

Chapter 70: Hopeful Speculation

Rhylix

“Miranon?” I said, nudging the girl at Raimie’s side. “Why don’t you show him what you can do?”

She flashed a blanched face and pleading eyes at me.

“It’s all right. I promise,” I said. “I know that after years spent hiding, this is hard, but I swear to you. You’ll be safe, even if I need to protect you myself.”

During that exchange, Raimie had bounced his gaze between us, but his mouth formed a perfect ‘O’ when Miranon took a deep breath and made her hands glow.

“Should I show him my splinter as well?” she asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” I said. “Raimie’s never been one to rely on formality or protocol. Hates it, from what I can tell.”

With his shock having apparently broken, Raimie shouted, “You can access Ele?”

At that, Miranon lifted her glowing hands, crooking an eyebrow.

“Right. Of course you can,” Raimie said with a nervous laugh. “Forgive me. You’ve come as a surprise. I thought primeancers were rare.”

“They usually are, but every so often, a surge of them spurts into the world,” I said. “It comes in *cycles*.”

“You mean-?” Raimie said.

I nodded. When Ele and Daevetch sent their Champions into the physical plane, a host of splinters soon followed, seeking out potential humans or Esela to partner with.

Squaring her shoulders, Miranon met Raimie’s eyes.

“Will you attack me?” she asked.

“No! I’m pleased to meet another Ele primeancer,” Raimie said, drawing his eyebrows together. “Why would I attack you?”

“Because you’re aligned with Daevetch, and my splinter doesn’t like you *at all*,” Miranon said. “The last time a Daevetch primeancer visited Qena, she tried to kill me, but then again, the last person my splinter hated is my best friend. Past experience makes me wary of you, but it also tells me to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

Gods, the pained look on Raimie’s face!

Raising his hands, he said, “Unless you try to hurt me first, I won’t harm you, Miranon, but you’re right to doubt me. I don’t know how I can prove that I mean you no harm, except by maybe...”

Raimie bit his lip with his eyes growing distant, and at the appearance of that expression, I internally sighed. Either a brilliant idea or a staggeringly dangerous one was sure to follow it.

Turning to me, Raimie said, “You said a surge? How many do you think are currently living in Auden?”

“How should I know?” I said with a shrug. “But I *have* heard rumors all across the realm of primeancers in hiding.”

“Hmm.”

Tapping his fingers on his lips, Raimie pointed at Miranon.

“How would you like to learn how to control Ele from someone who’s mastered it?” he asked.

“I’ve been hoping for greater control since Creation first came to me,” Miranon said. “Soon after her appearance, I started practicing, but in one session, I accidentally jumped too high over a fallen tree and broke my arm in the fall. I’d like to avoid repeating that experience.”

Hissing, Raimie said, “Oo... yeah, I’ve done that. Doesn’t feel nice, does it?”

Miranon shook her head, and watching them interact, I realized what my friend was thinking of doing, wanting to smack myself for not seeing it sooner.

“You want to build a school,” I said.

“Think about it, Rhy!” Raimie said. “We gather primeancers together, give them what they need to master their respective energies, and when Doldimar eventually returns...”

“We greet him with an army of Ele wielders,” I breathed.

The idea was audacious, breathtaking, and utterly brilliant. In the past, gathering a group of Ele primeancers together had been guaranteed to end in slaughter, prompted by either Daevetch wielders or norms, burdened by fear. Since coming to Auden, however, Raimie and I had worked

tirelessly to prove that Ele primeancers were beacons of hope, although those efforts sometimes seemed to have barely worked, but even still, with Doldimar vanished, a school for primeancers might be feasible.

“Until Doldimar makes his move, we can create a haven in the palace for Ele and Daevetch primeancers,” Raimie said. “Alouin knows there’s room-”

“*Daevetch* primeancers?” I said. “Why would you want them anywhere near you? When they’re not insane, they’re bloodthirsty.”

Raimie flinched away from me with hurt spasming across his face.

“Ouch! That smarts, Rhy. They can’t all be as you’ve described. Some have to be like me. They *have* to.”

Looking to the side, he crossed his arms, slowly breathing out, and I frowned at him. Was he worried that he’d become like Doldimar’s Enforcers, the only other Daevetch primeancers he’d met? Because... he would. Eventually. Daevetch allowed nothing less for its primeancers, but I didn’t think Raimie’s fall was likely to come any time soon. My friend rarely, if ever, showed the symptoms associated with that final state.

