

# Chapter 98: This Is It for Us

## Raimie

“We’re going to die here, aren’t we?”

Stone, intruding on all sides, muffled my question. My words sounded as if they’d come through thick cloth until they bumped into one another in my head. Fortunately, Nylion heard me without a problem.

“Probably,” he said.

Nylion’s voice had come from outside of our coffin, a pinpoint I latched onto. It was helping with my cling to sanity. If I pretended my other half was really out there instead of trapped in here with me, I could continue breathing in an even rhythm rather than devolving into hyperventilation.

The only problem with this situation? With him outside, I couldn’t touch Nylion in any way, but although we both desperately needed that comfort, it wouldn’t ward off a debilitating panic attack, one that I couldn’t have. We’d tried having Nylion lie in this coffin with me enough times to know that now.

*Alouin, Nyl. Tell me what you really think, I hissed.*

But my mouth curled at the sour tone in Nylion’s voice. How did he always know how to cheer me up?

“Would you rather if I lied to you?” Nylion said. “Because I am not sure if I can. I have never lied to you before.”

That ripped the blossoming of something resembling a good mood out by the roots.

*Never lied? I growled. What do you call hiding that our mother spent a huge chunk of our childhood beating us?*

Nylion kept quiet while I simmered, in tune to our boiling blood, the powder keg waiting for a single spark.

After that heat had faded, he said, “I took what I thought to be the healthiest path, mentally, for us. I am sorry.”

It was my turn to stay silent. The ache in my neck had weakened, so I stretched to reach my peephole out of this coffin, eager to absorb the view of something other than dimly lit stone, mere inches from my nose.

"I know, Nyl," I whispered.

Followed by *I don't blame you* and *How could you?* in my head. Thankfully, Nylion didn't comment on the thoughts that I knew he'd heard.

Just like I knew I wasn't angry at *Nylion*. Not really. I might be a little irritated that he'd shouldered the burden of our mother's abuse alone, without asking for help, but the white-hot, bitter RAGE that kept me from sleep on most nights, that required a self-medicated dose of alcohol to quell it, was directed at myself.

For years, I'd been oblivious not only to Nylion's presence but also to what he'd been protecting me from. My debt to my other half was a drained gulf. It could never be filled, never repaid. I could try to do that for the rest of my life, and my efforts would never be enough unless...

No. I could never bring myself to surrender control, never be the one condemned to watch our life played out through our eyes, and that selfishness was why self-loathing had been my constant companion these days.

"Let us try again," Nylion said.

I jumped; I'd been so consumed by drowning in misery. Again, how did Nylion always know how to cheer me up? Right when I began to crumble, there he was, throwing me a lifeline.

I cleared my throat, almost coughing.

"Bright? Dim? You two listening?" I called. "You saved me in Qena. Think you can do it again?"

Silence answered me, and as usual, when I sought my sources, I found nothing.

*Do you think Doldimar destroyed them?* I asked.

At the idea, a thrill of fear zipped under my skin.

"The bastard only had Lighteater with him, not Shadowsteal, so only Order was in danger," Nylion said. "As for what could be keeping Chaos away, I have no idea."

*They've seemed weaker lately,* I said. *Have you noticed the cracks in their disguise? The ones they try so hard to hide from us?*

"Yes. Gods, for a Daevetch splinter they are terrible at concealment," Nylion said. "Do you think their weakening has something to do with their current lack of response?"

*We ARE beside a tear, a glimpse into the primal forces. What do you think a weakened Daevetch splinter would do when confronted with their 'whole'? I asked. Doesn't explain why I can't FEEL them, though.*

Our current speculation was much appreciated, as was anything that could distract me right now. I couldn't think about the certainty of stone's weight above and around me, the inability to move—

*It's not right! Please, don't hurt me! It's not right!*

—the loss of my Daevetch and Ele sources, the knowledge that my enemy was marching on my home while I lay here, trapped. The certainty that it and everyone I loved would be destroyed.

"Raimie, focus," Nylion said.

With deep breaths, I beat back the fear that was clawing up my throat and the need to get *out* of my itching skin. Fuck, if only I could sleep. If only our circumstances, including a tenuous cling to sanity, weren't keeping me and Nylion from our shared dream space, somewhere we could touch without the fear of spiraling into a panic attack. It didn't matter to me that retreating like that would be selfish to an extreme, not anymore. Not after how long I hadn't been able to move or breathe easily. Gods...

