

Chapter 85: Fixing What's Broken

Raimie

I didn't head toward Oswin after trudging free of the sand. Instead, I retrieved my things, donning my armor while waiting for him to approach, and once he had, I turned my most mischievous smirk on him, one that wavered when I saw how tight his face was.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You should come with me," he said. "Something requires your special brand of crazy to fix it."

At that, my eyebrows shot for the sky. It had been significantly less formal than he typically was with me, almost sounding like something a friend would say.

"What exactly is this 'something'?" I asked.

Shaking his head, Oswin said, "Not here. Please. Just trust me."

As I chewed my lip, I glanced over the spy, but a question of trust wasn't what prompted this. Surprisingly, I had no question when it came to that. I was more concerned with whether I could handle something that had rattled a former spy of a Hand.

"All right," I said. "Lead on."

With a sharp nod, Oswin started running, moving so fast that I had trouble keeping up. At least while maintaining this pace, I only caught brief glances of people when they bowed to me. At some point, I should address their deference, let it be known that I wouldn't take the throne if we overthrew Doldimar, but that was a problem for later.

When people started diminishing in number, Oswin slowed down, which let me rattle off a question.

"Will you tell me where we're headed?"

"Where you'll be sleeping while here. Some of the soldiers took it upon themselves to prepare a place for you."

When I clicked my tongue, Oswin smiled, a small one that seemed mostly directed at himself.

“Don’t worry. It isn’t fancy. After the journey here, everyone knows you don’t like preferential treatment,” he said. “When we went our separate ways, I headed there, meaning to check it before writing my report, but something happened while I was doing that. I had a different surprise in mind for you today, but this problem needs you to diffuse it.”

Hell, I had so many questions. What surprise had Oswin had in mind? Why had he felt the need to check my sleeping place for safety?

Those weren’t important right now, though.

“You won’t share what I’m about to walk into, will you?” I sourly said.

Oswin glanced my way before fixing his eyes in front of him.

“It’ll be better if you see it for yourself,” he said.

Well, that was just *great*.

Ahead of us, the line of tents on either side bent until our passageway curved out of view, and in front of this turn, a red-haired woman and a very small man... or maybe teenager were playing keep-away, dissuading soldiers from advancing past the point they were guarding. Conversely, neither of them looked at me or Oswin when we strode past them. Obviously, they knew the spy, but before I could ask him about it, we turned the corner, and with my heart leaping in my chest, I faltered in my step, forcing him to steady me.

We’d stopped in a cleared space, one formed by a circle of tents. The campsite wasn’t finished. Its fire pit was still in the midst of construction, and several weapons had been left lying in the grass, but even still, I loved it. It felt homier than the rigid discipline found elsewhere.

One problem with it, though.

Misty, white light was billowing over the ground, partially concealing the grass. Rising to mid-shin, it roiled like angry thunderclouds, and tendrils of it quested through openings in the circle, seeking escape.

In the middle of this, Bright was pacing back and forth with their hands in their hair and a chant on their lips.

“WhatamiWhatamiWhatami?”

Oh, my heart hurt to see this. They were in such distress, and no matter how exuberant I was to see them—I’d been starting to doubt their earlier appearance—I *had to fix them*.

Forget Oswin, watching me with his arms crossed, and what him bringing me here must mean. Forget what might soon happen if he hadn’t secured this scene quickly enough.

A being I cared for was in pain. Until I did what I could for them, everything else could go *straight to the void*.

Taking a step into the mist, I said, *Dim, I know you're avoiding me, and yes, they're your enemy, but...*

"I'm already here, ya idiot."

So, they were. I didn't know when they'd appeared at my side, but they were tracking Bright with singular fascination, even if their nose was also wrinkled.

"How is Order...?" they said. "*How?*"

I don't know, but if you have any suggestions for how to proceed, I'll take them now, I said.

