

# Chapter 57: This Is a Trap

## Ryvolim

“What is this?” Eledis asked behind me.

Ignoring him, I irritably hummed to myself. The others, old man included, probably saw this open gate as danger, a trap, everything that would send lightning crackling through their bodies. I saw it for what it was: an invitation. Doldimar hadn’t used this tactic in ages and had only ever done so when Arivor still clung to control.

It was a statement, a taunt.

*We don’t need these armies, these playthings, in our war. Come and get me if you can, E. Let’s do this, you and I, with none of the bullshit to confuse our true purpose.*

The trouble was, I couldn’t feel my old enemy (friend’s) presence in the city, not definitively at least. This close, revulsion and conflict should be irresistibly dragging me down the streets. Instead, it tickled at the edge of my awareness, disappearing like a child playing hide and seek when I latched on.

“Rhy?” Raimie said.

Snapping out of my thoughts, I realized that my hum had risen in volume, almost to the level of a restrained shout.

“Sorry,” I coughed, “it’s just that...”

Turning one way and then the other, I grunted.

“I can’t feel him,” I growled, baring my teeth, “or I can, but not in the way I normally do when we’re this close. It’s like he’s jumping around the city, moving from one side of it to the other in an eyeblink...”

Trailing off, I smacked my forehead.

“He’s shade melding. Of course he is, the bastard. Always compelled to make things interesting.”

“So... what do we do?” Raimie whispered.

But he looked behind him as he finished speaking. He was right to do that, though. The soldiers were getting restless.

“Can you shade meld yet?” I asked. “I’m not well versed in a Daevetch primeancer’s progression.”

“I’ve never thought to try. Can’t you just-?”

Shooting his hand out, Raimie grabbed at the air before jerking it back, and I blankly cocked my head, making my friend huff.

“That thing you did in the forest,” he said. “With Teron.”

“Oh! Right,” I said, chuckling. “I wish I could pull him out of the shadows like that, but I’d need to be near his point of ingress to do it, and I don’t think I’m likely to stumble onto one, do you?”

Making a face, Raimie said, “In that case, I guess I can try to shade meld. Dim can teach me how. When we find Doldimar, I can pull him...”

He paused as if listening.

After a moment, I said, “Well?”

“Dim says that’s an exceptionally stupid idea. If I tried to dive into the ‘atomic level of reality’—”

Raimie scrunched his face up with confusion.

“—I’d lose my way almost immediately. I don’t have the necessary willpower for it yet, *apparently*.”

Damn.

“I don’t know how to force him out of the shadows, and without a battle to distract him, he’s sure to know that I’m here by now. Soon, I won’t feel his presence anymore,” I said before sheepishly smiling at my friend. “Looks like I dragged you to Elisk for no reason.”

Grinning, Raimie said, “Not true. Are we seeing different pictures here? Gate wide open, lack of resistance, very little Kiraak—if any—in the city? It’s obviously a trap, but even still, I can’t help but think that Doldimar’s handed Elisk to us on a silver platter.”

Oh, gods. Raimie couldn’t know the subtleties and long-term plans that the Champion of Daevetch might have in store. This, the lack of a fight for the city, was much too painless, and I’d never seen it before. My every instinct screamed to retreat. Elisk wouldn’t be worth the price that Doldimar would eventually exact for it.

Throwing my head back, I drank in a wisp-covered blue sky. It was too bad. Today would have made a fantastic final day for this cycle.

“Raimie-” I started.

“What are you two blabbing about up here?” Eledis said while joining us. “Have you come to a decision?”

“About?” Raimie asked.

Rolling his eyes, Eledis said, “Whether we’re taking this city or not.”

“Raimie-” I tried again.

We *needed* to retreat.

“We’ll move forward,” my friend said. “Spread out, and if anyone encounters unexpected resistance, fall back.”

When he looked at Oswin to spread the order, the spy nodded.

Oh, well. Now that Raimie had made his decision, I couldn’t voice my doubts. When in a situation like this, an ordinary man such as me didn’t question the king, no matter that we were friends. I hoped the cost for his choice wasn’t too high.

“Rhy, you and I have somewhere to be,” Raimie said.

Frowning at him, I said, “We do?”

“Sure. I only feel one, concrete Daevetch tangle, up in the city’s center,” Raimie said. “I figure that if Doldimar plans to contest our capture of Elisk, it’ll be there.”

