

# Chapter 79: Disaster

## Raimie

When I accepted Shadowsteal's offered grip, the world crawled to a stand-still, which I'd half-expected. Everything else, I had not.

Ele suffused the hall of worship—in the walls, the floor, the air—and I could see every speck of it. Scattered splotches of it brightened and gathered until they drifted toward me, and I gratefully accepted them, letting their energy buzz through my veins until everything wrong with me fell away. A drumming beat thrummed alongside this energy, and rolling my neck, I took a moment to enjoy this glorious sensation. Peace and a humming pulse drowned out my consciousness, but after a moment of thoughtless floating, I struggled to find the surface, intent on discovering how else Shadowsteal had altered my world this time.

Eledis, Oswin, and Kylorian were shining brighter than the hall of worship's background with each of them caught halfway through a breath. Oswin's proud look of triumph was spreading across his face at a snail's pace with Eledis' disquiet joining it. The three stood as glowing statues, moving much like I imagined stone would, if it could.

In front of them, Rhylix was a blazing beacon of white light, and I shielded my eyes to keep from going blind. Beside their Eselan, Creation watched me with foreboding, although no light emerged from the splinter. They were merely Rhylix's twin.

Meanwhile, Bright clapped and giggled at my side, hopping in place, and a stain upon the world was standing with the Ele splinter. Its uncertain grin was barely visible through the swirl of wrongness that made up its face.

I restrained myself from twitching the blade toward it. Yes, that was the enemy, but it was also Dim, and while I held this weapon, I wouldn't let Shadowsteal destroy my Daevetch splinter. Piecing Bright together after their destruction had been enough of a pain in the ass. I didn't want to do the same for Dim, not when I could avoid breaking them in the first place.

But out of all the world's changes, only one sent my heart soaring into my throat with panic soaking through my mind.

Nylion had disappeared.

Frozen in place, I could only stare at where my other half had been standing with questions flying through my head. Was Nylion gone? Had I lost my other half again?

Because I couldn't do it. Not a second time. Not after everything we'd become over the last four weeks. I COULDN'T.

When reassurance and calm zinged down our bond—Nylion doing what he could to communicate with me, I assumed—I ever so slowly relaxed from a tautness that scared me. He was still there. Everything was ok. I needed to breathe.

And focus elsewhere.

Behind me, a song of voices raised in joyous cries started up, and I turned to accept those cheers. A collection of white candles made up the crowd with each of them glowing at varying degrees of brightness. Most matched Oswin and Eledis, but one of them near the back overshadowed the others, someone who had an Ele splinter hovering behind her, and I jumped at the sight. An Ele primeancer, here?

Had that woman's splinter told her what might occur when I touched Shadowsteal? If they hadn't...

My grip on the sword slackened, to the point that it almost clattered to the ground. How much of an invasion of privacy had I imposed on that woman?

Despite this violation, I couldn't stop fascination from stealing my focus. If I could see concealed splinters while holding Shadowsteal, maybe this inconvenient weapon could be useful after all.

And that moment of contemplation was when I saw it: thick smoke cloying along the underside of the roof. The sight of this didn't fit the investiture's scene, not with gas lamps and candles lighting the hall of worship. They shouldn't produce as much smoke as what was floating above me. So, what was?

When I traced it back to its origination, I found it coming from the windows, and with Ele singing inside, I danced forward to investigate. Energy's beat pulsed so loudly in me that I worried it would rip through my skin, breaking the barrier to the physical plane that was me, and gleefully vibrate the world to bits with its newfound freedom.

"Silly human!" Bright said. "It could never do that."

When they manically cackled, I cringed at the uncontrolled exhilaration found in the voice of a primal force's fragment. What disaster could come from Bright's unusually agitated glee?

On the fringes of my vision, a stain upon the world said, "Ignore them. They can't cause much damage all by their lonesome."

I took Dim's suggestion to heart, having made it to the closest window. Behind me, the crowd caught up with my sudden movement, shouting a measure of surprise and delight to contrast my dismay.

For outside, someone had built a string of bonfires along the hall of worship's walls with each of them placed beneath a window.

With Ele's beat forgotten, I sprinted to the door at the back of the hall, trying to open them in vain. I'd already thought a barricade would be blocking them, but I'd hoped...

Hope would get these people killed.

The audience was gradually getting to its feet, twisting to face me. Their new king. The one who'd vowed to protect them.

Blocked door. Ridiculously narrow windows, obstructed by fire. Walls built to repel invaders. Had the architects of this place not considered that this precious edifice, dedicated to Alouin, might be burned down?

One good point. We'd die of smoke inhalation before the flames reached us.

"Oh, gods. What do I do?" I whispered.

"Perhaps you could blast the doors off of their hinges?" the stain beside me said. "Who knows what type of barricade lies on the other side, though? If it's made up of my whole, the bits of it that you throw could bounce back, hitting others, before clearing a path. Maybe... You could shade meld outside!"

"I won't leave these people behind," I growled.

How could they even think I'd-?

Rolling their eyes, the stain said, "Raimie. I wasn't suggesting anything like that. Shade meld into the hall and break the barricade there, so they can escape."

I could hear Dim's added 'stupid', even if the word was left unspoken.

"That could work," I said. "Thanks, Dim."

Without panic making me desperate, the peace inside took control once more, but when I reached for my Daevetch source to start the plan, I couldn't find it.

