

Chapter 32: Approaching the Truth

Rhylix

I don't know how much longer I can resist its influence

When I caught up, neither Raimie nor I said a word. I didn't, as a general rule, tease people, but hell, if I wasn't tempted to do it now. In the end, though, I decided to abstain from that mischief, if only because I knew how much trouble I'd be bringing Raimie tonight.

Together, he and I left the confines of Paft's buildings, strolling alongside a field. It was empty with its produce picked and stored. Eventually, we reached the plains around the village, but I didn't wander far into their tall grass before dropping to the ground.

While Raimie sat, I stretched my legs out, leaning back to see the stars. They'd always been so bright once firelight was left behind and the moon...

Closing my eyes, I could almost imagine that its beams were caressing my skin like the sun's did.

"How angry is Eledis?" I idly said.

Chuckling, Raimie said, "Pretty damn furious. It's an interesting experience. I've never irritated him on purpose before but... he's not talking to me."

Something ripped nearby. Probably Raimie tearing grass clumps from the ground.

"Don't worry. He'll get over it."

Lowering my head, I gave my friend a half-smile.

"You're his grandson, after all."

Raimie ducked his head, trying to hide his answering grin.

“I suppose that’s true,” he said before peering at me, “but that’s not why we’re out here.”

“No, it’s not.”

Sitting up, I crossed my legs and pressed my palms together.

“Listen. Raimie. This thing we’ll be discussing? It’s dangerous,” I said. “I showed you my splinter. If you took that information to... well, anybody really, it would get me killed.”

It would also see Raimie dead, but telling him that would distract from the point. I needed my friend to understand what he was getting into. I had other reasons for starting our conversation like this, but that was the biggest one.

“I don’t think you’ll do something like that to me. It’s not in your nature,” I continued, “but if you made yourself as vulnerable as I have, it would make me more comfortable. I’d like to see your splinter, Raimie, and if you’re ok with it, I’d like to ask it a few questions as well.”

Having solemnly watched me while I’d spoken, Raimie tilted his head to the side, looking up at the stars as if thinking.

“Ok. That’s reasonable,” he said. “How do I do that, though? Usually, I’m the only one who can see them.”

Oh, gods. How had this wonderfully *terrifying* kid achieved everything he had and yet not know how to do something so basic?

“Um. It- it’s fairly simple, actually. You tell them that you want me to see them, and they’ll make themselves visible,” I said, “and don’t worry about our watchers by the field. They’ll still be blind to your splinters.”

“Oh! That’s- hmm. How did I not figure that out by myself?” Raimie said before shaking his head. “But my idiocy doesn’t matter right now. Here goes. Bright? Dim? Could you please-?”

Another Raimie, a version of him with light streaming through slits in its face, popped into view beside the original, and after a pause, another one, leaking inky darkness, appeared behind them. With its arms crossed, it snarled at me, hovering somewhere between cowering and wanting to claw my eyes out. Meanwhile, Bright—why had Raimie felt the need to give them nicknames?—rushed forward with its hands outstretched.

“*Thank the whole!*” it gasped. “Maybe you can tell him what we are.”

Before Bright could collide with me, I rolled to my feet, leaving the splinter teetering.

“What do you mean ‘tell him who you are?’” I asked. “You haven’t done that already?”

Recovering its balance, Bright shook its head.

“We-”

“You *understand* them?” Raimie said.

Pausing, I narrowed my eyes at the kid.

“You don’t?” I asked.

Raimie rubbed the back of his neck, shrinking on himself with one eye closed.

“Not always?” he said. “When we talk about anything important, all I hear from them is buzzing.”

Turning to Bright, I asked, “Is that why he doesn’t know? I thought it was strange that he didn’t yet.”

“Partially, yes,” Bright said. “We’ve had other problems-”

“Stop! Staaaahp!”

Jerking to the source of this voice, I fought off a wave of nausea. Dim had chosen an interesting compromise between its previous two desires. Crouching behind Raimie, it had one hand on his shoulder while the other was raised, holding a lump of penumbra. This, the pull of Dim’s substance to the physical plane, had me hunching on myself, hugging my stomach with one arm.

Trembling in place, Dim shouted, “Will anyone acknowledge the bind that *you’ve* put me in, one I’d never have come near on my own? Stopping myself from clobbering that sniveling piece of the enemy is hard enough, but *no*. You had to go further. Where do you put me? Not fifteen paces from... from *him*. I am doing my fucking best to resist my nature, but *the lot of you are making it near impossible*. Why do I have to be here?”

The splinter was screeching by the end of that rant. Its guise undulated over the waves passing beneath it, and despite my revulsion, my jaw dropped open. This... this was impossible.

This might help me break the cycle. I had to keep Dim stable.

Lunging forward, it roared into our silence, and I snapped my hands above my head, spreading my fingers to make it more obvious if I meant to attack.

“I... I’m only here to help Raimie understand his situation,” I said. “I swear that I won’t touch you. This time. Damn. Never thought I’d say something like that.”

Dim looked like it was on the brink, and for a heart stopping moment, I thought it would attack, forcing me to banish it, but Raimie, who’d been flicking his eyes between us the whole time, rested his hand over where Dim was touching his shoulder.

His palm sank through the splinter to his own skin, of course. Dim’s non-corporeal form wouldn’t allow physical touch, but it calmed the splinter down nonetheless. Taking a shuddering breath, it

backed off, lowering a hand filled with darkness.

“Well. That was interesting.”

Licking his lips, Raimie joined me on his feet.

“You ok?” he asked.

Lowering my arms, I choked on a crazed giggle when I saw how badly I was trembling. Gods, it was almost as violent as Dim’s shaking had been, but what could I say? This? An enemy splinter tolerating my presence? It was exactly what I’d been looking for.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Yeah, I’m good. I’m just-”

By the void, was this joy? Was this hope, when that emotion wasn’t held at bay? How had I forgotten what it felt like?