"How long have we been here?" I said, mostly to myself.

It must have been at least through the night. Grit scraped my eyes when I closed them, and my mind was wandering too freely. An empty void had taken the place of my stomach with every passing hour dragging more of my body into its grip, and my throat was a desert with my lips chapped and my tongue swollen. I was sincerely regretting the brandy skin that I'd drunk to steady my nerves before reaching the isles. It was better not to think about what was stiffening my clothes because of that.

"One day, thirteen hours, forty-two minutes," Nylion said.

*That's an oddly specific number, I said. Where did you pull it from?*

"An excellent internal clock?" Nylion said before laughing. "I am guessing, heart of my heart. I have no idea how long it has been since Doldimar left us here. At least a day."

Which meant that depending on where the bastard had been hiding for the last four years, Elisk could already be under attack.

Flinching from that thought, I instead focused on the tear outside. My only realistic way out of this death trap would be with primeancy use, and even then, escape would be difficult. I'd have to shift collapsed stone with Daevetch and use Ele to prevent another cascade, all while holding perfectly still without an outside view. The task seemed more than a little daunting, but it was possible. Or it would be if I could reach either of my sources, which the tear was preventing. Dear gods, I hoped that was the case, at least.

Maybe... could I draw Ele or Daevetch from the tear? It was a hole into the plane that the primal forces occupied.

Hesitantly, I reached for a point of rigid calm or angry chaos beyond the black oval, but all I got was dread and panic, the typical reaction to something so obviously unnatural, so *wrong*.

With an exasperated sigh, I gave up on my attempt, although I didn't relent in my glare. The tear was inanimate, a break in reality. It couldn't respond to me, but I couldn't help myself.

"If you're going to block my splinters, the least you could do is give me another way out of this mess," I shouted.

After a beat of quiet, Nylion chuckled.

"I like this game," he said. "Will you relay something for me? I have a few choice words for those damn things, always trying to destroy me when..."

He trailed off as, as if in a delayed response, the middle of the waist-high tear bulged toward me, and for a moment, I was outside Qena, trying to bring their rip in reality under control again. I forgot that stone had ensnared me, forgot that I couldn't move, and roughly jerked away. Rock ripped patches of skin off of my back and arms, and I stifled a scream while the bulge reached further... further...

Something stepped out of it. In a snap, black shucked away from a humanoid form before returning to its unnaturally natural formation.

A woman. The tear had just dropped a woman into the world.

"Well, that is new," Nylion dryly said.

Shaking herself, the woman curiously took in her surroundings.

"Yup, this might be it, but don't get your hopes up," she said under her breath. "Remember Vathaylia."

As she came closer, the tear's halo of wispy light let me get a better look at her. With dirty-blond hair, brown eyes, and a petite frame, she looked like an ordinary human. That perception was only marred by what she was wearing and the bulging satchel thrown over her shoulder.

A thin, silver chain was circled around her neck, accenting the soft lines of her jaw and exposed collar bones, and an embroidered jacket with knee-length coattails hung in an open cut over her chest, partially hiding a vest and buttoned shift beneath it. A pair of tight pants finished the picture with its cuffs tucked into leather boots that rose to mid-calf. With all of it in wine-red and black colors, it was a strange outfit, and if I hadn't been so desperate to get away from this woman, I might have liked it.

"If this is home, the door to it opens onto *the* worst possible exit point," she sighed. "I don't see a crack in this cave's walls. Do you?"

Who was she talking to? Carefully, I scooted as close to stone as I could, scanning her once more. Ordinary female, strange clothes, out-of-place accessories, and a white ball with brightly glowing, blue stripes circling it, one that was rolling alongside her. In my surprise, I must have made a noise because the woman snapped her head in my direction.

"Hello?" she said, reaching for her satchel's flap. "Is someone there?"

Oh, gods! What should I do? She was coming my way, and *what was she?* Would she hurt me?

"The only way to find out is to talk to her, Raimie," Nylion snapped. "Maybe she can help us."

Oh.

While I'd panicked, the woman had started backing toward the tear with its black ovoid stretching eager fingers for her, and I cursed myself for almost letting a source of possible rescue walk away.

"Wait!" I shouted. "Please, don't go. Can you help me?"

The woman stopped with the tear close enough to touch her. With her head cocked, she didn't come closer, but at least she wasn't leaving. If I could only get her to stay...

