

Chapter 59: A Kingdom at Peace

Raimie

When I woke up on my twenty-second birthday, I was aware of the day's significance, much as I hated it. I was hoping the news that I'd brought home would distract anyone from doing anything to recognize the day.

Last night, I'd come home late from negotiations with the mountain clans, or the Matvai as they liked to be called. A *lot* of drinking was always involved in their bargaining, their drink of choice something they called vodka. Before I'd met the Matvai, I'd never tried the drink before.

I hated it. Vodka was quite possibly the worst thing I'd ever put in my mouth, but even still, I'd gagged my way through every round of it, intent on keeping from insulting the clans.

Gingerly, I sat up, pressing my fingertips to my temples as I scanned my surroundings. On seeing my familiar study, I sighed.

"Oh, good. I didn't screw it up this time."

The current round of negotiations was being held in the Matvai's ceremonial hall, located deep within the mountains to the north.

Which were hundreds of miles away.

I couldn't remember what had made me want to come home last night, but I did vaguely recall finding a thick patch of shadows after it had become clear that the negotiations weren't going anywhere.

"Ring will be *irate* with me."

After making the mistake of chuckling, I hissed, squeezing my eyes closed.

Last night might not have been the first time I'd slipped past a member of the Hand, but Ring always took this—a dereliction of her duties, as she called it—more seriously than the other four, although I didn't fully understand why she felt that way.

Ring wasn't a primeancer. She couldn't call on Ele to chase her rapidly vanishing charge, and she most certainly couldn't shade meld after me, if I decided to travel through the shadows. It wasn't at all her fault if she lost track of me.

Even I had difficulty using that particular skill. Shade melding was—how exactly should I put it?—unnatural.

When I'd asked them about it several months ago, Dim had spent way too much time trying to explain it to me. They'd claimed that the world was made up of billions upon billions of invisible particles called 'atoms', and to shade meld, I'd need to force my 'atoms' apart, travel at atomic speed to my intended destination, and reassemble them upon arrival. At least, that was how I'd heard everything that Dim had said, even if I hadn't understood them. The splinter had spewed mumbo jumbo at me for almost a quarter mark, growing increasingly frustrated, until Bright had interceded for them.

"Become one with the shadows, Raimie," they'd said.

Which had made perfect sense to me. After trying this, I'd gone from my study to the gardens outside.

Once I'd broken through my disorientation, I'd caught Bright speaking with Dim.

"Mortals here need the analogy of the shadows for a reason," they'd said. "They can't comprehend the theory yet, not without the proper knowledge base."

However shade melding actually worked, I avoided using it when possible. When I entered the shadows, 'Raimie' stopped existing. My essence of self disappeared, and I floated as one with the shadows. It was only ever through extreme force of will and occasionally, Dim's help that I was able to break free, and when I could do that, I was, more often than not, nowhere near where I'd meant to go.

Maybe being drunk helped with the process, however, because here I was in my study, sitting on my bedroll over a vast chasm with only glass between me and it. Exactly as I'd planned.

Since no one was expecting me to be home for a few weeks, no fire was warming the study, which sent a shiver down my spine. Almost, I could hear a feminine voice starting up her typical soliloquy in my head—

"Don't hurt me. Please, don't hurt me. I'll be good. I promise to be good. Just be gentle. Don't—"

—but as usual, I tuned it out as soon as I noticed it. I wasn't sure what was going on with that. The voice had been popping in and out of my thoughts for the last few months, since shortly after we'd captured Elisk, but it was... strange. Unlike with Nylion's voice, this one felt... foreign, and I didn't know how to deal with it. I *couldn't* deal with it, not on top of everything going on with... him.

Fortunately, sunlight was dimly illuminating the room, which slowly smoothed out the prickles running over my skin. Pulling Ele to me, I stumbled through stacks of books, down a short set of

stairs, and to the study's door.

"Does anyone know where Rhylix is?" I shouted down the hall before wincing. "Gods, I hope he's home today. Worst. hangover. ever."

A maid, humming as she'd been meandering down the hall, shrieked and dropped the sheets that she'd been carrying, and groaning, I massaged my forehead.

"Apologies, my lady. I didn't mean to startle you," I said. "Could you please-?"

But when I lifted my head to meet the maid's eyes, she was already gone.

"Great job," Nylion said behind me. "Terrifying the help is a wonderful way to start the day."

And there he was. As always when around my other half in recent days, my heart started fluttering in my chest with my head going muddled.

