

# Chapter 28: Saving the Lost

## Raimie

Thank Alouin for no further surprises. In the house at the middle of the Birthing Grounds, the ground floor's second room looked exactly like Little had described it last week. Doldimar had left his victims dangling from the ceiling: several dozen captives, hanging in neat rows.

These people, I could save. Open cuts and slashes might decorate their skin, but each wound was superficial, something they could heal from, and I didn't see any signs of deadly infection on them.

As I moved into the room, I brushed against the closest prisoner, swinging him, and that fixed his pained eyes on me.

"Please..." he rasped. "Let me down."

How long had these people been left hanging like this? Glancing up, I tensed on seeing so many blue fingers brushing against the ceiling. Their captivity must have been *lengthy* for necrosis to have set in so deeply. If they had any hope of retaining their hands, I'd need to release them quickly.

So, I hugged the waist of the first prisoner I'd encountered, lifting his rope-bound wrists up and over a hook, but as I was lowering the man to the floor, he shifted his weight, and I lost my balance. Tumbling, we both landed *hard*.

Desperately, I sought the air that had been knocked out of my lungs, but my search got impeded by the forearm that bore down on my neck. Peeking over it, the freed prisoner feverishly grinned at me. Combined with the shock of my fall, the feeble pressure he was applying might have been enough to keep me pinned, if not for my primeancy.

I blasted the man with Ele, watching more prisoners swing in the wake of his flight. As I should have expected, desperate pleading and screams started ringing out, which soon had Hadrion stumbling into the room.

"Raimie!" he said.

"Keep back!"

As I'd shouted, the freed prisoner had tried to stand, but another Ele burst helped to flip him onto his back.

*"Stay down,"* I growled.

But the prisoner refused to listen, unsteadily climbing to his feet again. Thankfully, arms wrapped him in an embrace before he could collect himself, and although he tried to break free, the hold on him was tight.

*"Quickly, Raimie!"* Hadrion shouted. *"I can't hold him like this for long."*

Damnit.

*What do I do, Dim?* I snapped. *I know I should draw Corruption out of him. That seems intuitive, but I need specifics.*

Sputtering, Dim said, *"I don't... specifics? Are you kidding me? All of mine just force Daevetch into and out of the body. There's never any finesse to go with it!"*

*Well, that won't help right now, will it?* I said. *If I get this wrong, I'll kill him.*

*"What?! I don't even-!"*

*"Just think about it for a minute, dimwit."*

Even as my splinters dove into their typical argument, an urgency from within demanded my attention, and Bright's suggestion faded to the background.

*Nyl? Is that you?* I said. *What's happened? Why can't you speak to me? Did... did that thing back in Sanc hurt you-?*

A distant sense of exasperation rose to stop my rapidly tumbling thoughts.

*Right. Focus on the current-day problem,* I said. *Can you help with it? What do I-? Could you... I don't know... take control? Like you did with Teron-?*

The world shifted, making me lose control of my body's strings.

*Are you paying attention?* Nylion snapped at me.

He didn't wait for an answer, simply calling for the Daevetch within the prisoner opposite us. That man screeched long and loud, or he did so until he lost consciousness, but even still, black tendrils streamed from his limp body to our hand until those threads sputtered and died. Upon their cessation, Hadrion dropped the prisoner.

*"Did that work?"* he breathlessly asked.

*"What do you think?"* Nylion growled.

Hadrion didn't seem to notice the sudden change in 'my' mood, only staring at the perfectly smooth skin of a man, newly freed from Corruption.

“Wow!” he breathed. “You can do it. I mean... I knew you could but... you can *do* it.”

Huffing, Nylion turned away from the teenager.

*We cannot release them before they are cleansed, he said. If each of them fights us, cleansing them will take far too long, and I... WE need sleep soon.*

*Is that... why you sound so... angry?* I hesitantly asked.

I'd never known my other half to be mad at me, and the idea of it... it shuddered something horrible loose from deep inside.

Pinching our eyebrows together, Nylion said, *Regret? Why are you feeling...? You should not feel guilty, heart of my heart. Is it because of my mood? You should not worry about that. I have merely been keeping a more vigilant watch over you since Sanc. So, I may be a little... exhausted.*

Oh. Oh, that made perfect sense. Thank the gods.

Damn, why was my relief about this so strong?

