

# Chapter 38: A Lull

## Raimie

Waking up didn't come as a surprise to me. It should have, given everything that had happened. I should have been marveling at every pull of air into my lungs and every thought that passed through my head, but the fact was that ever since awareness had begun its creep on my dreaming state, I'd found every moment predictable. Expected.

Because I remembered everything that had happened. Meeting Alouin. The space between realities. Hovering over my dying body. And with these? Really. Who wouldn't wake up a little bored by the fact that they were alive?

When I got around to opening my eyes, I delicately transferred the hand resting on my chest to the ground, watching the man sleeping beside me all the while. It was strange to see my father unconscious, a little splash of my life before finding Shadowsteal.

For eighteen years, we'd shared a room in our cottage, although I didn't remember much about the first half of them, but since this mess had begun, we'd been kept separate. The return to close quarters was welcome, if only for the sense of security that it imbued, but also more jarring than expected. Maybe I'd enjoyed gaining some distance from my family.

I sat up slowly, scanning my surroundings, and started patting the ground around me, looking for my weapons, while dizziness receded. A dagger was lowered from above me with someone dangling it in front of my nose.

"Looking for this?"

Carefully taking the blade, I kept a tight grip on its hilt, ready to draw it if needed.

"Your sword's behind you. I made sure they left you those two weapons. Figured you'd want them after..."

I counted my breaths, abruptly aware of the miracle of life that I'd treated so flippantly not a moment ago, and waited until I was calm.

More pleasantly than I'd thought possible, I said, "Would you please come out to where I can see you, Dath?"

"Oh. *Duh*. You're probably still weak-"

Cutting off, Dath shuffled into view, displaying his empty palms while folding to sit on the ground. Slowly, he lowered his hands into his lap.

"I know it's stupid, considering you could have killed me in my sleep, but I need to know if I'm remembering this correctly," I said. "You wanted my help with defanging a trap, one we accidentally walked into anyway. After we were attacked, you knocked me out to slow poison's progress through my body before running to get help. Is that right?"

Nodding, Dath hung his head.

"I'm sorry, Raimie," he said. "You weren't supposed to get hurt."

Damn, he looked crushed. That plus the fact that my father had let him stay here while we'd been sleeping had me slowly breathing out, letting anger and doubt go with it.

"You mean the drowning thing? That was nothing," I said with a slight smile. "I've almost died before, remember?"

Relaxing, Dath softly laughed.

"True. It's becoming a habit of yours," he said. "A bad one to form."

"Oh, I know," I said with my smile becoming a smirk. "So, what are you doing here? I thought you'd be long gone. Or have your former comrades been taken care of?"

Dath shook his head.

"It's only been two days," he said. "Rhy hasn't had time to investigate yet."

*Two days?* No wonder my stomach was yowling at me.

"Rhylix is investigating this conspiracy? That's an interesting choice," I said. "But what about you? You didn't answer the question. Why are you *here*?"

"He's keeping watch."

My father rolled to his back, but he didn't sit up, flinging his arms over his face instead.

"If a portion of the Zrelnach is plotting against us—and by that, I mean *you*—you need someone watching your back," he said. "It'll be temporary. Until we've figured this scheme out at least."

Nodding, I said, "Makes... sense."

Hell, that had sounded tense. Flattening a surge of emotions, I somehow kept my focus on Dath.

"Thank you for doing this. It certainly would have been easier to try your luck elsewhere," I said. "I'll rest easier knowing that you're helping me keep an eye out for danger, though."

“Don’t thank me. I should fix what I did, and this is the best way to do it.”

Dath glanced between me and my father, and he must have read the room, so to speak, because he cleared his throat.

“I bet you’re hungry. I’ll... grab you some food.”

Hastening to his feet, he ducked out of the tent, and alone with my father, I took a deep breath before facing him.

Only to get attacked with a hug.

Never had I been so engulfed by love and concern, and having experienced it, I wasn’t sure I wanted to again.

The stranglehold that my father had on me told me exactly how badly I’d distressed him, though. Thrusting me away, he lightly backhanded my chest.

“*What were you thinking?* I love you, Raimie, but this was- was-”

Hissing, he pulled away from me.

“You can’t imagine what it’s like, seeing your child laid out and expecting him to die,” he said. “I- I can’t do this again. Do you understand? You have to be more careful. Promise me.”

Struck speechless by my father’s ferocity, I searched for my voice, clearing my throat once I’d found it.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” my father said. “Just-”

“Be careful. I know,” I said.

When my father didn’t reply, I shifted in place while he rubbed the back of his neck, glancing away, and the gateway to his emotions slammed closed.

“Well, then,” he gruffly said. “Now that you’re awake, can I get you anything? A book maybe? I know how much you love your reading.”

“I like *learning new information*, not reading,” I said, “but no. I don’t need anything besides food.”

