

Chapter 83: Meeting Him

Rhylix

Raimie's monotone demand to leave his splinter be echoed in the room around me. I stopped my swing just short of Chaos, gritting my teeth to resist what was compelling me to finish the strike. Beside me, Creation popped into existence, apparently summoned by my dilemma, and after taking everything in, they zipped forward to lay a hand on my wrist.

"Leave Chaos alone, Eriadren," they said. "The dimwit's a necessary evil."

Their words granted me the necessary tenacity to force my muscles into sheathing Shadowsteal.

"Thank you," Raimie hissed, relaxing ever so slightly.

Oh gods, I'd woken my friend up.

"I'm sorry, Raimie. I didn't mean to disturb you," I said. "And I'm sorry about Chaos. You know how I get about anything related to Daevetch. The temptation to get rid of it was overwhelming, but I have a handle on it. You can go back to sleep."

Hesitantly, Raimie pulled his feet back onto the bed, but he paused before lying back down, clearly fighting with himself about something. Constantly flicking his eyes to me, he opened and closed his mouth a few times before nodding to himself.

"I am not Raimie," he said.

Confusion rankled my apologetic demeanor. Had my friend taken a head injury today?

"That's not funny," I said. "I know you need rest but-"

Raimie flinched, deepening my confusion, and as if to add to it, Creation sat beside my friend, meeting my eyes.

"Where is Order, Eriadren?" they asked. "Truly look at this man who's wearing your friend's body. Is he Raimie?"

I didn't know how Creation had noticed before me, but Raimie's splinter of Order had indeed vanished. Even when I told the splinter to make themselves visible, they didn't appear.

In addition, Raimie had unquestionably changed. The kid had adopted an easy confidence that also managed to radiate fragility and his eyes! Gods, their pupils were enormous!

I leaned down to check on them, concerned that I'd been right about a head injury, but the kid's jerk away from me brought me up short.

"I am *not* Raimie," he repeated in a trembling voice.

Abruptly, I remembered everything Raimie had told me outside of Qena and the many conversations that had taken place on the way home to Elisk. I remembered Raimie acting like an arbiter, speaking for Nylion. The kid had tried *so hard* to scrub anything 'abnormal' from what Nylion had said, but I'd caught how extraordinarily shy that unseen conversation participant had been.

I remembered what I knew about people who were 'many', like my friend.

And I hazily remembered when a man disguised as my friend had rescued me from three people who'd been trying to beat me to death: how careful he'd been when handling my injured body.

"Nylion," I said.

With an uncertain smile, Nylion said, "Hello. This is not exactly how I wanted to meet you."

Crouching, I made myself shorter than the other man, which seemed to relax him, but of course it did. I wasn't sure how yet, but given everything I knew, whether about Raimie or because of certain... other knowledge, it was obvious that Nylion had been *badly* hurt by someone or something in the past. If I made myself look like less of a threat, perhaps the kid could relax, at least a little.

"I wasn't sure if I'd ever get the chance," I said with a smile, "but I'm glad it's happened. I think this is how people greet one another in your homeland."

I extended a hand, and flicking his eyes between it and me, Nylion cautiously shook it. Gods, such fear in him!

"I don't mean to offend," I continued, "but where's my friend right now?"

"Dreaming in the shared space we formed years ago," Nylion said. "He is perfectly intact, although our body may not be receiving the rest you wish."

Right. I'd forgotten about how often the singular pronoun got replaced with the plural in cases like this.

Repressing a shiver, I glanced over who was sitting in front of me, a body so familiar to me moving in ways that were completely foreign to it. Nylion was saying something, I thought, but I was too distracted by watching someone else manipulate those well-known features to hear him at first.

Which was stupid.

“Chaos, do you not think you should leave while you have the chance?” Nylion drawled with his face starting to pinch. “If he decides to attack you again, I doubt I could stop him.”

Making a soft, choking noise, the Daevetch splinter popped out of existence.

“There,” Nylion said. “We are alone. At least, I believe it is so. I cannot tell if your babysitter is tailing you now or not, after all.”

I kept a smile on my face, despite the shock of hearing Creation referred to as ‘babysitter’ by someone other than myself and Raimie. I hadn’t considered it yet, but how many of my secrets had Nylion learned from my friend? Could I trust him? How often was he awake and watching behind Raimie’s eyes?

