

# Chapter 2: Taking a Fortress

## Raimie

The winter months were over, and I was glad for it, even with how much we'd needed the break. We'd needed the time to recover from a devastating battle, time to get established, time to make plans. *I'd* needed the time to rest and learn, and if I'd also used it for other pursuits, no one had commented on it, not to my face at least.

For the first time in sixteen months, I felt somewhat settled. Grounded. Maybe even confident, for once.

Now, it was time to test everything we'd gained.

"Are you ready?" I whispered.

Beside me, Rhylix softly said, "Always."

Time to move.

Hah! Why did so much of life come back to that one, precious commodity?

Shaking my head, I darted out from beneath the cover of the trees, keeping low to the ground. Ahead, the imposing tower of Da'kul loomed, and I might have found the sight more intimidating if Rhylix and I hadn't already identified a weakness in its defenses.

Even still, I glanced toward a spot further along the tree line, checking for signs of the soldiers waiting there. I wasn't sure why I was doing this. If I'd actually seen something, it would mean trouble, a surprise attack ruined.

*They are a source of comfort. Family,* came a thought from deep inside. *Perhaps you need that reassurance.*

Wincing, I said, *Maybe. Considering I have you, though, I don't know why that is.*

Nylion didn't get a chance to respond as I reached the wall at that moment. Never checking for Bright's presence, I reached through them for Ele, even as I touched the mass of thick vines crawling up the wall in front of me.

This was Da'kul's weakness, small as it was. In typical circumstances, an average person's body weight would tear this plant off of the stone that it clung to.

Which was why I fed it a faint stream of Ele before mounting it. With that extra bit of strengthening, it held firm as I scrambled up it, though that proved difficult. The vines were thick, but I still had problems with finding handholds in them. They were closely plastered to the wall, and soon enough, their abundance died off until only weak strands remained, leaving a person's height of wall above me .

I waited here for Rhylix to catch up, but when he did, he didn't plunge forward like we'd planned.

Hesitating, he said, "Are you sure about this? If we take Da'kul, the peace from the last few months will be well and truly over."

"It would have been over soon anyway," I whispered. "So, can we please get this over with? If we survive tonight, I'd like to get home soon."

Smirking, Rhylix said, "I bet you would. Someone waiting for you there?"

Gods, he'd never let me hear the end of that, would he?

Before I could make a comeback, Rhylix vanished, but from the distortion in reality that had taken his place, I knew he'd pulled an Ele bubble around himself. Sighing, I did the same, and together, he and I used our primeancy to make an impossible leap, easily clearing the remaining distance to the top of the wall.

Landing in a crouch, I hastily scanned my surroundings but found no enemies nearby, which wasn't surprising.

This winter had been a bad one. Resupplying Da'kul with troops would have been near impossible, snowed-in as everyone on this side of Auden had been.

So, the fort was still manned with only the skeleton force that Teron had left here before the battle, months ago. Or that was what Oswin had told me, and I knew better than to doubt him. In the time I'd known that spy, he'd already proven himself ten-times over.

That made me no less cautious as I descended Da'kul's wall from the inside, but as expected, Rhylix and I had encountered no one once we'd reached the bailey at its base.

Why was the fort's abandoned state making my skin crawl? It was what we'd wanted, right?

*Even still, it is rather creepy,* Nylion said.

And I choked while containing a laugh. Gods, one of these days, his unexpected commentary would get us killed, provided I didn't learn to control myself first.

As if aware of my unease, Bright and Dim, hovering in my peripheral vision until now, stopped short with their bodies going stiff, and I automatically ducked into cover, frowning at them.

*Hello...?* I said. *Are you two all right?*

They never moved, and within a breath, a nearby distortion in reality softly popped, revealing Rhylix.

“Something wrong?” he whispered.

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head.

Why had my splinters turned into statues, and... why did Rhylix look almost as distracted as them? What was I missing?

Hesitantly, I said, *Bright? Dim?*

While the Ele splinter remained unmoving, their counterpart spun on me with feral eyes and bared teeth.

“*What?*” they growled.

...Why did this feel familiar? Also, why was it happening now, when timing and a lack of distractions were paramount?

“Gods, how did I miss it last time?”

The tone of Rhylix’s voice had me turning to him with a raised eyebrow, only to have my stomach bottom out at the look on his face.

Meeting my eyes, he shakily said, “There’s a tear here.”