As if summoned by the mention of food, Dath burst through the tent flap.

Tossing me a heel of bread, he said, “Heads up. Eledis is incoming.”

He breezed to the other side of the tent before rolling under its canvas wall, although his silhouette stayed in place once he was on the other side.

“That’s my cue,” my father said. “He won’t want me here once he sees you’re awake.”

Slapping his knees, he flowed to his feet before ruffling my hair.

“Good luck,.”

While he traded places with Eledis, they almost bumped into one another, and casting an annoyed glance at my father’s back, my grandfather came inside, pausing for a split second when he laid eyes on me. As he stopped beside the bedroll, I realized this would be the first time we’d spoken in over a week.

“What happened?” was what he opened with.

But I didn’t mind the abruptness. That was just Eledis. I saw his worry in how thoroughly he was scanning my body.

“There’s not much to it,” I said. “I was attacked while taking a walk. I ran. I got caught in sucking mud. The end.”

I hadn’t seen such a scornfully dubious look on Eledis in a while, but even though it should make me defensive, I couldn’t help but smile at it. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed my grandfather.

“You were alone on this ‘walk’?” Eledis asked. “There was no one with you?”

Best not to mention Dath right now, I thought. Here was hoping I could lie convincingly for once.

“The point of taking a walk was to get away from everyone, so no,” I said. “I was all by myself.”

Harrumphing, Eledis crossed his arms.

“What about the people who attacked you?” he asked. “Did you catch a glimpse of them before running away?”

I winced.

“Unfortunately, no,” I said. “Visibility was poor, what with the mist, and I didn’t want to stick around for a second arrow after the first one hit me.”

“You’re not giving me much to work with,” Eledis said. “I can’t find the traitors in our midst if you won’t tell me anything about them.”

Shrugging, I said, “I can tell you they were probably Zrelnach. Who else could have tracked me while I was outside camp? I can tell you that they meant to let sucking mud kill me instead of finishing me off themselves, which implies a lax attitude. I can tell you they probably weren’t alone in their plan, given who they were trying to off.”

A twitch had started beside Eledis’ eye.

“Yes, all of that seems obvious,” he said. “I’m looking for more-”

Someone burst into the tent, someone with frazzled hair outlining a face that chilled me.

“Oh, good. The rumors are true. You’re awake,” Ferin said.

Paying not a whit of attention to Eledis, she summoned a book before tossing it at me. I barely had time to drop it before another one came sailing for my face. Flustered, I managed to catch four more of them before the next one smacked me in the nose while another glanced off my shoulder. Through watering eyes, I watched Ferin ball her hands into fists by her sides.

“I’ve figured out my new lesson plan,” she growled. “It involves you *staying out of trouble* and *reading what I tell you to read*, even if I say the information is useless. I can’t get you prepared to be the king *if you’re dead*.”

Spinning on her heel, she stormed out, leaving me gaping. She’d said it. She’d actually said the ‘k’ word.

“You won’t be at all helpful, will you?” Eledis sourly said.

Rapidly blinking, I managed a squeak.

Sighing, Eledis said, “That’s what I thought.”

He stormed out, which left me grappling with what Ferin had said. Could I keep pretending that I didn’t understand what she was implying, something that I’d known to be true since Allanovian?

On top of overthrowing an evil tyrant, Ferin and the Zrelnach wanted me to become a king. Did Eledis and my father want the same thing? More importantly, what would I do about it?

I was still gaping at the tent flap when Dath crouched in front of me. Retrieving the hunk of bread from my lap, he dusted it off before offering it up again.

“You should eat,” he said, “and then, you should get some rest. Sure, you just slept for two days, but you also almost died.”

“You’re... probably right.”

While Dath found somewhere comfortable to keep watch, I mechanically lifted food to my mouth, fighting to keep my mind off of my latest complication. Worrying about it now wouldn’t do me any good. What the Zrelnach expected from me would merely be a nuisance until I’d let the idea settle. Probably.

So, once I was done eating, I lay down and emptied my mind. I doubted I’d fall asleep, but Dath had been right. I did need the rest...

*Once again, I found myself lying in a nightmare realm, but something had changed this time. The color that I'd seen while dying here had bled into the place's black, forcing a retreat, and sitting up, I examined what that ink-stained veil had hidden.*

*I was at the bottom of a well, an exact replica of where mama and I-*

*I blinked, and water had risen to my chin, climbing higher with every second. Struggling to touch the restraints pinning my legs, I took a desperate breath before I was submerged. When my lungs started burning, my search became ever more frantic, and despite myself, I wasted precious air on a laugh, sending bubbles floating over my head. I'd survived drowning on mud, and now, my dreams would have me suffocating on water.*

*"How on earth did such a stupid child come from me and your father?"*

*I barely heard my mother's voice because THIS WAS A DREAM. Alouin, I should smack myself.*