"I've been trapped by a cave-in, and I can't move," I said. "Please, I don't know who you are or how you came through a tear, but I need your help. Will you give it to me?"

Tensed all to hell, the woman had her hands balled into fists with words tumbling from her lips.

"Don't intervene, don't intervene, don't intervene--"

"*Please!*" I cried, although my voice was clogged with unshed tears. "My home! My wife! My child! They'll die if I don't return soon. Do you require a price from me for your help? Name it! I'll pay anything, whatever you want. Just *please! Help me!*"

As the woman hissed a long sigh, tension fled from her.

"I'm going to regret this," she said.

But she strode toward me, and I couldn't leash the burn in my eyes any longer. I was sobbing, breathing through my mouth as my nose clogged, screaming in my head at the panic that this impediment added to an already overwhelming pile.

Somewhere nearby, Nylion reached for my hand, almost as wrecked as me. I could feel it, even if I couldn't see him, and I reciprocated the only way I could: by meeting Nylion's blind grab through our bond.

“Thank you,” I hiccupped.

“Don’t thank me yet. I haven’t figured out how to free you,” the woman said. “Ailig. Light, please.”

The ball at her feet shone with white light, and with a hand on her hip, the woman absently surveyed the rock piled atop me while removing the chain from around her neck. Once it was gone, she spoke, letting a jumble of unintelligible syllables tumble from her lips in a nonsense pattern. Frowning, I tried to make sense of it, grateful for something to help quell this outpouring of emotion.

“I’m... sorry?” I said. “What...? I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

Why didn’t I understand, though? Was she speaking some type of code? I knew Oswin occasionally translated the Hand’s reports before they ended up on my desk, but I’d never heard of anyone from any nation speaking code.

With a sigh, the woman fastened the chain around her neck again.

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t think it would work,” she said. “Keep talking to me. It’s helping me figure out where you are in this mess.”

What should I say, though?

‘Who are you? How did you get inside a tear? Where are you from?’

In the end, I decided on a simpler topic than any of those.

“Can your... companion use Ele?” I asked.

“What’s Ele?” the woman said with her gaze lazily tracking above me.

What was Ele? Everyone knew the answer to that question. Where had she been living? Under a rock?

But then, I hadn’t known much about the primal forces before meeting Rhylix. Given that, I wouldn’t be surprised if somewhere in the world, people had never heard of them.

“Ele, the primal force of light, life, order, et. cetera,” I said. “Never heard of it?”

“No,” she said.

She met my eyes through the peephole with a predatory smile flashing over her face.

“Found you!”

“Creepy...” Nylion said.

*Oh, like you’re one to talk,* I said.

Opening her satchel, the woman dug through it until its lip touched her shoulder, which was... impossible. The bag couldn't possibly contain her whole arm within it. Chalk it up to another of this woman's oddities.

Making a triumphant noise, she withdrew a set of gloves. Made of hexagonal, shimmering fabric, glowing tubes had been laid in a spiderweb across their backs with one tube connected to each fingertip.

"Have you heard of the United States of America? Texas? Houston?" she asked.

As she slid the gloves on, I was at a loss for how I should reply. It was like she'd started speaking gibberish again.

"Thought not," she continued, "but those names are commonplace in my iteration. Don't judge me for my lack of knowledge about yours. More light, Ailig."

The little ball brightened considerably, all while she knelt.

"What are those names?" I asked. "Houston?"

I'd hoped that by expressing an interest, I could smooth ruffled feathers, but my tongue tripped over the pronunciation. It almost made me miss when the woman fell still with her features tightening.

"Home," she whispered.

Shivering, she rubbed her gloved hands together.

"Let's see if these still work."

When she grabbed the boulder closest to her, a whine—steadily rising in pitch—screeched against my ears, and I winced. My hands twitched, so badly did I want to block out the noise, but they were helplessly trapped at my sides. Mercifully, the jarring noise soon stopped while the boulder puffed into a cloud of fine, white granules.

Giggling, the woman kissed her palms.

"Good job, my lovelies!" she said.

And I lurched free of my shock.

"What was *that*?" I yelped.

She snapped stern eyes toward me.

"No. I've already done more, said more, than I should. I don't want a repeat of Hiyuki," she said. "You're getting nothing more from me, stranger, so why don't you talk instead? Tell me your life

story. Make us strangers no longer.”

