

Chapter 94: Fancy Meeting You Here

Raimie

I should be terrified. I should be running as fast as Ele would carry me away from this place, but all I was in this moment, finally meeting my enemy, was cold.

And so was Nylion.

So, I drew on Ele, unsheathed Silverblade, and flashed across the distance to Doldimar, touching my sword's tip to the hollow of the bastard's neck as he straightened. I wasn't sure why I didn't go for a killing blow. I was acting on instinct right now, moving as my body and subconscious demanded, and by the time I'd registered how little of a threat I was to Doldimar, he'd swatted the blade away with a roll of his eyes.

"Don't bother," he said. "I could squash you like a bug if I wanted, but I haven't. I'm here to surrender."

To my shock, Doldimar, the one I'd spent six years trying to destroy, tossed a weapons belt at my feet before raising his hands above his head. Slowly, with my eyes fixed on him, I crouched to retrieve the belt, throwing it over my shoulder, before retreating several paces.

"Bright? Dim?" I said under my breath. "Would one of you check whether he's hiding any other blades?"

Bristling, the splinters transferred petrified gazes from me to one another, letting a silent conversation take place, until Dim threw their hands in the air with a groan. As they edged forward, glimpses of black peeked from beneath their clothing with their cringing only getting worse as they got closer.

"Sure, don't listen to me," they said to me. "Stay right fucking next to my whole's avatar. That seems like a *great* idea."

When Doldimar snapped his eyes to the advancing splinter, Dim turned stiff as a rod while their complaints cut off with a pained whine.

"I assure you that if I wanted you dead, you'd be dead by now," he said. "I like my games and my playthings. I'm not such a child that I'll destroy them before they've outlived their usefulness."

And all the while, Dim's quiet screech got louder.

"Let. Dim. go," I growled, raising Silverblade.

Doldimar snorted.

"Dim. Is that what you call it?" he asked. "All right. Have the disobedient piece back."

He wiggled a raised finger, and gasping, Dim zoomed to cower behind me.

I'm so sorry, I breathed to the splinter.

Shaking, Dim rested a hand on my shoulder, revealing cracked skin with glimpses of shadows beneath it.

"I'm fine," they gasped.

They weren't fine. I could tell, but with their visage steadily decaying over the last few years, the splinter hadn't been fine for a while now. I couldn't do anything about it right this moment, though, nor was it a good idea to focus on it.

"Why are you really here?" I asked. "And if you're powerful enough to wipe me off the face of the earth without a thought, why have you been in hiding for the last four years?"

"I haven't been *hiding*," Doldimar scoffed, wrinkling his nose. "I've been *watching*. Surely you can tell the difference."

I didn't grace him with a response, which was a smart decision as it turned out. He appeared not to have wanted one.

"No? Not as smart if I took you for, in that case," he continued. "As for why the sudden desire to throw myself on your mercy, E told me that he's figured out how to break the cycle. I couldn't find him, but your location's always been a blazing beacon in the shadows. You're his ally. You'll eventually lead me to him, so... here we are."

"E? Who's that supposed to be?" I asked.

"Eriadren," Doldimar said, making a face, "my old friend from another life."

"You mean Rhylix," I said with my voice going soft.

"Yes, yes," Doldimar said, dismissively flapping a hand. "Whatever he's calling himself now."

Warily regarding the Eselan, I said, "You expect me to believe you've overruled the command that Daevetch holds on you because Rhy gave you a slim glimmer of hope?"

“Oo... he *has* told you our story!” Doldimar said with a giggle. “And yes. That’s what I expect.”

No way in hell did I trust the man who’d once dominated my kingdom, but the Eselan had twice mentioned the marvel of my continued life. Considering the enmity between us, I should be dead. Earlier, Doldimar could have killed me rather than offering to light the pirates’ pyre. I hadn’t heard or felt him coming.

“I did. I should have said something earlier. I am sorry,” Nylion said. “Do not, however, take this bastard at face value. Put Silverblade away. It will make us look confident, but do not let your guard down.”

I never do, I said, and don’t apologize to me. I should have listened to you earlier.

Nylion squeezed my free hand.

“You were being you, offering aid to someone who seemed to need it. It is one of the things that I love about you, so never apologize for it,” he said, “and please. Do as I said, heart of my heart.”

I did feel a little silly brandishing a sword at an unarmed man, regardless of the primeancy that said man could wield. What could I hope to accomplish with my blade in any case? The only one who could kill the embodiment of Daevetch was Rhylix, and my friend had vanished like a forgotten dream.

Sheathing Silverblade, I said, “We’ll see. Come with me. I have a task to finish before I can get you to Rhy.”

I made to leave the ridge, but Doldimar interjected, lowering his arms.

“A moment. I hoped you might satisfy my curiosity before we’re surrounded by your friends,” he said. “You’re not wearing Shadowsteal. It’s typically E’s weapon, but I understand that this cycle has seen the sword given into your hands. So, my question. Why isn’t it with you?”

Coming from my enemy, the question seemed intrusive, but I couldn’t see the harm in answering it. Replying would cost me nothing and gain Doldimar little.

