

Chapter 8: Expected Hatred

Rhylix

As I ran out of the tower, the scene I'd left behind kept playing out in my mind, mostly in sound.

"Nyl, where are you?" Raimie dazedly said.

A barely audible whine filled the room, but by the time I'd leaned through the doorway, it had stopped, and Raimie was roughly shaking his head. I relaxed, thinking everything was fine.

A few moments later, he said, "At the moment, what Raimie would or would not want does not matter. He is not here right now."

And I froze, knowing I'd stumbled onto something important. Unfortunately, knowledge of it got pushed away when Nessaira started howling in pain. By the time she'd stopped, falling unconscious, black lines had faded from under her skin, and I ran from what that meant.

I was still running from it, but much as I might like it to, that strategy wasn't working. So, I stopped short, completely out of breath, and considered what I'd seen.

Nessaira was an Overseer, a Kiraak who'd been afflicted for long enough that her blood lust no longer controlled her. Even beyond the events of the recent battle, I'd verified that fact when infiltrating this fort, months ago.

And yet, if I returned to her cell now, I wouldn't find a trace of Daevetch on her.

Which meant she was no longer a Kiraak. Raimie had... cured her.

Gods, I'd be sick.

Forever ago, when I'd still had hope of breaking free from the cycle's curse, I'd aspired to do what Raimie had accomplished. I'd desperately wanted a fix for the monsters Doldimar always created, had spent so many years looking for one, but as time had gone on, that desire had gradually faded. It had slowly retreated before my growing hopelessness until the cycle had come when I'd broken. During that one, Doldimar had been around for centuries before I'd shown up, much like in this cycle, and the things he'd done...

He'd nearly won that one, and after it had been over, I'd just... given up. For centuries upon centuries, countless cycles passing me by, I'd gone through the motions, unable to do much else

until Raimie had given me hope again. My wish to help the Kiraak had died back then too, and until now, I hadn't examined what my long-ago surrender to the inevitable might mean, both for the Kiraak and for myself.

How many of them had I killed, thinking nothing could save them? With what Raimie had done, how much blood now stained my hands, or- or... had it always been there, unseen by a man too oblivious to notice it?

Gods. I couldn't consider that idea, couldn't carry the weight of it. Not alone.

So, I scrambled for another problem to occupy my mind. Like... like...

Like, what had Raimie meant earlier, saying he 'wasn't around'? He'd been standing *right there*. Had the pressure of the task he'd undertaken made him fracture from himself, even if temporarily? I'd seen that happen often enough in times of war and other such horrors.

If so, what did that make the 'Nyl' he'd mentioned?

"You... oh, no. Eriadren, you should pay attention to your surroundings. *Now.*"

Creation? What on earth was the splinter doing-?

Sharp pain in my head jarred me out of my thoughts, and as I pitched forward, I tried to figure out what had hit me, as something *obviously* had. This question occupied me as I rolled onto my side, curling protectively around myself.

A harshly whispered voice poked through the haze of my pain.

"Remember. We can only do things that a fall off the wall could cover up."

And even as another blow landed and another, I was silently sighing to myself because I knew what this was. I'd been anticipating it since first revealing myself as a primeancer.

That made it no less painful. As these judgmental assholes proceeded to beat me to death, I did my best to protect vital areas, wrapping my arms around my head and pulling my legs to my stomach. Logically, I knew I should just let them kill me. Dying and subsequently reviving would spare me a lot of time and pain.

But I couldn't help fighting to survive.

When a kick to my kidneys had my body spasming open, I struggled to curl up again. When that attempt failed miserably and a foot connected with my groin, I tried to roll away from the blow, even with how hazy I'd already become.

At some point, there was a pause with frustrated voice saying something about how annoying it was that I wouldn't lose consciousness—they could thank Ele's persistent attempts to keep me in perfect health for that—but I couldn't acknowledge that brief respite, save to use it to pinpoint my

attackers. Once I had, I gathered Ele to me, ready to both shoot it at them and propel myself away.

I'd gotten halfway to doing that when a loud *crunch* filled my ears and mind. I had half a second to process the noise before an oscillating storm of pain and a dull ache radiated from my jaw. Cold air brushed against body parts that it should never touch, and my teeth loudly pulsed in their sockets.

