

Chapter 40: A Lesson

Raimie

Rhylix still looked like I'd smacked him in the face with an unpleasant truth, but he forced himself to focus, shaking his head to clear it.

"Well, here is where I'd help you pull Ele to yourself," he said, "but since you've already done that, we can move on--"

"Wait. I have?" I said. "When?"

Shouldn't I remember having done something like that?

At least my confusion seemed to have put Rhylix back in control.

With an amused smile, he said, "Besides when you closed Allanovian's tear? Several times. During your second trial. When you first fought Dath. That boy also intimated that you might have used Ele when fleeing the people who attacked you."

"I was using magic when...?"

How in the *void* had no one noticed me doing that before?

But besides that, the idea that I could have forgotten something so life-altering had me suppressing a shiver.

"Rhy... I don't..."

"I know. Having listed the times you've used Ele, I've realized that they were also times of extreme stress for you," Rhylix said. "You- hell, this is an interesting concept for me, but you might have instinctually called on the primal forces' power."

Which wasn't terrifying in the slightest.

"But that means I'll need to teach how to intentionally access Ele," Rhylix said. "Do you remember anything from the instances I mentioned?"

Coughing a bit, I said, "Just- just what I already told you."

“So, you feel them at least. That’s good,” Rhylix said. “Although... huh. You might be the first person this question applies to, but is there a distinction between the energies you feel?”

That was a good question. For the most part, I’d ignored the sensation of untapped power, just out of reach, but with my attention drawn to them, I did notice a difference.

“One’s a roiling storm of angry energy. Wild. Alluring,” I said.

Falling silent, I let this foreign, imparted feeling wash over me before shaking myself.

“The other is... peace. Perfect contentment with who I am for the first time in-”

Cutting off, I bit my tongue. I’d talked for far longer than I’d meant to, almost revealing one of my deeper insecurities, but Rhylix hadn’t noticed. With distance in his eyes, he drummed his fingers on his knees.

“That is an... *interesting* take on Ele. Not wrong, of course, merely different from mine. I’m glad that you experience such tranquility when accessing it,” he said with a smile. “As for the other, it sounds about right for Daevetch: uncontrolled and unparalleled power.”

“Wow! No insult?” Dim sarcastically muttered. “I thought for sure-”

“It matches the temperaments of its asshole primeancers,” Rhylix continued, talking to himself.

“And there it is,” Dim sighed.

“He’s right, though,” Bright said. “Your humans tend to be... not the best of people.”

Dim took a step toward its counterpart, opening its mouth, and wincing, I rubbed my temples.

“Please, don’t start arguing,” I said. “Hell, you’re making this process difficult.”

Clicking its teeth together, Dim returned to its spot.

“Whoops,” it said.

Meanwhile, Bright drew itself upright.

“Unless it’s relevant, you will not hear from us again,” it said.

Nodding acknowledgment, I dropped my fingers into my lap. Maybe the splinters would stop adding to my burgeoning headache.

“What does that have to do with using these energies, Rhy?” I asked.

“Well,” Rhylix drawled, “we wouldn’t want you drawing on the wrong one right now. Not only have I only used Ele in my lifetime, making me a useless teacher for Daevetch applications, but you saw how I reacted when it was pulled to the physical plane before.”

I remembered how my friend's face had turned green in the moonlight. Alouin, he'd tried so hard to hide the tremble in his hands!

"I don't want a repeat of that," I said, "but if you can only teach me about Ele, how will I learn about Daevetch?"

As if weighing his words, Rhylix said, "You could *not* use it."

The growl that Dim unleashed on the world almost rumbled from me, but I held it in check. Arguing about this would serve no purpose, not when more important matters called for my attention. For now, I'd have to content myself with unraveling Daevetch's intricacies on my own.

"Perhaps," I replied to Rhylix, flexing my hand at Dim.

Surprisingly, the splinter fell quiet, looking almost self-satisfied, and a little mystified, I shook my head at its strange behavior.

"But we should focus on what I *can* learn," I said. "So, how do I use Ele?"

Rhylix looked like he wanted to further argue the point, but he relented instead.

"The peace that you feel," he said. "It's centered somewhere, yes?"

"...Yeah, now that you mention it."

It most strongly emanated from a point hosted in Bright, and when I glanced at it, the splinter indulgently smiled at me.

"That's your source. Later, we'll talk about what that is," Rhylix said. "For now, though, focus on that point of peace. Reach through it to the energy beyond, and tease a thread to you."

He made it sound so simple. I was sure that more would be required of me, but like my time beside the tear, I tentatively reached for my source, and from nowhere, understanding slammed into me.

