

# Chapter 49: Full Extent of the Problem

## Ryvolim

As usual, Sigemond's tavern was noisy and packed, strongly smelling of alcohol and other types of sticky sweetness. Meandering to the bar, I raised a hand to grab the barkeep's attention.

On noting me, Sigemond shouted, "Ah, Ryvolim! A whiskey fur yu, my friend?"

"No, thank you. Tempting, but no," I said, chuckling. "I'm looking for Aramar. I was told he'd be here."

"That's right," Sigemond said before pointing. "In corner there."

Considering how similar it was to Raimie's hair, the drab color atop Aramar's head, sticking out from the crowd, should have been a blazing beacon for me. How had I missed him on first coming inside?

"Thank you, Sigemond!" I said with a quick grin.

Slicing through this thick crowd was a chore, but I did it despite my misgivings. As a result, I was out of breath by the time I reached the tavern's far wall.

When I flopped onto the bench opposite Aramar, he was in the process of raising a froth-topped mug to his lips. He thought better of taking a sip, lowering it to the table instead.

"Rhylix," he said.

Folding my hands on my stomach, I blandly smiled at him.

"One of the many names I go by."

Aramar merely looked at me for quite a while, but eventually, he said.

"Are you sure you want to do this? I know what happens when an Ele primeancer restores an injury to the body. If you take on my paralysis, then-"

“I’ll be fine,” I said.

When I displayed my feral grin, Aramar flinched before turning his gaze on the crowded bar.

“Raimie told you what he wants?” he asked.

“He did.”

With his shoulder rising and falling, Aramar folded over on himself.

“I don’t want to leave him here, not with Eledis,” he said, “and I’ll *never* understand why he cares so much about Nylion. But if he needs space, I’ll give him space. I can always watch over him from afar.”

I had no reply for him—why would I deign to give him comfort?—and after a moment, Aramar turned to me.

“So, how do we do this?” he asked.

“All you need to do is let me touch you. I’ll do everything else,” I said. “May I have your hand?”

“You want to do this *here*?” Aramar hissed, glancing around the tavern. “You don’t want to go somewhere more private?”

“Here is fine.”

Aramar was taking too long. With what I’d recently learned, I was having a hard time with staying pleasant around the man. I’d thought that maybe I could resolve my own issues with him before completing this task, but on considering that, I kept seeing the pain that Raimie had shown me not long ago, all caused by his father. It made me want to *hurt* Aramar, which I couldn’t and more importantly, *didn’t* want to do, so reaching across the table, I rested my hand on the former spy and Let Go.

Something tore through my spine, an abrupt flash of agony that vanished so quickly it dazed me, and I lost all feeling below my waist.

I’d expected the paralysis. The drunkenness, however, came as a surprise, even with Raimie’s warning from earlier. With a spinning room refusing to give me the focus I needed to balance on my dead hips and legs, I toppled onto the table’s surface.

“Gods, how much have you had to drink?” I gasped.

I tried to right myself but only ended up knocking mugs to the floor. Fortunately, someone stopped my flailing, and I was dragged into a sitting position.

“Are you all right?” Aramar asked from somewhere beyond a golden haze.

“Peachy,” I groaned. “The tavern’s spinning like a top, I have little control over my thoughts, and I can’t feel my legs. Gods, I haven’t been drunk in ages, so thanks for that, at least. What about you?”

“Well, I’m standing without the help of that infernal device you once gave me,” Aramar said. “So, there’s that. I think it worked?”

“It did, which means our business is complete,” I said. “Much as I’d like to be polite and kind to you right now, all I currently have is for you to leave Tiro and stay away from Raimie, at least until he’s ready to see you again. It’ll be best for you both. Trust me.”

Aramar’s grip on my shoulder, once keeping me from falling, briefly clenched before he abruptly released me, but despite that, I managed to catch myself on the table before I could faceplant again.

Maybe Aramar imparted words of thanks before leaving, but if that was so, I didn’t hear them. The force that had plagued me throughout the cycles, the one that insisted on keeping me in perfect health, had decided to take its time with this paralysis, but given everything Creation had said earlier, I’d expected the delay.

I’d looked forward to testing my newly recovered ability to get drunk while waiting for a reticent healing wave, but apparently, I wouldn’t have to make the effort. Aramar had seen to it for me.

Floating in a drunken stupor, I occasionally tried to move my legs, laughing when they didn’t respond. I also tried to transition back into Ryvolim’s mindset, but that enthusiastic, optimistic, thoroughly human persona brutally clashed with the maelstrom roiling in my gut. Until I could dispel that storm, I hoped I could remember to answer to another name.

Also, rumors would unquestionably get started among those who’d known me as Ryvolim, the change in my personality would be so vast, but perhaps the others would chalk it up to a fugue that I’d acquired during the recent battle.

Yeah. That could work...

