

Chapter 96: The Night Before

Rhylix

You're the only one I've ever known with the strength to do what's right.

Evening had settled around me and her and our various guests, but despite the glorious sunset painted above us, I couldn't take my eyes off of her, this woman I loved. She was beautiful and kind and witty, everything I'd ever wanted, and joining with her would be the greatest privilege of my life.

When we breathed each other in, we became one in mind and soul, a glory I'd ever be eager to repeat, but soon enough, the Join broke, returning me to a singular existence. Despite this loss, I smiled. I still had her, after all.

That smile quickly flattened when I opened my eyes. Her body was utterly broken, leaving me unsure of how she was still standing, and as if prompted by the thought, she collapsed into a pool of blood, one that expanded until it had risen over my head.

I swam in this viscous liquid, recoiling from its awful warmth, and around me, the shadows of familiar forms flickered in and out of view. It was a host of my dead: my family and every loved one, and on recognizing them, a question howled through me.

WHY COULDN'T I SAVE THEM?

My sister floated into view with her black hair drifting around her drained-white face, and as she opened her mouth, I cringed in anticipation of the accusation that she'd surely hurl at me.

"Rhylix," she said before pausing. "Healer! Wake up! You're—"

"—needed."

Gasping, I shot upright, clutching at my chest. A dream. It had only been a dream.

Why did my nightmares still affect me like this?

“Are you all right? You were thrashing something fierce.”

Rapidly blinking, I looked up into the concerned face of Chela. The Eselan healer was leaning on her knees with her head cocked, and in answer to her question, I wearily nodded.

“Just a bad dream,” I croaked. “You said I was needed?”

Damn, speaking hurt. Had I been screaming during this one?

Straightening, Chela doubtfully eyed me, but she didn't pry further.

“Um. Raimie... the king... he asked for you,” she said.

“I see.”

That Raimie had given in to his rightful place still caught me off guard at times. If Chela's fumbling with words was any example to go off of, uncertainty about his status seemed fairly common among the others as well.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“I'll take you to him,” Chela said.

We found him much deeper in the woods than the rest of the army. Nestled among the roots of a massive tree, Raimie had several pieces of parchment spread in front of him, hovering over them with his fingers spread and Silverblade in his lap. Not an unusual sight when coming upon a commander on the night before his first battle.

The young woman lounging at his side, casually chatting, was different, though.

Chela made her farewell of me, and I slowly approached the two, watching them. Raimie muttered something, glancing at Ren with a smile tugging on his lips, and throwing her head back, she laughed, such a contrast to the silently restless slumber of the soldiers behind me.

Damn. She liked him. Well and truly *liked* him.

That could end in disaster if not handled carefully.

As I came closer, Raimie tiredly smiled at me.

“Rhy. I'm glad Chela found you.”

He leaned over his spread of parchment, quickly getting absorbed in it once more.

“Figured you'd want to know that your sister's here,” he said. “She has news.”

He'd sounded exhausted, not that I could blame him. In the last two days, none of us, least of all him, had gotten much sleep, too busy getting ready to indulge in rest.

In contrast, my sister looked vibrant, even with an ugly look spread across her face. She was in a bad mood. That wasn't my fault, was it?

"I was just telling Raimie about my efforts with Dury," she said. "There was no way in hell that he'd provide more troops or supplies to aid your cause, but Raimie and I both hoped he'd at least offer refuge to people in need."

"I'm guessing from your presence that he gave you an answer about that?" I said.

In the dim light of a nearby lantern, I watched Ren's face darken with a sigh. In this case, expecting compassion from Tanwadur had been too much to ask for.

"His exact words were, 'You can tell them to go to hell'," Ren said.

Apparently having already heard this, Raimie barely reacted, only tightening his lips, but I knew how much this rejection had crushed him. He'd always desperately wanted to protect his people, seeming to need nothing more at times, and knowing this, I couldn't help myself.

"I'm sorry, Ren," I said. "I know Tanwadur's your father, but he's a selfish, judgmental, small-minded asshole."

He'd condemn thousands of people to death, just because he hated their leader!

Biting her lip, Ren nodded acceptance of what I'd said while beside her, Raimie rearranged his pieces of parchment, content to ignore my outburst.

"Thank you for delivering the news, no matter how bad it was," he said.

