

Chapter 70: Crash Landing

Raimie, Rhylix

Raimie

Huddled between crates, I kept an eye on the hatch that led into the hold. Bright was standing below it, swaying in place, while Dim hovered beside me.

It wasn't the best configuration. Not only was I unsure about whether I could use Ele or Daevetch to fight another primeancer, but with Bright in la-la land, I was reluctant to use them as more than a lookout.

At my side, Dim hissed, spinning toward a darkened portion of the hold, and tightening my grip on Silverblade, I turned that way much more slowly. Even squinting, though, I couldn't see what had alarmed my splinter. Glancing over my shoulder, I checked on Bright, only to find them staring in the same direction as Dim.

Before I could ask them what they were doing, the ship lurched, setting the hull creaking and nearly toppling me.

The hell had that been? Had we hit something? If it happened again, would it breach the-?

"He's coming. It's too bad. I'd have liked granting you a few more minutes of life, Raimie from the line of Audish kings."

With cold strangling my heart, I faced the darkened spot—where the voice had originated—but this time, I might see something in it.

Maybe.

"I've enjoyed having you around. Your living, breathing state aggravates my Volatility splinter beyond reason, which is something I've always liked. A tit-for-tat, if you will. They've made me do so many awful things over the centuries. Do you know what they call you, little king?"

Slowly, I eased along the crate I was crouched behind, moving toward the humanoid shape in the darkness. Maybe if I got close enough, I could...

What exactly would I do when I reached Teron?

"Volatility names you the Balancer, you poor child."

Having run into an invisible wall, I almost squeaked aloud. The Balancer?

In the chaos of crossing the Narrow Sea, I'd forgotten about that mystery. With a dry mouth, I peeked at first Dim and then Bright to gauge their reactions, but my thoughts skittered to a stop on viewing the Ele splinter.

Bright was still swaying in place, but behind them was a man hidden by a cloak, holding a sword to the side. As if in slow motion, Teron swung this blade at Bright, and I wondered why I was so frantic to reach them. What could a physical sword do to a piece of a primal force?

Maybe this fear was Teron's battle magic talk-

When connecting with Bright, the sword slowed down, as if it had met resistance, and in utter silence, I watched the splinter gasp with their eyes going wide. I watched tendrils of night blaze down the blade, watched Bright find me, and then, they exploded in a spray of light fragments.

Lurching forward, Dim howled, "*NO!*"

But the sound of it had come from the bedrock of reality, and the patches of dark found within the hold expanded as if inhaling. They grew and grew, and as they touched the hold's torches, those flames went out, leaving me in pitch-black.

Dim's howl fell to a shaking voice, one that was jabbering to nothing.

"I can't do this alone. Can't- can't-"

Struggling through disconnected thoughts, I reached for my Ele source...

...and found nothing.

Bright? I shouted. *Bright, where are you?*

Had- had Teron just killed-?

"Let's see you balance without Ele."

Oh... I didn't know how I kept myself from leaping at Teron and *ripping his throat out*. Instead, I went quiet, listening to the silence.

"You know, my master would reward me if I brought you to him. From my time spent chasing you, I know he'd find you entertaining."

Fissid, Lancik, Paft, Drigel, Bright...

Bright. Gods.

"If that weren't enough, you've already attracted a Daevetch splinter, making you a prime candidate for becoming an Enforcer."

Somewhere nearby, Dim growled, low and feral.

“But in the end, it wouldn’t be wise to introduce you two, despite how much ending your life will pain me. You’re too much of a danger to my master.”

“He’s right in front of you,” Dim said with their voice made of ice.

Shooting to my feet, I lunged with Silverblade, pouring every ounce of my outrage into it, but Teron merely batted the blade aside, which lurched me sideways.

“To your left,” Dim said.

When I swung this time, Teron’s parry was forceful enough to rip Silverblade out of my grip. Backpedaling, I reached for a weapon, any weapon, but a hand around my neck stopped me, adding speed to my retreat. When I was slammed into the bulkhead, my head bounced off of its wood, making my ears ring.

“Tell your aberrant splinter to hush,” Teron growled. “They’re making Volatility angry, and not in a good way.”

Dim, don’t you dare... I started.

“The dagger at your back, Raimie,” Dim calmly said.

Gods, how had I forgotten about that? Ripping it from its sheath, I stabbed in the direction of Teron’s voice, but something caught my wrist, banging it into the hull once, twice, three times. With my fingers spasming, I dropped the dagger, and as I was jerked forward, it was kicked away.

“Stop. resisting!” Teron hissed, smashing me into the bulkhead with each word.

Even in the dark, the world was spinning, and dazedly, I reached out.

Dim? Dim? Dim?

“I’m sorry. I have nothing else,” they said. “Against him, my whole won’t help you, and you’re... I have nothing.”

Which meant I was going to die. Again.

Surprisingly, this thought spread a smile across my face, because look at me! Here I was again, fighting for my life, *resisting* as Teron had put it, but this time, I’d gotten a reaction. This time, I’d made him angry.

Starting in my belly, a laugh struggled around the bastard’s hand, brokenly bursting out of my mouth. The moment that glorious sound hit my ears, however, Teron bore down on my neck, cutting it off, and I clawed at the hand pinning me.

“What could you find so funny right now?” Teron spat.

When he eased up, I spent a good minute coughing, but when I could, I answered.

“Worth it,” I rasped. “Even if I die here, it will be worth it because I’ve been annoying enough to bother cool, implacable you, all of which tells me one thing. I’ve stuck around when others would run. Your battle magic’s not working.

