

Chapter 100: Final Confrontation

Raimie

After who knew how long spent running, I had to stop and catch my breath, if I didn't want to keel over, that is. Gasping, I leaned on my knees while glancing at Dim.

"Did we lose him?" I asked.

"Doubtful," Dim said. "Even if we did, he could catch up with us via a shade meld."

Rolling my eyes, I rubbed my calves, hoping to relieve sore muscles.

"And what's that?" I asked.

"How the enemy keeps popping up wherever you happen to be. It's one of their people's most annoying abilities."

Already tensed to hell, I jumped at Bright's sudden reappearance, at which they sheepishly smiled.

"Sorry," they said, "but your friend knows the plan now."

"Great. Thanks," I said before scowling at Dim. "Why haven't you mentioned 'shade melds' before now?"

Looking down their nose at me, Dim said, "You've been a bit busy. Also, why would I share something so advanced with you when you're still struggling with the basics?"

With a wince, I said, "Fair enough."

Straightening, I took stock of my surroundings, noting the clearing around me with satisfaction.

"This'll be a good place to make a stand," I said. "Little to no tripping hazards here, and the sun hasn't fallen far enough to impede sight. Not that the coming dark should be a problem this time."

When Bright flushed, I stuck my tongue out at them, well aware of how uncomfortable they'd be at the reminder of their 'death'.

“Truly, you’ve gotten to know us too well,” Dim muttered, as if hoping it would go unheard.

Before I could ask them about that, though, both of my splinters stiffened, which could only mean one thing. He was here!

Which patch of shadows was he hiding in, though?

“You, Raimie from the line of Audish kings, are a roach,” Teron’s disembodied voice said. “You just refuse to die.”

With Silverblade held at the ready, I spun in place, prepared for anything.

“Thank you,” I said before frowning. “I think?”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“To your right!” Bright and Dim said as one.

Ignoring their resulting looks of distaste, I faced where they’d indicated. White light flashed in the clearing as I snapped my blade up, catching the sword coming for my head. Teron quickly followed it from the shadows, although he soon leapt away with a hiss.

“So, I was right,” he said. “You do have an Ele splinter again. *How?*”

Why would he think I’d answer that question?

“No,” Teron breathed. “No, I must be mistaken.”

Stepping into the shadows, he vanished, and with an eyeroll, I looked to my splinters for direction.

“Behind you and to the left,” Dim said.

With that prompting, I took a few steps forward, smiling when I heard Teron’s frustrated growl.

“To your right. Again,” Bright said.

Twisting, I caught and parried Teron’s blade before swinging my fist at his hood-shrouded face. To my great surprise, the blow connected, but as he stumbled away, I didn’t let the unexpected flare of pain in my knuckles phase me. In one stride, I was within his guard again, able to end this and him, but for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Teron had done many awful things, things for which a clean death would be a merciful punishment, but... but...

There had been enough killing today.

So, instead, I slapped my hand to Teron’s chest and shoved Ele through it.

I had a moment to enjoy him soaring away before Dim was screeching at me.

“You weak idiot!”

Slamming into a tree, Teron tumbled to the ground, but before I could check whether that had knocked him out, his body dissolved into the shadows, disappearing again.

“You should have killed him,” Bright said.

Even as I shot an incredulous glance at the Ele splinter, a stray thought once more rose to the surface.

Mercy. That is so utterly YOU.

Wha-?

“You can access Ele, impossible as that should be,” someone new said. “Unacceptable. The Balancer cannot have both. Make sure you kill him this time.”

Spinning toward the voice, I caught sight of a vaguely outlined person, someone who reminded me of Dim—Volatility perhaps?—but consideration of them fell away at the sight of Teron. With his hood fallen back, his blue and blonde hair was revealed, which meant I’d been right all those months ago. Teron was Eselan.

That wasn’t what had stopped me in my tracks, though. Above his sneer, he glared at me with black eyes. In them, I found no irises or sclerae. Just solid black, as if the dark vines, so rampant throughout a Kiraak’s body, had centralized there. Did that mean Corruption controlled him as much as it did with those monsters?

“No more holding back,” he said.

Then, he attacked.

I didn’t know how I survived the first five seconds of his barrage. Barely ducking beneath a Daevetch bolt, I dodged his thrust at my chest by the barest of hairsbreadths, and at the end of this single exchange, panic was already screaming in my mind. How badly did he outclass me?

Rhylix’s training gave me another ten seconds of life, but by then, I was fully occupied by a need to escape. How did I get away from this?

-me help!

Another stray thought burst through the haze engulfing me.

Heart of my heart!

Nylion. My greatest sense of safety, in all things.

Even as I gave him control, I didn't know why I was doing it. My other half might be many things, but he wasn't experienced in combat.

Or so I thought.

