

Chapter 45: Life Is Never Fair

Raimie

How could Ren do this? It made no logical sense for her to say she loved me and then, walk away. She'd said those three, beautiful words, the ones I'd never known I needed to hear. She loved me, and I could do NOTHING about it.

Because much as it hurt to admit, Ren was right. I needed Kaedesa.

Flopping sideways, I curled into a ball, distantly aware of Nylion clutching my head to him. An overbearing voice in my head was screaming denial. *I didn't need Kaedesa. I needed nothing. Not Tiro, not my family, not the army. Nothing.*

Skills imparted through years of lessons and training had forged Nylion and I into a self-sufficient being. We could hunt and gather, had learned how to build makeshift shelters, and knew how to locate water sources, and companionship had never been an issue. So long as one of us lived, the other would exist, a friendly presence overlaying every thought.

If Nylion's companionship wasn't enough—which I had to be honest, it would be—I knew I could persuade Ren to come with me into the wilds if she gave me a chance. We could have a quiet life together, avoid Kiraak patrols, build a home to defend.

So, why hadn't I run yet? What the hell had so thoroughly ensnared me and Nylion here?

"We need Kaedesa," my other half said with his voice breaking.

Denial rose again. *We didn't need her.* Marcuset would gladly welcome her troops, and Eledis would love to have the backing of Ada'ir's court, but even those two didn't *need* her.

Who did? The Audish people? Why should I care what happened to them? I felt for them, truly, but they weren't *my* people, not yet at least. They weren't the chain that was tethering me in place.

"No," Nylion said. "*They aren't.*"

My muscles went loose, and with a lengthy hiss, the ball of flesh that was me unfurled. The soldiers, mercenaries, and gullible farm boys who'd followed me across the sea. They were my

cage.

“Our family,” Nylion said in correction.

“I know.”

Those people had trusted that a naïve boy could lead them to victory, all based on a foretelling that had backed him, and I’d brought them to a hostile land, fraught with danger and death. They were my responsibility. I needed to provide them with a refuge, and to do that, I needed more resources. So, in essence, *they* needed Kaedesa, and for their sakes, so did I.

Which meant that for the sake of those I called family, I must close my heart to the one I’d come to love and turn it to another.

Instead, I reached for the one who’d always been there, desperately seeking a sense of comfort, much as I had as a little boy. What rose to greet me from Nylion, however, was a pang that echoed my own distress, and I was unbearably grateful that our bond had been weakened. Bouncing grief from me to Nylion and back again, multiplying its strength with each pass, would culminate in me doing something incredibly rash. It had happened before.

“I am sorry, heart of my heart. Truly, I am,” Nylion said. “I wish I could give you what you need, but... I liked her too.”

“It’s...”

I couldn’t finish that thought. Hopefully, Nylion could feel how much I didn’t blame him for what he was feeling. How could I expect him to shut down his emotions when I’d never come close to doing the same?

So, what else could I do to relieve this furious energy, the pressure threatening to burst me into chunks? I needed another solution.

I needed to hit something. Maybe Tiro’s training yard was open, despite the late hour.

When I reached the front door to Tanwadur’s house, I slammed it open with more force than I’d intended, storming down the street that would lead me to the training yard.

“Raimie!” someone called behind me.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I slowed down to let her catch up.

“Have you thought about what I proposed?” Kaedesa asked, out of breath.

“Yes,” was all I said.

“And?”

That question brought me to a halt, although Kaedesa strode forward for a few more feet before noticing.

“Yes,” I hissed through my teeth. “I’ll marry you, but don’t expect me to help with the arrangements, Auntie. I’m much too busy planning a war.”

“Auntie?” Kaedesa said, wrinkling her nose. “What-? Why does that sound so familiar?”

But I was already out of sight.

The training yard’s master looked surprised to see me.

“How may I help you, Your Majesty?” he asked.

I’d gone distant, far from the world and myself. Still, I knew what I needed.

Glancing over what was available here, I said, “Looking to hit something.”

“Sure, that’s what this place is for. We don’t allow outside weapons into the yard, though, Your Majesty. Only blunted blades and the like,” the master said, flicking his eyes up and down my frame.

“I know how a training yard works,” I said.

As I unbuckled Silverblade, removing several other weapons as I did, I frowned.

“You don’t happen to stock staves here, do you?”

“Of course. We wouldn’t be much of a training yard if we didn’t supply even the poorest of weapons,” the master said, even as he juggled my recently freed blades. “But even with you unarmed, there’s still the matter of the... um. The...”

When he coughed, I sharply glanced at the man. When had *that* rumor become fact in Tiro?

“Primeancy? I didn’t plan on using it,” I said. “I need to *hit* something, not destroy it, but if it will make you happy, I can make a vow to shun all primal energy while here.”

