

Chapter 87: A Lesson

Rhylix

A Daevetch bolt streaked over my head at such a narrow margin that my hair rustled in its wake. Raimie followed his magical attack with a more conventional one, swinging Silverblade at my vulnerable legs.

Grinning, I leapt over the attack, using white energy to power my jump, and while in the air, I attracted the Ele in my feet to that in the ceiling. The room flipped upside down, and I landed on my new floor.

Sticking my tongue out at Raimie, I waved at the crowd, sending them into peals of laughter, and rolling his eyes, Raimie roughly gestured downward. The ceiling-floor that I was stuck to crumbled, and I fell with its resin and volcanic glass.

After creating another attraction between stone and my flesh, I landed in a graceful crouch, rolling to spread the impact on my knees. As I flowed to my feet, the ground broke beneath me, making me stumble away from a deteriorating floor. A destructive path chased me wherever I fled until I needed Ele in the approximate direction Raimie was attacking from.

For a split second, the ground stabilized, and I used my brief respite to locate my opponent before anchoring my body to the wall behind me. Once I was fixed in place, I attracted the Ele in my body to Raimie's, and my friend flew across the room, straight for my brandished sword.

At the last second, Raimie disrupted the attraction, an abrupt loss that jarred me. I hadn't known that breaking someone else's Ele draw was possible, and the shock of that revelation almost earned me defeat.

Raimie skipped to a stop a breath away from impalement. He smacked my sword away, stepping in for a Daevetch-powered punch that I barely ducked in time. After that, the fight devolved into a contest of who would break first: Raimie with his bone-shattering strength or me with my nimble quickness.

This swordplay wouldn't add to today's lesson, not when compared to our display from earlier, but gods, I'd missed sparring with my friend. At the very least, our audience must find the fight entertaining. Good-natured cheers interspersed the clash of steel on steel.

The fight wasn't much of a contest for me. Since the investiture sixteen months ago, Raimie hadn't found much time to practice with the blade, and his poor leg had never properly healed after Qena.

Even with that, my friend didn't go down easily. He gave me no openings, despite the minute grimaces that revealed how badly his old injury was hurting him today.

In the end, what vanquished him was his total focus on his opponent. When Raimie sprang forward to take advantage of a perceived opening, I avoided the strike, and my successful feint gave me enough time to attract an obsidian shard to Raimie's thigh. When that piece of debris hit, my friend grunted with his leg giving way. I flowed around his descending body and from behind, jerked his head back, smoothly snaking my sword to rest against my friend's neck. He dropped his sword, raising his hands in surrender.

As the room burst into applause, I released my captive.

"Need to work on your awareness, Raimie," I said. "Your lack of it has always been your biggest weakness."

The king accepted my offered hand up.

"Tell me," he panted. "Will I ever be able to beat you, or is that a vain hope?"

"You've already done that, remember?" I said. "Years ago? When you pulled from Daevetch and kicked my across camp?"

"Ah, yes. Not my proudest moment," Raimie said.

His eyes unfocused, but he quickly snapped them to me, accompanied by an impish grin.

"What I hear you telling me is that if I want to beat you, I need the element of surprise."

"What you hear me saying, oh great king of Auden, is that I need to address my students," I said.

"And I need to repeat this display with Nessaira and her Daevetch pupils," Raimie said, making a face. "I'll see you later this evening, yes?"

"Our dinner's tonight?" I asked.

Raimie had invited me to join him and some friends for a meal a few weeks ago. How had the days so quickly passed me by?

"Yes, Rhy, it's tonight," Raimie said with a smile. "Should I send a guard to fetch you? I know you get so sucked into your activities that you forget about the world outside of this school sometimes."

"No, no," I said. "I'll be there."

"Good. Until tonight, then."

Raimie parted the sea of onlookers around us with his very presence, an unconscious movement from all involved. Swiftly striding for the training room's door, he distractedly twitched his fingers, the sole indication of how badly he must want to shade meld to the Daevetch spire to save time. Doing so, however, would abandon today's bodyguard, Pointer, to the Ele student's care. Avoiding a lecture from Oswin about his disregard for safety must have been more attractive than salvaging fifteen minutes from his unexpected chore.

I was grateful that my friend, the king of Auden, had squeezed these impromptu demonstrations into one of his rare days of leisure. When I'd woken up this morning, energized enough to leap out of bed, I'd sent word to Raimie, asking for his help. Days where I was fully myself had gotten few and far between. It was best to take advantage of them when I could.

Pointer peeled out of the corner he'd been wedged in, following Raimie like a wraith-like shadow. Everyone knew that the spy held a healthy dose of wariness for primeancers. Lingering in a room with so many of them must have unnerved him, but he'd stuck it out, just for Raimie.

Quickly enough, he and the king disappeared down the stairwell, and I ran my eyes over said primeancers. They'd taken to chatting amongst themselves while their teacher was distracted.

Such a diverse group! Most were youths but a few laid claim to old age, although I couldn't help but think of even them as children. A smattering of farmers, two brash Matvai, some children from wealthy merchant families. Even a Zrelnach Eselan, to my surprise, and of course, Miranon, our resident Qenan scientist. All told, Ring had located fourteen of them on her four-month long journey from a year and a half ago, although several of them hadn't reached Elisk and the palace until recently.

I hoped that over time, more would gather. The number I was already teaching was more than enough, thank you! But this school was rapidly transforming into a safe space for all primeancers, somewhere they weren't hunted and murdered for something they had little control over. I wouldn't want any of them to miss the opportunity, even if that chance for safety came at a price.

When Raimie had first informed me of the condition that had been exacted for the primeancy school, I hadn't been pleased. Actually, if I was being honest, my reaction more resembled a heated, one-sided speech than anything else. When he could get a word in edge-wise, Raimie had explained why the insult had been necessary, and I'd understood. By ourselves, my friend and I couldn't feed, house, and provide for an unknown number of people. His ministers held the nation's purse strings, and therefore, we must bow to their desires, accepting an unwelcome uniform and insignia pair.

At least Raimie had managed to render what should have been a distinguishing uniform down to something as commonplace as possible. Nearly identical to the army's dress, it was almost bearable. Almost. To this day, this form of discrimination made my blood boil, but at the time, I'd reluctantly accepted the restriction placed on my future students. Upon my concession, however, I'd decidedly informed Raimie that if he ever tried to put me in a uniform, of any type, I would make his life a living hell.

Once a student noticed his teacher scrutinizing them, he hushed the others. Their descent into silence happened far too quickly for me. These people shouldn't be showing me so much respect.

"I hope you enjoyed the show today!" I said to fill the quiet. "Can anyone tell me what they learned from it?"

"That you and the king are badassess," a young farmhand breathlessly said.

Several of the primeancers gasped while an older merchant lightly smacked the back of his head.

"Language, Irya!"

With a half-smile, I tipped my head to the side.

"No, it's all right," I say. "You should never be afraid to use strong language when a situation calls for it. It's a tool like any other."

Striding to Irya, I crouched in front of the boy, hanging my wrists off of my knees.

"In this case, though, perhaps your word choice wasn't wise. With time and training, all of you can use Ele like I did in the fight. You can become 'badasses' yourself," I said, patting Irya on the head. "What else did we learn?"

As I stood, my students were quiet, almost introspective, but someone eventually spoke up.

"The king's terrifying."

Pavensu had probably meant what she'd said as a quip, but genuine fear had infected her voice as well, fear that was reflected in the others.

"Because of the dark energy he wields?" I softly asked.

On receiving several nods, I stook my head.

"Raimie is more skilled with Ele than he is with Daevetch, *and* he's *your* ally," I said. "You don't need to fear him."

Quiet murmurs followed this, but most of my students appeared comforted now, if not entirely mollified.

"What else?" I asked.

"Ele is in everything, and we can manipulate it," Miranon said before ducking her head.

Poor girl. Her friendship with Tejesper, a Daevetch student, hadn't earned her a warm welcome here. The Ele students ostracized her to an extreme, as could be seen from the mocking glances they were directing at her.

I understood their scorn. What Miranon had said was common knowledge for everyone, not just primeancers. Her fellow students probably thought she was silly for reiterating it.

“Very good, Miranon,” I said. “I’m pleased that at least one of you figured it out.”

As the others gave me various surprised reactions, Miranon lifted her head with a small smile, and I dipped my head to her. I’d been trying to help her where I could, but that was hard to do without looking like I was playing favorites.

“Figured wut out?” asked a Matvai boy.

“Manipulating Ele in his body and in the obsidian around us is how Rhylix stood on the ceiling and flung rubble at the king,” Miranon whispered before tightening her arms around her middle.

“That’s... brilliant, Miranon! Smaert and pretty,” the Matvai boy said. “Whu’d have thought?”

Leave it to someone from the Matvai clans to make a compliment sound like an insult at the same time.

“I learned that Ele isn’t nearly as useless in combat as you’ve made it seem over the last few weeks, Rhylix,” said the Zrelnach among the primeancers.

What was her name? Jeme? After the time I’d spent teaching her, I should know it by now, but something about her made my attention slip away whenever I interacted with her, probably some Zrelnach training I’d forgotten about.

“You’ve emphasized every way that Daevetch can be used to destroy us,” she continued. “Knowing that we have our own ways to attack heartens me.”

“My intention wasn’t to discourage you, Jeme, but rather to warn you of what you’ll face,” I said. “Daevetch primeancers aren’t to be trifled with.”

The Zrelnach didn’t react to the name I’d spoken, so I must have guessed it correctly, but by the sober expression on the others’ faces, I could tell that this lesson had finally sunk in.

“Now that you understand the danger, we can begin your training in truth,” I said. “Over the next few months, I’ll work with each of you, one on one, to develop your skills. While I’m doing that, the rest of you will meet with Nessaira’s students on a limited basis.”

“WHAT?”

“Yu *just* told us Daevetch primeancers are daengerous enemies,” an older Matvai woman added. “Why pit us against them when we haeve nu skills?”

She was one of many loudly protesting people, all hurt or confused, and some of them had clearly started wondering if they’d made a mistake in coming here.

"I never said they were your enemy. I only said they were dangerous, which they are," I called over them. "They're also human and Esela. For the most part, what attracted a Daevetch splinter to them wasn't a conscious decision on their part, much like what happened between you and your splinters."

"Take Miranon's friend, Tejesper, for example. He attracted a splinter of aspect Destruction because he enjoyed crafting explosives to help with his village's mining efforts. His actions were in no way harmful to society, but Destruction came to him all the same."

"Daevetch primeancers aren't evil—"

I had to say those words, even if they stuck in my throat.

"—and we Ele wielders must learn to work with them if we're to defend the realm."

They looked so uncertain, exchanging glances among themselves and licking their lips.

An elderly farmer said, "But—"

I stepped in before this lesson could go off the rails. I'd gotten them where I needed them.

"In this school, I encourage you to question the rules," I said, "but when I tell you what will come next in your training, I expect you to do it. I'm the most experienced Ele primeancer in Auden—"

The world.

"—and I want you to succeed. I won't ask you to do something unless your development as primeancers requires it. Do we understand one another?"

Half-hearted agreements returned to me, which would have to be enough. I couldn't push any harder on this issue today.

"Excellent! Now, if you Restore this room quickly enough, we can sneak into Raimie's demonstration with Nessaira before it's over," I said. "Should be fun to watch the king using Ele, yes?"

My students exploded from the floor with some already wrapping their hands in white light. Rather than joining them, Jeme, the Zrelnach, separated from them to approach me.

As she stopped beside me, she said, "You make a much better teacher than a student."

I peered at her with hooded eyes.

"Did we know one another in Allanovian?" I asked.

A short giggling fit briefly stole her ability to respond.

"You know, I had a running bet with myself about whether you'd remember me," she said when she could. "You always were the most aloof trainee in our class."