"Suggestions? *Really?*" Dim said. "Raimie, Bright shouldn't exist. I've never seen one of us come back after one of those swords has destroyed us, and I've been around for-fucking-ever."

Greeeeeeaaaaat...

When I reached Bright, they didn't acknowledge me, just continued to pace. Unlike with me, their passage through the mist sent it flurrying behind them, and if that hadn't been enough, every time they tugged on their hair, more white light spurted from them.

Hell... my poor heart...

How in the void did I fix this? I didn't fully understand my splinters in the first place, and now, I had to tackle something about them that had never happened before. It was overwhelming, and I was halfway tempted to abandon this endeavor but Bright...

Fuck it. I had to start somewhere.

Bright, I said, *can you hear me, buddy?*

For a breath, the Ele splinter faltered before picking up their pace and volume.

"*WhatamiWhatamiWhatami?*"

"You think talking to them will change something?" Dim asked, warily eyeing me.

Shooting a glare at them, I said, "How about this? Any better?"

Mid-step, Bright stopped before shooting toward me. They seized my arms, a hold I could actually feel, and I'd have marveled more at this if the fight against madness in their eyes hadn't stolen my breath.

"*I need you to tell me what I am!*" they shrieked.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

No! I couldn't indulge in panic or fear, even if that was what Nylion was shouting at me right now. It wasn't what Bright needed.

Hovering my hand over their shoulder, I said, "You're Bright, a splinter of Ele, although you'd probably snap at me for calling you that. You give me access to your whole, and on more than one occasion, you've saved my life. You're a regular pain in the ass sometimes, but I need that. *We* need that."

With their brow furrowing, Bright mouthed the word 'we', and I motioned Dim forward.

"This is Dim, a splinter of Daevetch," I said. "I don't know why yet, but you two have set aside your differences. Considering how they've been acting since you left us, I'd say that you might even be friends now-"

"Yeah... no," Dim said. "Friends is a strong word for what's between us..."

They trailed off at the look on my face.

Please, Dim. I know you want them back too, and they'll need the truth for that.

Slumping, Dim rubbed their eyes.

"By *me*, I won't *be* me by the time this is over," they said to themselves before pushing me aside.

Not that I minded. While they rested their hands on their hips, meeting Bright's placid gaze, I rubbed my chest. Not only had the pain in my heart spread, but it had become physical in nature, an ache that my fingers couldn't relieve.

With an exasperated sigh, Dim threw their head back.

"Our human's right. I need you back, weakling," they said. "We had a plan, remember? Something our wholes don't agree with-"

"Raimie in the balance point," Bright blurted.

As they started murmuring to themselves again, repeating the conversation from the beginning, Dim shot a sidelong glance at me, but I just stared back, digging into my skin. If I was supposed to catch a hidden meaning from that, it had gotten lost in the vice tightening around my chest.

"That's right," Dim said with a frown forming. "I can't do this alone. Our human pulled you back from whatever happens to us when we're destroyed. Don't ask me how. Over our time together, I've stopped trying to figure him out, but you need to take the final step in fixing yourself, and... and you should do it fast."

Why did they look so concerned?

I quickly gave up on answering that. This pain, threatening to buckle my knees? It was coming from Bright, had to be with how much worse it had gotten while standing in their presence. They were defying nature's laws, a dissonance marring the world's music. Something that a simple key change would fix.

With their face scrunched, Bright cocked their head.

"I... am Bright," they said. "I exist to help Raimie, fixing the imbalance in the Eternal War. I am Bright."

With a decisive nod, they stepped back, there to wait.

"Now what?" I wheezed.

"Hell if I know," Dim said, still watching me with concern. "I was taking a wild guess when I told them they should accept their existence. It's your turn to contribute. Raimie, are you...?"

Holding up a finger, I scanned my surroundings. Besides Bright, the only thing out of place here was the white light—so like Ele—all around us. Visible to even a norm like Oswin, that primal energy must have penetrated the barrier between it and the physical plane.