*I forced myself to take a breath, and water flooded into my lungs, igniting my chest in a blaze, and all the while, I chanted in my head.*

*'Not real. Not real!'*

*Illusory water vanished, leaving me choking on body-convulsing coughs. Damn. I hadn't needed a horrific recreation of my mother's death—the worst moment of my life—now. Or ever, really.*

*Once I'd recovered, I reluctantly examined the well, and on doing so, I groaned. The black, ever haunting my nightmares, hadn't vanished as much as I'd thought. Instead, it coated a curving wall, smooth and slick, and while color had pushed its enemy back, it was a weak victory.*

*I saw only two points of discrepancy: a weak, blue-gray patch, outlined by the well's lip overhead, and the leached brown of the ground I was sitting on.*

*Great. Apparently, this journey was multi-step. So, how did I advance the nightmare now? Climb for my freedom?*

*"Are you ok?"*

*The question sent a shudder to the depth of my core, dragging forth a host of memories.*

*Running through the forest with a boy at my side. Talking to my friend while my parents indulgently looked on. Pouring every doubt and fear on the boy while wishing he could do the same.*

*How had I forgotten?*

*With my face tilted to the gray window overhead, I twitched in place while the emptiness that was ever mine filled the smallest amount, and the restraints holding me snapped. Rubbing my legs, I unsteadily stood.*

*At my side, the wraith was leaning against unnerving black with his arms crossed, except he wasn't a WRAITH, was he? And he most certainly wasn't a stranger.*

*"I'm fine," I said before smirking, "Nylion."*

*The wraith, Nylion, jerked as if a sliver of lightning had run through him.*

*"You... remember me?" he said with such hope in his voice.*

*"Sure, I do!" I said. "You're my imaginary friend from when I was a kid."*

*Resting my hands on my hips, I turned in a slow circle, seeking a way out of this pit.*

*"I'm not sure why my mind put you in my dreams, but I won't question it," I said while biting my lip. "Is there a way to scale this wall that I'm not seeing?"*

*Having come full circle, I cocked my head. Hunched over, Nylion was shaking, and concerned, I took a step toward that hooded figure, only to be stopped short by him flinging his head into the wall.*

*He started uncontrollably giggling, but it was the saddest, most crazed-tinged display of mirth I'd heard in my life. So, I strode forward, determined to fix what was wrong.*

*When I reached to push that damn hood back, however, Nylion caught my wrist with his laughter dying.*

*"No," he said, squeezing his grip tight. "Not yet."*

*What was this intensity? Why did it make my heart hurt?*

*Whatever it was, I could answer it only one way.*

*Licking my lips, I said, "Ok."*

*And I fought not to cry when Nylion removed his hand from me. What was it about his touch that brought such a sense of completion, of a half becoming whole?*

*Rather than think about that, I asked, "What next?"*

*Pushing himself off of the wall, Nylion examined it with me.*

*"Now, I figure out how we are meant to climb this slick surface while you continue solving your real-world problems. If history is any indication, you'll have a plethora of those, waiting for you," he said. "I think, however... I think that I can once more help you in the real-world like I did when you were a kid."*

*"Right!" I said. "When I got stuck while exploring the forest, you'd help me get out of trouble. Yes?"*

*Nylion turned his hood to me.*

*"...Something like that," he said.*

*Humming, I said, "That could be useful. Do you think I'll remember this place when I wake up?"*

*"Doubtful," Nylion said. "She would never make it that easy on us."*

*"She?"*

*Ignoring me, Nylion moved closer to the wall, bending so that only a hairsbreadth of space lay between his hood and the wall.*

*"This material is fascinating," he said. "I wonder where in your imagination it came from."*

*Watching Nylion, I sucked on my teeth. This wasn't how I remembered my friend. During my childhood, he'd always been timid and ever, in all things, completely needy. Maybe he'd grown up like I had?*

*Either way, I was fed up with his enigmatic ways. I hopped to the wall, poking it in the hopes that I'd learn something new, and I certainly did that. My finger sank into disturbing black while a wholly unpleasant sensation ran from that point of contact to my neck, and with a yelp, I shook out my arm, making a face.*

*"I figured it out," I said, "and it'll be a WONDERFUL problem to solve."*

*"You touched the wall?" Nylion hissed. "What am I thinking? Of course you did."*

*Shaking his head, he repeated my experiment, bringing his finger to a barely visible mouth once done.*

*"Hell," he said around it.*

*"You see it too?" I asked.*

*"Unfortunately," Nylion growled, "and if we are to have any hope of climbing this wall in a timely manner, we will need to work together once more."*

*With a smile twitching on my face, I said, "You have an idea?"*

*"I do," Nylion said, "and you will not like it."*

## **TTS Chapter Thirty-Eight**

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