

Chapter 46: Shift in Perspective

Ryvolim

Raimie had left for Tiro without me. My friend had promised to stay out of trouble for *one day* while I fought against an energy drain's pull, and the kid had run off, sans protection, through one of the most well-traveled regions of Doldimar's domain, *without me*.

Well, Raimie didn't need to worry about that danger anymore. I was going to *kill* the bastard once I'd caught up.

I refused to admit that I was exaggerating my anger at my friend to keep other, less easily manipulated emotions at bay.

Don't you get sick of it? All the hatred, I mean.

What's happened in the past does NOT define the future.

No. Anger moved me forward. Anger had pieced my mask together, pasting it to my face. Anger made my flight down enemy-infested roads swift.

Guilt. Grief. Regret. I had no time for these emotions or any others. Not right now.

Raimie had a two-day head start on me. Recovering from a weeks-long grip on a human form had taken longer than I'd anticipated, which had left me confused. Usually, the force that kept me in perfect health didn't let me experience any form of exhaustion for long.

Given this, my gratitude to Oswin knew no bounds, for the moment at least. He'd kept me hidden and fed for the two days I'd been out of commission. Oswin had also been the one to tell me that Raimie had left the Birthing Grounds. He'd seemed pleased by my immediate decision to go after my friend, even though my recovery had been far from complete, and for once, I found that I couldn't blame someone else for their manipulation of me. Oswin's charge had abandoned him again, and he didn't have the ability to follow Raimie as quickly as I could. If our roles had been reversed, I'd have tried the same trick on the spy.

It was funny how one human's exploitation of me felt acceptable but my friend's broken promise prompted nothing but outrage.

When I arrived outside of Tiro, that anger was the only thing that propelled me into the city, keeping my exhaustion at bay.

“Where is he?” I snapped.

Wincing, Creation said, “The training yard with Eledis. Careful, Eriadren. Something’s broken within him since you two last spoke.”

“More than it already was?” I said, mostly to myself.

“Mm,” was all Creation hummed in response.

As I stormed toward the training grounds, I forcibly parted a stream of people, all retreating to their homes for the evening, but soon enough, I spotted a familiar mop of drab hair bobbing amongst relative strangers.

“There you are!” I said when I met my friend.

With a tired smile, Raimie said, “Hey, Rhy. I’m glad you’re here.”

Damn, Creation had been right. I’d never heard my friend sound so dead before.

Even still, I grabbed Raimie’s shoulders, flipping him around. Placing a hand between his shoulder blades, I pushed him back the way he’d come.

“What are you doing?” Raimie said. “Rhy! I need to sleep.”

“So do I!” I snapped.

Probably more than he did too.

When we reached the training yard, I brushed myself and Raimie past its startled master, coming to a stop in its wide, open space. It was empty, abandoned for the night save for the yard master who’d been closing shop when we’d arrived, but this was good. It meant I wouldn’t have to hold back.

Drawing my sword, I said, “Time for a lesson.”

“What-?”

I didn’t let Raimie finish his question. When I lunged, my friend was lucky enough to lean away from the swipe before it cleaved him in two. Silverblade was out of its scabbard, and we descended into a frantic fight, and for me, it was fueled by a wealth of bitter emotions, sunk below the surface. All of them safely hidden until a trigger had brought them to the forefront.

Anger pushed me a step beyond the normal limits I set in place when fighting my friend, but surprisingly, Raimie kept up with me. I read the intensity of his own emotional state in how

recklessly he abandoned his safety, willfully overreaching at time. His fighting style begged for me to smash through his defenses and strike him down, which...

Why was that?

For a moment, I reined in my fury, wondering whether Raimie's lack of self-preservation was what had let him match my speed. Then, I saw Ele's light dancing across his skin.

Drawing upon my own supply of that energy, I became a blur. With his magically enhanced speed, Raimie could almost match me, but he had neither the experience needed to fully do so nor the edge that I enjoyed as Ele's Champion. Raimie's Ele source was separate from him, in his splinter, whereas mine resided within.

