

Chapter 80: A Shockingly Easy Resolution

Raimie

I'd almost caught up when the stranger stopped, slumping.

"I wondered if you'd detect me," she said.

Nope. Not going to comment on that one.

"Who are you?" I snapped. "Did you set the fires?"

"No, I didn't."

Turning, the stranger revealed a smirk set below two, black eyes.

"My Kiraak, on the other hand, are definitely to blame."

"So, this destruction is of Doldimar's making," I said. "What's he playing at? He must know that a trap like this wouldn't ensnare Rhylix or me."

With a mocking bow, the Enforcer said, "Merely another gift, King Raimie. He hopes you'll sleep well, knowing how simple it would be to reach you."

I took a step forward with my hands balled into fists.

"You can tell Doldimar that I'm sick of his 'gifts' when next you see him."

"When I see him? Are you planning on letting me go? Alive?" the Enforcer said with her eyebrows soaring. "That seems... unwise."

With a shrug, I said, "I need you to deliver my message. I don't know of any other way I can communicate my utter *loathing* to him, so you'll go free. I can't, however, let you leave the way you are right now. You're too useful of a tool in Doldimar's hand."

"What's that supposed to mean?" the Enforcer asked with an amused smile.

"You'll see."

Shadowsteal works like Lighteater, yes? I asked my splinters.

"Correct," Bright said. "It's similar but opposite to Lighteater."

Then, Dim? I need you to step back. We wouldn't want you caught up in what's coming next, would we?

With a heavy sigh, Dim said, "No, we wouldn't."

After dropping Silverblade, I drew Shadowsteal, freezing the world around me, and lazily strolled until I was almost nose-to-nose with the Enforcer. Searching those black eyes, I found no trace of humanity in her, only an empty husk that had been hollowed out by Doldimar and filled with Daevetch.

At her side, a stain on the world that I had no claim on silently watched me.

"Which aspect are you?" I asked it.

"The one that will destroy you," it said.

Wow... smug bastard, huh?

From far behind, my own stain said, "That's a piece of Death, Raimie."

But they hadn't sounded... happy. If anything, I'd heard resignation and despair in their tone, which... what? Had I somehow offended them?

I couldn't deal with that now.

"Thank you, Dim," I shouted. "Again."

Hopefully, that would keep them at least moderately satisfied.

With a sniff, Death said, "I don't understand the fuss about you. You're infinitesimally insignificant. I'll never know why your Chaos piece insists that you can right the disbalance in our war, just as I can't comprehend why the whole would want a return to that equilibrium. We're close to winning! Why would we want you and your weakness to force a retreat from total victory?"

That was... interesting. I wished I could ask about what this stain had said, but I wasn't sure what it could do to me, even without its human to serve as a bridge. To be safe, I should quickly finish this.

"Thank you for your opinions, Death," I said. "I truly wish I could change what must come next. I'm sorry."

"What-?"

I stabbed the stain, and it had an instant to gasp before it exploded into dark shards that quickly faded to nothing. A shockwave cascaded from Shadowsteal's point, down the blade, and up my arm, leaving it tingling, but more importantly, a choked gasp burst into the Ele-slowed world from far behind me.

Oh. That was why Dim had been upset.

"I am so sorry, Dim. I didn't think..."

Gods. I'd known Shadowsteal would destroy the Death splinter, but I hadn't considered what it would mean. What had the loss of that piece of their whole done to Dim?

I refused to face them, couldn't stand to view my action's consequences right now.

"You... you..." they croaked. "I knew you'd do it, but I still hoped..."

"Me too," I said under my breath.

Behind me, I could hear their teeth chattering while skin roughly chafed against skin.

"Oh, mine old enemy," Bright said. "I wish I could say I'm sorry, but all I can give you is my sympathy."

"Just... return to what you were doing before. *Please*," the stain moaned.

Fucking hell, the grief and pain in Dim's voice...

Trying to ignore the dirty feeling crusting my skin, I marched back to my starting point before sheathing Shadowsteal. As the world sped back up, the Enforcer pushed her hand forward, as if to throw something, and when nothing happened, she drew it to her chest with a crinkled face. After a moment, color drained from it.

"What have you done?" she asked.

"Defanged you," I said. "Get out of here. Go home. If you're lucky, Doldimar will fix you."

Stumbling backward, the Enforcer ran away, and while I watched her grow steadily smaller, I systematically packed my disgust for what I'd done into a little box. A swell of well-being wiped the remnants from my mind.

"Nicely done," Nylion said.

Never once mentioning what he must have felt coming across our bond, he joined me in my observation with his arms crossed, careful not to touch me.

Thanks, I haltingly replied. *I thought she'd attack before I could draw Shadowsteal. If she had, our odds against her wouldn't have been high, considering my injury.*

“Sometimes, we get lucky,” my other half said.

