

# Chapter 50: Pivot Point

## Ryvolim

Seemingly finished with me, Bright craned their head toward their human.

“Crisis solved,” they said. “You can tell him your news now.”

“But you didn’t answer my... ugh!”

Groaning, Raimie slapped a hand to his face.

“Whatever. I should be used to people keeping things from me by now,” he said. “Guess I’ll follow my reliable routine of pretending I’m not confused as hell.”

With a head shake, he crouched beside Bright.

“Are you all right, Rhy? I’ve never seen Sigemond moving so quickly before.”

With a grimace, I said, “I’m fine, although I may need help with getting to my feet. We should let Sigemond close shop, like he was doing before I asked him to get you.”

“Sure.”

With Raimie’s help, I got to my feet, but as soon as he stopped steadying me, I wobbled, having to grab for a table. At that, Raimie, of course, tried to help me again.

Waving him off, I said, “I promise. I’m fine. My legs are a little unsteady, is all. Let’s get out of here.”

As he followed me out of the tavern, Raimie watched me, probably so he could catch me if I fell. I didn’t like him thinking he needed to take care of me, so I tried to distract him.

“What did Bright mean when they mentioned news?” I asked.

“Oh, that,” Raimie said.

Half-closing one eye, he rubbed the back of his neck.

“After you left, I spent most of last night browsing reports from the Hand-”

“Not sleeping?” I amusedly interrupted.

“I did some of that too! Hell, you really are like a mother hen sometimes,” Raimie said. “I kept waking up, though, so I gave up on sleep after a while.

“Anyway, it seems we’ve missed a lot of Hand business while capturing the Birthing Grounds. Apparently, Thumb sent us a warning about Kaedesa’s arrival a while back. I wish I’d read that report before she showed up on our doorstep, but I guess that’s in the past . I can’t change it. Something else that could be significant, though: we received a rather succinct report from Pointer last night.”

Frowning, I said, “Remind me which Hand member Pointer is again?”

“Wait, have you met all of them?” Raimie said. “I didn’t think- No, actually, it makes perfect sense that you’d know who’s in my Hand.”

As he shook his head, I smirked at him. I *had* always gone out of my way to make sure Raimie was as safe as he could be. So, as soon as I'd learned about Oswin before the beach battle so many months ago, I'd figured out who else might be a spy in my ally's army.

“Pointer’s the slender, tall, and utterly nondescript one,” Raimie said.

“Ah, yes,” I said with a nod. “The one who’s in love with the big guy.”

“The big... Thumb?” Raimie said. “Pointer and Thumb are *together*?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at his reaction.

“Yes, but hush! I don’t think anyone’s supposed to know about that,” I said. “So, what did Pointer have to say?”

“Uhhh...” Raimie said before shaking his head to clear it. “He- he wrote up his assessment of Elisk’s defenses as well as sharing that he and Thumb have escaped the city and are on their way home.”

Well, then. Finally, some progress.

Making a sharp turn, I ducked into an alley, and after making sure no one besides Raimie was watching, I used Ele to spring from perch to perch until I clanged onto a poorly placed balcony, far above the heads of the people meandering down the street. Peeking through the door that led onto my narrow roost, I scanned the empty room beyond with satisfaction. I was in the process of building an Ele cocoon between my hands when Raimie leapt onto the balcony beside me.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Why the subterfuge?”

Giving him a significant glance, I finished with my cocoon of white light before answering.

"I'm making sure that Doldimar can't overhear us. He doesn't like using a shade meld to eavesdrop on his enemies, but for this conversation, we must be, without a doubt, alone. Now. What did Pointer say about Elisk's defenses?"

With his lips pursed, Raimie examined my cocoon, obviously trying to figure out how he could recreate what he was seeing.

"Basically, he said that if we tried to take the city now, it would end in a slaughter," he distractedly said.

All right. That was about what I'd expected, which made my next question so much more painful to ask.

"Is Doldimar in the city?"

Focusing back on me, Raimie said, "That depends. Is he a crazy, blonde-and-blue-haired Eselan?"

"How am I supposed to know what Arivor's current body looks like? He's always been a recluse once he's taken over," I said, "but he would be the only non-Corrupted Eselan in his domain. His first task with every cycle is to wipe out or convert others of our kind."