Oh... that made so much sense. It explained my unease and how my splinters were acting and-

Waitamoment.

“*Godsdamnit,*” I hissed.

As I continued with my quiet cursing, Rhylix just watched me, which only made things worse. I knew what he was thinking.

“I can’t, Rhy,” I said. “You don’t understand. The last time I did it-”

“Do we have another choice?” Rhylix interrupted.

Not really. A tear’s naturally imparted panic would wreak havoc among the troops, something wholly *not good* when completing an assault. If we wanted to capture Da’kul, I’d have to close this break in reality, and with how much time and effort I’d put into planning this assault, I couldn’t

abandon it.

No matter how much fear Nylion was spewing at me.

He was trying to contain it. I could tell, but with communication fully opened between us, he couldn't do that in full. Our bond, so long severed, no longer had barriers in place to block our emotions, and the water in its stream bed had become a steady flow rather than the trickle of the past.

I wasn't sure why he was afraid of closing the tear, but no matter how much I wanted to ask him about it, I knew he wouldn't answer me. In some ways, he was like Rhylix: keeping things from me and going stone cold if I approached those topics.

Unlike with my friend, however, I somehow *knew* that Nylion was doing this for my own good, so I'd never pressed him about it. Because he refused to share these things sometimes, though, I'd been learning to do things regardless of how he felt, although this only applied in the direst of situations. The rest of the time, I went out of my way to respect his feelings, using them as a warning system for danger.

But Rhylix was still staring at me.

"Gods fucking damnit," I repeated before blowing out a breath. "Ok. I guess we're making a detour before opening the gate."

Wincing, Rhylix nodded.

"I'm sorry, Raimie," he said.

"Not your fault."

Turning toward the bailey, I narrowed my eyes at the buildings on its other side.

"Any idea where it is, besides hidden?" I asked.

"No clue."

Helpful. Still, I couldn't expect my friend to know everything.

"But we could follow the tear's aura of panic to its source," Rhylix continued.

Or he could simply need a moment to conjure the problem's solution from thin air.

"Sounds simple enough," I said. "Shall we get started?"

As we raced across the fort's bailey to its buildings, Rhylix and I kept our Ele bubbles wrapped around our bodies, but when we were beneath the roofs' eaves, we released them. Feeling panic was relatively difficult when a source of peace was all around you.

We wandered between the buildings until panic started receding rather than growing, but then, we had to choose between the structures on either side of us. Approaching the first, I clicked my tongue.

“Of course it’s locked,” I said before glancing at Rhylix. “I could use Daevetch to break the door down...”

On seeing my friend rummaging through his pockets, I trailed off.

“Why make the noise?” he whispered.

With a flourish, he held a lock pick and wrench aloft, and I sighed.

“You know how to pick locks,” I said. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“Live a few hundred years, and you pick up some tricks,” Rhylix said.

While he crouched in front of the door, I worked on suppressing my irritation.

Not at Rhylix. He’d done nothing wrong. It was just that for months, I’d been looking for someone to teach me this skill. Nylion and I needed it to open a certain locked chest in our mind, but to date, I’d been unsuccessful in the search.

Perhaps I could have asked Oswin to teach me. I was sure he knew how to pick a lock, but every time I’d considered posing the question to him, I’d shied away from doing it. Contradictory as it might seem, I hadn’t wanted to ask him about something so sordid, even knowing the skill was in his repertoire.

Or maybe I’d been delaying with this task for other reasons. I didn’t know what the problem was, and when I tried to solve the conundrum, my thoughts always ended up wandering.

Now, however, I had no further excuses. As I watched Rhylix pick this lock, I compared his presented example against everything I’d learned in books, and with it, I had a good idea of how the process worked. After a little practical application, this skill would be mine.

*About time*, Nylion said.

Wincing, I said, *I’m sorry. I’ve been distracted lately.*

Maybe Nylion grumbled something back at me. If he did, I didn’t catch it, too preoccupied by Rhylix swinging the door open.

Inside, we found stored weapons and armor, which was only mildly disappointing. We might not have found the tear here, but if we managed to seize this fort, these supplies would be ours.

So, we darted across the gap to the other building. To my surprise, this one was unlocked. Why would anyone leave a tear unguarded, given how much the items from one could fuel an economy?

*Cut off as Auden has been, that may not have been the case here, Nylion said. Besides, remember how bloodthirsty the Kiraak are. It is no wonder their superiors would secure those weapons.*

True... I said.