After a pause, Nylion said, *Can you handle this cleansing job on your own? I do not know if-*

*Of course I can, I said. Of course. Although... please, keep an eye on me still? I'm not sure if I'll be able to do this right.*

Frowning, Nylion said, *I do not understand what you are trying to say. You are giving me self-confidence and then uncertainty? What does that mean? Should I give you control or not?*

Yes, I-

I stumbled from the force of Nylion's departure. He must be *truly* tired if he was letting go that fast, and... I thought he might be angry about something without telling me what it was as well. He'd been acting a little more irritable in the last month or so, and I wasn't sure why.

Maybe I should ask him about it face-to-face. I hadn't been able to visit him for quite a while, needing uninterrupted sleep in the brief times I'd been able to get it. When I went to sleep tonight, I'd be sure to visit our shared space, but first, I had several real-world problems to tackle.

When I moved to the next person in line, Hadrion followed me with wide eyes.

“Do you mean to heal all of these people?” he asked.

Cocking my head, I said, “It's not healing, Hadrion. I'm not taking on these people's wounds. I'm merely removing the Daevetch in them. Now, hush. I need to work.”

Before I could get started, Dim popped in front of me.

“Hang on,” they said. “What's going on with you? Bright disappeared for a second. Are you...?”

Bright had *disappeared*? That was concerning, but when I looked for them, there they were, watching me with a pained look on their face and their arms hugging their chest.

Gods, I *still* got freakishly terrified whenever Bright was anything less than ok around me. Back when I'd reconstructed them, what I'd done had seemed so intuitive, like the easiest—and yet, most painful—thing in the world. Now that I knew how impossible what I'd done actually was, something Rhylix and both of my splinters had been uneasy around me with, I wasn't sure if I could replicate the process. The mental block of 'first person to have done it' would probably stop me from saving the splinter if I ever needed to again, and this made me anxious beyond measure.

It didn't help that all parties who knew about that process had been on-and-off interrogating me about the few minutes that I'd needed to break their world view. Of them, Bright seemed to have finally accepted what had happened, if only in recent days, but Rhylix and Dim were still having trouble with wrapping their minds around it. It was another source of pressure added to everything else, and I couldn't handle it, now when I was supposed to be finishing up my side of a *battle*.

*Not now*, I told Dim, hoping they'd drop the subject.

Fortunately, they did, and swallowing any apprehension I might have about making a mistake, I felt for the Corruption entwined around my first subject's wet tissue. First, I carefully unlatched each of Daevetch's holds on her before sucking that energy to me. A familiar feeling of invincibility clamored to take over as shadows rushed over me, but as always, I held the feeling at arm's length. I couldn't let it come any closer because if it did, I didn't know what would happen. I wasn't strong enough to resist the temptation that Daevetch always brought.

After what felt like seconds to me, the last of the Corruption in my subject's body came to me, and I opened my eyes. Sprawled out on the floor nearby, Hadrion covered a yawn, grinning at my startled look.

"Is she human?" he asked.

Glancing over my subject, I nodded.

"Yes, I've removed the Corruption in her," I said.

"You did it without her screaming too! Good job," Hadrion said. "Took a while, though."

Oh, no.

"How long?" I asked.

Humming, Hadrion tapped a finger on his lip before holding it in front of him.

"Maybe five times as long as the first time?"

Groaning, I rubbed my forehead. I wasn't going nearly fast enough. When forming this plan, I hadn't thought there would be a time crunch on me. If Ryvolim failed in his half of our saboteur

mission, then my half was doomed to fail anyway. In the long run, it wouldn't matter how long I took to give these Kiraak their humanity back.

But if Nylion was suffering right now, exhausted as he'd claimed, then I needed to finish this as quickly as possible. If there was one thing I'd noticed in our time since reuniting, it was that our wellbeing affected one another. When he was tired, I got cranky. When I was worried, he got over-protective and aggressive. When he was happy, so was I.

That didn't mean our emotions necessarily *matched*, just that one of our moods might splash onto the other in this duo.

And I didn't want to crash and burn in the middle of enemy territory. I also didn't want to indulge in sleep until I'd at least helped the people in this room. They were the ones most at risk for long-term complications from Doldimar's ministrations. I had to see them safe.

But I also couldn't spend as much time here as I'd need, if we healed them my-

"I *cannot* keep doing these things for you," Nylion snarled.

