

# Chapter 86: All I Suffered

## Raimie

The journey was much shorter this time. In the last month, I'd made it many times when Rhylix hadn't been around. Always when my friend hadn't been looking.

When Ren and I stumbled out of the shadows and a burning freeze greeted us, however, I knew I'd misjudged something. Desperately scanning our surroundings through a curtain of snow, I yelped with relief at the sight of a nearby mound.

"Sorry, I overshot," I yelled. "Follow me?"

When I offered her my hand again, Ren slowly unwound one arm from hugging warmth to her stomach, and I was relieved to see her grinning despite her chattering teeth. We raced across the frozen tundra, giggling like children at the icy kisses that each flake left on our skin, and Nylion followed, laughing with us as he tried to dodge the snow. We'd returned to our origin, the winter of our courting. The only missing element was the furtiveness of our excursions, and I missed that not one bit.

The mound loomed ahead of us, and I circled it until I found what I needed. Clearing frost off of glass, I pressed my near frozen palm against a rectangular surface.

And nothing happened. Oh, no. Had I broken it the last time I'd been here? I'd been rough while searching the place, discarding caution in my urgent need to find warmth.

Before I could panic, the glass panel lit up, and lines of neon blue and purple raced away from it to outline a rectangular shape, hidden beneath the snow pile. The mound rumbled, and snow fell into the gaping mouth of the cave materializing beneath it.

I led Ren inside. Once we'd crossed the threshold, the blizzard's freezing cold vanished, to be replaced with a comfortable warmth, and thicker bands of purple and blue streaked at timed intervals down a smooth hallway, disappearing into the earth.

"Raimie, how did we get here? You never answered me about that after the investiture," Ren whispered. "And where are we? What is this place?"

"We're in the north, past the Matvai homeland. I found this place during negotiations with them. The Matvai are a... ponderous people. Making decisions of any kind takes them ages, and so, I did a lot of exploring in my spare time," I said. "As for how we got here, well. We shade melded."

“Shade melded?” Ren echoed.

“Primeancer skill. I’ll tell you all about it later,” I said. “In the meantime…”

As the hallway opened in front of us, Ren stopped short, and I watched her, afraid she might collapse. I’d nearly done so myself when I’d first visited this place.

This ruin contained mindboggling wonders, marvels that dried the mouth and weakened the knees. Lines of blue and purple streaked out of the hallway and over the cavernous room’s walls, but that fascinating display paled against the chamber’s ornaments.

When I was sure Ren wouldn’t collapse, I walked to the fire burning in the center of the room, unbuckling my weapon’s belt to lean it against a wall. When I’d visited in the past, I’d always found it easiest to first focus on the room’s least strange features, and that was the fire. Even if it never extinguished, even if it refused to burn my skin, it still produced heat, crackled, and flickered like a fire should. I draped my jacket over the low-to-the-ground railing that surrounded it, letting my clothing dry while I waited for Ren to adjust.

Next came the second least strange wonder. I sank onto the chamber’s bed, pulling my boots off, and its bouncy surface conformed to me, whisking away the moisture coating my trousers without prompting. When I got up to place my boots beside my jacket, the bed returned to a flat platform with nary a wrinkle in the single blanket atop it.

A consortium of boxy devices covered one of the room’s walls. I had yet to gather the courage needed to figure out what each of them did, but I did know, from the one night I’d slept here, that a smaller cube magically produced food in the morning, and shortly afterward, a person-sized box spewed soapy water from a nozzle inside for a short time.

Pure, white light illuminated every surface of the black-walled room, and while pulling my soaked undershirt over my head, I accidentally caught a glimpse of its source. The ceiling stretched far above me, and in that open, black space, globes were hanging without support. They floated in place with no tangible buoy to stop them from plummeting to the floor, but this phenomenon wasn’t what unnerved me.

Each of those white globes was a hardened, crystallized Ele ball. Bright called them ‘purified samples of the whole’s life force’, the same thing that had once been folded into Shadowsteal’s blade. It was what allowed the sword to destroy Daevetch splinters. Whatever the globes might be, they made my skin crawl, so I avoided looking at them as much as possible.

The strangest of the room’s oddities was saved for last, but it was the one I’d grown to love the most. When first entering the room, the image might be disconcerting because from the hall, the far wall appeared to have been obliterated. A void had replaced it, an abyss replete with millions of brilliant stars and one, huge ball of orange fire.

“It’s not real,” I said. “If you come closer, you’ll find distortions in its glass. It’s a picture of something that Dim tells me is called ‘outer space’.”

Glancing back, I winced. Ren had become a petrified statue, stuck in the threshold.