Amplified by Nylion’s reciprocating emotions, such a strong surge of relief rolled through me that I almost fell. I needed my crutch.

“Oswin, I’m going to assume you’re lurking nearby,” I said.

“You’d assume correctly,” Oswin said.

Strolling to my elbow, he handed off my crutch without a word, and I gratefully accepted it, releasing the Ele that I’d been using to keep pain at bay.

“Two things,” I said with a wince. “First, I need someone to tail that Enforcer. She might lead us to Doldimar.”

“Already done. I’m sure Little will enjoy the challenge, and he’s been eager to please since Qena,” Oswin said. “Maybe we’ll get results from him this time.”

“Good thinking,” I said. “Little does like his challenges.”

After a brief pause, Oswin turned to me.

“And the second thing?” he asked.

I rounded on the spymaster, my oldest friend. Given our history, scolding him might be difficult.

“You know that he would rather if you spoke up about it,” Nylion said. “If you let it go, he probably will not say a word, and it will hang over you both.”

I know, I said. It’s still difficult. But you know that.

At Nylion’s half-smile, warmth and comfort flowed to me, and I took a deep breath.

“We should discuss how an Enforcer entered the palace grounds without your knowledge, Oswin,” I said. “That’s a serious breach of security.”

As Oswin’s shoulders slumped, he suddenly found his boots fascinating.

“I’ve been trying to tell you, Raimie. Maybe it’s time I-”

“So this is where you ran off to!”

I needed to blink a few times; I’d been so thrown by Auntie Kaedesa’s appearance. Not even a fire and attack by mob could ruffle the queen’s calm, apparently, and somehow, she’d emerged from that disaster with perfect poise and not a hair out of place.

“We need to talk,” she said. “Alone.”

Great... I'd much rather head back to my gathered guests, seeing what I could do to help and otherwise dealing with the giant disaster that had happened, but considering the look on Kaedesa's face, that wasn't likely to happen anytime soon.

"I'll get rid of mine if you get rid of yours," I said, pointing at Pierdriel behind her.

Glancing back at him, Kaedesa paused in thought.

"They can keep one another company again," she soon pronounced.

"Oh, no," Oswin breathed beside me. "Raimie, please!"

Impishly grinning, I said, "A fantastic idea, Your Majesty."

Oswin looked like he'd faint as Kaedesa and I abandoned him with Ada'ir's Minister of Finance. We strolled along the cliffside with an uneasy quiet between us.

"So... that was a travesty," I eventually said. "Are you hurt, Your Majesty?"

"I told you to call me by name," Kaedesa said.

"Sorry."

Gods, I hated using her name, though. It would be like if my mother had asked me to call her Samantha, absolutely shudder-inducing.

"Kaedesa, are you all right?" I said anyway.

She tightened her lips before veering from our course, making for the edge of the cliff. Once there, she dropped to the ground with her skirts poofing around her and her legs left dangling.

"Join me," she said, patting the stone beside her.

I took my time with settling beside the queen. Beneath our feet, an abandoned neighborhood was spread. A short drop was all that stood between me and it, and the irrational desire to fall into its depths lured me to the edge. I shuffled closer, only stopping when another inch would send me plummeting.

Meanwhile, Nylion dangled even further with his plunge to the earth certain, if he were truly here.

Are you trying to remind me that I'll never get to touch you in the waking world? I asked.

Glancing at me, Nylion smirked before tumbling over the edge to hang from the cliff by his hands.

"If I was in the waking world, I doubt that our bond would exist," he said. "I think the loss of a body is worth it if it means that I am you and you are me and we are we. Do you not?"

Oh, I wouldn't give up our bond for anything, I said. *Can't help wanting to have it all, though.*

Laughing, Nylion hauled himself back on top of the cliff, leaning into me, and with a palm covering my hand, he swung his legs into thin air. Gods, my other half amazed me, so happy even when trapped in our mind. He was so resilient and far too positive, given his circumstances, and I was lucky to have him, no matter what he might be. I... I thought I lo-

"Let's talk about the wedding," Kaedesa said.

Jerking toward her, I almost tipped over the cliff's edge, clinging to stone to keep from falling. Once my heart stopped feeling as if it would tear itself out of my chest, I processed what Kaedesa had said and winced. Gods, but she was impatient.

"I'd like time to heal, if you don't mind," I said. "A month? Maybe two and we'll be wed."

Chuckling, Kaedesa threw a hand at me.

"See? That. That's what I want to discuss," she said. "Please, Raimie. Tell me why you're stalling."

Sharply, I returned my attention to the neighborhood below us and to Nylion, at the corner of my eye.

"I'm not trying to postpone this," I said. "Circumstances simply..."

Placing her hand on my cheek, Kaedesa gently turned me toward her.

"Raimie. Why don't you want to marry me?" she asked. "The truth this time."