I ducked Silverblade's slow motion thrust for my neck before knocking the sword out of my friend's hand. Reaching for the Ele in the stone behind Raimie, I attracted it to what resided in my friend, and he zipped backward, as if on a line attached to his back. He slammed into the wall, but despite his frenzied efforts to break free, he couldn't disrupt the hold that Ele had on him.

Once he recognized this, Raimie stopped trying to escape, and I dashed across the space between us, drawing uncomfortably close to my friend.

"You *cannot* leave me behind like that," I hissed in his face. "Doldimar is at least as powerful as me, and you're my ally. He'll take any opportunity to *destroy* you. You agreed to help me with my quest, so when I tell you I'll be out of commission for a day, you *stay put* until I can protect you again. Do you understand?"

After a split second of blank-eyed inattention, Raimie glanced to either side, craning his neck to see what was restraining him.

"How are you doing this?" he said. "It's like what I used back in..."

As he fell silent, I snapped, "Raimie! Do. you. understand?"

"Yes," Raimie said with an eye roll. "I'm sorry I left the Birthing Grounds without you. I'll try not to do something similar in the future. Now, will you please let me go?"

His blasé attitude was less than reassuring, but I couldn't keep my friend pinned to a wall until he understood the danger he was in. That might take hours. So, I returned the Ele within the stone to its natural state, and slumping at the sudden release of pressure, Raimie rubbed his shoulder with a wince.

"I don't understand why you're so upset," he said. "When coming back here, I was moving too quickly through enemy territory for anyone to touch me."

"Except for an Enforcer, who could shade meld in front of you, toss Daevetch into your path, or snare you in a Vice," I said.

I jabbed at an open cut on Raimie's neck, making him grimace.

"When you're nearby, they can sense you just as much you can with them," I continued. "Plus, every time you've left without me in the past, I've had to rescue you from some incredibly dangerous situation. I swear. I stop tracking your every move for even a single moment, and you nearly get yourself killed."

Again, there was a split-second hesitation before Raimie crossed his arms. That was... interesting.

"Whoa, Rhy! What an invasion of privacy! I thought we talked about you using our splinters to keep tabs on me last fall," he said, "but I do see your point. I won't leave you behind again, not without telling you first at least."

"Thank you," I said, slapping my hands to my thighs.

Stepping closer, Raimie surreptitiously looked around the empty training yard before leaning toward me.

"You know I can protect myself, right?" he whispered.

Snorting, I said, "To a certain extent, maybe."

"If you don't think I can, maybe you should return to the role of tutor," Raimie said, spreading his arms wide. "Given that fight, I'd say you've been holding out on me."

Tapping my lips, I said, "I *have* been neglecting that duty, haven't I?"

With mischief dancing in his eyes, Raimie grinned at me.

"That would be... a yes," he said.

"Oh, hush," I said, shaking my head.

Thank the gods Raimie was taking my attitude and behavior in stride. From the moment I'd left the Birthing Grounds, I'd known I was overreacting to the news that my friend had left me behind, but still, I couldn't calm myself down from that frenzied point, or I couldn't until now.

Hoping to brush it under the rug, I said, "We should let the yard master finish closing shop for the evening, yes? I've let my need to make a point delay him for long enough."

Seemingly having forgotten the man was here, Raimie sharply glanced at him, where he was perching on a fence.

Rushing to clasp the other man's hands, he said, "I forgot how late it is. Please, forgive us for keeping you, sir."

Prying a hand out of Raimie's grip, the yard master tapped my friend's shoulder.

“That’s all right, Your Majesty. Watching the two of you fight was a pleasure, and if I may say so—”

Cupping his mouth, he lowered his voice.

“—I’d avoid making your friend angry in the future. He almost cleaned the floor with you, and *he was holding back.*”

Laughing, Raimie said, “Oh, I know. He does that, has from the moment we met. I’d be insulted if I wasn’t terrified to face him at his strongest. I’ve never seen anyone with so many tricks for a fight, not even when I was a kid in Dai-”

As he cut off, his face went red while his eyes widened.

“If you’ll excuse me, sir.”

Despite his seeming haste, Raimie dragged his feet while he took his leave, and he paused outside of the fence.

“Come see me later, Rhy!” he shouted, almost as an afterthought. “I have a favor to ask.”

