who replaces my friend every cycle, but we shouldn't discuss him. I won't desecrate this place with a hint of his presence."

But I had nothing else to say to her. Leaning over, I cupped the iceflower's chill petals, breathing in its mildly sweet scent, before standing.

"The next visit won't be a thousand years from now. I promise," I said.

Tucking my chin to my chest, I stormed to the shed in the corner of the garden, my old laboratory. Doldimar was somewhere in this city, but this place was vast. Searching it in its entirety would take a few days, and I needed somewhere to rest my head at night, an enclosed place that the Kiraak wouldn't disturb. I couldn't stay in the house—too many triggers that might spill memories over—but the lab? Here was a place of refuge without that danger in it.

Even before going inside, however, I knew something about the shed was off. As I approached it, a sick feeling churned in my stomach, but I dismissed that as a result of the unpleasant task I'd just

undertaken.

I'd forced myself to confront my girls, the source of the hole in my heart. As a rule, I didn't stab at open, festering wounds. I ignored them until they'd rotted from the inside, requiring excision. When I went against my natural inclinations, especially where Ele was concerned, I got nauseous, and my body ached in reaction to stress. I assumed the same held true for this most recent trial.

When I closed the shed's door behind me, wearily leaned my forehead on it, and opened my eyes, however, I knew I'd been wrong, just as I remembered something I'd long forgotten. Woodenly, I faced the source of the wispy light that was illuminating the shed's interior, and the tear's draw instantly captured me.

Its attraction was a million times stronger than when Raimie had closed Da'kul's tear or when I'd shown my friend the Accession Tear. Then, I'd been complete, but for years now, I'd been partially separated from Ele, and so, the energy that made up my life force *sang* to me from this break in reality.

I took a hesitant step forward, raising a hand to reach for it. Maybe if I touched its black slit like Raimie had, Ele would rush to fill the empty, gaping chasm in my essence.

"Rhylix," someone behind me said.

I stopped. My hand drifted to my side.

"It's good to see you, son."

The world hushed while numbness spread from my head down my limbs and to the tips of my fingers and toes. I finally gave voice to the thought that had been a wheel, rolling over and over in my mind, since I'd stepped into this city.

"This isn't possible. It can't be! Ren said... she said you'd been taken. That she found no sign of you when visiting our old hometown, but

I couldn't believe that, not after what I left you with."

"That's true," the voice said. "I was facing six Kiraak when you ran."

And I flinched away from that near-physical blow.

"*You* told me to run!" I said with a whine crowding my voice's fringe.

"Face me, Rhy."

It was the last thing I wanted to do. I didn't want to see the ghost of my recent past brought to life in this vestige of my long-abandoned home, didn't want to see what had become of the man I'd once called father. Not in this city. Not in what had to be the enemy's headquarters.

But my *father's* voice had made that request. The man who'd ignored racial prejudices to fall in love with my mother and had accepted me as a son. A man who'd willingly become a stop-gap for the hole that my birth father had created with his death. The man who despite my long-practiced efforts to hide it, had discovered what I was before my mother. Who'd watched me escape death's clutches after a horrible hunting accident. Who'd never once said a word about something that most would view as a miracle or a curse. (It was a curse.) The one who'd insisted on defending me from the Kiraak, despite the knowledge that I could easily survive everything those monsters threw at me. How could I refuse him?

So, I turned until I saw his feet, and I reluctantly raised my gaze. My father's black eyes steadily met mine.

"An Enforcer?" came my strained whisper.

In a city's noise, that question would have been hardly audible, but it boomed in the shed's stillness.

"He made you *an Enforcer*?"

I'd known Doldimar had probably made my father a Kiraak, if he'd been taken like Ren had suggested, but...

Flinching, my father crossed his arms.

"What did you expect to see, Rhy?" he asked. "Doldimar's owned me for years."

"I'm sorry," I breathed.

For not staying to fight with him. For returning too late. For not searching longer for his corpse. For the urge, deep inside of me, to rip my father apart, making it as if he'd never been.

My father squeezed his arms tighter around his chest, looking away.

"How's your sister?" he said to a spot over my head.

"Good. Happy," I grunted, balling my hands into fists at my sides. "With child."