“What about you?”

It took me a second to realize Raimie was asking that question of Dim, but that was long enough for Bright to return to its human.

Resting its hands on its hips, it asked, “Yes, how are you, oh most rash force of destruction?”

Sarcasm had been laced through that question, but I could swear I’d heard concern—of all thing—too.

Hugging itself, Dim weakly growled, “Fuck off, stick in the mud.”

Bright clicked its tongue.

“You can do better than that,” it said before turning to Raimie. “The idiot will be fine, given time.”

“Good,” Raimie said. “Because I’m still pissed at you for your behavior at the tear. I *still don’t feel right*, you assholes.”

He shoved a finger toward them.

“So, no more fighting, or almost fighting as the case may be, for the rest of the night. Be on your best behavior.”

With a fist held in front of my face, I bit a knuckle to keep from laughing. After all, Raimie had just berated two of the most dangerous beings he’d ever encounter, but considering he didn’t know any better, the splinters should forgive his disrespect.

So, when they instead bowed their heads, mumbling apologies, I dropped my arm to my side. When would this kid stop surprising me? I should be used to oddities like this by now, but I... most definitely wasn't.

“We were discussing communication issues, I believe?” Raimie said, lifting an eyebrow.

Jumping, I cleared my throat.

“Right. You said you hear buzzing from them at times?” I asked.

“Usually when they’re about to tell me something important, yes.”

“Huh.”

That was strange. It could be why Raimie’s use of his ‘energies’, as he’d called them, had been so sporadic too, which wasn’t good. In the future, he’d need that to be consistent, but I wasn’t sure how to fix it.

“I wonder if the block is between you and your splinters or all of them,” I said.

“Why don’t we find out?” Raimie asked. “You have a splinter. Creation, yes? Why don’t you have it join us?”

Behind him, Dim tensed.

“Raimie...” it muttered.

Glancing over his shoulder, Raimie said, “It would only be for a few seconds.”

“And I’ll keep it from attacking you,” I added.

Because this was a good idea. If the problem was merely with Bright and Dim, maybe Creation could intervene for Raimie.

“*Fine*,” Dim groaned. “I’ll just sit here and, you know, hold myself together while you invite another enemy to the table.”

“So glad to have your approval,” I said, showing the splinter my teeth. “Creation, do you mind?”

“Yes?” a small voice asked.

If I squinted hard enough, some of the damage done to Creation appeared to have healed, but the splinter still looked like hell. At its arrival, Dim barked a laugh before slapping a hand to its mouth. Still, its amusement was strong enough to knock it to the ground, where it rolled back and forth with barely muffled snickers.

“Why haven’t you banished that repugnant stain?” Creation asked.

Even exhausted as it looked, it fell into a ready stance from a long-vanished fighting form, fixing its eyes on Dim.

“It’s Raimie’s splinter,” I said.

“Oh.”

Gradually, Creation relaxed, wincing as if doing so hurt it.

Once it had stood down, it wearily asked, “Why am I here?”

No protests over leaving the enemy on this plane of existence? No attempts to override my decision? Curious.

“I need you to tell Raimie where you come from,” I said.

When Creation wrinkled its brow, light scattered through the cracks found there.

“You mean the whole?” it asked. “Why does he-?”

“It’s buzzing,” Raimie interrupted.

Huh. So, the kid’s splinters weren’t defective. Did that mean *he* was, or had something weakened his ties with his splinters or-?

What was I doing? The night was getting late, and I hadn’t gotten to the issue that I’d brought Raimie out here for in the first place. Drawing his splinters into the physical plane had been meant as a subtle hint as to what his life would soon become. As an added bonus, I’d also gotten the chance to speak with them, but neither of those side-goals had been the point. It was time to focus.

“Thank you, Creation,” I said. “That will be all.”

“But the enemy-” Creation started.

“I can handle one splinter,” I interrupted before lowering my voice. “I need you to heal, please.”

Sighing, Creation said, “Ok.”

After it vanished, Raimie said, “So, this communication problem-”

“Can wait,” I again interrupted. “We’ll work on it together, but for now, I can tell you most of what they’re trying to say. So, let’s allow Dim some relief, shall we? Although...”

I turned on the remaining splinters, raising an eyebrow when I saw Bright’s proximity to Dim. How on earth could they stand being so close to one another?

“We can excuse your human’s failure to properly introduce himself, considering he doesn’t know what you are,” I said, “but I’d like to know your aspects, please. It’s only fair since you know mine.”

I let my feral grin out, hoping Dim would hear my unspoken threat, but the splinters ignored me, exchanging a glance.

That was new. Usually, I had to deal with adoration or fear from them and nothing else. Well, except for from Creation.

“Doing this will advance the plan more than harm it,” Bright said.

“I fucking *hate* agreeing with you,” Dim hissed, bristling as it faced me. “I’m a piece of Chaos.”

“Which makes me a piece of Order,” Bright said, flourishing a bow, “but please. We’d prefer to be called by the names our human has given us.”

When Dim flashed its teeth in challenge, I raised my hands placatingly.

Gods, such powerful aspects. I should have expected as much but still.

Once this was over, I’d need to shudder the prickles out of my skin for a good five minutes. Enemy splinters didn’t work together. They just didn’t.

Rubbing my eyes, I said, “Will you tell them to leave us, Raimie? They’re giving me a headache.”

“Sure thing,” Raimie said before turning to Bright and Dim. “Do what he says. We’ll talk later.”

“Of course.”

“Be careful, kid.”

And they vanished.

TTS Chapter Thirty-Two

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