Gods, what should I say? A thousand thoughts raced through my head: how much I missed him, that we needed to sit down and talk about everything that we'd ignored, what I'd realized about him on a rainy day over one year and nine months ago.

But as always, I hid these things under a veil of feigned irritation.

"Oh, hush," I said. "Are you here to insist that we send the people who hurt us away again? That's all you've wanted to talk about when you decide to show up these days."

Why the hell did I keep doing this to myself?

Flexing my fingers, I started up the stairs, and racing around me, Nylion climbed the last few steps backward.

"No," he said, "I... I have decided to let that go."

Hearing that, I almost tripped on the last step. He'd *what* now? Was...? Could we *finally* move on?

For almost two years, it had been nothing but a building cycle between us. Anytime we were around Eledis or Marcuset or Gistrick, Nylion got angry, fuming at them, and as a result, I had to hold my temper throughout those conversations. Later, I reminded him of what we'd *both* decided after our memories had fully returned to us, and he conceded to that, but the anger remained. It had been festering between us with nowhere to go but toward each other, and I'd done my best to keep from directing it at Nylion.

He'd been less successful with doing the same, not that I could blame him. Of the two of us, he'd always held more anger, and I *knew* how much he struggled with keeping it under control.

So, no. I wouldn't get my hopes up about the possibility of him working through our inability to punish the people who'd hurt us. I. would. not.

“...Really?” I said, narrowing my eyes at Nylion. “You’ve pestered me about our ‘vengeance’ for the last two years and have decided to give it up now? Why?”

Looking away, Nylion shrugged.

“You think I have not noticed how much this argument is driving a wedge between us, but you are wrong,” he said, “and I... I cannot take it anymore. I would rather live with those three continuing on as if nothing has happened than lose you.”

I crossed my arms, on the one hand trying to keep my heart from leaping out of my chest and on the other, deciding if I believed him. One didn’t give up an obsession fueled by anger, not without an enormously compelling reason. Was our relationship as meaningful to Nylion as it was to me?

The fragile bond that we shared had further withered over the last two years of an argument neither of us had been willing to let go of. At times, I could have sworn that Nylion was just another person rattling around in my head instead of the extension of personality that he had been when we were kids. I remembered that time: ever knowing what Nylion had been thinking or feeling, and now, I rarely ever understood what my other half was doing, hence why I was unsure about this change of heart.

But. I wanted to believe that it was real, more than anything.

“All right,” I said, reaching for the first book on my desk. “If you’re not here to argue, then what do you want?”

Nylion spun full circle with his arms spread wide.

“Lo and behold, we have come upon the mystical beast called spare time. I figured you would go straight to your... hobby,” he said, cracking a smile at my souring expression, “and I thought... I could help. If you want.”

Oh, how I wanted.

“That would be very helpful,” I said. “Thank you, Nyl.”

“I do not need your gratitude,” Nylion said. “You should know that, heart of my heart.”

And there it was. Sure, that interaction had felt forced, like we’d been playing along to roles that no longer apply, but *gods*, that nickname. I’d missed t.

“I do,” I said, “but that doesn’t mean...”

No. Best not to go into any topics that had been sources of contention between us.

“Never mind,” I said. “So. You want to help me look through these books for clues about the Eternal War?”

Folding to the ground, I opened my book to rest it on my legs, nonchalantly leaving an open palm on my knee, and as I'd hoped, when Nylion joined me, he brushed his fingers along my hand, although he didn't take it.

"It is what you will do, regardless of my help. Why should I not join you?" he said. "Where are we starting?"

Quashing a smile, I gestured at the book in my lap before flipping through it. Once it had been absorbed, I grimaced. Nothing useful there. It joined its brethren in the stacks around us. Reaching above my head for another, I followed the same routine.

We continued in this manner while the sun finished lifting its head above the horizon. Having Nylion nearby both helped and hurt my progress with this. Typically, I'd struggle through these books' contents with such a massive headache to impede me, but with my other half helping, my naturally quick learning and reading rates accelerated, so much so that the hangover almost didn't matter.

At the same time, being near Nylion had become... distracting. It didn't matter that what I was seeing wasn't a real representation of my other half. I had... *things* that I needed to say, that I'd needed to say for quite some time actually, but I wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

Even with that, the simple task of sitting in Nylion's presence was the epitome of peace for me. When we were like this, communing in a shared activity, waves of ease reverberated between us like a ball thrown with increasing velocity from one to the other. Comfort crashed down our dwindling bond, forcefully carving through its riverbanks, and I knew every connection that Nylion made from our current book to the ones we'd already looked through, just as I felt his nervousness.

