

Chapter 37: Restoring Memories

Raimie

"That was stupid," Nylion said.

With his hands on his hips, he leaned over me, smirking.

"You cleansed, what? Five, six hundred Kiraak? All in the space of twelve hours," he continued. "Do you know how much Daevetch you handled in that time? Consequences do exist for using that much magic, even if it is of the primal variety."

Gingerly, I sat up, prodding at my stomach. Thank the gods, it felt normal here. I hated nausea.

As for here, yes. I was in the dream space I shared with Nylion. Was I ready to tell him what I'd figured out while awake?

Taking a deep breath, I nodded.

"If you're quite done lecturing me, I believe we have a chest to unlock," I said. "Or am I wrong about that?"

Nylion froze solid.

"Are you sure we should do it now?" he asked. "With everything that has happened in the waking world-"

"I need a distraction from it," I said, not wanting to hear more about... those problems. "So, let's get that chest open, yes?"

For a split second, Nylion hesitated with something almost painful passing over his face. Then, he jerked back into motion, offering me a hesitant hand.

"Well, that took you long enough," he said. "Will you... tell me why you were so reluctant before?"

Refusing to meet Nylion's eyes, I rubbed the back of my neck.

"Honestly? I was afraid," I said. "I'm happy with the way things are right now, and the memories locked in that chest could change us for the worse. I want to bring justice to whoever ripped us apart as much as you do, but I don't know if satisfying that urge will be worth the other memories that might come with the names we want."

Flinching, Nylion said, "That is... understandable."

Gods, he looked guilty, although I wasn't sure why that could be. He wasn't at fault for any of what had happened between us in the last couple of days.

Clearing his throat, Nylion asked, "What made you change your mind, then?"

"You weren't happy."

I shrugged.

"I've put you through enough already without denying you this. Gods, I can't even imagine what it was like to be locked alone in our head for nine years. So, yeah. I'll learn to deal with whatever extra baggage might come."

When Nylion didn't immediately respond, I bit my lip. Had my answer upset my other half? Maybe I should retreat from this place, giving Nylion some space, but before I could pop into my dreams, he spoke up.

"Thank you."

With his fingers tangled in his tunic, he looked like he might start crying, fixing his eyes on the ground.

"I can feel how difficult this decision was for you," he said. "So, truly. You have my gratitude, heart of my heart."

Nodding, I decided this place's non-existent sky had become exceedingly interesting, hoping all the while that the body I portrayed here couldn't blush.

"So, how are we doing this?" I asked.

Chuckling, Nylion said, "You are the one who conjured a vampire to guard our memories, I think it is only fair that you fight it while I pick the chest's lock."

That comment jerked my head down.

"You can pick locks?" I said.

"I brushed off the skill while you were learning it," Nylion said with a smirk, "but I believe I may be faster with it. Can you distract our fairy tale monster for the thirty seconds I will need with the chest?"

"Depends. Can I...?"

When I tried to draw on Ele or Daevetch, neither responded, which had me cursing.

Snorting, Nylion said, "We are in our head, silly. What makes you think the primal forces would answer your call here?"

I made a face at him.

"There was no harm in trying," I said, "but in answer to your other question, I can do thirty seconds. Maybe. As you said, though, we're in our head. If that vampire tears us apart, would it matter?"

"I am confident that it would still hurt like hell, but... fair point," Nylion said before gesturing toward our goal. "You go first, and I will follow once you have the monster's attention."

With a hesitant smile, I reached out, brushing my fingers against the back of Nylion's hand, and the same electric jolt that had always come from our touch shot through me.

Shivering, I said, "Wish me luck."

It was time to go.

When I was halfway to the vampire, I dropped a hand to my hip, cursing when I realized I had no weapons or armor on me. All I had on was my uniform, my preferred outfit nowadays, but its cloth would still part like butter beneath the monster's talons.

Gods damnit. Was this to be a game of swipe and dodge, then? I HATED that type of combat, but since I couldn't avoid such a fight, I might as well get it over with.

"Hey, ugly!" I shouted, waving my arms overhead. "Over here!"

The vampire leveled its gaze at me, but besides that, it didn't move. What...?

Confused, I came to a stop.

"Aren't you going to fight me?" I asked. "I thought for sure you would."

"Is that what you want?" the vampire said. "You are the master of this mind, and I am your creation. If you wish for a fight, then that is what I'll give you."