Right. Like Raimie hadn’t been looking for a way to spring that request on me since we’d met in the street. Unless the situation was truly dire, the kid had almost always refused to take help from anyone, preferring to handle his problems on his own. The fact that he was asking for help now was concerning.

Still, Raimie should know by now that he didn’t need to ask a favor from me. I’d do whatever I could to ease his troubles without expecting anything in return.

"Can't ask now?" I said.

"It's of a *sensitive* nature," Raimie said.

He darted his eyes to the yard master, who was watching our exchange with interest.

“Plus, I thought you’d want to see your sister as soon as possible, given... what happened at the Birthing Grounds.”

Raimie’s face twisted at the mention of Ren, much like my spirit did at the reminder of what had happened to Hadrion.

“Right,” I said with a dry mouth.

As Raimie left without another word, I reached for anger to smother the unpleasantness threatening to take me over again, but that fiery emotion had dissipated after my confrontation with my friend. Instead, Hadrion grinned at me in my mind’s eye, pleased to have learned the new fighting technique I’d been teaching him, and I winced.

Gods, how I wished I could return to the familiar, bored state that I'd floated in for the last dozen cycles. Why had I thought welcoming emotions back would be a good idea, and where was a distraction when I needed one? I knew from experience that not much could keep this pain at bay, although...

I fumbled for the peace and stillness ever found at the center of my being, a quiet that a thin barrier blocked, and when I touched it, a wave of calm worked its magic on the distress eating me. Releasing the breath I'd been holding, I hastily strode forth to find a place to sleep or maybe... maybe Ren.

"Master primeancer, sir?" the yard master said behind me, freezing me solid. "I- I hate to mention this, but... you're glowing. You, um. You might want to dim that a bit if you want to stay hidden."

Oh... shit. Had I just ruined my disguise as 'Ryvolim' in my haste to escape from something I should, frankly, have been facing head on?

The yard master must have seen something on my face because he raised his hands in front of him.

"Don't concern yourself with me! I know how important it is to keep your secret."

Lowering his eyes, he looked away.

"I had a little brother... He..."

It took him a moment to continue, swallowing a few times before he could.

"Anyway, he wasn't so good at concealing what he was. The Enforcers came for him when he was nine. He put up a good fight, but-"

The yard master shrugged, but I was a little too busy with the meaning of what he'd said to fully notice his discomfort.

"Are you telling me that Ele primeancers are walking in Auden again?" I asked.

Seemingly taken aback, the yard master said, "Well, sure. Both varieties crop up all the time, probably more than we know. The poor things must learn how to hide their primeancy quickly, though. Otherwise, they're recruited or murdered by an Enforcer, depending on their affinity."

Maybe that could explain why the only physical danger I'd faced after revealing myself as 'Rhylix' had come from Raimie's soldiers. The people of Tiro certainly hadn't been happy to learn that I was a primeancer, but they'd never made a move to attack me, like the soldiers had.

Still. What the yard master had said...

Cold inside, I rounded on Creation, who was browsing through a stack of practice pikes with their shoulders drawn together.

Keeping my voice carefully blank, I said, "Is there anything you want to tell me? Don't think I haven't noticed how... sluggish Ele has been with me in recent days. I thought it might have something to do with the 'shifts in the Eternal War' that you've been on-and-off mentioning. But if there are new primeancers on the physical plane, then..."

Then, I wasn't sure why Ele had been so slow to respond since I'd reached Auden.

"What's going on, Creation?" I said. "Stop avoiding whatever it is, and just tell me."

Hunched on themselves, Creation glanced up at me before fixing their eyes on the weapons in front of them again, biting their lip, but after enduring my glare for quite a while, they opened their mouth.

"My whole is losing the war, meaning resources are scarce," they hesitantly said. "So scarce, in fact, that for the last few months, we've been abandoning the front on the physical plane."

That... was... *not* what I'd expected Creation to say.

Nervously laughing, the splinter quietly said, "First time I've shocked you speechless, huh?"

They weren't wrong. I had to shake my whole body to get my thoughts into working order again.