Why, though, would Nylion be thinking about things like that?

Shaking myself, I followed Rhylix through the door, and on the other side, we found our goal.

As always, the black and white ovoid of the tear mesmerized me. The light undulating around its shadowy interior pulled at me, distracting me almost as much as the tangible fear in the air, but I tore my gaze off of it, helped in part by running into Rhylix.

He'd stopped short, staring at the tear with glazed eyes, and nearby, our three splinters, entirely visible here, looked much the same. They swayed toward and away from the anomaly, continually wincing.

The look on their faces distinctly reminded me of how Bright had appeared in the moment before their destruction, months ago, and seeing this, I once more grappled with the impossibility of their continued existence. Over the winter, Rhylix had shared with me exactly how *strange* it was that I'd been able to reconstruct my Ele splinter, another drop of the impossible added to so many other mysteries circling me, and for a moment, I again faced the confusion and utter discrepancy that surrounded my own life. Why couldn't I answer some of the most basic questions about how and why I could do what I'd done?

But then, I shoved it below the surface again, focusing on my companions.

"Everything ok?" I said.

Grimacing, Rhylix said, "Not really. That thing serves as direct access to Ele and Daevetch. Given everything I've shared, I'll let you speculate on how it's affecting me."

Yeah... probably not in a good way.

"I'd better get started, then, huh?" I said.

But gods, if I didn't want to. I could recall in vivid detail the last time I'd closed a tear, and that absolute *wrench* through the core of my being...

It hadn't been fun.

At least this time, I might not have to touch the damn thing. I already knew how to accomplish my goal, having no need to consult with anything beyond that break in reality.

Hesitantly, I teased at the power behind my splinters, and like before, Ele and Daevetch flowed from not only them but also the tear. Thank the gods for caution.

As always when holding onto both of the primal energies, a war sparked inside of me, trying to rip me apart, and I acted as a negotiator between them. Ele and Daevetch, however, refused to cooperate this time. Any time I brought them close to one another, they shot apart like black and white bullets, and after struggling with this for far too long, I almost, *almost* gave up.

Before I could release my hold on the energies, though, they surrendered to my will, melding into something I found utterly foreign.

I only gave myself a moment to enjoy it this time. I knew what came next in this process.

So, I turned this mix of peace and harmony... *Balance* on the tear, plastering it over that wound in the world like a bandage, and as the last drop was wrung from me, something deep inside *wrenched*. As this sensation rippled to the surface, I lost control of my legs, fully prepared to accept another host of bumps and bruises, but before I could receive this gift, someone took my elbow, steadying me.

I hardly noticed. The temptation to curl around my wound, licking at it, was as strong as I remembered, and all of my focus went to resisting it. Sleep, just out of view, laughed at my attempts, lapping at my mind.

And behind it all, Nylion screamed.

This should concern me... right? Why had I... hurt myself like this?

As suddenly as it had swept over me, all that was wrong with me got stripped away, leaving me addled. What had happened? Why-?

Beside me, Rhylix grunted, and I realized that he was the one who'd taken my weight. Before shame for that could take more than a toehold, though, I had to return the favor. He released a strangled yell, and I knew what had happened.

"Oh, gods," I whispered. "Rhy, what did you do?"

With his eyes unfocused, Rhylix didn't seem to have heard me.

"Is this... what happens when you...?" he gasped.

He couldn't finish the thought, but fortunately, white light washed over him at that moment. Clearing his throat, he shakily pushed me away, able to support himself.

"Raimie," he said. "I-I'm so sorry."

That was a confusing reaction. Yes, the result of a tear's closure might not be pleasant, but it was manageable. It was like a papercut on my essence, although...

Nylion had barely had time to stop screaming in our head, reducing that noise to mere whimpers. What could have happened to him?

“Don’t worry about it,” I distractedly said. “Tear’s closed.”

I threw a hand toward where it had been hanging not long ago, noting my splinters’ absence with surprise. Where had they gone?

“We should get going. Open the gate for the others.”

Spinning for the door, I didn’t give Rhylix a chance to respond. He probably had questions. Who wouldn’t after assuming such a strange wound from a patient? This, however, wasn’t something I was willing to discuss. Given how often we’d talked about boundaries when it came to our respective privacy, Rhylix should respect that.

So, I drew an Ele bubble around myself and hurried across the bailey.

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