“Not the reaction we wanted,” Nylion said.

Sighing, I gently guided her inside.

“I know it’s overwhelming,” I said, adding my undershirt to the steadily growing pile by the fire, “but I thought it would be better than my room, and I don’t know. I thought you might like it. A few years back, you mentioned a desire to explore the northern ruins, but you weren’t exactly sober at the time. Maybe I read too much into what you said.”

Clutching at my arm, Ren wordlessly shook her head.

“It’s perfect,” she breathed.

Turning toward her, I said, “Really? Because this isn’t my only refuge.”

Ren's hold on my arm unexpectedly accelerated my turn, which had the bedside painfully bumping into my legs. Losing my balance, I tumbled onto the bed.

Unnerving Ele globes glared at me from above while weight settled on my hips, pinning my arms to my sides. Ren’s smaller hands grabbed my cheeks, lifting my head to meet her lips, before moving to my bare chest. My head flopped against the bed’s single sheet, and all the while, I fought to silence the shrieking, distinctly feminine voice that was somehow both in my head and not.

“This is wrong, this is *wrong*, THIS IS WRONG!”

I didn't understand it. Ren and I had cuddled like this before, even if she was acting slightly more urgent than other times. Why did I want her to back the hell off for a moment? Where was Nylion to help with that, as he'd done in the past?

While working at my trousers’ clasp, Ren raked a fingernail across my belly, and that minute ripple of pain was enough to send me tumbling into animalistic terror. I didn’t matter that *she* was Ren, and *I* was safe. All I knew was DANGER, DANGER!

Instinctively, I called for Daevetch, bucking *her* off of me, and blindly crawling off of the bed, I stumbled toward warmth. I barely made it to the fire pit before the stew that I’d eaten for dinner returned as mushy mash.

When my stomach had finished heaving, I curled, panting, into as small of a ball as I could manage, and crouching across from me, Nylion waited, accepting my hand when I eventually reached out. That contact was enough to still my whirling thoughts, but as soon as they’d calmed down, questions replaced them.

Why the fuck had I panicked like that? Why had it happened so quickly? I was used to a certain amount of fear when Ren touched me, but this version of it had been *unreasonable*. For gods’ sake, I’d been imagining a scene exactly like what had been happening with relish when considering

what tonight might entail. What the fuck was *wrong* with me?

A water skin descended into my field of view, and I sharply glanced at Ren. She wasn't hurt, thank Alouin, but her face had closed off.

Accepting the water skin, I sat up.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Water washed the taste of vomit out of my mouth while Ren folded to the floor beside me.

"We need to talk about this," she said. "You've always cringed if I touch you when you're not expecting it, but Raimie... Is it just me, or do you have this violent of a reaction with other people too?"

I buried my face in my knees.

"It's not just you," I said, uncaring of how muffled my voice has become. "Every other woman who's expressed an interest in the last two years... it usually ends like this, although nothing's ever gotten *that* far before."

After a moment, Ren cleared her throat.

"Given everything you've expressed about Nylion, have you considered that you might be—"

She took a deep breath.

"—of a different persuasion?"

Different persuasion? The hell was that supposed to mean?

"She wants to know if you would rather sleep with a man than with her," Nylion said.

I shot my head up.

"No! No, that's not it," I said. "Nylion is... *Nylion*, and I want *you*, only... I don't know. When you get aggressive, something in me just... reacts. I don't know why."

"Raimie, that's how I am," Ren said. "Impulsive. Aggressive at times. When we're intimate, I can work with you, help you feel comfortable. I don't mind *at all*, but I need to know why you react in such a violently rejecting manner sometimes. It makes me feel... unwanted."

Which I didn't want.

I curled even tighter on myself than I'd thought I could.

"I DON'T KNOW!" I yelled into the tiny pocket of air between my knees.

It echoed and echoed and *echoed* in this enormous chamber, and I heard the helplessness in it, heard my frustration over the years. *Why* did women sometimes scare the shit out of me? I *liked* women. Some of my favorite people were women. So why...?

"Would you like to know?" Nylion asked.

Slowly, I raised my head until I could peer over my arms.

"I can share if you are ready," Nylion continued.

Leaning back on his hands, he was indifferently staring at the picture of space at our side, but I could feel the anxiety and wariness that my other half was feeling right now.

"You know why?" I said regardless.

Nodding, Nylion said, "It was part of our childhood agreement, remember? I shield you from damaging knowledge, and in return, you let me have control of our body at times. What you want to know about is what damaged us the most, that I know about at least. One of those 'splinters in the mind' that Rhylix once told you about, long ago."