I understood stubborn women better than most—my wife was one, after all—so I knew when I should retreat, lest I unleash an onslaught of petulance. If I wanted, I could try coaxing more information from this woman later. For now, I told her about Auden, Ada’ir, and me in between sporadic bouts of my coffin’s destruction.

Sometimes, the pauses between those vanished boulders stretched long, and in others, the woman asked me to be quiet so she could consult with Ailig. It was a delicate process, exhuming me. If she incorrectly shifted one rock, I’d become meat paste between the rubble above and the cave floor below.

Even with those breaks in my talking, I exhausted safe conversation topics in what felt like no time, although it must have been hours. I tried to match the woman’s silence, but quiet had never agreed with me.

Unless I was alone. Which I never was with Nylion in my life.

*Can I-?* I started.

“Tell her about me?” Nylion said. “I have no issue with it. I doubt she will be around for long after helping us. Plus, I would kill to fill this silence right now.”

So, I strayed into my most guarded secrets and fear, starting with the other half of me, but I also talked about my splinters, Rhylix, my mother, meeting with Alouin, and the fear that those meetings had only been the product of a dying mind.

The last two were the only revelations that elicited a response from the woman. I’d long since stopped craning my neck to watch her work, so my only indication that I’d caught her by surprise was a choked gasp at the mention of Alouin’s name.

“Out of everything you’ve heard, that’s what surprises you?” I asked with amusement.

The whine of another rock’s crumble cut me off mid-question, and when the noise fell silent, I stubbornly held my tongue, certain she’d interrupted me on purpose.

“Sorry. That was rude,” the woman eventually said. “Alongside rips in reality, Alouin is one of the fixed concepts in every parallel universe, although he’s not always called ‘Alouin’ and the reality rips aren’t always apparent. You and one other man are the only people I’ve come across who’ve met him. As for the rest of your story... I don’t know what to say. Life’s dealt you a rough hand.”

Frowning, I shifted in place as much as I could. I didn’t think my life had been so bad. Sure, it was hard at times, but the good outweighed the bad, or at least, I thought so.

Was I missing something?

Clicking my tongue, I shoved that question aside.

“Who else among your acquaintances has met Alouin?” I asked. “And was this other person’s experience similar to mine?”

The woman’s shuffling had grown louder recently, but now, it seemed to be coming from the other side of the closest stone.

“His name was Kasai, and he was my... friend,” she said.

But she’d spoken the word ‘friend’ so mournfully that I could almost feel her grief as my own.

“And yes,” she continued, “it was similar.”

Another high-pitched hum assaulted my ears with another rock puffing into dust, and with it gone, light spilled into my coffin. Seeing it, my heart soared.

“You should be able to squeeze through- whoa!” the woman shouted.

I couldn’t blame her for shouting, though, frantically scrambling past as I was. Gods, I’d almost knocked her over, but there was Nylion with his arms outstretched, and I was barreling into him, even if I had to stop my own momentum. I was crying with my face buried into Nylion’s neck and by the void...

I could breathe again. I could MOVE.

“We are free,” Nylion roughly said. “Gods. Heart of my heart, I thought we were dead but-”

“We’re free,” I breathed.

I didn’t know how long I stood there, just sobbing and rocking from foot to foot. So much of what I’d been repressing came flooding forth with violent trembling following it, and my other half and I took turns battering each other with our relief and joy and fucking hell...

Pulling away, I said, “That was *awful*.”

“Yes,” Nylion said.

But we were together. Even now, we were one.

“I love you,” I said.

“Mm. I know,” Nylion hummed. “I love you too.”

With a closed throat, I kissed him, nothing passionate or heated, simply two people abso-fucking-lutely thankful to be alive, but still, when someone cleared her throat, it quickly broke us apart.

The woman!

Spinning, I grabbed her gloved hands, absently taking note of how uncomfortable that made her look.

"Thank you," I said. "A thousand times, thank you. How can I ever repay this debt?"

The woman wrinkled her dust-coated face.

"Your payment was your story, which you've already given. Consider us even," she said. "Besides, don't you have bigger problems to deal with right now?"

Hearing those words, it was like I'd been punched, which forced the woman to take my weight for a moment.

Doldimar. Elisk. Ren. In my giddiness over breaking free of stone, I'd forgotten the reason behind my urgency to escape what should have been my grave.

