

Chapter 95: What Do You Want?

Raimie

I trudged into the fire's vicinity. Retrieving strips of salted pork—a traveler's standard fare—from an abandoned pack, I tossed some to Doldimar before settling opposite him.

"How in the *void* have you gotten Daevetch primeancers to work with the Ele infected?" the Eselan asked.

Given the lack of preamble, he must have been restraining that question since our initial confrontation with the students, and I cast an annoyed look his way.

"With great difficulty," I said.

Tearing a chunk off my dinner, I chewed on it, amused by the frustration that flashed across Doldimar's face. I'd give him nothing, playing the game for as long as I could before my enemy got bored and moved on to his next tactic.

"What was that about?" Doldimar asked next, gesturing to where I'd given Jeme her orders.

"I'd think that was fairly obvious," I said. "Unless you think I was planning on keeping my students on the same island as you, which... ha!"

Doldimar drew his eyebrows together, looking confused, which was strange to see on someone who was supposed to embody evil.

"Oh," he said after a moment. "No, I wasn't talking about the conversation you were holding. I meant the touching the air and talking to no one bit."

I froze with a strip of meat raised halfway to my lips.

"None of your business," I woodenly said.

No fucking way was I letting Doldimar learn about Nylion. Keeping his existence secret wouldn't protect my other half much—what happened to me happened to him, after all—but I wouldn't put it past the Champion of Daevetch to find some way to torture Nylion after learning about him.

“I’ve obviously hit a nerve,” Doldimar said with a laugh in his voice. “Careful, young one. Don’t give away your weaknesses so easily.”

Ignoring him, I finished off the strip I’d been holding before leaning back on a hand.

After watching me for what seemed like forever, Doldimar eventually growled, “How long do you expect us to sit here?”

“A boat should return for pickup in the morning,” I said around a mouthful. “We can find Rhylix once we’re on the mainland, but no way are we shade melding there. I don’t trust you with the technique. In all honesty, I should probably induce sleep in you with Ele, but I don’t plan to, not unless you give me a reason for it.”

“Fair enough.”

To my surprise, Doldimar, living embodiment of Daevetch, tore into his share of dinner. Watching him eat, I could almost believe that my companion was an ordinary man, but I’d seen far too much of his devastating handiwork to accept the illusion.

As he finished his meal, he said, “Thank you. For the food, I mean.”

“It was no trouble,” I automatically said before wincing.

“Polite too,” Doldimar said. “You look at me, and I see no hate. Disgust for my choices but no disdain for me.”

“Rhylix has shared your story. I know that you have little control over your actions, and this cycle, my friend has been long delayed in freeing you,” I said with a shrug. “Three hundred years of Daevetch without Ele to counteract it. The world should’ve burned to nothing by now. I’d guess that we have you to thank for our continued existence.”

Doldimar wordlessly stared at me before flinching, snapping his gaze to the side.

“No,” he growled. “Not yet.”

“Is that your ‘babysitter’?” I asked. “Which aspect monitors you? Rhylix’s is Creation and yours...?”

Again, Doldimar stared, but this unblinking gaze was one of calculating evaluation.

“Corruption,” was what he eventually shared.

“Order. Chaos,” I said, jerking my thumb over my shoulder at my splinters, “but I call them Bright and Dim. Their actual names are too stuffy for me.”

“You’re a strange man, Raimie, king of Auden,” Doldimar said.

“Thank you. I think.”

The fire spit sparks into the air between us, and I traced those glowing embers' rise into the air until they cooled, becoming ash.

"Would you like to know a secret?" Doldimar asked. "It's about your family."

I tensed at the change in the Eselan's voice. It had gone darker and colder, and I knew we'd reached a tipping point, the reason Doldimar had 'surrendered' in the first place.

"My family has many secrets," I said. "I doubt you could say much on the subject to surprise me, but you're welcome to try."

"You were correct before," Doldimar continued, apparently content to ignore what I'd said. "Three hundred years is a long time, even for ones as long-lived as E and me, but I vividly remember your ancestor, the king who gave me Auden. Did you know he tried to negotiate with me?"

He barked a laugh.

"Of course, I had no intention of honoring any agreement we made. That deception kept Daevetch occupied for years. Being its Champion is a delicate tightwire to balance. Feeding Daevetch chaos, destruction, and deception is demanding enough on its own, but sustaining it just enough that it's distracted from unleashing hell upon reality is nearly impossible, especially on the days when my sanity flees from me."