A splinter of the mind? *Another one?* The absolutely *giant fucking shard* of one that I'd run across after the Birthing Grounds hadn't been enough?

Before I ducked my head back below my arms, I barely caught Nylion's flinch, but still, it froze me solid. He was terrified on the other side of our bond. I could feel it beating against an invisible wall he'd raised between us, and I *hated that*. So, no. I couldn't run away from this, no matter how much I might want to.

In increments, I started uncurling from my ball.

"If it's so damaging, why would you offer to tell me about it now?" I hesitantly asked.

"You have matured," Nylion said with a shrug. "You are prepared to accept the reality of our childhood. I think. I hope."

Should I seek answers for something that my other half, my constant protector, thought of as dangerous? Sure, I couldn't run away from the fact that apparently, something else had been stuck in my head, affecting my present-day self, while I remained ignorant of what it was, but I didn't have to find out the details of it now. Nylion had asked me if I wanted to know. He'd *asked*, so I could say no. I could live with this peculiarity I experienced at a woman's touch, learning to quell my panicked reactions as much as possible, but doing that could take years.

Years in which Ren might blame herself for causing every one of my flinches. Could I inflict that on her, simply for my peace of mind? Looking at her expectant face, I knew what my answer to that question would be.

"Tell me."

“You should let her hear it from my lips, heart of my heart,” Nylion said. “It would be more efficient, and... do you trust me?”

Frowning at him, I said, *I LOVE you, dumbass. Of course I trust you.*

I readily relinquished control to him, but this time, I didn't retreat to our shared dream space when the world snapped.

*May I touch her?* Nylion said.

Why would he ask such a thing? Wasn't the answer obvious?

“You are me, and I am you, and we are we, Nyl,” I said. “She's your wife too.”

Nylion paused with something strange flooding across our bond before scooting closer to Ren. He reached for her hands, but before taking them, he met her eyes.

“So we are clear,” he said, “Nylion is in control now.”

“Oh, I know,” Ren said with a smile. “I saw the switch, clear as day.”

She took our hands, and relaxing, Nylion folded into a cross-legged position.

“How do I begin?” he said. “What would be the easiest way-?”

Squeezing our hands, Ren said, “Just tell him.”

So, taking a deep breath, Nylion began.

“Do you remember the bruises and scrapes that we hid under our clothes when we were kids, Raimie?”

“The ones we got during particularly bad training sessions, yes?” I said.

Nylion shook our head, sighing long and loud.

“They were not from weapons masters or tutors,” he said. “They were mother's gifts.”

Opposite us, Ren gasped, but I barely noticed that. Inside our mind, I giggled. That wasn't right. Mama had told me stories at bedtime. Mama had kissed my forehead before blowing out the candle. Mama had called me her beautiful boy. She'd never lay a hand on me in anger. I didn't know what Nylion was talking about but-

“No. She wouldn't have done that. Not with you,” he said. “Never you. Except for the accident when we first told her about us. And except for the incident when we were five. We had finished a history lesson, but because I was distracting you, we had not performed well. Our mother unexpectedly showed up at the end of the lesson, long enough to observe our behavior. After sending the tutor home, she proceeded to beat your knuckles and back bloody with his ruler, and I

do mean *you*. We had not made our agreement yet. I suppose she had finally had enough of NylRaimie.”

“That’s not... how I remember it,” I uncertainly said.

Uncertainly because what I’d said wasn’t necessarily true. I did remember the lesson in question, just as I remembered mama nursing me afterward, but the rest was a giant blank.

“I isolated the memory from you as part of the agreement we made that night. I promised to take the brunt of our mother’s fury from then on, and I would have been content with keeping it solely at that,” Nylion said. “You are my dearest friend, Raimie. The one I will always love. The heart of my shattered heart. I would do *anything* for you without expecting a reward, but you insisted on repaying me. You promised me freedom and remarkably, found a way to give it to me. Because of you, I can walk this world on our feet, and when it is my turn, *I* make the decisions. Such small autonomy is more than I ever expected.”

I half-listened to him, filing away everything he’d said for later review and reaction, but for now, I was caught on the idea that the countless nights when I’d cried myself to sleep because of cracked ribs and welts had been because of mama. How did that reconcile with what I knew about her? Did I trust that Nylion was telling the...?

He’d never lied to me. Why would I think he’d do that now? What possible reason could he have for doing such a thing in the first place?

“If it helps, I do not believe she hated you,” Nylion said. “I think something was deeply wrong with her. She used to scream at me, blaming me for her inability to go home. I always found that baffling. Where is home, if not with family?”