Shaking himself, Raimie said, “Besides, what Daevetch primeancers can do is more conducive to combat than Ele’s granted abilities, and I believe in offering protection to anyone who might suffer at the hands of our enemy, including primeancers who are typically associated with evil.”

He paused.

“Dim wants me to add that Ele primeancers aren’t much better. They’re self-righteous to the point of rigidity, unwilling to recognize a creative solution to a problem if it bit them in the ass. Their words, not mine.”

“Even if it’s possible that they deserve or need protection, you can’t put primeancers from opposite sides so close to one another,” I said. “They’d rip each other apart, and you’d have a massacre on your hands.”

With an eye twitching, Raimie opened his mouth to argue, but a knock stopped him from speaking, for which I was grateful. I didn’t like disagreeing with my friend, but I especially didn’t like it when the disagreement was over a concept that shouldn’t be in question.

A niggling piece of my heart that belonged solely to Lirilith found the idea of Ele and Daevetch primeancers working together intriguing, but the Champion of Ele had too many years of dealing with primeancers to find it viable. I’d never met anyone, burdened with a splinter, who could tolerate being in the same room as a primeancer from the opposite side.

Except for Raimie. I had no issue with being around my friend. Why was that?

A teenage boy poked his head around the door, roaming his bespectacled eyes over the room until they landed on Miranon.

Pushing through the door, he said, "Miri! They said you'd be in here. Why aren't you in the lab? Was my grandmother awful to you again? I thought we were planning on testing those new materials today. Remember? "

The teenager's close-cropped, black hair had turned his head into a fuzzball, further blurred by his rush to Miranon, and she came to meet him, grabbing his hands.

"Jesper! You have perfect timing, as usual!" she said, pulling him behind her. "This is Rhylix and Raimie. We've been discussing an intriguing idea, or rather, they have. I've mostly been watching and staying out of the way. Raimie. Rhylix. This is my best friend, Tejesper."

"Pleased to meet you," Raimie and I said with utter confusion in both of our tones.

"Wait. Miri! Raimie, as in soon-to-be-king Raimie?" Tejesper asked with his hazel eyes lighting up. "Oh, my gods, you're my hero!"

As if realizing how much he'd been gushing, he blushed, ducking his head.

"I suppose you get that a lot, though, what with being Auden's liberator," he said. "Is it true that you control both Daevetch and Ele?"

"...Yes?" Raimie said.

"How?"

Tejesper moved forward, adjusting his spectacles on his nose.

"Please, tell me how you do it. I need to know. Please."

"Um," Raimie said, taking a step back. "I was born with both splinters. I don't really know why."

Now *that*, I hadn't known. As far as I was aware, people weren't *born* primeancers. They had to *do* something to attract a splinter. Add another oddity to the list of peculiarities that made up Raimie.

"Oh," Tejesper said.

Stopping short, he slumped, and relaxing, Raimie came close enough to rest a hand on the teenager's shoulder.

"Why did you want to know?" he quietly asked.

Tejesper hesitated. From behind, Miranon prodded his side.

"Show them," she hissed. "I did, and I'm alive. I think we can trust them."

Glancing at her, Tejesper said, "I trust you, Miri."

But he stepped back and closed his eyes, and the room darkened with shadows slithering over every surface. My stomach rebelled at the sight, and it didn't matter what Raimie was or why I could stand to be near my friend. My mind screamed 'enemy', and I shot Ele forward, pinning a Daevetch primeancer to the wall. The shadows vanished as my adversary struggled to get away, kicking against the wall and trying to jerk his hands free, but his attempts were futile. No one could escape my Ele grip.

Starting forward, I reached for one of my knives, but someone grabbed my wrist before I could unsheathe it.

"Let him go, Rhy!" Raimie shouted.

Blinking, I tried to understand why my friend was stopping me. Didn't he understand? Did he not see?

"He's the enemy!" I snapped. "He needs to die!"

I tried to tug my hand free, but Raimie held firm, peeling his lips back from his teeth.

"Rhy," he hissed. "Look at Miranon."

To appease my friend, I did so and cocked my head. The girl might be trembling, but white light had filled her hands, aimed at me. Her eyes were so very wide with a single tear rolling down her cheek, and she was prepared to attack me, her ally, to protect a primeancer who belonged to the enemy. Why?