Unlike other times when we'd switched like this, I clung to the real world today. If I was about to die, I didn't want to do it unaware. I wanted to know what had killed me.

So, I was perfectly cognizant as Nylion held his own against Teron, laughing as he did it. He was a wonder, almost playing with Teron over the course of several minutes, and gods.

If I didn't love him for it.

I spilled over with this, and for some reason, the rush of it made Nylion falter. Teron took advantage of the opening, surging forward to disarm him, but instead of taking my head as he should, he flicked his sword's point through my uniform's cloth, leaving a cut in my chest.

Fear shot through Nylion, rooting him in place, and flinging his arms over his head, he dropped into a crouch, despite our imminent peril.

"No, please!" he shouted. *"Not again!"*

Then, he was gone, and I was left in control. Falling back on my hands, I scrambled away from Teron, all while reaching for my other half.

Nyl? I called. *Are you ok? What was that?*

I am so sorry, Raimie, he sobbed. *I- Watch out!*

I had a split second to register the needle of Daevetch hurtling for me before it impacted my chest, and I thought I was dead. It was to my shock, then, that I continued breathing, only amplified when I noticed that something was worming into my body through the cut in my chest.

"A Vice?" Bright spat. *"That's barbaric!"*

Interspersed with this, Dim shouted, *"You have to fight it, Raimie!"*

Clambering to my feet, I brushed against what was climbing through my body, but addled by what Nylion had left swirling in my mind, I couldn't get a grip on it.

"Raimie. You are strong," Dim shouted. *"Come on. You can beat-"*

"Hush, aberrant splinter."

Teron's command preceded a wipe of sensible thought from my mind. Pain sent arcs of fire to my extremities, lighting up even the tips of my fingernails—was I supposed to feel pain there?—and I could do nothing except scream.

As abruptly as it had come, the storm passed, and left gasping at too thin air, I found I couldn't slump, as my body required. Held up by invisible strings, I couldn't move, and seeing the smug look on Teron's face, I had a good idea of why that was. I didn't know how he had control of my body, but I couldn't argue that he didn't own me right now.

"I should just kill you. Really, I should," he said. "It's the smartest course of action, but Volatility has gotten so loud lately. What better way to silence them than with the torment of someone they loathe?"

"Raimie, take from me," Bright said.

Facing Teron, they were utterly tense with their hands balled into fists. It was an interesting look on them but... where was Dim?

"Raimie! Do as I say for fucking once!"

More than anything else, Bright's cursing helped me understand the urgency of my situation, so reaching for my source, I pulled a sip of Ele to me. I got no further than this, though, as agony scoured it from me, scraping my body clean.

"No, that won't do. No Ele for you."

Again, I was freed to a bright world of clarity, only to find Teron wagging a finger in my face.

Lowering it, he said, "As I was saying, if I'm to have any peace in the coming days, it's time to give Volatility their due, and so, I will be using a Vice on you, little king. Given the circumstances, my master shouldn't begrudge me its use, just this once. The only reason I'm telling you this is because I want you to fight it. I need every ounce of suffering that I can milk from you, and having come to know you, I believe the best way to provoke your, frankly, excessive stubbornness is to tell you how hopeless your situation is. Please, do try to escape it anyway, though. You may have control of your mouth now, if you have any last words you wish to say."

He flicked his fingers at me, and when my jaw loosened, I worked it for a moment, looking for Dim in my limited field of view. Had Teron done something to them?

"I'm here, you absolutely, *horribly* compassionate human," they said behind me. "I can't do anything to help you, though, not when he has my whole in your brain. If it were only down to me, he'd have won."

It wasn't up to only them, though. I had Bright, all of which meant I needed to figure out how to slip Ele usage past Teron.

"I'd be more inclined to fight you if I understood what you've done, but I have no idea what a Vice is," I said. "Care to enlighten me?"

Maybe that would give me time...

With a smirk, Teron said, "You're stalling. How cute."

And again, pain wiped me clean.

Or I thought it was me who was feeling this. As I screamed myself hoarse over what might have been minutes or years, Nylion and I slipped and slid between one another. Under this onslaught, neither of us was able to maintain control for long.

That was what it seemed like, at least. Who could tell when all you knew was fire burning in your lungs, lightning singing in your veins, glass coursing through your lungs?

Would it ever end, or was I trapped like this?

Again. It's happening again.

I couldn't take this. I couldn't!

No escape AGAIN. We're stuck, and it's too much. Gods, please! I can't do this again. It's TOO MUCH!

"Let him go."

Rhylix's voice dove to the heart of us. Of... me. I was me. Right?

"Why would I do that? I have him where I want him, and so long as he's mine, you won't attack me. If you do, I'll only hurt him more."

What was... he talking about? How could there be more than... this?

