

# Chapter 39: False Life

## Raimie

“Somebody help me restrain him!”

With Oswin’s voice roaring through the black of my dreams, I grudgingly moved toward it.

“I’ll hold you all responsible if he hurts himself during the next fit!”

When I opened my eyes, Oswin’s face filled my view. It was turned to the side, presumably toward whoever he’d been yelling at, and judging from his position, he must be the one who was keeping me pinned.

“Let me up, Oswin,” I rasped.

Damn. I must have been fiercely screaming if my throat was this raw.

Oswin sprang off of me, and I slowly sat up, rubbing at the places on my arms where Daevetch tendrils continued to pulse. I let those remnants spill away, hissing at the clawing sensation that this produced.

“Are you all right, Raimie?” Oswin whispered from where he was kneeling.

Damn, he looked so relieved and small. How badly had I scared him?

“Fine,” I croaked. “I didn’t know using primal energy came with a limit.”

Nervously chuckling, Oswin said, “Rough way to find out.”

I grunted in response. When I tentatively reached for Ele, it leapt to my call without the side effects I’d been experiencing from Daevetch. Something to be grateful for, I supposed.

“Help me up,” I said.

Scrambling to his feet, Oswin pulled me to mine, and thanking him, I stretched in place, loosening my muscles up as much as I could. A storm in my mind was raging, which meant I needed to leave. Immediately.

With his voice raised an octave, Oswin asked, “What are you doing, sir?”

“Preparing for my trip to Tiro,” I tiredly said.

Oswin took a step back.

“But... sir! Is that wise after what happened? And... do you mean to go *alone*?”

“I am fine, Oswin, and I’m leaving by myself,” I said. “Are you planning on helping me or not?”

With a hugely released breath, Oswin fixed his eyes on the ground.

“I never could stop you when you put your mind to something,” he said before shaking his head.

“What do you need from me?”

“The army should prepare to march home. You should move out as soon as possible, but leave enough people and supplies at the Birthing Grounds to hold it. We can’t be sure if or when Doldimar will try to recapture this place,” I said. “Make sure those who stay are equipped to incorporate the newly turned humans into our rank and file. Recruitment will only be for those who want it, mind you, but we should bolster our numbers whenever we can.”

I paused in my stretching.

“While we’re at it, we might as well rename this place. The Birthing Grounds? Ugh. Who came up with that stupid name?”

Despite how tightly he was holding himself, Oswin chuckled at that, and it was almost enough to have me smiling again.

“Also, if Kaedesa asks after me, tell her I’m considering her offer,” I said.

“Her offer, sir?”

Should I share the queen’s proposal with him? Why wouldn’t I, though?

Making a face, I said, “She wants to marry me.”

Snorting, Oswin devolved into outright laughter when he realized I was serious.

“Oh, that’s priceless,” he gasped. “Good luck dealing with her and Ren, sir.”

Rolling my eyes, I swatted his shoulder.

“I’ll be off, then,” I said over his guffaws. “I expect you’ll be quick with following me.”

“Of course, sir,” Oswin gasped.

Striding for the door, I drew Ele to my legs and feet, pausing before crossing the threshold.

“When you get the chance, I suppose you should tell Ryvolim where I’ve gone as well,” I said. “He seemed anxious about staying near me, for some reason.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Oswin bowed, but by the time he’d risen to his full height, I was gone.

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Wind ruffled my hair as I dashed through the forest. The storm had broken, leaving a relentless flood of once-abandoned memories to scour my mind, and facts that for a lifetime, I’d wholeheartedly believed gradually shattered under the force of the truth’s revelation.

All of my memories from before my ninth birthday—the ones about the forest, the homestead, and Fissid—glimmered and puffed into smoke. Climbing trees in the forest was replaced by racing across Daira’s rooftops. Happy dinners with mama on the homestead, laughing while my father cleaned dishes, were displaced by tense meals in our manor house, worrying about whether the head of our household would survive his current mission for the queen. Learning to trade for grain in Fissid was smothered by watching Eledis negotiate with yet another rebellion’s leader.

Once my past’s underlying base had shifted back into its proper place, detailed recollections rose in a barrage, and I couldn’t stop them from flowing forth.