"Ok. That might explain why Ele has been taking its time with healing my injuries and the like," I said, hardly believing what was coming out of my mouth. "If this is so, then how can Ele spare splinters for new primeancers on this plane?"

As Creation's lips pulled into a thin line, I *knew* they were about to wall me off again, and given what they'd admitted, that possibility froze my heart over.

"Why are you keeping secrets from me?" I said. "I need to know about these things. What if this thing you're hiding stops me from getting to Doldimar or *anything else* I'm supposed to be doing here? I- I've done *everything* you've ever asked of me, even if it's come with a healthy dose of complaining and sarcasm. Don't I deserve the truth?"

Creation took a deep breath, held it, and released it in a rush.

"I can't," was all they said.

I had to keep calm. I *had to*.

"Because your whole says so or...?" I said.

"Because *I'm trying to keep you safe*," Creation bellowed, finally facing me. "You have *no idea* what I've shielded from you. What the whole wants to do with you."

As they shuddered, I bristled so hard that I thought Creation might be able to feel it, even as far away as they were.

"Maybe if you *told me* about these things, I could HELP!" I shouted.

And we were left glaring at one another. Vaguely, I was aware of the yard master's quiet lock-up and departure, which was probably for the best. This conversation had quickly barreled into dangerous territory, and if it unraveled further, I didn't want anyone caught in the crossfire.

Setting their jaw, Creation said, "Try to draw from me."

"...What?" I said. "Why would I-? You're not my source."

"I *know that*. I'm not an idiot," Creation said, crossing their arms, "but you're our Champion. You can draw from any piece of any aspect. Taking from yourself is easier, or at least, it must be so. Otherwise, you'd have sought an alternative like this ages ago."

"...All right."

Creation's logic seemed sound, but I couldn't help my surprise when I reached toward them and found a point of peace, much like the one in me, within them.

"Huh."

When I teased an Ele tendril from Creation, a wondering smile started spreading across my face. How had I never figured this out before? Considering how badly I'd always wanted to right the disbalance between Ele and Daevetch, perhaps I should have figured out how they mechanically worked before-

The flow of Ele from Creation shut off. Startled, I lost control of the thread I'd been holding, and it zipped off, tipping over a barrel of staves. Had Ele... cut me off?

"What. the. godsdamned. hell?" I said, barely aware of speaking through the haze around me.

Creation was suddenly beside me, resting a hand on my shoulder, and no matter how impossible it was, I swore I could feel pressure there.

"My whole is retreating from the physical plane, but you must remember, Eriadren, that we're an eternal force of nature. Our retreat may take eons," they said. "It must start somewhere, though, and most of my whole has decided it will begin with you. I tried so hard to argue against it, but... I'm sorry."

With... *me*? After everything I'd sacrificed for Ele. Was Creation serious?

One look at their face said that they were, and there, anger was again, bright and crystalline in its purity. I spun away from the splinter, so great was fury's stranglehold on me.

"Thank you, Creation. You've given me the perfect escape from something truly horrible, but you might want to leave now," I said. "I appreciate that you've fought for me, but even the faintest glimmer of Ele might tip me over at the moment, and we don't want to have an out-of-control

Champion again, do we?”

I faced the splinter with a peeled-back smile and bared teeth, but Creation had already popped out of view. They knew me well.

What should I do now? Find Ren, like Raimie had suggested?

The laughter filling the air sounded almost crazed, and when it cut off after I clamped my lips together, I realized it had been mine. Probably not wise to visit my grieving sister when I was like this.

I could find the nearest Kiraak encampment and *wipe them out*, but... Raimie could cleanse Corruption from those pitiful beings now. Even if it remained to be seen whether returning a Kiraak's humanity to them was a blessing or a curse, I couldn't slaughter monsters who had the potential for freedom from Daevetch.

The request Raimie had made not long ago would require my attention at some point. He'd probably meant for me to find him in the morning, but I needed something to occupy my time *now*, and my only other option for that was to try sleeping. I knew how doing something like that would end: in a night spent raging at Ele and the life it had captured me in. I didn't want that, not again.

No, I'd go see my friend.

With my mind made up, I cast off every leftover Ele speck that was clinging to me and left the training yard.

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