*I dragged cupped hands through an ocean of blood, clawing my way to the surface. Ignoring the bodies of family and friends, clogging the liquid around me, I focused on the pinpoint of bright red above, but with every stroke that I took, it retreated a step further. My lungs begged for something, ANYTHING to fill them, and while I fought the impulse for as long as I could, I eventually gave in and drowned on blood...*

When someone poked my shoulder, I snorted awake, quickly realizing that I’d gone through yet another nightmare.

Those had picked up in frequency since Da’kul. Over the winter, I’d had a break from them, and my freedom from visiting a world of blood every night had come as a relief. In the last week, however, nights spent flailing amongst my dead loved ones had called on me three times. Soon, sleep would bring nothing but the memory of past violence and dearly loved faces, slackened by death. Yet

another delight to add to the pile.

“Surry, Ryvolim, sir, but I’m closing,” Sigemond rumbled above me. “Yu all right? Were thraeshing.”

I didn’t answer that question, blearily looking around instead.

“What time is it?” I asked, rubbing my face.

“Urly hours of the murn, sir,” Sigemond said.

Nodding, I yawned, ruffling my hair into some semblance of order before scooting to the end of the bench.

“Let me get out of your-”

When I tried to stand, my legs refused to support my weight, and I collapsed to the ground, smashing my chin on the table on the way down. Groaning, I tried and failed to get up, once again.

“Damnit, really?” I snapped.

Why was I still paralyzed? *Hours* had come and gone since I’d healed Aramar.

“...Are you all right, Ryvolim?” Sigemond said. “Shuld I get someone for yu?”

“Raimie!” I said. “Get Raimie. Please.”

Eyeing my laid-out state, Sigemond said, “Ok... shuld I help yu-?”

When he reached for me, I quickly shook my head.

“Please, just... find my friend.”

With a nod, Sigemond dashed out of the tavern with the door slamming behind him.

Once I was alone, I shouted, “Creation, get out here!”

When they popped into existence, they had *the* most annoyed look on their face, immediately saying.

“There’s no need for that, Eria-”

“DON’T CALL ME THAT!”

My shout reverberated in the empty tavern, and when Creation jerked away from me, I winced. That had been much more aggressive than I should have been. Before I could apologize for my behavior, though, Creation went pale, reaching for my legs.

“What did you *do*?” they gasped.

“Healed Aramar for Raimie,” I said. “Don’t worry about it. Just tell me if I’m stuck like this.”

Because that could cause... problems. I could handle it, given time and patience, but I doubted I’d have either of those things in my present circumstances.

“I told you that the whole was abandoning you!” Creation said. “Why would you immediately go out and get yourself hurt after I did that?”

“Because I didn’t think that Ele’s ‘perfect health’ trait could fail on me like this,” I said. “I knew it would take longer for me to come back from death, but I didn’t know how far this abandonment would go. Seems it’s much further than I assumed.”

Groaning, I rubbed my face before something froze me solid.

Wait a minute. Did this mean...? Could I die—*really, truly die*—now?

*Where was my sword?*

No. Hang on. Even if I could finally move on from this plane of existence, I had too many responsibilities here. I couldn’t leave Raimie behind, especially not after everything he’d told me last night, and besides that, I’d made a promise to Arivor. I wouldn’t let Daevetch continue to manipulate my old friend, simply because Ele had partially retracted its claws from me.

And... I didn’t want to die. Seizing an easy solution to my curse—one that might not actually solve anything, now that I thought about it—seemed short-sighted. There had to be a better way to end the cycle. I needed to keep looking for it.

Which meant I needed to figure out how to heal from the condition I’d taken from Aramar.

As if reading my mind, Creation sighed.

“Pull from me,” they said. “I’ll help you bend reality so you can retrieve enough of my whole for healing.”

Smirking, I said, “We’ve spent way too much time together. You shouldn’t be able to know what I’m thinking like that.”

Creation rolled their eyes.

“Just do it, arrogant snot.”

And I obliged them. I didn’t bother with teasing at Ele, taking what was rightfully mine before infusing my body with it. As I did, Creation choked and gagged, and the gates stayed open for a moment longer. Then, they slammed closed with that loss of contact jarring me, but I’d stolen enough. I hoped.

If I coated my body with Preservation's power, it should jumpstart the healing process, or at least, that was the idea. I didn't have any experience with this application of Ele, so I couldn't be sure it would work. I'd have to hope I was right, trusting that Creation, with their eons of lived experience, wouldn't have suggested this if it wouldn't .

Speaking of which, I should check on them.

With difficulty, I split my awareness, leaving one part firmly holding onto Ele while the other found my constant shadow, but at the sight of them, I almost lost hold of that primal power.

Creation's form was flickering with internal waves distorting their body. Their features had been stretched apart so far that the edges had disappeared while their fingertips had pinched into a vanishing point. The view reminded me of when a splinter popped out of existence, but in slow motion.