Maybe that could explain why Bright was looking at me so expectantly.

Closing one eye, I reached for my Ele source, half-expecting that it wouldn't exist, and instead, I found it all around me, not in Bright. No wonder my heart was hurting so badly. My access to Ele's well, what I'd come to associate with wellbeing, had shattered into pieces around the campsite.

"I don't know how this is possible since it's supposed to be them," I said, pointing at Bright, "but my Ele source is broken."

With their eyes popping, Dim recoiled.

"Into pieces? I wonder how that happened," they said before glancing around. "Has it moved?"

Oo... this might end poorly.

"Um... no," I said. "You're standing in it, actually."

Sucking in a gasp, Dim became a statue before zipping out of the mist. They fell to their hands and knees with wretched coughs filling the air, and with each heave of their stomach, their form shivered, letting slivers of black peek through it.

Yup. Bad. I'd have more sympathy for Dim if I hadn't felt like I was dying myself.

Fortunately, the splinter quickly got to their feet, wiping their mouth.

"Can you put them back together?" they said.

Doubtful. I was having a hard enough time with simply thinking right now but even still...

"I'll try," I said.

Reaching for the shards around me, I drew them close, releasing a relieved wheeze when the touch of them eased the pressure on my chest, and once I held a few, I embedded them into position within Bright.

For close to an hour, this continued. I cobbled the pieces together as best I could, but some refused to fit. These, I had to mold into shape, which wasn't pleasant to do.

Eventually, though, the last of the shards passed through my hands, returning the campsite to a scene of normalcy, and I stumbled. Nothing was crushing my chest anymore, but I was exhausted, trembling at the effort to stay on my feet.

Meeting Dim's eyes, I took a deep breath, reaching for my newly reconstructed source. Would it work? Considering it was of human make, I was half-convinced it would shatter when I pulled Ele to me, but the energy came as called, and nothing in my source so much as shifted.

Biting my lip, I fought to keep from crying as I released the Ele coating my hands.

Had that-? Was Bright-?

Gods, please say they were ok.

"What... happened? Where-?"

With a cough, Bright started violently shivering, hugging themselves. Meanwhile, Dim edged toward them.

"Raimie resonated with the wholes, which was unexpected. So few humans can do that," the Ele splinter said to themselves. "I was distracted. Teron got behind me. Lighteater..."

Moaning, they clenched their eyes for a breath before opening them again, searching for something. Skipping over me, Bright focused on Dim, and I was worried that in their disorientation, they might start a fight, but stumbling forward, they fell into the enemy splinter, taking fistfuls of their clothes.

"Chaos! Oh, my old foe," they gasped into Dim's chest. "I don't know what to- fuck! It was awful..."

They lifted their head with tears in their eyes.

"You have to help me!"

I'd never seen a person so clenched tight before. Dim found me over Bright's head with such panic written on them, and I crossed my arms.

Help them, I said. Unless you want them to stay this wrecked, probably for longer than we can afford?

“Damnit,” Dim murmured.

Grimacing, they lifted their arms, wrapping them around Bright with the most potent expression of repulsion on their face.

Patting the Ele splinter’s back, they said, “There, there, you useless brat. Can’t believe you’re making me do this.”

For some reason, this made Bright laugh before they buried their face in Dim’s chest once more.

“Make yourself useful, Raimie,” Dim growled. “You can’t have missed that several norms are staring at you. After we went to all this trouble, I’d prefer it if you didn’t get strung up today. I know you’re ecstatic to have the milksop back, but...”

They had no idea. I hadn’t felt this light in ages. Bright would need time to recover, but they were ok.

I’d done it! I’d dragged someone precious to me back from the brink.

Somehow. At some point, I’d have to ponder how I’d managed the impossible, but for now, I let myself watch my reunited splinters for a breath before spinning toward the norms at my back.

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