The picture shifted, and I was immobilizing not an enemy but a terrified teenager to the wall. A boy who was barely out of childhood and I'd planned to murder him. As I flinched away from the thought, Ele returned to me in a rush, and Tejesper collapsed to his hands and knees, coughing.

Not trusting myself to come any closer, I said, "I'm so sorry. You can't understand. I've fought Daevetch for so long. It's almost an instinctual reaction--"

"I don't blame you," Tejesper interrupted with a raspy voice, "and I do understand. What do you think I feel every time I look at Miri? But she's my best friend. I won't let Daevetch control me. I control it."

Easy for him to say when his source wasn't keeping him alive but...

"I take your point," I said.

"When I broke my arm, 'jesper used Daevetch's strength to carry me home," Miranon said. "It nearly killed him."

Good gods, how strong-willed was this kid? He'd not only restrained an overpowering desire to kill his friend but used Daevetch, the energy that had been prompting the murderous desire, just to help her. He and Raimie would get along famously. Or they'd kill each other.

"Out of curiosity, which splinter did you attract?" Raimie asked.

"That's right. I haven't properly greeted you yet."

Climbing to his feet, the teenager laid a fist over his breast.

"Tejesper, citizen of Qena, aspect Destruction, at your service."

His twin flashed into view, hungrily leering at me, before disappearing.

"I hope you don't mind," Tejesper said. "I'm not fond of my splinter."

"No, dismissing it was wise, given Rhy's reaction to you," Raimie said. "We shouldn't bring a Daevetch splinter into the mix. Rhylix can barely control himself around Dim. Chaos. Whatever they're called."

Turning to me, he rested his hands on his hips.

"So, what do you think now?" he asked. "Is a school enrolled with Daevetch *and* Ele students possible?"

"I think...it's worth trying, if only because *they* are better able to kill our enemy," I said. "We'll need to be extra cautious when the wielders of opposite sides meet, though. Keep them separate for the most part."

"Do we get a say in this?" Miranon asked with a huff.

Raimie blinked at her with a troubled expression crossing his face. He probably hadn't considered that some primeancers might not want what he was suggesting.

"You always have a say in your future," Raimie said. "Always."

Or he could be surprised that these two had thought they wouldn't get a choice. Raimie might have liberated Auden, but he could never understand what his new subjects had lived through since birth, or... given what I knew about his past, maybe he could.

"Would you like to live in the palace at Elisk and learn to control the energies that you wield?" he asked. "You're welcome to stay in Qena, if that's what you want."

Miranon and Tejesper exchanged glances, seemingly talking wordlessly.

"I think we'd rather come with you," Tejesper said, holding Miranon's gaze.

"Wonderful," Raimie said.

And all three of them grinned with giddiness infecting the room.

“Go pack a bag, you two. Once I’m finished with the tear, you’ll come home with me.”

The teenagers made their farewells, and all too soon, only my friend and I occupied the room.

“If this idea works, who will teach them?” I asked, fixing my eyes on a closed door. “You?”

“Are you kidding me?” Raimie said. “On top of running a kingdom, searching for Doldimar, and researching solutions for your curse? I wouldn’t have the time. Besides, I’m not a master of either side of primeancy, but I know someone who is.”

“You’re going to make me a teacher, aren’t you?” I groaned.

“Oh, don’t give me that. You know you’d love it,” Raimie said. “Besides, if we’re taking the ‘Doldimar comes to us’ route, you’ll have plenty of time on your hands, and I know you don’t like being idle.”

He’d made a good point but...

“I’ll accept your offer to head the ‘college of Ele’,” I said, “but who will teach the Daevetch students? Certainly not me and you’ve said you can’t.”

“I have someone for the job, but I’m not sure where she is at the moment,” Raimie said. “Do you remember Nessaira and that Kiraak you spared at the Birthing Grounds?”

“I recall them both, especially the Overseer of Da’kul and her crossbow bolts of doom,” I said, making a face. “I also remember that neither of them could access Daevetch, hence why they were Overseers and not Enforcers, but I’ll indulge you. Whatever happened to those two?”

“They were released after thorough interrogations,” Raimie said. “I found it unlikely that they’d return to their Dark Lord, knowing what would happen to them after spilling his secrets to the enemy.”

“A reasonable assumption,” I said.