*My earliest memory is of Nylion. Mama is teaching us our letters, writing out a sentence before having us copy it, but she only ever talks to me with her instruction, ignoring Nylion. With each snub, my other half gets more upset, and I decide to speak up before his anger bleeds over onto me.*

*Tugging on mama’s sleeve, I say, “Nyl makes pretty letters too.”*

*Perking up from where he’s been lying, Nylion beams at me, rubbing his cheek against my leg. My other half is always desperate for praise. He never gets the credit for anything good we do. Only I get that.*

*“Your imaginary friend?” mama says. “I’m sure he does, my beautiful boy. Why don’t you show me?”*

*“Would you like a turn?” I ask Nylion.*

*Rising to his elbows, my other half nods, and I give him permission to take over. I watch through our eyes as Nylion precisely copies mama’s example. Compared to my wiggly scrawl, my other half’s version looks like an exact replica by the time it’s done.*

*“See, mama?” Nylion chirps. “I write pretty letters too.”*

*We grin, wanting to hear her praise, but with her hand flying to clasp her mouth, she chokes on a gasp. We don’t know if the retching noises she’s making are compliments or not. Crawling toward her, we reach for her cheek.*

*"Mama-?"*

*"What are you?" she whispers with tears glistening in her eyes.*

*Why is she asking that? Shouldn't she know?*

*"We are NylRaimie," we say.*

*With a sob, she flinches away from us before smacking us so hard that we fall to the floor. When our head cracks against tile, we black out.*

The time when bumps and bruises began.

*I'm four, and my education has already begun. While mama watches me from her corner, I give the wrong answer to my history tutor's question, and as it passes through our lips, Nylion winces. When I see the disappointed look on mama's face, I flush, but my shame is forgotten when the tutor advances on me with a red face.*

*I'm gone for several hours, and when awareness returns, mama's soothing the welts across my knuckles and back while Nylion cries in a corner.*

The beginning of my martial training.

*"I don't want to! I don't want to!" I shout as I race over the garden's grass.*

*Behind me, I know a group of palace guards is following me, as I know what will happen if I'm caught. When I reach a tree, I jump up it in one go, huddling on a branch once I'm far above where anyone can reach me.*

*As they approach the tree, the palace guard stops, looking up at me with their hands on their hips and disgruntled expressions in place.*

*"Raimie, you have to come down now," one of them says. "Your father wants you in a weapons yard. Now. A spymaster's training always starts after their fifth birthday. You know that."*

*But I don't want to learn how to fight. I don't LIKE fighting. Because look at Nylion, huddling in the crook of a branch and its trunk! He's shaking with fear, and that feeling is making my world warp.*

*The soldiers below me turn into faceless people, monsters come to hurt me and him, and I can't get away.*

*Still.*

*"No!" I shout. "You can't get me up here, and I'm not coming down. So... so... YOU GO AWAY!"*

*For a while, I think I've won. Then, someone comes to the tree with a ladder.*

A bubble of light and laughter, interspersing the darkness of my first nine years.

*Auntie Kaedesa has thrown an extravagant party for the advent of my seventh year. Everyone's here: mama, Eledis, Auntie, Lysinthir, Oswin, Silivren, even Uncle Marcuset. With protocols relaxed and my guard lowered, remembering to call my uncle by something other than Emir has been more difficult than I thought it would be, but I've managed it, to my quiet pride.*

*Even my father has shown his face, released from his duties as spymaster for his son's birthday. It's one of those rare days where mama is happy, where my tutors are banished, and where Nylion doesn't take control. I go to bed that night without a single hidden bruise.*

The realization that I'm not quite normal.