As if it were nothing, I gathered white light in my hands, cupping them like Rhylix had done, days ago. My friend's hum of perplexity was lost in my stare at the energy pooled in my palms, and after who knew how long, I dragged my gaze to Rhylix.

"What can I do with this?" I asked in monotone.

What need was there for intonation or inflexion? My words carried my meaning, so why ripple the smooth pond of my voice with expression?

At that, Rhylix half-smiled.

"First, you can release the Ele that you're holding," he said.

With an order given, I obeyed. I leeched white light into the world, and once it was gone, I gasped, throwing a hand to my chest. What had *that* been?

“As you may have noticed, holding primal energy affects your emotions. Sorry, I should have warned you,” Rhylix said, “but don’t worry. With practice, that will quickly fade.”

Rubbing my arms, I said, “It had better. That was awful.”

“Mm,” Rhylix said with his half-smile now holding a secret. “But you asked about uses for Ele?”

I worked my jaw as I nodded. Why had that sense of perfect harmony been so disquieting?

“Considering how many there are, I’ll only focus on three, basic skills,” Rhylix said. “First and foremost, Ele makes you *fast*, so much so any the norms around you—those without magic—will look like they’re moving in slow motion.”

Humming, I said, “I bet that makes us hard to hit.”

“Exactly. Your speed has drawbacks, of course, but we’ll discuss those later,” Rhylix said. “Second, if you release Ele in a burst instead of leaking it from you like you did just now, it will generate a burst of force.”

Stopping, he looked at me expectantly, and I realized that my friend expected another example of a real-world application from me.

“Um.”

Scrambling, I searched for an answer in my surroundings, nearly bursting into laughter on catching Dim’s yawn, but a glimpse of Bright’s long-weathering sigh kept it inside.

“You did it during your second trial? Before that one took hold of you,” it said, jerking its head at its counterpart.

At the memory of a caved-in face, my gorge rose, and I took a few moments to control it before answering Rhylix’s unspoken question.

“Propelling enemies from you,” I hoarsely said.

Softening, Rhylix radiated concern, but he didn’t comment on my distress, to my relief.

“Yes, you can do that, although there are other applications as well,” he said. “I always thought it was curious how the primal force that encompasses protection lets its primeancers harm others with it. It seems contradictory.”

And indeed, Bright appeared mighty uncomfortable with this paradox, shuffling in place. When Dim cupped a cheek to leer at its counterpart, the Ele splinter started sputtering, and I returned to ignoring them.

"It's interesting, yes, but I won't question it," I said, "not when it might save my life someday."

Blinking, Rhylix said, "That's a good point. But in any case, there's only one other Ele use we should discuss today. Considering how consistently you've gotten injured since I met you, it might be the most important one as well."

I spread my arms.

"Lay it on me."

This set a twinkle in Rhylix's eyes with an unshared joke held behind them.

"Healing," he said, "or a version of it at least."

Oh. Of *course*.

"Was it you, then?" I asked. "You brought me back from the brink of death."

Rhylix stiffened.

"What makes you think that?" he asked with his tone bordering on harsh. "If Ele's version of healing worked the way you suggested, if I could fix a person's injuries without any consequences to me or them, do you think I'd be in Ada'ir alone right now? No. I'd have family. I'd have--"

He sucked in a breath, but after a few tries, he found his voice.

"I couldn't have saved my parents. I know this, but my baby sister? She should have lived. You didn't see what happened after Ren and I fled home. We ran for what seemed like hours and miles, but it- it was neither, not by a long shot. We'd almost made it to the closest tree line when Ren tripped. Her foot had gotten stuck in a hole and her ankle... damn, it was a bad break."

Folding to rest his elbows in his lap, Rhylix scrubbed his face, but I didn't use this pause to offer useless sympathy. I knew what this sudden outpouring was: a confession, and I wouldn't interrupt it, no matter how uncomfortable it was making me.

"She *screamed*. Gods, I still hear it," Rhylix said. "I could see the Kiraak coming. Their whoops and hollers mixed with the shriek, swirling around me, *as usual*. Gods, every time!"

With a strangled sob, Rhylix straightened.

"Ren was magnificent," he said. "She heard them coming, and swallowing her pain, my sister begged me to leave her there. And hell, I didn't want to. I wanted to stay, to fight, to *protect*, but something took hold of me. I fled, and my sister *died*."

Breathing hard, Rhylix held my gaze, but I refused to show him the condemnation he was looking for. Who was I to judge him for this when I'd gotten my mother killed?