Surprise flickered across my father's face.

"I'm going to be a grandfather?" he whispered with something unspeakable crinkling his face.

Then, he returned his eyes to me, wincing.

"Gods, it must ache to resist killing me. Your control has always been admirable, son," he said, "but in this case, you should have succumbed to your needs as soon as they made themselves known."

Aghh... I *must* rid the world of the filth in front of me. I was carving crimson crescents into my palm, and my arms were shaking, so badly did I need this. That filth, however, was my father, and I wouldn't be the one to end him. Not when Raimie might cure his affliction.

"Why is... that?" I huffed through clenched teeth.

My father sadly smiled at me, but a hint of something else glittered in the black of his eyes.

"Because, son," he said. "I'm the distraction."

A foreign chill stabbed through my back, plunging deeper, deeper, until it reached my heart and twisted. For a moment, I stood there, examining the sword point jutting through my ribs, but shock couldn't long stand against such devastating damage to the body.

All I was became pain, such staggering pain. My chest was fire while a fist squeezed my body's engine, and I couldn't breathe. I gasped and coughed and hacked, but nothing relieved the pressure in the space where my heart had been, the vacuum that was crushing my sternum to my spine.

Someone unseen snaked a limb under my arms and around my chest, taking my weight as my legs gave out.

"Hey, E," they whispered. "Glad you could make it."

That supporting arm lowered me to my side while my head lolled. All energy was diverted to maintaining the spark of life in my irreparably damaged body.

"Nice bit of acting," someone said.

"Thank you, Your Greatness," my father replied.

It didn't make sense. Pain, my old friend, had come to greet me, and I was dying again, but this time was so. much. worse. A ripping, searing blaze located not in my chest, not where my heart had been, but in the threads of Ele that kept me rooted in this world. The absolute, mind-consuming, screeching AGONY.

My back arched, and a shriek was lodged in my mouth, on the verge of unleashing, but it was unable to go further, not with my muscles tautened to stone.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" said my murderer.

I fought through the fog to identify that voice, and when I did, disbelief numbed me. How had I not felt...?

Dread broke through the gradually ebbing clench in my chest.

"Dol... di... mar," I managed to gasp.

“Oh, good. I wasn’t sure if you’d realize before you died,” my enemy (friend) happily chirped. “Isn’t this exciting? I’ve never won before, E.”

Oh, gods. The world... the world without Ele...

Doldimar chuckled at the desperate whine keening from me, a snicker that my father joined.

My father... I was... dying, and my father stood there and... *laughed*.

“Why” was the world flashing in and out of focus? What was this darkness tugging on me? I’d died so many times before, but this... nothingness was new, different, and it terrified me. I struggled to stay in the world of light and life, pushing against nothingness with what remained in me.

Which wasn’t much.

“Why, what?” Doldimar asked.

What.

I’d meant to ask something before this nothingness had come calling, but my new fight had driven it from my mind. What had it been?

“He wants to know why me.”

My father had supplied both the question and the answer.

“Oh!” Doldimar said, clapping his hands. “This is the best part, E! Let me introduce you. Meet Coleath, aspect Deception.”

Ah, that was it. Why was my father standing, *laughing*, by Doldimar’s side while his son died? Painfully. Slowly. Had Daevetch... already ensnared my father...?

The pressure where my heart had once beat went still, making the only source of continued pain the flare consuming Ele, starving as its fuel burned to smoke.

And nothingness nipped at my heels. I took another shuddering breath, hoping air—blessed, clean air—would drive it away, but it only advanced more quickly. It stole my past lives, my origins, and my current life until only the idea of Rhylix stood and fought.

Fought to keep Ele in the world. Fought for forgotten friends and family. Fought simply to be difficult.

“What’s taking so long?” someone I’d hated (loved) whined.

“Without the heart, the body can last a few minutes before expiring,” said someone I... I... “Don’t worry. It’ll be over soon.”

“I want it over *now!*”

A blunt object crushed my skull, and nothingness dragged the screaming remnant of me under.

---

Revision #1

Created 1 December 2025 18:45:00 by FatalisticFable

Updated 1 December 2025 18:58:33 by FatalisticFable