*"You're mastering the blade at a surprisingly quick rate, young Raimie," Bryruned says.*

*After a lengthy sparring session, I've backed my weapons tutor into a corner, and with a grin, Bryruned concedes the fight. It's a nice feeling, only supplemented by Nylion's whooping cheers, and I smile.*

*"We thank you," I say before lowering my blade.*

*After Bryruned sheathes his own weapon, we collapse with our muscles trembling. Today demanded an extensive training session, considering I'll be participating in my first mission for the Hand tonight. After its successful completion, my weapons training will move away from the formal fighting styles that I've been learning over the last two years. Now that I can duel and spar with the best of nobles, the time has come for me to learn how to use crude weapons and uncivilized styles, things that will keep me alive while I serve in the Hand.*

*"WE thank you?" Bryruned asks, lifting an eyebrow as he joins me.*

*Humming, I rock from side to side, bumping my shoulder into Nylion's, and at each of these, my other half's smile widens.*

*"You gave us praise," I say. "Why shouldn't we thank you? We've trained with you for years, and in that time, you've never given us a complement. After what happened last month, we weren't sure if you could forgive us."*

*"Raimie, everyone knows you didn't mean to hurt Heritren," Bryruned says. "Let go of that guilt, boy. He wouldn't want it for you."*

*Ha. This remorse can't be soothed with words alone. Reaching over Nylion for a water bladder, I hastily raise it to suppress a rush of shame, and while I drink from it, Bryruned watches me with a frown.*

*"You said we again there, Raimie," he says.*

*Why is that man so focused on which words we use?*

*"We are supposed to refer to ourselves as 'I', remember?" Nylion says with an eye roll.*

*That's right. The childhood lessons that mama has given us for as long as I can remember faded in the rush of battle.*

*I've never understood her insistence on using the singular pronoun. 'I' seems like such a useless word. When is anyone alone enough to need it? For that matter, what is 'alone'? The idea of being solitary makes me sick to my stomach, one of the rare things I can't hold at arm's length. I pity any poor bastard who's caught in such a life, spent apart from his other half.*

*Mama insists that I must pretend like I'm alone, though, that I can only use 'I', and frankly, I'm sick of that sham. Why must Nylion hide in the shadows? It's not fair, and I CAN'T STAND it.*

*With fire rising up my throat, I say, "WE, Bryruned. WE would like to know if WE can go home. Nyl and I have a lot to prepare for tonight."*

*The weapons master recoils from me.*

*"Fucking hell..." he says under his breath.*

*And the fire in me goes out, leaving mirth jumping between me and Nylion.*

*"Oo!" I say. "Is this another curse? I like it. Fucking hell, fucking..."*

*Repeating it to myself, I commit it to memory, never seeing the weapons master reaching his feet.*

*"GET OUT!" Bryruned roars.*

*With his hackles raised, he advances on me, and I've seen the look on Bryruned's face before. It's one that always comes with pain, and that knowledge makes my choice simple. I flee.*

*The epitome of my youthful mistakes.*

*I'm six, and I've learned a lot in the year since my martial education began. Easily riposting Heritren's swing, I use the light to dance around the sword master, giggling the whole way. Heritren rounds on me, pressing the attack until my back is to the wall. The older man smirks, but it's one that I return.*

*I bind the light in my feet to the ceiling's, leaving my opponent standing beneath me. Well out of his sword's range, I beckon for the sword master's next attack.*

*"Careful, Raimie," Nylion says. "He is smart, remember?"*

*As if to emphasize my other half's point, Heritren reaches for his belt, tossing a brace of throwing knives at me. I have no hope of dodging them all, and the floor is at least ten feet below me, which wouldn't be a fun drop to make. Either way, pain's coming for me.*

*In a panic, I release a wave of dusk to halt the knives, but that's done, leaving steel clattering to stone, I forget to dismiss it.*

*A dark wave speeds toward Heritren, and although he's fast enough to sidestep out of mortal danger, the shadows tear through his arm, removing it at the shoulder.*

*Together, Nylion and I scream alongside Heritren's grunt, and at the sight of so much blood gushing from my tutor, I lose my grip on the light that's holding me to the ceiling. When I wake up, hours later, I have a concussion, a dislocated shoulder, and the burden of what I did to handle.*

This memory integrated with such a wrench that I tripped. Failing to recover from this, I tumbled for quite a while before coming to a stop on my back. Tears were threatening to spill from my eyes, although that wasn't entirely caused by the fall.

"Is it over?" I groaned.

"One more, heart of my heart," Nylion whispered. "At least, for now."

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