Shuddering, I pushed down my unease.

"Does that mean I can unlock the chest behind you without trouble, then?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, that is something I cannot allow," the vampire said.

I waited for more from it, but when nothing was forthcoming, I hesitantly edged toward the chest.

"Look, I need to open that box, so either stand aside or fight-"

Without warning, the vampire lunged at me, and dodging its talons, I tripped backward. Its next swipe landed me on my back, and I rolled sideways to avoid its claws, plunging for my belly. I scrambled to my feet, but I wasn't fast enough to avoid the barbs that got raked across my back. Stumbling, I twisted, yelping at the sight of fangs baring down on my neck.

And the monster vanished in a puff of smoke, leaving my heart threatening to leap out of my chest.

"Fucking... vampires..." I gasped.

My cursing trailed away as the rush found in battle wore off, and while it did that, Nylion hurried to me.

"Are you ok?" he frantically asked.

Delicately picking at the edge of my tunic, Nylion peeled it up, sucking in a gasp at the wounds lying underneath, and something instinctual had me yanking free of him. I turned toward my other half, forcing a crooked smile into place at the panicked look on Nylion's face.

"I'm fine. It's all good, Nyl!" I said. "Nothing's real here, remember? Well... except for you. You're... very real."

That stopped Nylion from speaking another word more, seemingly driving concern for me from his mind as well. Clearing his throat, he abruptly spun in place before marching to the chest.

"Shall we?" he asked with a thick voice.

Huh. Embarrassment was a nice look at him.

It took a moment of waiting, but when I was able to catch Nylion's eye, I smirked.

"Let's."

Mama's fever had taken a turn for the worse, and mine wasn't much better. I vaguely recalled the carriage ride from Daira to Allanovian and my relief on entering this mountain's embrace, unchanged despite my many visits in the past.

I also had a few fragmentary memories of my father arguing with hostile Esela and one of their councilwomen at one point. If I concentrated, I could touch on the knowledge that that Councilor was renowned throughout Ada'ir for her control of a type of mind magic. I wasn't sure why my father would want to speak with her.

Perhaps back then, he'd been begging the Esela for their aid with my fever because a little while ago, Gistrick had summoned me from my sick bed, although he'd never explained what was going on. My Eselan weapons tutor was almost always quiet, but right now, the older man also had a sour

look on his face, one that he'd only worn on the *worst* of occasions before. He and another Zrelnach had been escorting me through Allanovian's many branching tunnels, all so we could meet my father outside of the Zrelnach's quarters.

"I need you to come with me, son," he said.

And I was happy to comply. I loved my father, missed him every time he was gone, so if we'd be spending time together, I didn't mind the fact that it would be while I was sick. I wanted every second I could get with him.

The further along we moved, though, the more my fever made me stumble, nearly tumbling me into the tunnel's stone walls. Gistrick and the unknown Zrelnach insisted on helping me at times, pulling me along by the elbows, and I *didn't* like this.

"Raimie, this does not feel right," Nylion said. "They are planning something bad."

My other half was walking beside us with his face creased, and something unpleasant tickled the back of my mind.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

Nylion, however, didn't get a chance to respond. The grown-ups around me exchanged a glance before Gistrick grabbed me and the other Zrelnach lifted me into the air. In my shock, I didn't fight this. I only remembered to scream and wiggle and shift once I was off of my feet.

WHAT WAS GOING ON?

After we'd passed through the trial chamber's doors, I was unceremoniously dumped into the middle of a small, crowded circle.

"Yes, I am sure," Nylion said, answering my question from earlier.

Concern was radiating from him in waves, flooding down our bond, and after finding my other half in the room, I scrambled out of the sand, falling into a ready stance. I didn't have any weapons on me, but with my Zrelnach training, I should be able to take a few enemies down. Whatever was happening, I had to protect us, protect Nylion, keep the one I loved safe. Maybe we could escape this place...

On looking around, however, those hopes crumbled to dust.

A ring of people had surrounded us with most of them faces that I'd dreaded seeing. Gistrick and several former sparring partners formed one side of this circle, and on the other half, Eledis, my father, and the magic genius of a councilwoman were watching me.

"What's going on?" I snapped.

They'd better have an excellent reason for-

“Raimie,” someone wheezed below me.