The Eselan fell silent with his eyes unfocusing, and I gave him time. Every minute of his distraction was another Auden could use for her defense. I almost laughed aloud at the thought, so similar to what my enemy had said.

"In any case," Doldimar eventually continued, "I was speaking about Auden's last king, the one before you. You should know that he wasn't a coward, despite what the history books may say. King Eledis was simply too cautious with how he defended Auden, and as a result, he, along with his wife and best friend, were all cursed in their separate ways."

"Wait, Eledis?" I said. "As in like my grandfather, Eledis? Why would his parents have named their child after such a failure?"

Doldimar flashed his teeth at me. With our latest conversation topic, his features had morphed from amused to something else, something much more threatening, and I had to restrain a shiver at the sight of it.

"Listen quietly to my story, boy, and I may give you a chance to stop what's coming," he snapped.

To my dismay, I couldn't stop my breathing from quickening in response, which only made Doldimar smile.

"As I was saying, the three were cursed, or blessed depending on your point of view, by the Eselan bitch who foretold of your eventual triumph, Raimie, king of Auden."

“Emir, the king’s Eselan bodyguard and best friend, was forced into a permanent shape change, one of a human’s features. His curse reflects his sustained reliance on shape change while in the Audish court. He now goes by the name of Marcuset, I believe.”

“Illasaya, the king’s wife, was burdened with a memory that wipes itself clean when she sleeps. Her curse reflects her willful ignorance of her husband’s misdeeds. Her newest name is Kaedesa, queen of Ada’ir.”

“Now, Eledis, he was afflicted with aging, his body to become a plain truth of the years that he’s lived. His curse was made in response to his disguises, meant to deceive the world into believing him an Ele primeancer. He never changed his name, moving on with his life until his descendant found Shadowsteal. Until you.”

“And in case you haven’t realized it yet, all three were cursed to live until they correct their mistakes by ridding the world of me.”

Rising to his feet, Doldimar deeply bowed, lifting his eyes to meet mine.

“Is that enough of a surprise for you?” he asked.

Reeling, I desperately searched for something, *anything* for me to cling to. First, the revelation years ago that my family had hidden my true past, stealing Nylion from me, and now, this. Was there anything genuine or true in my family? How false were the men I’d spent my childhood with?

“We have another family now, Raimie. We have Ren,” Nylion said. “Do not let the deceptions of the people who spawned us make you lose focus. Doldimar is playing with us.”

My other half might as well have been talking to thin air. I couldn’t truly hear him, not with my thoughts churning through what Doldimar had exposed.

What rocked me about this revelation was how obvious it was, concerning Eledis at least. So many of that man’s inexplicabilities made perfect sense in the context of him as the exiled king of Auden. My grandfather... ancestor’s eagerness to accept the quest of liberating Auden, the friendship between him and Uncle Marcuset, his frustrations with me as king, the average Audish citizen’s hateful reactions to him, the initial hostility between him and Auntie Kaedesa...

Kaedesa. I’d almost married her. Fuck, I’d be sick!

Scrambling away from the fire, I coughed up dried meat chunks while Doldimar’s snickering gave chase, and Nylion’s nausea only compounded mine. When my body gave me control again, I marched on the Eselan, binding the Ele in his body to the ground’s. Doldimar dropped with an *oomph*, and I planted a foot on his chest, resting Silverblade on his neck.

“What do you have planned?” I snapped. “I’ve spent years preparing for your return, knowing it would never be enough. So, tell me what will happen to my people, and I might not hurt you before sending you to sleep.”

Doldimar laughed, great gasps that sent my planted foot up and down like it might move during an earthquake.

“Your threats mean nothing to me, boy,” he said. “You can do nothing that I haven’t experienced a thousand times before.”

The gray eyes set above Doldimar’s manic grin screamed the truth of what he’d said, and seeing that, I shrank inside. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath.

“We truly were looking for a solution to break you free from the cycle, you know,” I said.

Then, I induced sleep in my enemy.

What a mess. I wished Rhylix had left me a note, a message, some indication of his intended destination before taking off. If my friend had completed that one small task... if I knew where he was, I could retrieve him and bring him here.

As it was, Doldimar would be free to enact his plan as soon as the Ele in his body dissipated, and I couldn’t stay here to refresh it. I needed to fly home and rally the troops. If only I could keep my enemy pinned...