"That... makes sense, unfortunate as it is."

With a grimace, Raimie got a faraway look in his eyes for a noticeable amount of time before slapping at his cheeks.

"If that's true, then yes. Doldimar's in the city," he said.

Looking away, I bit the inside of my lip. Hell. A silly part of me had been hoping to hear the opposite.

"Why is that relevant, Rhy?" Raimie asked.

Puffing out a sigh, I hugged myself while keeping my Ele-wreathed hands visible.

"I need you to give the order to attack Elisk," I said, looking over my friend's head.

As a choked cough flew from him, Raimie rocked backward.

"Why would I do that?" he hissed. "I just said an assault on the city would lead to a slaughter."

Gods damnit. Gods *damnit*, why was this cycle forcing me to ask my friend if he'd order the people he considered family into a battle that would claim far too many lives?

"Ele's losing to Daevetch, Raimie," I said, forcing myself to meet his eyes. "If you don't believe me about that, you can ask your splinters. And I'm... my powers are failing me. I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to kill Daevetch's Champion."

“But that’s... huh.”

Raimie pulled Ele to one hand, adding to my glow, before briefly pulling Daevetch into the other one. Flinging both away, he shook out his hands.

“You’re right,” he said. “I’d noticed that Ele was getting sluggish when I called for it, but I thought that was because of how much Daevetch I’ve had to use recently.”

“That’s reasonable,” I said, “but wrong.”

“Well, shit.”

Holding my breath, I gave my friend a moment to fully appreciate the implications of what I’d said before continuing.

“I’m not like the spies of your Hand. I can’t approach the city by myself because Doldimar will feel me coming from miles away. I need you and your army to play distraction while I sneak up on him and end the threat.”

Frowning, Raimie slowly says, “I know that, but... what about your other goal?”

He leaned forward, dropping his voice into a conspiratorial whisper.

“Breaking the cycle?”

With a sad chuckle, I said, “If things continue as they have been this time around, I don’t think the cycle will be a problem for much longer. That, however, isn’t a question I can afford to think about any longer. We *could* take the time to figure out how to fix the disbalance between Ele and Daevetch, definitively releasing me from this repetition of pain and death. We could risk the chance that while undertaking that search, my ability to kill Doldimar fails. Or we can end the threat to Auden now. Let you, your people, and countless generations lead full, happy lives.”

With his jaw set, Raimie said, “I’m willing to take that chance. The world shouldn’t rely on you alone to kill Doldimar. Another way to deal with this problem must exist. We can find it together.”

“Can we?” I asked. “Doldimar is sustained by a force similar to what’s keeping me alive. I’m not sure why I’ve been able to kill him as many times as I have.”

Crossing his arms, Raimie glared at me, probably frustrated with me for giving up so easily. I could hear him saying those words, even knowing that he never actually would.

“Say we focused on the curse afflicting the two of you. Say we found a solution,” he said instead. “If the cycle’s broken, Doldimar could revert to Arivor again, and the need to kill him would vanish. It wouldn’t matter if your ability to do it still worked.”

“Or he could stay Doldimar, a powerful Daevetch primeancer in command of a vast army. One that he’s had centuries of experience with leading,” I said.

Oh gods, the struggle on Raimie's face! My friend desperately wanted a happy ending for us all, and it warmed my heart that he cared so much, but sometimes, happy endings were like an isolationist Ratchavish town that happily accepted foreign visitors. They just didn't exist.

"I'll give the order," Raimie said with his shoulders slumping.

Nodding, I prepared to drop down to the streets below.

"But, Rhy?"

When I looked up, I barely held back a wince on seeing my friend's stiff posture and the stubborn look in his eyes.

"Don't you dare think about doing anything stupid on your own," Raimie said. "I'll go with you to face him."

I'd confronted Doldimar countless times, faced every trick in the Dark Lord's arsenal, retreated, regrouped, and suffered far too many agonies on this last, inevitable leg of the cycle. I was more than prepared for what the next few weeks would bring with them. Even so, it was touching that my friend wanted to help, even if it made lying to him hurt all the worse.

"Of course, Raimie," I said. "I'd never leave you out of this."

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