

Chapter 49: Welcome to Daira

Raimie

I'd decided that I hated traveling by sea. When we'd left Sev behind, I'd already been queasy, and then, the sloop had ventured into the aqueous territory around the Accession Tear. I'd spent the next four days huddled on the brig's floor, rolling across it as the waves had demanded, while fighting off nausea. It had been a struggle I'd lost more often than not.

By the time we were pulled off of the sloop, poor Eledis was covered in my vomit, but I couldn't be bothered to care about that. Still mired in the depths of sickness—why the hell was land swaying like a boat?—I didn't register much between the docks and a dungeon. The only things that stuck out to me were a thick fog, hanging over everything, and fuzzy balls of light, passing by us at regular intervals.

When I was finally allowed to stay still, I curled into a ball, switching between keeping my gorge down and getting much needed sleep. Eventually, nausea loosened its claws on me, and I unfurled, noting the iron bars around me. It was sad how quickly I'd grown accustomed to the sight.

Eledis was snoring in the cell beside mine, and with no guards around, I wouldn't have a better chance at exploring this place, perhaps finding a way out in the process. I just had to escape this metal box.

Leaning against the cell's bars, I circled them to its door, but as I should have expected, it was locked. After pulling on it several times, I leaned closer to the lock, examining it.

Maybe I could pick it. That was a thing, wasn't it?

"Do you think he's forgotten about us again?"

Jerking away from the cell door, I fell into the bars beside it, staring at my twins.

"I suppose he could have. Anything's possible," one was saying. "He certainly seems aware of us now, though."

Pushing myself upright, I advanced on them with my finger leveled.

“Where the hell were you in Sev?” I growled.

One of my twins turned to the other.

“Yup,” it said. “Definitely sees us.”

The other one waved off the first, and that disdainful gesture helped me figure out which of them was which.

“A moment, ignoramus,” Bright said. “Why are you upset, Raimie? You’re the one who told us to stay out of sight when you’re in a crowd.”

“But not when I’m in danger,” I hissed.

“At no point were you in danger, though,” Dim said. “The forgetful one could never harm you, and if truly required, you could have handled the other peons there.”

...What?

Hissing, I knotted my fingers in my hair, rubbing my temples with my thumbs.

“Ok, fine. Whatever,” I said. “Look. We should renegotiate. Because I’m... one of *them*, you two will always be a part of my life. I should learn how to deal with having you around. So...”

Alouin, I’d regret saying this.

“Consider our previous agreement null and void,” I continued. “I’ll trust you to give me space when I need it.”

Bright and Dim exchanged a glance.

“He clearly doesn’t understand what I am,” Dim said.

Wincing, Bright said, “Just go with it. For now.”

Both turned to me.

“We shall do as you say,” they intoned, if with minor variations.

Hearing their voices intertwine, Dim buckled on itself, dry heaving, while Bright rubbed its arms, and I waited for them to collect themselves, barely containing myself.

Dim recovered first, wiping its mouth as it looked around.

“How’d you land yourself in prison?” it asked with amusement.

Freezing, Bright whirled on me.

“Prison?” it snapped.

“It’s not my fault!” I said. “Someone alerted Queen Kaedesa to our people’s presence, and she hasn’t decided whether we’re rebels. We’re her prisoners until then.”

Both splinters blinked at me for a moment with Dim unsuccessfully trying to speak. Bright preempted it.

“Aren’t you royalty too?” it said. “Given that, you deserve something better than this dingey cell.”

Crossing my arms, I said, “You think I haven’t considered mentioning that? If I did, though, how would I prove it? With Shadowsteal? That sword’s been missing from the world for long enough that the queen won’t know what it is, and it’s the only proof of my standing. Without it, I’m merely an upstart peasant in her mind.”

But the splinters had frozen, drilling into me with wide eyes.

“*Shadowsteal?!*” Dim screeched.