Ah. They'd switched to using weapons, then. Great.

Another *snap* filled the air, followed by a fiery spark in my foot, and another and another and-

I lost any tenuous grip I'd had on Ele, cursing it all the while. Gods, I was going to die again, and because of the curse that primal energy had placed on me, it wouldn't be quick. Of course.

I didn't know where I'd found the energy to be angry about that.

As if to echo that whisper of emotion, someone familiarly welcome *roared*.

"That is *not* allowed!"

There was a *whistle* and a *thump*, and when I managed to crack an eye open, I was greeted by the sight of a strange man, sprawled on the ground with a clean hole bored through where his heart should be.

Rescue. Hopefully, it had come in time.

Two more bodies fell to the earth, and feet thudded toward me.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," someone harshly whispered. "Raimie will kill me."

My friend collapsed into the dirt between me and the man he- he'd killed—I hadn't thought Raimie could even *hurt* someone in his new 'family'—but instead of reaching for my broken body, like most people would, he clenched his hands in his lap, running his eyes over me.

"Where does it hurt worst?" he asked. "And- and may I touch you?"

Oh. He *did* want to help.

Why had I been certain for a moment that he wouldn't?

Groaning, I started getting to my feet... or trying to. My first attempt only landed me flat on my face again.

"Don't bother with that," I panted. "Just... get me somewhere hidden. Please."

No one could see what would soon happen to me. No one but Raimie.

As I pushed myself onto my elbows, my friend slowly offered me a hand, refusing to move until I'd taken it. Then, he hauled me upright, throwing my arm over his shoulders, and even with pain

screaming through my mind, I noticed how he shuddered when our skin made contact.

What-?

“Where should I take you?” he asked.

Why was he asking *me* that? I could barely think, let alone-

“The tower,” I surprised myself by saying. “Hopefully, we can-”

-make it. That didn’t seem likely, not with how much Ele was already glowing under my skin. Those men might not have inflicted fatal damage on me, but with how many things Ele needed to heal and had *already* healed in my body, I didn’t- I didn’t know if...

“Hey, stay here, please,” my friend said. “It is difficult enough, dragging you along half-conscious. I do not think I can manage anything more.”

Right. Yes. I couldn’t think about what was happening in my body or the energy that Ele was sipping away...

Had to- had to focus on putting one foot in front of the other. Had to reach the tower—

Safety.

—before anyone came to investigate the commotion.

Was anyone coming? Or would I die, alone and uncared for, again?

“Rhylix,” my friend hissed. “*Please*. Gods, it is- it is too much for-”

My friend. He was helping. Or trying to. Bless him.

I didn’t think it would be enough.

As expected, we were within a couple dozen paces of the tower’s entrance when Ele’s healing process sapped the last spark of energy from my body, and I wilted. Grunting, my friend fought to support my body weight, but that was beyond him.

I watched from both my own eyes and a point above us as he lowered me to the ground. I noticed the full-blown panic in his gaze, how *not there* he seemed.

Consumed by his fear.

“It’s ok, Raimie,” I mumbled. “Will be back soon.”

And hopefully, no one else would be here to observe that.

To my distant surprise, I noted that my words hadn't comforted my friend as I'd expected. With panic still running wild in him, he jerked his head up, glaring at me with his lips peeled from his teeth.

"I am *not* Raimie," he growled.

Wha-? He wasn't making-

"What's going on?" a strange voice called.

Shit.

As my friend whirled away from me, I fought to stay in my body, desperate to keep my curse from discovery, but it didn't matter how much I struggled. The world pulled away from me—

—and I was floating in the black. There were voices on every side, and it was all so familiar, and I'd just been somewhere safer and yet more dangerous than here. Which was it?

What happened now? Did I stay here? Did I move on? How did I both know and not know the answer to those questions? Why was this place so loud and—

—familiar?

Like where I was now.

Dazedly, I swayed in place, barely staying on my feet, and scanned a flat, green landscape with a blue sky overhead.

Alouin's world. I'd made it.

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