“I don’t like what it does to me,” I said. “Seeing the world in slow motion and vibrating to the tune of Ele’s power aren’t exactly pleasant experiences.”

“Ah. Perhaps you should try my blade, then. Lighteater,” Doldimar said.

He pointed at the two-handed sword hanging from my shoulder.

“Completely the opposite of its counterpart.”

Did he think I was stupid? Shaking my head, I pointed ahead of me.

“Go on. You first.”

I kept a close eye on Doldimar's back as we marched toward this evening's campsite. In the past, I'd never considered surrender as a possible outcome for this conflict. The idea had seemed too far-fetched, and yet, here we were. I half-expected Doldimar to turn on me at any moment, but we arrived at our destination without a single surprise.

As the students' excited chatter reached me, I turned grim. I'd wanted to make tonight special, a glorious evening of fun and frivolity to drown out their guilt, but with this—I needed my gaze at the small of Doldimar's back—my plans were ruined.

The two of us came into view, and for a moment, I caught a glimpse of the students, my fellow primeancers, in their unguarded state. The group had decided to let their ocean-soaked clothing dry on their bodies while their drenched hair lay flat on their heads. Games from the beach had carried up the ridge to the campsite. Young ones were chasing one another in rings around the fire, and the adults amusedly poked and prodded giggling children into meal preparation and bedroll arrangements.

An Ele child, Pavensu, caught sight of first me and then, Doldimar, and the excited grin that had bloomed at the sight of her protector froze on her face with her eyes widening. She and a Daevetch child, Calium, had been sneakily examining my fireworks when Doldimar and I had emerged from the trees, but her behavior made Calium turn, and on seeing us, his features went slack, as if drunk.

Pavensu screamed, and after seeing what had distressed her, all twenty primeancers settled into battle stances, although the response times for the Daevetch aligned were slightly more sluggish.

"Raise your hands if you don't want to get blasted by fourteen Ele streams," I said with pride warming my otherwise tight voice.

Doldimar did as I'd suggested, if more slowly that I'd have liked. He stared with fascination at the light and shadow-coated limbs confronting him.

"It's all right, everyone," I shouted, stepping in front of Doldimar. "Everything's under control."

The students flicked fearful eyes between me and their former oppressor, so I bade Ele to cover my hands, broadly displaying them.

"See? I couldn't call on Ele if he'd caught me in a Vice," I said. "Doldimar and I just need to... *discuss* a few things. Go to the beach. Wait for your orders. Jeme, can you hang back?"

The Zrelnach warrior nodded, and gradually, the other students retreated, taking their confusion and uncertainty with them. I pointed at the ground beside the fire.

"Sit," I said. "Stay."

While Doldimar arranged himself, I grabbed Jeme's arm, dragging her away from the campsite.

“What’s going on, Your Majesty?” she asked. “You’re not under his control, so why isn’t the bastard dead?”

“You have such confidence in my ability to kill him,” I said.

“Can you not?” she said.

I brushed the question aside.

“Doldimar’s surrendered. That’s why he’s not dead yet.”

“Your Majesty...” Jeme said. “You can’t believe he’d truly do such a thing.”

“No, of course I don’t, Jeme!” I said with a strained laugh bursting from me. “Doldimar is the most manipulative son of a bitch I’ve heard tell of, but every minute I spend with him, pretending I *do* believe him, is another that Auden can use to prepare.”

When her eyes widened, I nodded.

“You must send word as quickly as possible. Doldimar’s appearance can only mean that he’s ready to make his move,” I said. “Have Tejesper shade meld home with the news, but once he’s delivered it, he and the other Daevetch students are to translocate to our fallback position. You saw how they reacted to Doldimar’s presence, a hesitation that’s sure to get them killed in battle. I won’t be responsible for sending children to their deaths.”

“Understood, sir,” Jeme said. “What about the rest of us?”

“You’ll have to find your own way home. My original plan for getting you to shore is no longer viable,” I said. “Return to the capital with all haste. Get my wife out, and as soon as I can, I’ll join the fight.”

Assuming I survived the coming conversation, of course.

“I have some ideas for reaching the mainland,” Jeme said. “Any other orders, sir?”

“Spread the word as fast as you can, Jeme.”

I looked toward camp and the solitary figure sprawled beside it.

“Doldimar’s coming,” I said under my breath.

“Understood,” Jeme said. “Good luck, sir.”

“And to you.”

By the explosion of light around me, I knew she was already gone.

“Keep him delayed,” Nylion said. “Great plan but we should also try to pry information out of him.”

Nyl, of course I'm going to do that, I said. Gods, we're dead. You know that, right?

"If we die, at least it will be in defense of our home," Nylion said. "And at least we will be together."

Yes. Thank Alouin for that.

Resting my palm on Nylion's cheek, I kissed him, and while this didn't feel the same as it did in our shared dream space, it was enough.

Pulling away, I said, *Keep a close watch while I speak with him. You're better at detecting subterfuge than me.*

"Of course," Nylion said. "I love you, heart of my heart."

With a half-smile, I said, *I love you too.*

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