She forced me to meet her eyes, unwavering in her resolve, and trapped like this, I couldn't lie. She'd recognize a mistruth in an instant.

And didn't she deserve the truth? If we were to spend our lives together, our relationship shouldn't be built on a lie.

"I'm in love with someone else," I said.

And I wondered at the jumble of confused emotions that came from saying that.

Surprisingly, Kaedesa merely nodded, releasing her hold on my face.

"I thought as much," she said. "It's the half-Eselan girl, isn't it? We were in life-threatening danger back there, and you went straight for her."

Swallowing, I clenched my hands together with their bones painfully grinding against one another. Yes, I'd meant Ren but also- also- I couldn't think about that right now.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've tried to forget her, truly, but nothing's worked. When she's not there, an empty void nags at me, but as soon as she steps into the room, it's as if lightning has struck."

Suddenly I'm drunk on life."

Hearing those words emerge, I winced. That last description probably hadn't been necessary, only making my confession to Kaedesa worse.

"Yes, not the smartest thing to tell her," Nylion said.

You're not helping, I grumbled.

But he smiled, and I didn't care anymore.

Kaedesa flopped onto her back, raising a hand to shield her eyes from the sun.

"The heart wants what it wants, Raimie," she said. "Our brain may rail at that weak, fleshy thing as much as it wishes, but doing so won't change what you desire. Trust me. I know from personal experience."

"How do we do this marriage, then?" I asked, pointing between us.

Lowering her arm, Kaedesa draped it over her face.

"We... don't," she said with a sigh. "Wedding's canceled, Raimie. I won't force you into a loveless marriage, and if I'm being honest, something about the arrangement has never sat right with me. But I proposed it anyway, and look where it's gotten me."

In a blink, Nylion was on his hands and knees on the other side of her, looking up at me with panic in his eyes.

"You cannot let Auntie cancel," he growled.

You think I don't know that?

"Kaedesa... I need this marriage," I said. "No, that's not right. *Auden* needs this marriage. We haven't recovered from what Doldimar has done to us, and honestly, Ada'ir's support is all that's keeping us afloat right now."

Peering out from under her elbow, Kaedesa laughed at the look on my face.

"I'm not suggesting we end the alliance, merely the marriage," she said. "Oh! And if you'll occasionally allow me to serve in an advisory manner, I'd be eternally grateful."

...What?

"*What?*" Nylion echoed.

"Why would you continue to offer us support?" I sputtered. "What advantage does that gain you?"

Kaedesa shot upright, glaring at me.

"I can't do it because it's what I want?" she snapped. "I like you, Raimie, and while I haven't figured out how, I know we were close in the past. I want to help you. Plus!"

Grumpily, she crossed her arms.

"Helping you will give me an excuse to escape my pestering nobles and ministers."

"And the real reason comes out!" I said with a laugh.

Thank Alouin she'd given me a way to evade our shared past. This conversation had been awkward enough without revealing that at one point, she'd literally acted as my aunt.

"Oh, hush," she said, swatting my arm.

Seizing her hand before she could retract it, I said, "Thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

"You keep your heart for the half-Eselan girl. I'll keep the gratitude," Kaedesa said, smirking. "Good luck juggling her heritage with Auden's prejudices, by the way."

I leaned over the cliff's edge. The empty neighborhood below was like a miniature playset beneath my feet, and if I squinted hard enough, I could see two-toned manes bobbing between empty houses.

"I'm working to change that," I said under my breath.

"Raimie!" Oswin yelled from behind us. "Fire's under control. They need you to explain how you broke out of a barred room."

Groaning, I tossed my head back.

"If you'll excuse me."

"Have fun!" Kaedesa said with a wave.

As I hobbled after an already departing spymaster, I couldn't help the beaming smile threatening to split my lips.

"That is one problem handled with little to no effort," Nylion said at my side. "Who would have thought that all it would take to get out of that nasty engagement was a bit of honesty?"

Giving him a sidelong glance, I said, *Are you poking fun at me?*

"What? No!" Nylion said.

Deliberately stumbling sideways, he crashed into me, looping an arm around mine, and pressing our bodies together, he tugged us ahead.

“I meant it literally,” he said. “Thank the gods that we no longer have a marriage hanging over our head. Now, we can focus on Ren.”

Yes. Ren.

Before I could voice anything more, I caught up with Oswin.

“What did Kaedesa want?” he asked.

“She freed me,” I said.

Frowning at me, Oswin said, “What does that mean?”

I found Ren in the group waiting to be questioned by the palace guard, and when our eyes met, her face lit up, as it always did when we were together.

“You’ll find out,” I said with a smirk.

Revision #1

Created 6 September 2025 19:44:05 by FatalisticFable

Updated 6 September 2025 19:56:54 by FatalisticFable