Glancing down, I choked on seeing mama’s ravaged state. Her face was flushed and gaunt with sweat drenching her clothes, and a crazed gleam was shining in her eyes. Even as Nylion crossed his arms, looking away, I dropped to my knees beside her.

“Mama, what are you doing?” I asked. “You should be in bed.”

She shook her head with difficulty.

“This is more important,” she said. “You see, my love, our family has a problem. A bad one. It’s long past time that we fixed it.”

Sucking in a breath, I tried to blink a sudden glimmer out of my vision.

“I know I’m a disappointment sometimes, mama, and it’s my fault that you’re sick-”

“Hush now.”

Shakily, she reached up to stroke my hair.

“You’re not the issue. I’ve always been proud of you, Raimie. I’ve pushed you as hard as I have because I wanted you to succeed. And you aren’t the reason I’m laid out like this,” she said. “The blame for my illness lies elsewhere, at the feet of the problem we’re here to solve.”

At that, Nylion snapped his head toward her with his eyes going wide, but I wasn’t paying attention to him right now.

“You shouldn’t talk like that,” I said. “Save your energy for fighting the fever.”

Unsteadily clasping my hands, mama half-smiled at me.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for me, my beautiful boy,” she said. “I’m too far gone, but I can use what little of my life is left to help you.”

This couldn’t be happening! I couldn’t lose my mother, not yet, not when I still needed to prove my worth to her.

“What are you talking about?” I said. “Please, save yourself. I don’t need help, mama.”

Her hands tightened around mine, painfully grinding into my bones.

“Ah, but in that you’re wrong, my son,” she said. “You’re broken, Raimie, and today, we’re gathered here to fix you. It’s time for Nylion to go.”

The world screeched to a stop with time skipping a beat. Unable to believe what I’d heard, I looked up at Nylion, saw the white in his eyes, and felt unreasoning terror rushing in a tidal wave across our bond. My other half reached for me, brushing a finger along my lips until it was resting on my

cheek.

And the world resumed.

NO! Something inside let loose a gut-wrenching howl of betrayal. I tried to jerk away from mama, to gather my other half to me, but her grip was iron. I couldn't escape.

Desperately, I tried to explain once more.

"Nyl is me!" I shouted. "You can't make him go away. If you did, you'd rip away a piece of *me!*"

"Raimie, behind you!" Nylion shouted.

Too late. Hands clamped around my temples, and Allanovian's councilwoman started mumbling under her breath. As panic ate through my mind, my eyes went wide with my breathing rate rapidly escalating.

They really meant to do it. They'd split me in two. Oh, gods...

Habitually, I reached for Nylion, screaming across our bond.

Nyl, what do I-?

Pain stabbed through my head...

And my other half flickered in and out of view, stopping my heart.

"You CAN'T!" I roared, reaching for Nylion, clinging to my other half like a lifeline.

Agony slammed like a mallet on my brain, and try as I might to fight it, my grip loosened.

No.

Gritting my teeth, I hissed curses between them, refusing to let go. The bond between us, between Nylion and me, me and him, him and me, brightly burned in my mind. The councilwoman circled around it, a portentous wind come to snuff it out, but she didn't have the power to do it. Not alone.

And I wouldn't let her! Our ever-present bond was the one thing I'd fight to the death for. I'd tear that Eselan woman's hair off of her head, rake her flesh, rip chunks of her from the rest with my teeth. I would *shred* her to protect Nylion and what I had with him. SHE COULDN'T HAVE IT!

Beneath me, mama drew a shuddering gasp before going still, and a ghost of her presence joined the councilwoman around our bond. Together, they circled the union deep inside that was RaimieandNylion. They advanced on it, and I scrambled for escape, knowing in my bones that I couldn't resist both of them at once. If I could slip free in the real world, maybe I could save this sacred space in my mind.

Before I could use my liberated hands to break free of the councilwoman's grasp, however, my head erupted into a volcano of pain with magma flowing down my neck and extremities. Under the force of this, my grip on Nylion faltered.

What had I-? I'd been fighting for... it had been something immensely important.

My other half rapidly quivered in and out of existence with memories of the two of us liquifying beneath the heat in our head, and desperately, Nylion pressed our lips together, clutching at my head on backing off.

"Do not forget me," he said before flickering out of view.

I wasn't sure why I was in such a large, underground room or why so many people were staring at me or why mama wasn't breathing-

A final surge burned through me, and unconsciousness greeted me like a friend.