Spinning to the next prisoner, he *yanked* Corruption out of them, finished with the process over the course of a dozen breaths, and I was left stunned, floating behind our eyes.

Nylion had never taken control like this before. He almost always waited until he had some measure of consent from me before sliding into that front-most position. So, this abrupt takeover? It had addled me, more than I would have thought it could.

"Are you ok, Rai-?" Hadrion started.

"Fine!" Nylion snapped before wincing.

He rubbed his eyes for a moment, slowly leaking tension from our body.

"I am sorry," he said. "I did not mean to snap at you. I am simply... tired. And sick of always having to do tasks I would never have taken on if I had been asked."

Softly smiling, Hadrion came closer, but he restrained himself from touching our body.

"That's all right. You're under a lot of pressure right now. I'm glad you apologized once you noticed what you'd done," he said. "It must be hard, dealing with all of this."

He vaguely waved around the room.

"Can I help you with it?" he said "Obviously not with the primeancy part, but maybe there's something else I can do?"

Blankly blinking at this kid, Nylion was quiet for far too long, and I wasn't sure what he was thinking.

“That... would be nice. Thank you,” he said. “If you could lower each of these people’s bodies from their hooks once I have finished with them, I would appreciate it.”

Grinning, Hadrion said “Sure thing, boss!”

He skipped to the woman that Nylion had finished cleansing, straining to take her weight, and all the while, Nylion stared.

*I have not met someone like him in a while, he whispered. He is... good.*

Yes. Yes, *he is*, I said.

But I said nothing more, waiting for Nylion to rally. Soon enough, he did so, and I made not a single comment more as he began his work, something he apparently hadn’t wanted to do.

...I wished he’d told me about that before accepting the task from me.

I watched Nylion go down the line of Kiraak, getting more and more concerned with each one he cleansed. As Daevetch’s power arced over our body with every instance of this, I might recoil from it, but Nylion embraced the feeling. After he was finished with his third prisoner, he started singing along to an unheard, discordant song, and three or four people later, he shoved the next one into a swing, chuckling when they released a pained yelp.

What in the-?

“Nylion. You need to release the portion of the whole that you’ve accumulated. Don’t let madness take you this soon.”

As Nylion laughed, I somehow gained enough control to focus our eyes on... Dim. Considering he was wielding Daevetch, I’d known my other half would have a splinter, but why did he have *mine*? Yes, we were two halves of a whole, a singular entity split in twain, but our personalities couldn’t be more different. We should have attracted different splinters.

“Oh, you have figured it out, have you? I thought it might take you longer,” Nylion sang to Dim. “Also. You should let me do as I please for once, Chaos. You have added inordinate trouble to an already chaotic life. Why can you not simply *help me* when I need it instead of scolding me?”

Ripping more Daevetch from his next victim, Nylion shot a tiny bolt of it at Dim. The splinter didn’t move, leaving a disapproving look fixed on their face, which I found weird. Dim had been nothing but ... well, *chaotic* with me. What was with the suddenly serious routine?

“You’re being foolish,” they said. “Raimie needs-”

Jerking his hands down into fists, Nylion shouted, “Do *not* tell me what the heart of my heart does or does not need, you constant *nuisance*. If you mean to be so intrusive, then I shall be so as well.”

He jerked our face toward the splinter.

“You shall SHUT UP and WATCH!”

As Dim’s mouth snapped closed, they clawed at their throat, which had me wincing. I knew how much the Daevetch splinter despised getting commands from me, hence why I didn’t use them. Much as I didn’t like seeing Nylion do this now, I was also grateful for it. The sooner this was done, the sooner I could sleep. The sooner I could figure out what the hell was wrong with my other half.

Nylion moved on to the next line of prisoners, drawing more Corruption from them, and as an ecstasy of power pounded through our body, I choked on it. My other half, however, thrived. He skipped from body to body, less intent on the task of returning humanity to these near-Kiraak than on the Corruption held within them.

Somehow, I heard a door opening behind us, despite all the worries and turmoil trying to drown me. I shoved aside Daevetch’s constantly roiling temptation, focusing on learning who’d come inside, but Nylion didn’t move to investigate, too intent on his current project. When steel clashed on steel, however, I turned cold.

*NYL! CHECK ON HADRION!* I shouted.

Gods, what had gone wrong?

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Revision #1

Created 14 September 2024 01:31:14 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable