

Chapter 92: Trouble with Her

Raimie

A picture of strife burned in my mind. The battlefield stretched beyond what I could see while the combatants on all sides fought with their faces twisted in anger or desperation. Most of them, I didn't know, but a precious few were incredibly familiar.

The tenuous peace that I'd forged between the students of my primeancy school had fallen to pieces. The vastly outnumbered Daevetch children huddled behind Tejesper and Nessaira as the Ele students hammered down on them with wave after wave of white light.

Rhylix had joined a blurred figure in battle. Their fight was catching other, unknown primeancers in the overflow of their attacks, but of all the combatants around me, the two causing the most damage were Bright and Dim. Horrified, I watched as my splinters haphazardly flung light and shadow at one another, and each successful blow tore a thread out of their guise, revealing the seething energy found beneath.

The other fights faded away, gone before I'd registered their passing. The longer I watched my splinters battle, the more their fight lured me in until in a disorienting tumble, I was standing between them. Bright and Dim devolved into indistinct suggestions of Ele and Daevetch. These unformed smudges modeled hands and unnervingly long arms from their blank surfaces, and in a flash, each of them seized one of my wrists and pulled.

The strain on me so quickly escalated that I let loose a yelp, one that transformed into a shriek as a fissure formed between my shoulder blades. This fracture shot in two directions, one to the top of my skull and one straight down, and insistently tugged in both directions, I peeled into two pieces, wrenching free of my body. As I drifted away, I numbly stared at the split-in-half remains of me and woke up with a gasp.

Flailing, I let my hands fly to my knit-together sternum before the dream loosened its grip. For a moment, I lay still, panting, while a cold sweat raised pinpricks on my skin. When my heart stopped thrumming in my chest, I tentatively reached for Ren, grimacing at the idea that I'd woken her up again, and as I'd feared, only empty sheets waited for me.

Damnit.

I rubbed my face, exhausted despite having just woken up. I couldn't, however, blame this exhaustion on poor sleep or the fun that Nylion, Ren, and I had participated in last night. No, the cause for this was much more terrifying than those simple explanations.

Open doors on the room's far side admitted the rising Sun's rays as well as crisp, fall air, and after groaning into my hands, I climbed out of bed.

"Do not go outside yet," Nylion said. "Let her calm down first."

Better to get it over with as quickly as possible, Nyl.

After slipping into my clothes, I trudged onto the balcony, plopping across from Ren at the garden table, and climbing on top of it, Nylion sat cross-legged between us, satisfied to let me have control for this morning's confrontation. Turning her book's page, Ren sipped her tea with steam rising above its lip.

I waited for her to say something, too tired to do anything more than watch the sunrise. For who knew how long, we sat in silence, but eventually, Ren closed her book and set her cup on the table's surface.

"You did it again," she said.

"I know," I replied.

"It's been happening more frequently."

"Trust me. I've noticed."

I refused to look at her. After all, I knew what she wanted, but Ren couldn't know what she was asking of me. Primeancy was everything to me, something as interwoven with me as breathing or Nylion, and I used it every day.

Ele gave me the comfort I needed to withstand Ren's touch without an initial surge of fear. I relied on its peace when meetings with my Ministers turned especially frustrating.

Daevetch infused me with confidence. It bolstered me when treating with foreign dignitaries and when dispensing harsh punishment, if the situation required it.

Losing primeancy would be like losing a hand, a survivable experience that would nevertheless haunt me with its lack. Without control of the primal forces, I was... less.

"We need to discuss this," Ren continued.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked. "I'm not consciously making gray energy."

Gray energy: the substance I'd used to close tears in the past. What had once brought Alouin's attention down upon me.

Now, its creation had been happening at the most random of times and without my knowledge. It also had a name, something Ren and I had wordlessly agreed upon for the mystery that had plagued our bedchamber since shortly after our marriage. Gray, because the mist I'd been making

while sleeping took on that color. Energy, because whatever the phenomenon was, significant force accompanied. We'd learned that lesson the hard way when that energy's first manifestation had flung Ren out of bed.

"Your lack of control *is* the problem," she said. "What happens if you don't wake me up with your nightmares beforehand and a fall from bed hurts the baby? I can take an occasional tumble. Our child cannot. Not yet."

"What do you want me to do about it?" I asked.

I met her eyes, daring her to ask again.

"Tell me that you and Nyl are working to understand it," Ren said. "Perhaps you can coax answers from Bright or Dim? It wouldn't hurt to try again."

Slouching, I crossed my arms.

"Their story will never change, love," I said. "They're pieces of eternal, primal forces, remember? They can handily resist my puny, human attempts to drag answers, especially those they want to keep secret, from them."

Ren copied my pose, although the slight swell of her belly kept her from slumping as far as I had.

"Let me try," she said.

A short laugh escaped me before I could control it. Ren, gods love her, was a norm. What could she hope to accomplish with my splinters when she couldn't even see them?

"Would you please summon Dim and Bright?" she asked.

Her tone had been all sweetness, an indication that I was skirting trouble, so I did as she'd asked. With a thought, the splinters—who to this point, had been standing in their usual positions at my side—manifested as thoroughly as they could into the physical plane. In this state, other primeancers, ones with connections to Ele and Daevetch's level of reality, could see them, but to those who were rooted entirely in the physical realm, the splinters would never appear. Ren, however, looked straight at Bright and Dim as she addressed them.

"Tell me what's happening to my husband."

They traded an uncertain glance, and I waved, encouraging them to participate in this charade.

"When Raimie creates what you call 'gray energy', he's attuning to our wholes' hold on him," Bright said, "but we don't know how he does it or why it's been happening so frequently in recent years. When he was a child, he forced a balance maybe twice a month. Now, it's twice a week."

"When I was a child?" I said. "You've never mentioned that before. How long have I been doing this?"

And why would they answer her question but not mine?

“Husband, I am speaking with them right now,” Ren said. “Wait your turn.”

Ducking my head, I murmured apologies. In the last week, I’d argued at least a dozen times with my wife. Each of those disagreements had started much like this, and I had no desire to engage in another one this morning. Arguing with her soured my day.

“I told you to let her calm down first,” Nylion sighed.

Extending his legs across the table, he leaned toward our wife, plucking at her hair, and I glared at him.

You’re not helping with MY calm, I said.

Nylion shook his head with amused irritation flowing over our bond while Ren took a breath.

“That being said, Raimie does have a point,” she said. “How long has he been making this gray energy?”

“Ever since birth, when he attracted us and harnessed our wholes,” Bright said.

“And what *are* your ‘wholes’?” Ren asked.

At her question, I whipped my head toward her.

“You can hear them?” I asked.

She looked down her nose at me, making me shrink in my chair.

“You’ve told me this before, haven’t you?”

Ren pointedly ignored me.

“Answer the question, please,” she told the splinters.

They looked exceedingly uncomfortable, shooting glances at me several times, but I did nothing to encourage or discourage them from answering. If they wanted to keep their secrets, they’d have to choose to do it. I wasn’t stopping them from speaking, especially not when my wife was the one asking questions.

“You lot call our wholes ‘Ele’ and ‘Daevetch’,” Dim eventually said, making a face.

I winced when the expression split the fissures in Dim’s cheeks wider, doing my best to ignore something that I knew the splinter didn’t want me to notice. Ren made that easy for me.

“So, our problem *is* connected to primeancy?” she asked.

"I thought that was obvious," Bright said. "The balancing that he's unconsciously doing is why he's not completely crazy by now."

"Or too rigid to allow change," Dim added.

When they didn't start catfighting after this, I frowned at them. Usually when one of them contradicted the other, my splinters devolved into a fierce bickering contest, but... now that I thought about it, that hadn't happened in a while. Why?

"If Raimie stopped using primeancy, would the 'balancing' stop too?" Ren asked.

Stiffening, I abandoned other thoughts with my every sense heightened. There it was again, a glimmer of the impossible demand that my wife had made of me several times in the last few months.

"I'm not sure something like that would stop it..." Bright said.

"And I'm not giving it up!" I said.

I'd tried to remain calm while I'd been speaking. Really, I had, but some of the lightning storm crackling inside of me had leaked into my voice anyway, and Ren noticed it. She jerked toward me, narrowing her eyes.

"Can you think of another solution?" she asked with heat creeping into her voice. "Remember, Raimie. I'm not worried about myself. I'm worried about our baby, yet to come. You can't give up primeancy for however long is left before their birth? Such a sacrifice seems only fair, considering all that I'm suffering for this child."

It was fair, and I knew it. I'd be more than happy to do as she suggested if the amount of time that I'd go without primeancy had been guaranteed but...

"What about when the next baby comes along? I don't expect or want you to bear more children unless it's what you want too, but let's be honest. We spend too much time in our bedroom for another child to be anything less than guaranteed," I said. "Do you expect me to abandon primeancy then as well? Do you expect me to set it aside when I need it to run Auden? I can't stop being the 'primeancer king' for several, unexpected nine-month periods, Ren. It wouldn't work."

Ren laughed, bitter and scathing.

"Oh, I see how it is. You can't figure out how to run the realm without primeancy, but I'm expected to learn how to be a queen while with child," she said. "That doesn't seem *exceedingly unfair* to you?"

Flinching from her, I said, "That's not what I-"

"No, it never is," Ren snapped. "You *never* think about how your actions and words will be perceived by other people. Thank *Alouin* you're normally a noble person, one others will follow

without thinking, or else we'd be in serious trouble, but hell, the times when you're not... So many disasters, Raimie. You 'not thinking' is what got my brother killed, for fuck's sake. You-

Slamming my hands on the table, I shot to my feet.

"Why don't you think about what *you're* saying, dear wife? Are you *sure* your problem with me is because of gray energy and what it might do to our baby?" I shouted. "Are you *sure* there's not something else we need to talk about? Because if you're only godsdamn worried about our child, I have a fucking *simple* solution for you. *Sleep somewhere else*. That would solve this problem to your satisfaction, wouldn't it?"

Ren recoiled from me as if physically hit. The three of us in a warm pile while falling asleep was one of the most sacrosanct points of our marriage, the one time when we could be fully and completely ourselves without the pressures of court bearing down on us. For me to suggest that it stop...

"That was a mistake," Nylion said with a dangerously angry rumble in his voice, "and I will not let you follow through with such a threat."

I snapped my eyes to slits, glaring at my other half.

You won't LET me? I growled.

Nylion sprang to his hands and knees on the table with his face uncomfortably close to mine.

"She is my wife too!" he shouted. "I need that quiet time with her as much as you do!"

Rapidly blinking, I took a step back with little throbs of anxiety squeezing my heart. My other half was never angry with me. *Never*. And I... I was never aggressive toward Nylion.

Fuck. I'd truly misstepped this time.

Dropping into my chair, I hid my face in my hands, listening to an uncomfortable silence. Punishing myself with it.

"I'm sorry for yelling," I said after a moment, both to Ren and my other half.

In the cracks between my fingers, I watched Nylion slump back into a relaxed pose with tentative comfort radiating through our bond, and hugging her swelling belly, Ren blew hair out of her eyes.

"Maybe there are other things that we should discuss when it comes to our relationship. Maybe not," she said, "but they're not what we're talking about right now."

Silently, I nodded, and after a moment, Ren clicked her tongue, taking hold of my hands. She pulled them away from my face, and once they were hers, she kept them.

"I understand how difficult my request would be," she said. "I'm sorry that I must ask the impossible of you, but I don't know what else to do."

Looking at her, crushed by worry, and looking at us, distanced by conflict, I decided it was time to try the one avenue of inquiry about this situation that I'd been avoiding until now.

"I have an idea, but it will involve me leaving Elisk for a spell," I said. "I realize how terrible it is for me to ask this after... what I said, but can you run the realm by yourself while I'm gone?"

Meanwhile, Nylion crossed his arms.

"Raimie, you are not thinking of finding Alouin once more, are you?" he asked. "The last time, we spoke to him, it nearly got us killed."

When I ignored him, he sat upright, taking hold of my chin.

"I am serious, heart of my heart," he said. "Please, do not put us in unnecessary danger."

Meeting his eyes, I asked, *Do you see another way?*

Clenching his teeth, Nylion compressed into a ball, but he stopped arguing with me, and I returned my attention to Ren, letting her know we'd stopped talking.

"If taking the reins will help us fix this problem, then I'll do my best," she said. "What's the difference between the few days that I've done before and a few weeks?"

"In that case, I'll leave as soon as I've finished running Rhy's field trip for his primeancer students," I said.

Making a face, Ren said, "I'd completely forgotten about that."

"Your brother picked a wonderfully perfect time to disappear," I darkly muttered.

Better to harbor anger toward Rhylix than drive myself crazy with worry. Ren, of course, had chosen the worried path, but then again, she had two loved ones who'd vanished.

Rhylix's disappearance was a familiar return to the first years after Elisk's capture, but Ring, a loyal member of the Hand, was another matter entirely. Of course Ren was worried sick over her disappearance.

Ren's fear for her friend might be understandable, but Oswin's obsessive anxiety about it concerned me. Since late last night, my old friend had been a neurotic mess, utterly incapable of his spymaster duties, as seen by the royal couple's lack of bodyguards this morning. Oswin had become so immersed in his desperate search for Ring that he'd failed to assume his rotation after the ball, Thumb and Pointer were off gods knew where while attending to other Hand matters, and Little had been too busy with the aftermath of the ball to notice the problem. The wreck that Oswin had become, dropping everything in his frantic hunt, was enough to make me wonder if perhaps Ring and my friend had finally given in to what everyone had seen in them for years.

“Rhy never dumps his responsibilities on others, especially not the ones that he makes for himself,” Ren whispered with pinched eyes.

Don't worry. He'll be fine, was what I wanted to tell her.

“It's not burden for me,” was what I said instead. “I've been looking for an excuse to leave the capital.”

“The trip will only take you a few days, yes?” Ren said.

“The time needed to get to the coast and one day while there,” I said. “No more than a week total, at most.”

“Well...”

Ren trailed off, intently gazing at the horizon as the Sun made its glorious first appearance of the day.

“You'd better get out of here,” she said. “The sooner you leave, the sooner you can start working on *our* problem.”

Rising to my feet, I circled the table, leaning over to brush her hair to the side.

“Of course, love,” I said. “Nylion and I will see you soon.”

Ren smiled at me, and I knew that no matter what the current stressor to our marriage might be, we'd find a way to overcome it and emerge from the struggle stronger. We were joined as one, all three.

I touched my forehead to hers, Nylion engulfed us in an embrace, and we enjoyed a brief moment of unity. Unity of purpose, unity of spirit. Unity across my bond with Nylion and unity in Ren's trust that I'd solve our problem.

Duty called. I straightened with a shuddering breath, reluctant to retreat from the peace that I felt with the two of them.

“I am coming with you, silly,” Nylion said. “Where else am I supposed to go?”

Snorting a laugh, I meandered inside to get ready for the day.

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