“Why not try Lighteater?” Nylion said. “It is not the best solution, but it might work.”

Oh, Nyl! Gods, I’m sorry I ignored you, I said. *I just-*

“It is fine, Raimie. I could feel how you reacted to Doldimar’s story, the same as you could with me. It was... intense. Let us not worry about that but our current problem,” Nylion said. “So. Lighteater?”

You think that’s a good idea with how heavily he baited us to hold the sword earlier? I asked.

“I cannot think of another solution. Can you?”

I drifted my gaze to Doldimar’s weapons belt, discarded by the fire.

Lighteater. It was Shadowsteal’s mirror. I’d watched Teron use it to obliterate Bright. If it could destroy a splinter, could it pin the Champion of Daevetch in place, even if it was associated with the same primal force? If it could, I wouldn’t need to worry about Doldimar escaping my hold, not on this remote isle. He’d stay in place, long enough for me to find Rhylix, and together, we could decide what to do next.

Hesitantly approaching, I leaned over the blade with my fingers shaking when I paused.

Did I want to do this? The sensations that Shadowsteal imposed on me were bad enough. Did I want to learn what its opposite would inflict?

The alternative was to leave an immensely powerful Daevetch primeancer here, to be freed at an unspecified time. Better to try a shaky plan than to do nothing at all, even if Bright and Dim were violently shaking their heads no.

I drew Lighteater.

The moment my palm touched the grip, a surge of power lazily flowed up my arm, unnaturally swelling my muscles until they pushed against my skin. At this oddity, I'd have dropped the weapon if I hadn't been so distracted.

My surroundings had changed. Shades of black were painted across the world.

Fortunately, one thing had stayed the same. Dim appeared as their normal, unassuming self at my side, to my relief.

Because the rest of the world had skewed. In this view, fire went dark rather than glowed, deeper in hue than grass or tree, and its gay liveliness had taken on a violent tone with tongues of flame hungrily reaching for me. Anything that had life in it had twisted and contorted into grim distortions, becoming sickly and wan.

Two total abnormalities occupied my immediate vicinity. The deep-within-the-caverns-of-the-earth, far-from-the-sun form must be Doldimar, which made the rigid fixture beside me Bright. In my hand, Lighteater twitched toward the fixture, but I willed it to stay still. I didn't have time to recompose a splinter today.

As when I held Shadowsteal, motes coalesced around me, but these were solid, black shadows rather than white orbs. When the motes sped toward me, I didn't flinch from them. I knew these Daevetch fragments wouldn't harm me, much like those of Ele never had.

Or so I thought. After my skin had absorbed several dozen of them, a high-pitched whine assaulted my ears, and the black world shimmered and cracked. From these cracks, formless monsters of oozing shadow slithered, advancing on me.

I took a step back, lifting Lighteater, and as if prompted by my retreat, a host of phantasmal whispers started. I didn't know how I could hear them over the ear-splitting eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee all around me, but half-whispers, unfinished threats, and promises drifted alongside that maddening noise, and I clutched at my temples with my fists, trying to block it out. I barely kept from slicing my shoulder open at the same time.

"I see you've claimed my sword."

At first, I thought this voice was simply another whisper, but the statement it had uttered hadn't been half-completed. I raised my eyes toward its source with difficulty, fighting against my brain going into overload.

Doldimar's pitch-black form stood a pace away with its head cocked. I could imagine the fascination surely contorting those features, lying on the plane above that faceless black.

“Finally!” Doldimar said. “Catch me if you can, Raimie, king of Auden.”

And he disappeared.

“It is a trap, heart of my heart!”

A thread of warning had been thrown into the whispers, a splash of fear added to mine, but I barely registered these things before discounting them. Instead, my rattled mind slogged toward a conclusion that should have been instantaneous, and when it hit, I shade melded after my enemy.

When I skimmed among the shadows this time, I somehow retained my sense of self, but on this trip, something new, something dangerous, accompanied me as well.

I considered abandoning Lighteater beneath the world’s skin. A hiss negated that option. I didn’t understand how or why, but the formless monsters that had crawled through reality’s cracks had joined me in the shadows, and they were prepared to chase me to the ends of the earth.

Panicking, I fumbled for a remnant of my enemy, and when I brushed against a cloyingly sweet taint, I latched on and zoomed along its trail. The journey seemed to last forever, a prolonged struggle to burn through Doldimar’s remnants as quickly as I could.