But if mama had been abusive toward us, wouldn’t *someone* have caught her? Wouldn’t I have noticed?

“We hid the damage to our body so the average person would not see it. Father was constantly away on Hand business, and when he was home, our mother behaved herself. His ignorance is understandable, if not forgivable. Eledis knew. He simply did not care. Whatever motivated us to become better tools in his hand was acceptable in his book,” Nylion says. “As for you, Raimie, why do you think you picture me so battered and broken?”

No. It wasn’t- I didn’t want to see this. I didn’t want to *know* this. NO! No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no....

“Help!” Nylion grunted.

He shoved a palm against our temple, and the pressure on our other hand, the one Ren was holding, strengthened. Addled, I fought to focus on those loving, gray eyes.

“Raimie, it’s in the past. I’m so sorry, but the damage is already done,” Ren said. “We know the problem. We can work together to heal this wound, and even if... even if we can’t., please

understand, my love. I'm here for you, come what may."

She was here. She was *here*, and she was... right. That mama had beaten us every day from the ages of five to nine didn't matter, not in the long run. I knew I'd have to work through a lot of absolute shit, now that I knew more about my life but right now? I had Ren. And back then, I'd had Nylion, both to love me—as a mother unconditionally should—and protect me-

"Oh, my gods, Nyl!" I whispered. "What she did to you!"

My other half shrugged.

*I am your protector, he said. I was doing my job.*

"Thank you," I said.

Everything about me was filled with a gratitude so intense that those words couldn't hope to convey it, but Nylion felt it through our bond. He could tell exactly what I meant.

*Between us, there is never a need for thanks, heart of my heart, Nylion said. You would have done the same for me if our roles were reversed.*

"I would. I always would, Nyl," I said. "Whatever you need, whenever you need it. Please know that."

I didn't know how Nylion showed himself in the waking world when he was in our head, but desperately, I saw myself kneeling beside my other half. I saw my arms around Nylion's shoulders. I saw us breathing in time together, reaching across our bond to one another.

And for an instant, we melded, savoring the union of two become one. For an instant, our bond was as strong as it had ever been.

"That promise goes for you too, Nyl," Ren said.

Unknowingly breaking our merge, she leaned toward us, nuzzling our neck.

"Come what may, I'm here."

Our body fell still, not even blinking.

"What?" Nylion said.

"You're part of Raimie, and Raimie's part of you, right?" Ren said. "When I agreed to be your wife, I agreed to be *your* wife. I didn't just Join with Raimie. I Joined with you too, Nylion."

"I saw everything. The days stuck behind his eyes. The time trapped in your mind after your mother gave him medicine. The years become eons spent in solitude, waiting for him to rescue you. I saw it all, although you managed to keep the worst of it from me. Just as you and Raimie

have lived my life, I have lived yours, and... I love you both.”

“Told you,” I said.

Even still, there was a difference between knowing this truth and hearing it spoken aloud. I didn’t know what to do with the sheer relief rushing through me, but I tried to keep it to myself, if only because Nylion seemed to be having just as intense of a reaction to Ren’s words. Tears—something I’d never known Nylion to waste—were spilling from our eyes, splashing unobstructed to the floor.

“I- I do not know what to say,” he whispered.

Kissing our knuckles, Ren stood.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Ren said, “but when the two of you are ready, can you ask Raimie if he minds whether you go first?”

*What does she mean?* Nylion asked.

And all I could do was laugh. Alouin, good gods above, but I loved this woman.

“Tell her I said not at all,” I gasped.

“He says he does not mind,” Nylion repeated. “Why would he mind-?”

He cut off as the gossamer outer layer of Ren’s dress puffed into smoke, leaving behind a long sheath of black silk. Together, we marveled while she wriggled free of it. Fabric flowed to the floor, and she was all skin with a backdrop of space and Sun to frame her.

Extending a hand to us, Ren said, “When and if you’re ready. I’d like to try a few things.”

For a moment, I could feel Nylion’s hesitation. Something I couldn’t name was still bothering him, and while that in turn bothered me, I also wasn’t sure how much more I could handle from him, of the unsettling variety at least. As I had moments before, I pictured myself standing beside Ren, offering him my hand as well.

“Come on,” I softly said. “Just like we’ve done before. But with *her*.”

Uncertainly eyeing me, Nylion slowly reached out. Ren took his hand, drawing him toward the bed with every move slow and gentle, and I settled in to watch. As she kissed him. As she pulled the rest of our clothes off of him. As she showed him exactly what to do to make both of their backs arch with pleasure.

I didn’t mind waiting. My turn would come soon enough.

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