*Come on, my friend. Don't heed the whole's call yet. Stay here. With me.*

When I reached for Creation, they struggled to clasp my hand. At the sensation of physical touch, I frowned and then...

White light blossomed on my legs, but tingling agony accompanied its normally soothing presence. When I screamed, Creation wailed alongside me, flickering and flashing until it hurt to look at them and then...

Ele retreated like a wounded dog from us both. Hissing, I rubbed my legs to soothe lingering pins and needles while beside me, Creation coughed, grabbing at their neck.

"What is this?" they asked. "Is this *breathing*? Why do I need to breathe?"

I shot an annoyed look at Creation, but that changed when I saw how wide their eyes had gone. Sliding closer to them, I patted their back.

"There, there," I said.

Wait. I'd *actually* patted their back. I could feel them.

"What the-?"

Narrowing my eyes, I poked Creation's cheek, getting a startled yelp in return. Slapping at my hand, they rubbed at the offended spot with a glare.

"That... hurt?" they said. "What in the name of the whole is wrong with me?"

Oh, no. I couldn't stop it. I shouldn't do this but-

Bursting into laughter, I gasped, "Welcome to the ranks of the living."

Raimie chose this moment to burst through the tavern's door, and the laughter that I'd already thought too intense doubled in strength. Tipping over, I hit the floor, clutching at my stomach. Gods, it hurt.

"Alouin, Rhy!" Raimie said as he rushed over. "What's wrong?"

"I've joined you fleshy mortals! That's what's wrong!" Creations shouted before gasping.

With their hands flying to their neck once more, they wrinkled their nose.

"Ouch. What... *is* this? How do you people stand it? And how long do I have to keep breathing like this?"

Wiping my eyes, I caught Raimie's confused look, but I was still too absorbed with catching my breath to explain.

"Um... it never stops?" he said.

"How do you lot endure this on a daily basis?" Creation said, mostly to themselves.

"Wait until you need to eat," I said, suppressing a grin. "Eating by itself is rather fun but if you wait a few hours..."

Creation's look of horror was worth it. Worth their previous cycles of nagging and monitoring. Worth every time they'd made me murder my best friend.

"Ok. I don't know how this—whatever it is—happened, but hopefully, we can help you fix it," Raimie said. "Bright? Dim? Do you have any thoughts?"

From where they'd appeared beside Raimie, Dim said, "Why would I help an enemy regain their power? Besides, I think this is hilarious."

For the first time, I found myself agreeing with a Daevetch splinter. What strange times I'd found myself in.

Unlike their counterpart, Bright merely circled Creation with a look of concentration on their face.

"Our Champion did this?" they asked as they crouched in front of the splinter-turned-human. "You haven't stayed away from the whole for too long or directly disobeyed the consensus?"

"I only helped him with something that the whole might have frowned upon," Creation said.

Looking at their hands, they looked so lost, and seeing that, I wanted to smack myself. Gods, I was acting like an asshole.

"Then, this may be a silly question," Bright said, "but have you tried returning to the whole?"

As Creation's mouth dropped open, they furrowed their brow before disappearing with a pop.

“There,” Bright said, brushing their hands off. “Problem solved.”

“How did they-?” Raimie said before lifting a hand. “No, wait. *What just happened?*”

Bright affectionately patted his shoulder.

“One moment, Raimie.”

Then, they rounded on me.

“You!”

As Bright flung Ele at me, it washed over my body with the barest of stings.

“I never thought I’d have to say this to *you*, but STOP ACTING LIKE A CHILD!” they shouted. “Yes! My whole has abandoned you. Yes! It’s come after millennia of service along with all of the suffering that entailed. Yes! That’s not fair. But in the name of the whole, Eriadren, *try* to look at the big picture.”

Gods, they’d raised their voice so much, making me shrink away from them. I didn’t think I’d ever seen an Ele splinter this angry before, and I most certainly had never seen this particular splinter acting so... *like this* before.

“My whole hasn’t completely abandoned you yet, or you’d be long dead by now,” they continued. “The process of restoring your body to perfect condition simply takes longer than it did before. Get used to it! Life changes, even one as long as yours.

“You’ve known for a while that something’s different about this cycle. I mean... look at your ally. A *dual* primeancer? We haven’t seen someone like that since Alouin.”

Bright got right in my face with their voice lowered to a whisper.

“The Eternal War can never end, Eriadren. The destruction of one side by the other would mean reality’s annihilation. Raimie, however, may have the ability to fix the massive disbalance between us, started by your silly experiment. Maybe, *maybe* he can free you from your ‘curse’ as well, but getting angry with a force of nature like Ele won’t solve anything. Drop it. Do we understand one another?”

Swallowing, I could do nothing more than nod, for the moment at least.

“Good,” Bright said.

And they turned away.

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