“Which means *I’m not afraid of you.*”

In the hold’s utter stillness, my ragged gasps were loud, competing with only one sound.

Clapping, Dim said, “Well done, my human. Your strength overshadows his aura of fear. You’ve made me proud.”

Teron sucked in a gasp.

“Pathetic child,” he hissed. “What good will that strength do you now?”

Something cold slid across my neck, and behind it, warmth flowed between Teron’s fingers and my skin, leaking over my chest. As a sheet of ice crept over me, starting at my hands and feet, I struggled to stay awake. I didn’t want to slip away, didn’t-

The pressure on my neck was released, letting me crumple to the floor, and a dull pain in my side had me tumbling. Somewhere nearby, light flashed, and a brief glimpse of a familiar face chased me into the black.

Rhylix

Someone was screaming himself hoarse in this cabin, blocked by a knife, and recognizing the voice, I wiggled the blade holding the door closed out of wood. As soon as it was possible, the door was slammed open, and I had to spin in place, clutching Aramar’s arms, to keep from falling.

Once we’d regained our balance, I almost released him, but he moved to blindly barrel toward the hold. So, keeping hold of him, I snapped my fingers in his face. After a moment of blinking, he focused on me.

“Rhy! Thank Alouin,” he gasped. “We have to-”

“We have to do nothing,” I said. “I will save Raimie’s ass again because I have the tools needed for it, and *you* are going to evacuate this ship. Do you understand me?”

Aramar looked like he’d argue, but deflating, he nodded.

“Just please-”

“I’ll bring your son back,” I said.

Slowly breathing out, Aramar clapped my shoulder before taking off for the main deck. I headed in the opposite direction, ignoring the annoying nuisance beside me, and as if uninterrupted, they continued from where they’d left off.

“You must be careful with this,” Creation said. “Yes, Raimie is essential to our efforts, but so are you. So, please. Don’t be reckless like you sometimes are.”

Gazing through an open hatch, I absently said, “Creation?”

“...Yes?” the splinter said.

I looked up at them.

“Do shut up.”

And I dropped through the hatch, landing in a spray of light while Creation groaned above me. In the dark, I couldn’t see Teron, obviously, but I could feel Daevetch, pooling on one side of the hold, and as I turned toward it, something thudded to the floor.

“I believe this is yours.”

Raimie rolled to a stop at my feet, and when light revealed my friend’s sightlessly staring eyes, I stopped breathing. Dropping to my haunches, I pressed my fingers to his slippery neck, slumping with relief when I felt heat rising from his skin. I had something—no matter how slim it was—to work with.

After feeding Raimie enough Ele to keep him alive, I rose to my full height before calling to the Ele in the hold. Eagerly responding, it lit the space with a flash.

Where I’d felt Daevetch coiling, I found Teron, leaning against the bulkhead with a sword planted between his feet, and at the sight, air seemed sucked from the hold because... because...

“Where did you find Lichteater?” I asked, ignoring how anxious I’d sounded.

I was right to be worried, though. With dark veins crawling over it, the sword was wrapped in a shifting, black spiderweb, and in its vicinity, black motes coalesced from the hull, from the cargo, from Teron himself.

And the sword hungrily sucked them down, forcing Ele to retreat from it.

“My master has long anticipated the resistance that would come from across the water, and as such, he has given me leave to borrow this blade,” Teron said. “Did you think he’d never heard of the Audish royal family’s foretelling? Given that, why wouldn’t he have prepared for it?”

“Doldimar’s crazy, but he’s never been stupid,” I said.

Surveying the hold, I ran through my checklist.

Idiot, dying kid? Check. Specially forged sword that he’d somehow already lost—gods, we needed to have a talk about that? Check. Several heavy crates between me and Teron? Check.

Yep. That ought to do it.

“Speaking of Doldimar, could you bring him a message?” I asked. “Tell him that the Ele primeancer said, ‘Your time unchecked draws to a close. We’re coming for you’.”

Arcing an eyebrow, Teron said, “*Just* an Ele primeancer?”

That was interesting. Had Doldimar opened up to his underlings this time around?

“Phrase it how you like,” I said with a shrug. “He’ll know what the message means.”

“Why should I deliver it, though?”

Lifting Lighteater, Teron held it to the side.

“Once I destroy you, your message will be pointless,” he said.

...Maybe Doldimar wasn’t sharing. Although...

No. It was more likely that Teron actually thought he could kill me.

Idiot.

Rolling my eyes, I said, “What is it about Daevetch primeancers and their suicidal overconfidence?”

Teron’s eyebrows scrunched together, but I was done talking. As I attracted the Ele in several crates to what lay in the bulkhead, I hefted Raimie’s body over my shoulder, and said crates shot forward at impossible speed.

They crashed into wood, and it didn’t matter how well-crafted this ship’s hull was. Against that much force, it had no choice but to crack. Once it had, I bound my feet to the floor, raised my hand, and shot a massive amount of Ele from it.

Teron dodged, building up a Daevetch layer in front of him as he did so, but he wasn’t fast enough. Nothing was fast enough to outrun Ele.

He was blasted into the bulkhead, which was enough to tear a hole in it. As seawater rushed into the hold, Teron was sucked through, and I started taking deep breaths, forming another attraction between Silverblade and my hand. When it slapped into my palm, I closed my fingers around its hilt.

Waiting for water to fill the hold, I shook my head.

Seriously. What was it about Daevetch primeancers?

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