“No, no!”

The man shook his head so vigorously that I was worried the pistol at the pinnacle of my weapons might go off.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said. “Staves are in the far-left corner.”

“Thank you, good sir.”

When I bowed to him, the yard's master flinched, and I inwardly groaned as I turned away. Seemed I still hadn't mastered the acting kingly bit yet.

This training yard had a surprisingly extensive weapons collection: swords of all types, shields, bows and arrows, pikes, and lances. As the place's master had indicated, the staves stood in the furthest corner. It was the spindliest and sparsest of the assorted weapons with only a handful here, and of those, most were poorly weighted and shoddily crafted.

They'd do.

I rubbed a thumb against one, relishing the feel of the wood's grain beneath my finger, before making a face. I missed Rhylix. He was an excellent sparring partner, always adjusting his skill level to match his opponent's. With my friend's new façade in place, would he and I get to spar like we once had?

Either way, he wasn't here now, which was disappointing because I didn't think I'd find another decent challenger in this sparsely populated yard. That was what I wanted: a fight with an evenly matched opponent, but if I couldn't have that, I'd take what was available.

When a hand landed on my shoulder, I jumped. How had someone snuck up on me...?

Well. Given my distracted state, that question seemed a bit silly once I thought about it.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Eledis said beside me, swaying in place much like Kylorian had been earlier. "I heard that Kaedesa made you a tempting offer, and I've come here, hoping I can convince you to reject it."

Was Eledis drunk?

"Well, you're too late," I said. "I've already accepted her proposal."

Pulling a staff out of its barrel, I winced. The ends of this one might be smoothly polished, but the wood in the center was still rough. If I used it, I'd get splinters in no time, so it was quickly returned to its place.

"Raimie, marrying Kaedesa is a supremely bad idea," Eledis said. "I know some things about her that you probably don't, things that might change your mind about her proposal. Come with me, and let's discuss them."

Sighing, I rounded on the old man with my hands on my hips.

"Thank you, but I'm pretty sure I know the relevant facts, Eledis," I said. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm trying to blow off some steam."

Eledis' face bloomed red.

“Insolent child. I’ve given you everything, and you spit my generosity back in my face,” he said. “Well, don’t come crying to me when you learn the great queen of Ada’ir’s many secrets.”

Spinning in place, he stalked off, leaving me boiling over inside. When had that old man ever sacrificed anything for his family?

Eledis had known about the bruises that I’d hidden beneath my clothing, passively watched when Daira’s citizens had beaten me bloody because of my primeancy. He’d forced me to participate in the violent quelling of a rebellion when I was six-years-old. He’d been an accomplice in Nylion’s banishment and the fracturing of my memories. Even after we’d moved into the forest, Eledis had only ever stayed in his damned cottage, emerging solely for forays to Fissid where he’d drunk the night away. How often had he screamed at my father when he’d thought I wasn’t listening?

By the time these indignities had finished passing through my mind, I’d already crossed the distance opening between me and him with Nylion at my side, and look! Daevetch was coating my hands.

“Eledis!” I shouted.

The old man turned, and I packed my body’s weight into my swing, connecting my fist with his cheekbone. Eledis stumbled backward, crashing through the supports of several training dummies before colliding with a fence. As its wood splintered, that loud crack drew the attention of everyone present, and on seeing the destruction unleashed among them, most sidled toward the training yard’s exit.

Having nearly fallen from the force of my punch, I righted myself, rubbing my hand, and when my grandfather peeled himself off of the fence, I threw a Daevetch bolt within inches of that white-clouded head. Eledis whipped around to look at the new break.

“A small gift from *me*,” I shouted.

With a jerking turn, I headed for the training yard’s exit with Nylion beside me.

“You meant that to be from me, yes?” he said.

Of course I did, I said, but I couldn’t say that, not without tipping him off to the fact that you’re back. I know our father might talk but...

“Best to keep things quiet for now,” Nylion said. “Thank you, heart of my heart.”

Sure.

Stopping for a moment, I pretended to look over what I’d done to this place, but I ended my inspection on Nylion.

I don’t know what to think of many things when it comes to us, including all that you’ve recently confessed, I said, but I do know I would do anything for you. Never doubt that.

With a small smile, Nylion said, “I never will.”

Setting off again, I quickly reached a shocked training yard master.

“I know. I said I wouldn’t use primeancy,” I said, “but trust me when I say that this was warranted. Even still. I’ll make sure you’re recompensed.”

The dazed man nodded, and as I left, I whistled to myself, a happy tune that was incredibly off-key, but honestly? I didn’t care about that. All I could consider was how funny it was that a single, well-deserved punch could lighten one’s mood.

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