Ren and I stared at him for long enough that he shook himself. With a tremulous smile, he joined me on my feet.

"And of course, thank you for everything else you've done. Perhaps if my people and I survive tomorrow, we can further build on that effort. I'd love to see an alliance form between us," he said.

Then, he performed the most graceful bow, which dropped Ren's mouth open.

Holding the uncomfortable position, Raimie continued, "If there's nothing else, you should head home. I have many tasks to finish tonight, and you need to be safe behind Tiro's walls. On the off chance that I get some sleep tonight, I wouldn't rest easy if you placed yourself in danger for something that's not your fight."

Snapping her mouth closed, Ren leapt to her feet before shoving a finger in my friend's face.

"I'll decide what is and isn't my fight, thank you very much," she snapped.

Sighing, Raimie folded to the ground again.

“You’re right,” he said, “and I’d never think to stand in the way of any decision you might make.”

Wait a minute.

“Raimie...” I muttered.

He’d better not be encouraging my sister to participate in something that was tantamount to suicide. Ren was wonderfully capable, and like Raimie, I’d never tell her what to do, but joining forces with us made no sense for her. She had no stake in this fight.

When she turned her ire on me, however, I found myself reassessing that belief.

“You were saying?” she hissed.

I raised my hands to calm her down while below us, Raimie clicked his tongue.

“If Ren were to join our fight tomorrow, it would mostly be in a last-ditch attempt to gain us Tiro’s aid,” he said. “She may love you, Rhy, but from what I’ve seen, she’s also entirely Audish. She won’t throw her life away for nothing.”

With a yawn, Raimie rubbed his eyes, missing how red Ren’s face had gone. I wasn’t sure if that was due to irritation or something else.

“If you want to help, you can stick to the fringes of the fight and cast illusions among the enemy to confuse them,” he continued before frowning. “But there I go again, being rude and assuming you can use magic. I’m sorry, Ren.”

He looked up at her so pleadingly, and for a moment, my sister choked on herself. Soon enough, though, she cleared her throat.

“There’s no need to apologize,” she said, “and I can play distraction. It’s a good idea.”

“Thanks,” Raimie said with a smile. “Let’s hope my other plans are just as good.”

He returned his attention to his work, and when Ren didn’t move, I nudged her.

“Why don’t you find somewhere to bed down?” I said. “I’ll catch up with you before you fall asleep, and you can ask whatever questions you might have.”

“Sounds... good.”

Hell, she’d sounded dazed.

“Good night, you two.”

With nothing else, my sister trudged away, leaving me alone with Raimie, and resting my hands on my hips, I watched him work for a good minute.

“You know you can’t think of everything, right?” I eventually said.

“I have to try.”

Another thirty seconds passed with nothing to fill it but the wind, rustling the leaves.

“Are you planning on sleeping tonight?” I asked.

When Raimie didn’t deign to reply, I breathed out through my nose, crouching opposite my friend. I looked at this contradictory mess of a man—too noble toward those in his care, too understanding toward those he called friend, too absolutely thick-headed to think about his own needs—and a decision I’d never been aware of pondering was made.

Damn the possible consequences. Lifting a hand, I placed a finger on Raimie’s forehead, and as I had with his hands so long ago, I Let Go. As a wave of exhaustion washed through me, Raimie reared back, crashing into the tree’s trunk with a hand slapped to his head.

“The *fuck* was that?” he asked. “I’m...”

Pausing, he lowered his hand to examine it.

“I’m not tired anymore.”

“No. *You’re* not,” I sighed, “and before you ask, I won’t explain now.”

Keeping his promise to give me space strained Raimie this time, clearly biting his tongue as he was, and oh, if his restraint didn’t warm me.

“But,” I said, lifting a finger, “I will tell you everything, every secret I’ve hidden and every mystery you’ve wondered about, once the battle’s over tomorrow.”

Pursing his lips, Raimie narrowed his eyes.

“If we survive it,” he said.

With a laugh, I said, “Yes. We’ll have to do that first.”

Slapping my knees, I rose to my full height.

“Good night, Raimie. Please, get some rest.”

But then, I left him to his worry, hoping the promise of resolution that I’d provided might help him in some way.

Revision #2

Created 28 August 2024 18:30:12 by FatalisticFable

Updated 8 September 2025 01:09:27 by FatalisticFable