It was real, but it wasn't, but it was, but it wasn't. It was what I'd always known but with more detail. It was my mother, the one I'd always loved, but also a horror. It was real. How could it be-?

With every sensation deadened in the wake of what I'd relived, I blinked away tears, but beside me, Nylion was snarling. He paced back and forth, reaching for an unseen threat.

"That BITCH!" he growled.

Tiredly, I sat up, rubbing my temples. Why did my head hurt when so many other, past injuries hadn't transferred to this place?

"Don't call mama that," I said. "We can't know if one of the others manipulated her-"

"YOU SHUT UP!" Nylion roared. "What the FUCK do you know? You know NOTHING, you useless little-"

"It doesn't matter anyway!" I snapped.

I didn't know why I was reacting like this, probably because Nylion's fury was stirring something similar in me, but right now, I was too addled to care.

"Mama's dead, much like that councilwoman. We can't do anything to them, so let's focus on the ones who are still alive."

Stopping short, Nylion took a few deep breaths before lowering his fists.

"You are right, of course. As you always are."

The two of us simply stood there for a while, so close and NEEDING to touch, but unable to. Something was coming, a churning storm of memories that was lurking on my mind's horizon, and because of that, we couldn't afford distraction of any kind. Not even...

"Did you kiss me back then?" I asked in monotone.

Surprisingly, I wasn't offended by the idea. Ren and I did that all the time, so why should I care if someone else kissed me too? Right now, I simply didn't have energy to infuse into my question.

Also. In that memory, I'd literally seen Nylion in the waking world, kind of like I had in Da'kul. That shouldn't be possible... right? I definitely shouldn't have felt that mouth lightly pressing on mine, definitely shouldn't have...

Lifting my fingers, I touched them to my lips while Nylion glanced at me with his arms crossed.

"What if I did?" he grumbled.

"I..."

That was a good question, one that I had no doubt would take me a while to answer.

"It doesn't matter," I said.

And I couldn't afford to focus on it. That storm of memories wouldn't long wait for me to find somewhere safe before bursting, which meant I needed a place of absolute solitude and quickly. Unfortunately, I couldn't do that until I woke up.

So gingerly, I brushed against the bond between me and my other half, worried that this memory would have damaged it, but after only the briefest of touches, I recoiled.

I remembered what our bond had been like when we were children: a place of comforting warmth, a union of purpose, a melding so complete that for all intents and purposes, we'd been one. A flow of being, unending from one to the other and so vitally energetic that I'd often thought of it as a merrily babbling brook of existence. Now...

Now, it was ash. The riverbed remained, and a dripping trickle haltingly traversed it, but it was a blackened husk of its former self, all cracked earth and parched reeds.

They'd taken something extraordinary and cherished and proceeded to defile it. I couldn't comprehend... I couldn't ABIDE it.

"Now what?" I asked.

For a moment, my throat ached from the ice in my voice, and hanging his head, Nylion hugged his elbows, probably considering the question.

“Since the councilwoman is dead, we cannot exact revenge on the one who actually enacted the spell, but Gistrick, Eledis, and our father participated, if nominally,” he said. “How shall we destroy them?”

It was a good question. I could think of many ways that I’d like to make those who’d hurt Nylion PAY, but for now, only one seemed fitting.

“First, we coerce an explanation from them,” I said.

Before I could continue, Nylion jerked toward me.

“What does their explanation matter?” he said. “They are guilty!”

“Think of it as practice for when we’re king, and don’t deny that the prospect of ruling over a kingdom appeals to you,” I said with a smirk. “I’ve felt you yearning for it sometimes.”

Nylion mumbled something unintelligible, which only made me smile wider. Gods. Maybe... maybe we’d be ok after this. Maybe our bond could return to how it had once been. Eventually.

“One of our responsibilities as king will be to listen as guilty people plead their cases, much like what we’ll do with Gistrick and the rest,” I said. “In the future, we can’t mete out punishment on a criminal before we hear all sides of the story. In the same way, we should wait to enact our vengeance. We can’t know how deeply each of the players betrayed us yet.”

Cocking his head, Nylion narrowed his eyes, but I knew when he’d decided to agree with me.

“We will destroy them, though, yes?” he asked.

With my teeth gleaming through my smile, I said, “They’ll receive their just rewards. Don’t worry. I already have some ideas for that.”

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