Behind me, the hisses never ceased pursuing me. I could feel their glee in the hunt.

I knew I was nearing the end when the shadows’ core changed from one of acceptance to one of distaste. Soon enough, they wouldn’t tolerate me anymore, and I’d be spewed from their embrace.

I was forced to blindly trust that Doldimar wouldn’t dump us at the bottom of the ocean or the middle of a volcano. The destination snapshots that usually accompanied my shade melding weren’t flashing before my eyes, so when I stepped out of the shadows and breathed clean air, I shook with relief while relaxing long-clenched muscles.

That was when Daevetch *slammed* into me. Its impact wasn’t a steady stream of motes gently absorbed into my body. It was a carriage running me over, an outpouring of shadows from the glowing halo opposite me, and the black river eagerly stampeded over my body to gather around the sword I was holding.

I flew through the air for a split second before smashing into something cold and hard. Pinned there, I listened to the dissonant sound of Bright and Dim shrieking, all while peeling my fingers off of metal.

Lighteater fell out of my hand, and I dropped to all fours, gasping and coughing. Nylion’s hand slapped over mine with his arms violently shaking.

“Ra... mie... watch...”

A shuffle sounded somewhere nearby, but before I could rise to confront Doldimar, a boot tip connected with my chin, snapping my head back. I fell sideways, and a crackling rumble gave me

an instant's warning before the stone above me came crashing down.

When its thundering roar ceased, I unclenched my body, amazed that I was still alive. As I opened my eyes, their lashes brushed against stone, and I turned to ice, inside and out. Carefully, oh so carefully, I traced the perimeter of my dimly lit prison.

Prison wasn't the right word. A cell gave the prisoner room to move around in. This was a coffin.

The air seemed to go thin. I could see, which meant that a hole in this coffin was letting light and fresh air inside, but that knowledge didn't change the fact that *I couldn't breathe*. Stone caressed me everywhere, and I tried to pull away from it, only to touch more. My frantic fidgeting left abrasions on my exposed skin while blood welled to the surface with every increasingly agitated twitch. A scream built in my chest, but before I could unleash it, a voice splashed into my panic.

"Thank you for doing exactly as I hoped, Raimie," Doldimar said. "I've been trying to bring Lighteater near a tear for ages."

Metal scraped on stone: the Dark Lord probably retrieving his blade.

"Ahh..." he sighed. "That feels much better than I expected."

"My people won't make this easy for you, Doldimar," I shouted. "We've had years to prepare, and this time, we have the advantage of knowing what you're capable-"

"I know about your preparations," Doldimar said. "Kylorian has kept me apprised.

I went very still with my breathing, even my heartbeat pausing.

"Kylorian?" I whispered.

I'd thought... we were friends. We'd spent so much time together and- and-

"That *son of a bitch*," Nylion breathed somewhere nearby.

No, I couldn't believe it. Kylorian wouldn't do this. He loved Auden too much to work with its former oppressor.

"Yes, Kylorian. That man has been *such* a mess to handle. So *moody*," Doldimar said. "It took me a while to drag his name out of him, but I eventually got what I wanted. As I always do. It helped that his own father had carved such *deep* paths for instant obedience and mental avoidance into his brain. I'll have to thank the man, if I ever meet him."

Fucking hell, that bastard actually had betrayed me.

I screamed, thrashing against the stone restraining me, and outside of it, Doldimar cackled.

“I love that noise, Raimie, former king of Auden,” he said. “I look forward to hearing more of it when I return from destroying your pathetic kingdom.”

And I was alone. I screamed again, pounding my fists on the ground, letting the ugliness inside of me pour into the world.

When I was calm enough to think logically, I searched for my sources to either Daevetch or Ele, but I found neither. I tried to shade meld home, but the shadows wouldn't accept me without Dim. Shuffling in micrometers, I eventually found a peephole that I could peer through, and my heart sank.

I hadn't wanted to believe what Doldimar had said, but there, outside of my coffin, hung the proof: a nauseating slit of black haloed by white strips. No wonder Bright and Dim wouldn't respond to me.

Another fit of rage and frustration took over, one that slowly morphed into something much worse. With hot tears blazing down my cheeks, I clawed at stone while pain flared from my nails. My mind was screeching at this immobilization until a forced wave of calm rolled over me.

“Stop, Raimie,” Nylion tiredly said. “There is nothing you can do. We are trapped.”

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