“Will you not speak with me, or shall I continue conversing with a statue?” Nylion snapped.

So, he did have some backbone. Good.

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to ignore you. I’m sure you’ve had enough of that in your life,” I said. “It’s just a little strange to see Raimie so—”

I waved a hand at Nylion, wanting to slap myself even as I said.

“—not Raimie.”

Tensing, Nylion said, “I cannot help the body that I have been trapped in. I hope you can look beyond the distraction of these familiar features and see me.”

He’d sounded so mournful, which only made me want to slap myself harder. Hell, I wasn’t doing a good job with this meeting Raimie’s ‘other half’ thing.

“I have no trouble seeing you, Nylion. Please, don’t let my ease with being an asshole bother you. I’m not good at... this,” I said. “Did you have a reason for taking control of your body, besides stopping me from destroying Chaos? Maybe a continuation of a topic we were discussing while on the road? Or did you want to discuss what you and Raimie have been doing recently? Not that it’s any of my business! Only... you can talk to me about anything you like, is all.”

Nylion looked thoughtful, doing that starting and stopping of speaking thing again.

Eventually, he said, “In this time of powerful magics, you would have destroyed my only means of defense, Rhylix. Prowess in combat will not help us when a Daevetch primeancer can slap us, swiping our head off of our shoulders in the process.”

Ok. Interesting choice of topics.

“Even without Chaos, you’d have Order to protect you,” I said. “Right?”

I'd never thought about how splinters would work when two people occupied the same body. Would they use the same ones?

Obviously, Nylion had attracted the same Chaos splinter, but what was to say that he'd done the same with an Order splinter? Maybe he'd attracted Perpetuation or a splinter of another Ele aspect.

"No..."

Nylion looked like he'd leave it there, but he barreled forward instead.

"Raimie would retain Ele's protection. I would not."

And my eyes widened. Oh. OH. Was *that* why Order or any other Ele splinter wouldn't come when I'd called? Were they quite literally absent?

"You're solely Daevetch," I said in a hollow voice.

Cocking his head, Nylion furrowed his brow.

"I thought Raimie had told you. It is why I never mentioned it while traveling," he said. "He has shared everything about you with me. I wonder why he failed to mention my deficiency. Was he afraid for me?"

He might have had need for that. Despite my rational brain screaming for me to stop, I shot to my feet before unsheathing my sword, touching its point to Nylion's neck, but then, I hesitated. What the godsdamn *fuck* was I doing? This person I'd almost shoved steel through was a part of *Raimie*, my *friend*.

But he was also Daevetch. It invoked a roiling firestorm, one that tore through my guts and to the back of my mouth. I remembered feeling something similar when Reive had tied my adoptive nephew, Rafe, to a stake for the crime of surviving his illness.

It wasn't merely hatred. No, it wasn't even loathing. It was abhorrence, a repugnance so severe that simply looking upon this visage made me taste bile and a salty, metallic tang.

And I didn't know why this could be, besides Nylion's association with Daevetch. Why was I having this strong of a reaction to a single Daevetch primeancer?

Nylion's mouth was moving in increment, and seeing that, I recognized Shadowsteal's cold grip in my hand. No wonder the flow of time had slowed to a crawl. Fortunately, I knew how to remedy my skewed sense of time, having learned centuries ago how to manipulate the damn blade's granted skills from the one who'd forged it.

Closing my eyes, I found the glob of soft, mushy tissue in my head that controlled my perception of time. Once discovered, I isolated it from the ocean of Ele, flowing in currents through my body. Outside, the soft shuffle of a passing guard's feet quickened to a standard pace, and something rustled through sheets with Nylion once more speaking.

“What are you-? Rhylix, stop! Please, for gods’ sake, stop! I do not want to- Raimie would be *destroyed* if I-”

Hastily, I removed Shadowsteal from his skin, returning it to its scabbard. When I opened my eyes, I found Nylion against the far wall, huddled into a ball but with Daevetch coating his fists, and despite how much my stomach roiled at that awful presence, I spread my arms.

“I won’t hurt you,” I said. “Nylion, I’m not going to touch a hair on your head. I’ll swear it by whatever you want me to.”

This went on for quite a while with me repeating my assurances and Nylion staying in his corner, almost catatonic. Eventually, though, he slowly unfurled, shaking.

“Why?” he asked.