"Looks like I dug a path out of this cave while unearthing you."

Dragging myself free of my detachment, I noted the woman pointing to a hollow crevasse between the cave's wall and the unsteady rubble pile that I'd been lying beneath.

"You're free to 'go forth and save the kingdom'."

She giggled into her hand.

"Always wanted to say that."

I pulled myself free of the woman's support, yearning to squeeze through that crack and run, sprint, *fly* home, but her presence kept me momentarily tethered here.

"What about you?" I asked. "Will you come with me or...?"

"Oh, I'm sure I've done enough damage here already," the woman said, throwing her hands up. "Besides, this isn't my world. There's nothing for me here."

"In that case, thank you once again," I said. "You've done me a great kindness, Mistress... huh. I don't believe I caught your name."

"I guess it won't hurt to tell you that," the woman said. "It's Bren."

"Mistress Bren."

Stepping back, I bowed low to this woman who'd saved my life.

"I wish you luck on your journey and in your endeavors," I said.

With a delighted giggle, she said, "And to you, Raimie. Maybe I'll see you again sometime."

Flashing me a bright smile, Bren stepped up to the tear with Ailig rolling behind her. A glittering effervescent rope uncoiled from the sphere, and when it touched the tear, something like a doorframe outlined it. Its black center eagerly reached out for them both. As it touched them, Bren waved before it drew them into its embrace.

And she was gone.

Much as I wanted to gnaw on the impossibilities that I'd seen in this place, I couldn't. I had a catastrophe to avert.

"Bright? Dim?" I asked.

When no one new filled the empty cave, I shook my head.

"Maybe once we are away from the tear?" Nylion said.

*I certainly hope so.*

Because the alternative was a long hike via mundane means from wherever I was to Elisk, during which time Doldimar would have reasserted his control on Auden.

As I squeezed through the gap, the cave made one final attempt to contain me. My already lacerated back screeched protests at its further abuse, and when I reached the other side, I purposefully ignored the drench of cold sweat soaking me. I wasn't trapped right now.

"We are free, heart of my heart," Nylion said.

*I know.*

On this side of the rubble pile, a narrow passage gradually sloped upward, and the dim glow of sunlight shone down its length. I darted along it, racing for the surface. At first, this race seemed to last minutes and then, days, all as my brain swirled from a lack of sleep, lack of food, lack of...

As I reached the end of the slope, a frustrated shriek echoed down the passage and into an abandoned cave.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," I hissed.

"That is... unfortunate," Nylion said.

He walked out onto a sparkling, frozen, never-ending sprawl of empty landscape, one that offered freedom and hope. My many explorations of the northern wastes should lend me the knowledge I needed to find a beacon of civilization here, and I could start my journey home from there, so that wasn't why I wanted to godsdamn *punch the tunnel's wall* in frustration. The problem was the sheet of clear ice blocking my way, distorting Nylion's form beyond it.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do now?" I growled. "Melt my way out with my body heat?"

“Certainly a possibility,” Nylion said, rejoining me inside the tunnel, “but-”

“Thank the whole! We found you.”

Bright’s long sought-after voice boomed inside the passage. I spun to find both them and Dim behind me, where no one had previously been standing. They were back, thank Alouin! I wanted to ask where they’d been but-

“We lost you shortly after you followed Arivor,” Bright said. “Where have you-?”

“No time,” I said, tripping over my words. “Dim, I need a *precise* shade meld. Can you help?”

The Daevetch splinter had been staring down the passage with an almost drunk look creeping over their face, but when I said their name, they jumped, focusing on me.

“I- I can try,” they said.

That response was a bit worrisome when combined with the evidence of Dim’s weakening that I could clearly see, but I couldn’t afford to think about that now, not when Doldimar could be in Elisk at any moment.

“Let’s go, then,” I said.

In the blink of an eye, I dove into and out of the shadows. Dim’s help made the trip elapse with the ease of breathing. Its simplicity didn’t halt my stumble, however, when the shadows released me.

After regaining my footing, I got my bearings. I was standing on the plains that surrounded Elisk with the city in the distance, and at first glance, everything looked fine. Maybe I’d gotten here in time.

“Raimie...” Nylion breathed.

He pointed, and looking where indicated, I saw a black smudge, spilling over the wall, and the faintest flicker of orange between buildings further up the hill.

The city was in flames.

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