“So, yes,” Rhylix eventually said. “If Ele’s healing worked the way you suggest, Ren would be alive. I’d have fixed her ankle, and we would have escaped Auden together.

“What Ele can do, however, is sustain you for a time. Say you get stabbed. Ele will keep you from bleeding out or let you walk on a disabled leg. But this effect will only last for a little while, and when Ele leaves, the injury will return with interest.

“Now. With only a single suggestion of the possibility, why on earth would you think that I healed you?”

The question didn’t penetrate my mind at first. I was still grappling with Rhylix’s story, but when he pointedly cleared his throat, I slapped my cheeks.

“I don’t know. Because you were the last one near me when I was floating outside of my body?” I said. “You sent the other healer away before sitting at my side. Then, you said... what was it? ‘You bastard. Don’t die on me.’ And light ripped me back here.”

Wordlessly, Rhylix stared at me until I shifted in place.

Then, he said, “You experienced something after your essence left your body.”

It wasn’t a question, but I nodded anyway.

“Tell me everything,” Rhylix said.

So, I did, everything about Alouin and the space between realities, and when I was done, Rhylix had closed off. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t read him.

“Interesting,” he eventually said. “There could be some truth to what you saw, although I’m not sure how much. The mind does strange things when under extreme stress. I’ve never heard of someone going through something as lucid as what you did, though.”

He was quiet for a moment, leaving me anxiously watching him, before slapping his knees.

“That’s enough of a lesson for today, don’t you think? We can continue with them once we resume our travels,” he said. “You should rest, and I need to figure out who tried to kill you. I might consult with Chela about your adventures outside your body too. If that’s ok with you?”

“I suppose,” I said. “Only if you think it will help, though.”

“It should.”

With a bright smile, Rhylix stood.

“Rest well, Raimie. I’ll send Dath in here soon.”

He strode for the tent's flap, and almost, he escaped before my thoughts caught up with what was happening.

"Rhy?" I called.

Pausing at the tent flap, Rhylix glanced back at me.

"Yes?"

Squirming, I picked at my bedroll's blanket with the weight of my friend's gaze dragging my eyes down.

"What I saw and all the things that Alouin said," I said. "Should I be worried about it?"

Taking a chance, I glanced up at my friend, only to find him indulgently eyeing me.

With a chuckle, he said, "Doubtful."

And he was gone. Alone for the first time since waking up, I chewed on the inside of my lip. For most of the day, things had progressed as close to normal as I'd expected but toward the end there...

Something had been off.

"He lied."

Crouching beside me, Dim dangled its hands over its knees, fixing its gaze on the tent's flap.

"Who? Rhy?" I asked.

When Dim nodded, Bright clicked its tongue, tapping a finger on its crossed arms.

"I don't think it was a lie," it said.

When Dim rose with a snarl, Bright lifted a calming hand.

"I'm not denying that something was wrong," it said, "just that it wasn't as severe as a lie."

Settling on its haunches again, Dim said, "A misdirection, maybe? A half-truth?"

"That sounds more in line with what I felt," Bright said.

"And what I smelled," Dim said. "Gah! What's gone so wrong that I'm agreeing with a prissy, stuck-up like you?"

"At least it still bothers you," Bright said.

Rolling my eyes, I interjected, "So, Rhy's keeping something from me?"

Dim and Bright exchanged a glance.

“You’re asking us?” Bright asked. “The ones who, and I quote, ‘want something from you?’”

As I scowled at Bright, Dim almost collapsed from its perch with laughter rocking it, but eventually, it transferred its gaze my way.

“Come *on*, kid,” it huffed. “By now, shouldn’t you expect that everyone is keeping secrets, especially from you, oh most significant of humans?”

I play-swatted at the splinter, but I knew it was right. Limply resting my hands on my shins, I buried my stare in their palms, considering what to do. I’d almost died because I placed my trust in Dath, someone who’d been an enemy not long ago. Given that and what my splinters had said, I had to wonder.

“Can I trust Rhylix?”

Transfixed by my hands, the silent conversation taking place between my splinters nearly passed beneath my notice, but at the end of it, Dim sighed in defeat.

“What do you think, kid?” it asked.

I thought... I thought...

“Rhy is my friend,” I said.

And friends trusted one another. I had to believe that Rhylix’s secret wouldn’t hurt me.

I could easily do that, though. Trust? Loyalty? I didn’t know how I knew this, but I was good at these things.

I’d be a true friend to Rhylix, no matter what it might cost me.

TTS Chapter Forty

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