Godsdamn. Hear the raw pain in that voice! It was worse than I’d thought. Someone had fucking *shattered* Nylion’s spirit.

“I’m always like that when Daevetch gets involved,” I said. “I’m sorry. I am.”

Nylion wouldn’t respond, merely arranging himself on the bed, and the quiet stretched for so long that eventually I had to speak.

“I think I was also being protective of Raimie. Sometimes, keeping him safe gets overwhelming, and I don’t know how you protect him yet. I was hoping-”

A gasp stopped me short, seeming to suck the air from the room, and the spark in Nylion’s eyes looked like it could jump free, burning up the entire palace.

“You have *no idea* what I have suffered for the heart of my heart, what I gladly relinquished to spare his youth,” he roared. “NO FUCKING CLUE.”

That ended in a squeak, and in Nylion, I saw such unbridled hurt and fury that it might hold a candle to mine. It made my heart break.

I’d only meant to ask about the methods Nylion took in keeping Raimie safe, hoping to find a source of connection with him, but... looking back on what I’d said, I can see how poorly phrased it had been.

“I’m sorry. Really, Nylion. I am *sorry*,” I said. “I only meant... you can talk about it, if you want. I’m happy to listen in whatever way you’d like. Whatever you need.”

“*Why* would I share with you when I haven’t told *him*?” Nylion hissed.

I lifted my hands, wincing inside. Gods, I’d fucked this up. *Badly*.

And I didn’t know how to fix it.

“Get out, Rhylix. Get out before I do something I will regret,” Nylion eventually said. “Raimie and I need sleep.”

Nodding, I said, “I will. Can we... maybe try this again? Another-”

“GET OUT!”

Swallowing, I spun before bursting through the door. On the other side, I panted, simply thinking for a moment, before repeatedly smacking my forehead. What in the *void* had that been? Gods, what would I do when Raimie learned about how badly that had gone? I’d only had the best of intentions, but as usual, I’d gone about having a delicate conversation in the wrong way. Damn it! I’d *known* I should have stuck with simply gaining his trust first, like I’d done with Raimie. Stupid, stupid-

“I will have Order speak with your friend,” Creation said beside me. “Please, Eriadren. It’ll be ok. Once he understands what happened, your friend can persuade Nylion to speak with you again.”

Taking sips of air, I slowly calmed down. I’d have to believe Creation was right because if I’d ruined the only friendship I’d had in centuries...

I focused on the energy in my system, an insistent beat that begged me to move, no, dance, no, *sprint* down the palace’s halls and up countless stairs. When Shadowsteal’s granted store of Ele burned to nothing, I was standing in one of the palace spire’s pinnacles.

Elisk and the surrounding plains stretched for miles in every direction, only blocked by the mountains to the south, and I could see it all. The gas-fire lit city quarters that grew in number every day, the sporadic pinpricks further afield that indicated farms. All were proof that humanity and in some rare cases, Esela inhabited these once dark lands.

It wasn’t enough, and it never would be. The world was too wounded (I was too wounded) for this small defeat of the darkness to balance the scales. Eventually, a disaster would come to destroy this scene of beauty. It was inevitable, as I would inevitably fall prey to the backlash right when tentative peace was born. I’d die, entering a war-torn world again, and at the thought, my eyes burned.

Damn these emotions. They wouldn’t make me a blubbing mess tonight, no matter how badly I’d failed all day. Keeping Raimie safe and healthy. Meeting Nylion. Gods. When I’d accepted emotions’ return all those years ago in Allanovian, I’d made a promise that they wouldn’t manipulate me. Look how well I’d kept it.

A new light flickered to life below me and in the opposite spire. What was someone doing in the palace’s zenith this late at night?

Shifting my eyes to resemble an eagle’s, I kept watch on the illuminated floor until Oswin wandered behind a window, distractedly waving a hand while talking to himself. The spire he was pacing around must have been bequeathed to one of the primeancer schools, and Oswin, being the night owl he was, seemed to be making plans for dormitories or perhaps a classroom.

Maybe the world was wounded beyond repair, but I knew that despite any melodrama I might occasionally indulge in, I was not. Every time someone worked to right an injustice, further promoting the causes of knowledge and understanding, an iota of the wound that was me healed and scabbed over.

I was the head of the Ele primeancer school. I should probably be helping Oswin.

Shifting to a hawk, I flew from one spire's pinnacle in the direction of another.

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