"Oh my me, really? You can't use me until you put *that* away," the stain said, pointing at Shadowsteal. "Touching it makes you one with the enemy whole, and it cannot abide you using *my* whole, not when it wants you to destroy me."

Oh. Well, the 'being one with the whole' thing certainly explained a lot. Like why I could see Ele everywhere and in everything.

Thank Alouin that I'd worn my typical clothing, including my weapons belt and accompanying blades, under these ridiculous robes. I'd had a feeling I'd need to be armed over the course of my final efforts to free my new subjects.

Shrugging a useless garment to the floor, I drew Silverblade with my free hand, replacing it with Shadowsteal on my hip.

As soon as I'd release that sword's grip, the world resumed its normal pace with confused cries and my leg's howling pain enthusiastically greeting me. I slapped my free hand to one ear, hoping to block the babble, because it wasn't helping with my search for my Daevetch source.

Of course, at that moment, the hall of worship's windows shattered, making way for a storm of bottles filled with liquid fire. Bursting on impact, they ignited everything they touched, including members of the audience. Just like that, their bemused confusion flipped to fear, and like a mindless herd, the crowd stampeded toward the doors.

I sprayed an Ele wave in front of the leading line, subtracting from the store of it that Shadowsteal had drawn to my body. Seeing that, the crush of people slowed down long enough to listen to me, although I wasn't sure how long they'd hold still with the agonized shrieks filling the air around them.

"Something's blocked the door," I shouted. "I need everyone to stay calm while I—"

A wail cut me off, probably because of what I'd said, which had just...

"Oh, well done, you," Dim said with sarcasm dripping from them.

Exactly what I'd been thinking but I couldn't snap a reply at them when several people had started rushing forward to try the doors, despite what I'd said. At the windows, others were frantically trying to squeeze through those small openings, although these people only retreated with glass-lacerated hands. In their blind dismay, a portion of the rest started hacking at the walls, occasionally wounding others with their wild swings.

Hell. Panic turned humans fucking crazy. How did I always forget about this?

"It's his fault!" someone shouted. "Get him!"

*How* was it my....? Focus.

Thankfully, no one in the crowd seemed to have the courage or desire to attack a newly appointed monarch, much less one who was a primeancer, but they were plenty willing to do the same to my friends, family, and allies. My leg kept me pinned in place while Uncle Marcuset and Gistrick stood back-to-back against a rush of frenzied adversaries, Oswin and the Hand fought to reach me, and the Ada'ir delegation—including Dath, to my surprise—arrayed itself in a defensive position in a corner. Tanwadur disappeared beneath a swell of bodies.

And all around, the flames spread, as if fueled by this violence.

I scrambled for Daevetch so I could give these reckless, angry people a source of release, but from the corner of my eye, I caught Ren retreating from a group of crazed Eliskians, and any control I might have clung to was dashed to pieces. Without conscious thoughts, I was across the hall and

carving through those who meant to do her harm. Wrapping her in my arms, I dove into the shadows.

Something new accompanied me as my scattered being floated between the world's cracks. The strewn creature that I'd become gravitated toward its warmth, even while images flashed.

A frozen wasteland littered with black boxes. *It was comforting.* A desert oasis in the middle of a densely whirling cloud of sand. *Completing.* A village beneath a gaping wound in the sky. *Encompassing.* A black hallway with a sheet of shadows where doors should be. *Thrilling.*

No. Stop. That was our exit. Let us go.

The shadows *spat* me from their embrace this time, displeased by the taste of my guest.

The one who was shivering in my arms.

"What was *that*?" Ren whispered with her voice worn to a scratchy rasp. "Alouin, what was that, Raimie?"

I gently pressed a finger to her lips. Questions could wait. The people trapped in the hall of worship couldn't.

Calling to the Daevetch barring the doors, I returned it in a blast that splintered their thick wood into slivers.

"Out, out, out!" I shouted.

A trickle of people stumbled out of the hall, coughing up a storm. They blearily paused in the threshold, as if unsure of where they should go, while the frantic crowd they were blocking threatened to bowl them over.

"This way!" I called.

As best I could with my limp, I led them to the closest exit, and they spilled outside, gratefully blinking at dazzling sunlight. The obsidian-cast palace shouldn't catch fire like the hall of worship, but with the crowd outside, none of them would again be caught in flames, should the worst happen.

Already, guards were approaching the commotion. Once they figured out what was going on, they'd see the palace evacuated until the fire was extinguished.

Looking back, I wasn't sure if anything could be preserved of the hall of worship. Fire licked along its walls, having already begun its feast on the roof, and given that, it wouldn't take long for the structure to collapse on itself. The bonfires I'd spotted before have done their job.

Speaking of those bonfires, who'd planned this? Because it had clearly been planned. Fires didn't start themselves, and the exit hadn't been barred by happenstance.

Now that Doldimar had gone into hiding, few enemies threatened me. His Enforcers and Kiraak had vanished alongside their master, taking their danger with them, and almost no one else hated me or Auden enough to try something like this. Only the Dark Lord stood out as a potential suspect.

So, had this fire been his move? An attempt to kill everyone who opposed him in one fell swoop? If so, it had been ill-advised. Doldimar knew I could control Daevetch. He should also have known that said control would let me escape...

My thoughts came to a screeching stop. Behind the palace guards, a woman was strolling away from the drama with her hands in her pockets. By itself, her calm departure from the scene of this crime wouldn't have raised my suspicions, but a hard Daevetch kernel was traveling with her, and *that* was fishy.

Without a word, I followed her as fast as my bad leg would allow.

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