"Raimie's strong. He can take far more than you can give. In fact, I'm sure he'll be free of that Vice before I'm done killing you."

Wait. *What?* Rhylix had finally gotten here and-

Somewhere, an enemy snarled, and what I'd already considered overwhelming doubled in intensity. I was swimming in it, unaware of anything but this, and- and-

"If you could stop screaming and help me, that'd be great, Raimie!"

THERE WAS NO ESCAPING THIS! Couldn't he see that? I was *helpless!*

"He's the distraction that you needed, human mine."

Why should I listen to them? They were a part of what was ripping my sanity apart, slowly killing me. Gods, where was relief when I most needed it?

"Right here, Raimie."

That was... right. I had a source of peace in my life, hidden behind a being I cared for, but unlike before—

Unlike when we were so utterly helpless in the past...

—I could use that peace to free myself. I could fight back.

So, I stroked *hard* for the surface of this pain, breaking one hand through it to reach for the weapon that might bring me victory...

...and Ele rushed through me, tearing Daevetch out by the roots.

Freed from the Vice, I collapsed to the forest floor, unable to do much more than twitch. My thready scream cut off, only to be taken up by Teron.

“No! Not this time!”

At the edge of my vision, I watched him break off from his fight with Rhylix, diving into shadows once he was clear. He reappeared not ten feet in front of me with his sword prepared to strike, and with twitches controlling my body, I could do nothing more than watch as it descended. It figured that even after I’d saved myself, I’d die anyway.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I reached for the one who’d been by my side from the beginning.

Nyl! I’m sorry!

There was the thunk of metal into flesh and bone. There was the sickening squelch of a sword pulled free, but I was alive. I was breathing. How?

When my eyes flew open, I was greeted by the worst possible answer to that question, a sight that would be seared into me for the brief moments I had left. Tottering in place, Rhylix held his chest together from where Teron had nearly cleaved it in two before collapsing into the grass, and as my world hiccupped, I could only stare at his still form.

This wasn’t real, right? So many times, Rhylix had been badly hurt, only to recover as if nothing had happened. It couldn’t end like this. Could it?

When Teron stepped over Rhylix’s body, I couldn’t deny reality any longer, though. My friend had died trying to save me, and based on how much I was struggling to move, that sacrifice looked to have been in vain.

Crouching, Teron placed a finger under my chin, tilting my head up, and wiped a tear off of my cheek.

“I’m sorry you saw that,” he said. “I only meant to feed Volatility your physical pain, not a loss like this.”

Gods, I wanted to scream at him or spit in his face, but my voice was long gone, and after my who-knew-how-long howling fest, my mouth was a dry desert. Teron must see the sentiment on my face, though, because he grimaced as he rested his sword on the ground beside us.

Reaching for a knife, he said, "Don't worry. I'll end it now."

This image was what got highlighted when light illuminated the clearing a breath later. As it faded, it emphasized how much color was draining from Teron's face, and when it died, he was on his feet, facing away from me.

"My master's stories were true?" he said. "You... you can't-"

"Stay dead? No. At least, not when someone like you imparts the killing blow."

With a grunt, my friend... my *completely whole, hadn't been breathing a moment ago* friend got to his feet.

Quirking an eyebrow at Teron, Rhylix said, "Aren't you going to run now?"

After a beat, Teron sprinted for a patch of shadows, diving into it, but Rhylix was right there after him. Making a face, he stuck a hand into those same shadows, where it vanished like Teron had, and hauled the bastard out. Throwing him to the ground, Rhylix stomped on his chest, and with an ugly look on his face, he chopped his sword into the Enforcer's neck. With some repositioning and two swings more, the man who'd hunted me for months was dead with another, impossible man standing over him.

"Hell, I'm glad that I've kept from pissing him off," Dim said from... somewhere.

I wasn't too concerned with finding them, though, preoccupied with watching Rhylix wipe his blade clean. Stalking my way, he knelt in front of me.

"Are you ok? I know Vices aren't fun, so maybe that's a silly question," he said. "Still. Do you need help standing?"

Uh...

Say something, silly, came an aberrant thought...

No. That had been Nylion.

"What-?" I started.

But then, I doubled over with the worst coughing fit wracking my body, and rubbing my neck, I tried to soothe a sore as hell throat.

Wincing, Rhylix said, "Right. You probably shredded your vocal cords. Here."

He touched my neck, and with another burst of light, my coughing fit ceased with my throat suddenly... fine. This gave me the energy needed to shoot upright, swaying away from my friend.

“What the fuck, Rhy?” I said.

“Yes. You-”

As if to mirror me, Rhylix started hacking into his hand, and I stared while this fit shook his body. When it was finished, he glanced at his palm with a grimace before wiping it on his pants. With a deep breath and a shaky smile, he met my eyes.

“You probably want an explanation, don’t you?”

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