“I thought so,” Raimie said. “In any case, about six months ago, I received a request from Nephiron’s mayor. Several of his citizens had been murdered in a manner that was disturbingly reminiscent of the days of Doldimar’s reign. I headed out, thinking the culprit would be a rogue Kiraak missed during the sweeps, but when I arrived, Nessaira approached me, requesting asylum.

“Before the incident, she and the man you spared, Wilphanas, had lived together for several months, drawn to one another by their similar backgrounds. From the way she described it, their relationship went deeper than mere kinship.

“Right as the two had begun adjusting to their life of normalcy, a group of Nephironians recognized Nessaira as Teron’s former Overseer. They, predictably, attacked her. She tried to flee, tried to

reason with her attackers, but they rejected her pleas and refused to let her escape. She took her beating, prepared to die for her past crimes, but Wilphanas came to her defense, dying in her stead. You can guess what happened next.”

“A Daevetch splinter came to her, and she massacred her attackers?” I said.

“That’s essentially what she confessed. I took her into my custody, dropping her with Gistrick at Da’kul,” Raimie said. “I lost track of what happened to her after that, distracted by the next catastrophe I had to handle.”

So, the Overseer was now a Daevetch primeancer, which made her a candidate for the position that would match mine. Still.

“Why do you think she, a woman who put a crossbow bolt through my neck and who we both know to be unstable, should teach impressionable primeancers?” I asked.

“We don’t exactly have our choice of Daevetch primeancers, Rhy,” Raimie said with a sigh, “and while Nessaira may only have months of authentic experience with her powers, she spent years watching Teron’s mastery of the shadows when he was alive.”

I kept my lips tightly sealed, hating the conclusion that my friend was forcing me to arrive at. I didn’t want to work with a woman who’d once killed me, no matter how temporary my death might have been.

“You know I’m right,” Raimie said, crossing his arms.

Making a face, I nodded, refusing to audibly agree, but that didn’t stop Raimie from beaming at me.

“Have we formed the first school, the first haven, for those of our kind?” he said.

Dear Alouin but that enthusiasm was infectious! Despite my misgivings about Nessaira, I couldn’t help but join my friend in an enormous grin.

“I believe we did,” I said.

“So many details to work out!”

Tapping his fingers on his thighs, Raimie started pacing, his typical habit when working through problems.

“We’ll need to allocate quarters for the students in the palace and figure out where they can safely practice with their energies,” he said, “and of course, there’s the problem of recruitment. How do we convince people who’ve been hiding for years to reveal themselves to the world?”

Restraining a laugh, I said, “You can worry about those problems once you’ve returned to Elisk. Don’t you have a task to complete here? Something to do with the nearby tear?”

Raimie grimaced.

“I’d almost forgotten about that,” he said with the words emerging as if they were rotten fruit. “They won’t explain what’s wrong with the tear, and yet, I’m expected to fix the issue. Sure, I’ve traveled to several of them in Auden, hoping to get a feel for their number and how active they are. I thought it might be useful to know what I can expect from that facet of the realm’s economy. That doesn’t make me an expert on the damn things, though, despite what everyone thinks.”

“You understand them better than anyone I’ve met before, my friend,” I said, “and that makes you an expert.”

“Regardless,” Raimie drawled, rolling his eyes, “I’m not sure what the fix for this tear will require of me, and it makes me nervous.”

A hopeful expression took hold of his face, which had me quietly groaning.

“Will you come with me?” Raimie asked. “I could use a friend.”

“Why are you even asking? You know what my answer will be,” I sourly said.

“Fantastic!” Raimie said, clapping his hands together. “I’ll let Little know, and we can get started.”

“Hang on!”

Leaping in front of my friend as he crossed to the door, I lightly rested a hand on his chest.

“I’ve been crisscrossing the Wastelands for the last week, only returning to Qena an hour ago,” I said. “Let me grab a bite to eat before we charge into those monsoon-plagued lands.”

“That’s fair,” Raimie said. “You can have your meal, but I *am* on a tight schedule, Rhy.”

What was that supposed to mean? At my questioning glance, Raimie shook his head.

“I’ll explain on the way,” he said. “Let’s say an hour? Will that be enough time for you?”

An hour to recover from three days without food and with little sleep? Ha!

“It’ll be plenty,” I said.

“In that case, I’ll meet you outside of town once you’ve finished,” Raimie said.

Happily humming, he practically skipped out the door, and once he was gone, I buried my face in my hands, screaming into them.

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