Hearing that, I could kiss the kid. With hope offered to me, I fell upon it, hungrily devouring it whole. Closing my eyes, I breathed in the city’s awful stench and felt the sun on my skin. Perhaps today *would* be a good one to end the cycle with.

Then, something Raimie had said hit me over the head like a mallet.

“Wait. You can feel Daevetch knots?” I asked. “From this far away?”

Snapping my eyes open, I ran after my friend.

“If I’m looking for them, yes. That’s how I know the Kiraak have abandoned the city, unless they’re in the cluster I’m feeling, of course. In which case, we’re screwed.” Raimie said. “Why? Can’t you feel them?”

“Raimie. I’m the Champion of Ele,” I said. “What do you think?”

“Sorry,” Raimie said, raising his hands. “You seemed surprised, is all.”

“That’s because most primeancers can’t feel primal energy unless it’s in their immediate vicinity.”

Snorting, Raimie shot a smirk at me.

“Yeah, well. You know how much I enjoy breaking the mold, Rhy,” he said. “By the way, should we be talking about any of this right now?”

He glanced over his shoulder at the soldiers tromping in our wake.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a norm right now. *Your disguise?*”

Half-smiling, I shook my head.

“Oswin knows Ryvolim is Rhylix. Eledis figured it out as we were approaching Elisk. Despite orders to the contrary, Oswin’s most likely told the other members of your Hand, which DOES NOT MAKE ME HAPPY,” I yelled at the spymaster. “And the rest of the soldiers accompanying us are too far back to hear the specifics of our conversation.”

Raimie whipped his head to look behind us.

Tracing a finger between me and the others, he said, “How did you...?”

“The unique patterns of their footfalls,” I said in deadpan.

That joke was a much easier explanation than the truth. After months together, I’d spent enough time with these people to distinguish between their unique Ele sparks, those slivers that every human and Esela carried within them.

Oswin’s bore strong flavors of Loyalty and Innovation while the rest of the Hand wildly ranged. Little claimed Courage; Ring, Resilience; Pointer, Love; and Thumb, Law. I couldn’t hope to differentiate between the dozens of soldiers who followed us, but at the very least, each of them strongly resonated with Devotion, a flavor that all of Raimie’s soldiers had.

And Raimie, the one who walked beside me? Of the many people I’d known in my long life, my friend was the most diverse in terms of Ele. He held so many of Ele’s aspects that it hurt to reach out and sense them, and the one that most intensely blazed from him switched on a near hourly basis.

Where once this conundrum might have puzzled me to distraction, now I accepted it as part of the overall mystery that was my friend. The Ele jumble currently matching my stride might never be steady, but if I could name the multitude of Raimie’s aspects as one, I would call it Comfort.

At that thought, I smiled. Ele might be in the process of abandoning me, but I had a few tricks still hidden up my sleeve. I wasn’t completely helpless yet.

And I had a deeply loyal friend for when that eventuality occurred.

While striding up Elisk’s hill, I noted the fine craftsmanship of the city’s homes, the smooth cobblestones that paved not only its streets but the alleys as well, and the gas lamps on every corner. This cycle had reached an inordinately high level of technology before Doldimar had arrived to lay it low.

I also noted furtive glances through curtained windows and the jerk of doors closed. Some humans had survived within the walls alongside those without.

When we encountered the first body, the tiny flicker of hope that I'd been nursing since the gate was snuffed out. Compared to past cycles, the death toll this time around hadn't been high, and to be honest, it still stayed quite low in comparison, even when adding in these bodies, but the rest of the group grew increasingly distressed with each corpse we found.

The final resting places of the dead were in the most random of locations: one lying on a porch in peaceful repose, one in itty-bitty pieces strewn across a yard, one propped against a stake driven into the middle of the road. In all states of decomposition, some looked alive with the flush of blood reddening their cheeks while others were bloated and gray with flies circling them. We even found sets of picked-clean bones next to a community well.

"What is this?" Raimie breathed.

That question had probably been rhetorical, but I answered it anyway.

"Kiraak and other beings influenced by Daevetch can't go for long without killing something or someone. It's a wonder you haven't given in to the need yet."

Raimie rounded on me.

"I would never do this," he growled.

"I know," I said with a nod. "I didn't say that I couldn't believe you hadn't, only that your resistance is a wonder. You'd never end a life to appease Daevetch. You'd rather die yourself."

Raimie regarded me for a painfully long time before turning on his heels, seemingly casting off my comment.

"Not long now," he said under his breath.

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