And I knew that Nylion's change of heart was true.

It wasn't enough to repair the damage done, but this one, small spell together, devoid of distractions, gave me hope.

"We should do this more often," Nylion said.

"Mm," I lazily replied. "Why haven't we?"

With a laugh, Nylion said, "Setting up a government does not give one much time to oneself. Or have you forgotten?"

"No. But surely... surely we could have made time for this."

That was how I'd broach the subject.

Setting aside my current book, I said, "I need to talk to you. Preferably where we won't have this—"

Waving a hand through Nylion's shoulder, I winced at the feeling of touch, even as I encountered no true resistance.

“—between us.”

Nylion’s eyebrows slowly crept up his forehead.

“So...” he drawled. “You want to...?”

Nodding, I said, “Can I meet you there?”

With a pleased smile, Nylion said, “Always, heart of my heart. I am always there.”

When I opened my eyes, Nylion was tapping a foot beside my head with his arms crossed.

“Took you long enough,” he said.

Making a face, I said, “Sorry. Getting to sleep took much longer than I thought. Anxiety apparently does that to you.”

“Hmm.”

With nothing else, Nylion offered me a hand up, but once I was on my feet, I didn’t release it, instead using it to pull my other half to me. With my arms around his waist, I rested my chin on his shoulder while a happy hum buzzed from me.

“Hell,” I said. “This is as good as I remember it.”

Even if Nylion was stiff as a board.

“What are you doing?” he tensely asked.

“What I’ve wanted to do since shortly after Vale,” I said. “You remember cleaning out that pack of Kiraak we thought were bandits?”

“Yes...” Nylion said. “I am... confused. Why are you-?”

“Just shut up and enjoy it for a moment, Nyl,” I said. “I know you want to.”

“I...” Nylion softly said.

But there was nothing more. He lifted his hands behind me, probably staring at them in the moment it took him to lightly press them into my back, but when he eventually did, they were trembling. Even still, I released a contented sigh.

Oh, it felt right. We were completely open to one another through our bond, and I was holding Nylion close. We were kids again, first experimenting with what we were separately while also knowing what WE were.

The situation was reversed now, of course. That oneness-as-two that had been so common for us when growing up had become... foreign, difficult to achieve even when we tried, while living separately felt natural. This was what being apart for so long had done to us, and again, I reminded myself of why I WOULDN'T tear apart the people who'd separated us.

But all of that didn't matter right now. I buried my face in Nylion's neck, trying to hide.

"I've missed you," I said. "I'm sorry."

Nylion tightened his arm around me.

"What are you saying?" he said.

"I'm saying..."

I pushed myself away from Nylion, if not out of our embrace. Could I say something so intimate to a part of myself? Was Nylion a part of me? We'd never thought to ask that question, always content with knowing that we were complete when together, and Nylion had been taken from me before questions like this would have bothered me.

"What are you, Nyl?" I asked. "I don't care one way or the other. I'm only trying to clarify. Only trying to reassure myself that..."

Gods, there several were again. Godsdamn singular pronouns, used with Nylion, but he didn't seem to mind. With his head cocked, he frowned at me, but the expression didn't seem displeased, more... confused. Unsure.

"I do not know what I am," he said. "I believe I am a person or entity that is separate from your psyche, but I do not know how that has happened. I also believe, however, that I am you, part of the we split in two. Why are you asking?"

Sighing, I deflated.

"Because if you ARE me or if you're something that I made up, like everyone seems to think," I said, "what does it mean that I want to...?"

I bit my lip, glancing at Nylion, so close to me.

"Want to what?" my other half said.

"Oh, fuck it."

Grabbing Nylion's head, I leaned forward and kissed him. It was almost angry, this press of my lips to another's, nothing like I'd ever done with Ren, but then, I supposed that was what would happen after everything we'd gone through over... over our entire lives, really.

Nylion went dead beneath my hands, and I worried that I'd done something wrong again. I'd thought... After seeing that memory of when we'd been torn apart, it had seemed like...

But then, Nylion moved his hands to the back of my head, and he kissed me back, and OH MY GODS. What was this incessant pull toward my other half, this tug that pressed our hips together, smashing our sternums into one another? And why did I feel like I was being sucked into-?

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