It was across the prison cell in an eyeblink with its hands curled in my tunic, and I could swear I felt pressure lifting me off of the floor, even given Dim’s incorporeal nature.

“You had Shadowsteal, and you *lost it?*” it hissed.

“It’s... not... lost,” I said, shoving Dim.

Surprisingly, the splinter staggered away from me, glaring once it had recovered its balance, but I didn’t care if I’d hurt its feelings.

“Kaedesa has it, which means it’s probably with her royal guard,” I said. “Why do you care?”

“Because, you insufferable moron,” Dim panted, “it might solve our communication issues.”

And suddenly, I was doused in shame. Pulling away from Dim, I ducked my head.

“I... didn’t know,” I said. “Of course it will! That’s why I could hear you after my Zrelnach trials.”

“If you used Shadowsteal at that time, then probably.”

Stepping between me and Dim, Bright glanced at us.

“If we could focus now, please?” it said.

After receiving our nods, it relaxed, almost imperceptibly, but I noticed.

“I assume we’re not staying here,” Bright said, “so, how are we getting out?”

Shrugging, I said, “I don’t know. Maybe I could steal a guard’s key?”

“Could you do that without them noticing?” Bright said.

Huffing, I said, “If you have another suggestion, you’re more than welcome to-”

“Oh, *come on.*”

Both Bright and I turned on Dim, who was tapping a foot. On noticing our inspection, it rolled its eyes.

“Oh, my *me*, do I really have to spell it out?” it said.

Crossing my arms, I said, “Yes, you really do.”

Lifting its eyes to the heavens, Dim extended its hands, and darkness spilled down its arms to cover them. While Bright gagged, Dim slapped the back of its hands together before making fists and dragging them apart.

“Oh.”

I smacked myself on the forehead.

“I’m such an idiot,” I groaned.

“Yes, you are,” Dim said.

It sweetly smiled when I glared at it.

“One problem with your plan, though,” I said. “I have yet to reliably call on Daevetch. It only comes if I’m in distress or in combat.”

“Try it now,” Dim said.

So, I reached for the seething mass of energy raging behind Dim, teasing at it, and as expected, nothing happened.

“I swear to me, you act like you’re solely their human sometimes,” Dim snarled, pointing at Bright. “For weeks, I’ve been waiting for you to get it but nooo...”

When I glanced at it, the Ele splinter shrugged.

“You know, Dim, you’re welcome to make a suggestion,” I said.

Dim buried its face in its hands.

“Why am I always stuck with the simpletons?” it breathed through its fingers. “Consider what I represent, Raimie. Will it respond to a wimpy plea for help or a demand for what’s rightfully yours?”

“Oh...”

I really was an idiot.

Reaching for what lay behind Dim again, I yanked it to me with no questions asked, and a sheath of black rolled over my arms. Lifting them, I giggled at my success, perhaps a bit manically, before advancing on my cell's bars. They bent like putty before me, and I stepped through the opening I'd created.

Free.

I should run while I had the chance. With what I was holding, the guards wouldn't stand a chance, and once I was out, I could go wherever I wanted. Be whoever I wanted to be.

"Release it, Raimie," Bright said.

Spinning on the splinter, I widened my grin.

"Why?" I asked. "Are you jealous?"

With a sigh, Dim said, "No. They're right, much as I hate to admit it."

It made a face.

"When it comes to using us, you're once more a baby, which means our emotional carryover is strong," it continued. "And the feeling imbued by what I represent is likely to get you caught here."

Caught? Me? Not possible. I was too strong.

"And what about Eledis?" Bright added.

Eledis. My grandfather. The man who'd once brought books home for me. I could get him out of his cell in the same way I'd done for myself, but doing so might lead to questions that I couldn't answer, and... I couldn't leave Eledis behind.

Wincing, I let dark energy seep from me, and once it was gone, I shivered. Hugging myself, I nodded to my splinters.

"Thank you."

They pretended like I'd said nothing, so I ignored them in kind, beginning my search for escape.

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