Jeme. Now that she'd mentioned it, I did remember a girl with that name, and it explained why I'd had so much trouble with focusing on her. It was an example of how my compartmentalization of memories could cause problems in my life.

"You were the quiet one," I said. "Everyone underestimated you because of your meek demeanor, but I knew that your tendency to fade into the background didn't make you an incompetent warrior. After our class's trials, you emerged second in their ranking, right?"

"Only because you'd dropped out by that point," Jeme said. "Ferin and I had a close contest, but in the end, I let her win our duel. I thought that eventually, she'd make a better leader than me. Look how wrong I was."

Bristling, I growled, "Commander Ferin did the best she could in a difficult situation."

The wound of her murder still badly ached from where it had begun scabbing over.

"Oh, I know, but her best almost destroyed our expedition before it left Ada'ir's shores," Jeme continued. "Anyway, those events are years in the past. There's no use in dwelling on them now."

Then, why had she brought them up?

Rather than challenge her, I asked, "When did you gain a splinter? It must have been recent, or your fellow Zrelnach would have noticed your magic by now."

"Actually, it happened a few years back," Jeme said. "On our journey across the sea, do you remember the pirate attack that happened during our becalming?"

Did I ever. Following that battle, I'd met Nylion for the first time, although I hadn't known Raimie had a second persona in his head at that point, and Nylion had still been... unstable at the time.

Gods, I hoped Raimie could eventually persuade him to meet with me again. It had been a year and a half. A second try should have been made by now, but whenever I asked my friend about it, he told me to be patient. Nylion took longer to heal and forgive than most people, which was understandable given their past.

With a quick head shake, I said, "I do."

"After the battle, I spared a pirate," Jeme said. "Commander Gistrick didn't receive Raimie's orders about the bastards' fates until the day after the attack, and without those orders, he'd decided to toss the pirates overboard."

"A teenager was waiting for death with them. Sobbing amongst those angry prisoners, he was so quiet that it broke my heart. That he should die for youthful mistakes didn't sit right with me. I snuck him away, hiding him until tempers had cooled. He sailed home with the former slaves, and

not long after that, Mercy appeared to me.”

Ah, aspect Mercy. What a perfect match for the girl I remembered from Allanovian.

“How did you keep your primeancy secret for so long?” I asked.

“Simple,” Jeme said with a shrug. “I never used it. Zrelnach training has kept me alive in the years since, but soon enough, I knew I’d face a threat that would force Ele from me. I’d rather declare my status as a primeancer in a place of safety than during a battle. In the aftermath of one, I’d prefer to avoid *coincidentally* succumbing to my ‘wounds’.”

“Smart,” I said, “but then, you always were, Jeme.”

“As you were always different, Rhylix,” she shot back. “I always wondered how you managed to stay exactly one step ahead of us during our training. Was that because of your primeancy, or are you hiding something else too?”

Thank Alouin. The other students had finished Restoring the room, giving me an excuse to abandon the conversation. I moved toward the grouped students, ignoring Jeme’s intense stare at me.

“Outstanding, everyone!” I said. “The room looks exactly as it did before the demonstration.”

“Nu thaenks tu the gray-eyes,” an older, Matvai woman muttered.

She made a face before sullenly eyeing Jeme.

“Yanovna!” the Matvai boy hissed at her side.

The woman snapped her head toward him, opening her mouth to reply, but I stepped toe-to-toe with her first, staring her down. The Matvai hated Esela for reasons I’d never discovered, which could become a problem since two of them were my students. I should confront this problem now, before it turned into something more than snide comments.

“Do you have a problem with the Esela, Yanovna?” I asked.

Stepping back, Yanovna bumped into the woman behind her.

“Nut at all!” she said, flashing a nervous smile at me.

I believed that as much as I believed that Daevetch primeancers didn’t have something inherently evil buried within them. Still, I’d take the woman’s concession, satisfied that she wouldn’t cause problems for a little while longer.

“Good!” I said. “Well, since the lot of you are finished, it looks like we can move on with our lesson today. Come on, class! Let’s see if Raimie’s wiped the floor with Nessaira yet.”