

Chapter 5: Inklings of Past Trouble

Raimie

Rhylix looked ready to leave.

With his hand on my shoulder, he said, "I'll bring you a report on what I discover in the morning."

But I didn't know if I should let him go. Despite what he might think, I knew what he meant to do tonight. Nessaira wouldn't willingly explain the inner workings of her master's kingdom to him. He'd have to force it from her.

Which would mean torture. I didn't know if that was how Rhylix phrased it to himself, but that was what it would be: making another person suffer until her will broke.

I didn't know if I could let that happen, let alone approve of my friend taking the task on.

We need that inside information, heart of my heart. In our current venture, timing is everything. You know that, Nylion said. And you certainly cannot and should not do this thing. After closing a tear and killing so many Kiraak, you are worn thin. I can tell. Please, do not stress yourself more than you must, especially when someone has volunteered to help you. If anyone can assume such a horrible responsibility with little harm done to him, it is Rhylix.

Much as I hated to admit it, Nylion was right. I considered what he'd said, especially his review of our evening, and my heart...

Gods, something awful was stirring there. I'd felt it since encountering Nessaira at Da'kul's gate, and with every passing hour, it had gotten stronger. I didn't want my friend to be here when it broke through the glass separating it from me.

So, I said, "Ok. Thanks, Rhy."

And he squeezed me.

"No problem. I'll see you later."

I watched him disappear down the stairs with a heavy heart. Gods, what had I done? What had I asked of my friend?

What was needed, Nylion whispered.

But I barely heard him. Hunching on myself, I hugged my elbows and slowly breathed out, fighting to stay numb. Whatever this was, this internal battle raging beneath the surface, I couldn't indulge in it.

I needed to get some sleep while I could because soon, Gistrick would arrive with his Zrelnach, set to accept control of this fort. When he arrived, I needed to be ready for him. Da'kul must be secured and an initial survey of its supplies completed. I needed to make sure all of this happened smoothly.

But everything that I was struggling to ignore refused to be denied. I was frozen in place, continually shoving an understanding of what I was rejecting away, but it kept creeping back into my awareness. It wouldn't *leave me alone*.

So, eventually, I stopped struggling against it. I let it come, and it rushed to the forefront.

The next thing I knew, I was huddled against the mantle with my back to the crease it made with the wall. With my arms thrown over my head, I was rocking in place and...

What was going on? Why- why was I...?

Everything was fine. I felt nothing, so why...?

But the more I considered these questions or tried to stop what was happening, the further away it all felt. From a distant place, I watched my body shake, but I couldn't focus on it.

The only thing that held my attention was the sound of a woman screaming outside. She was roaring such unkind things at an unfortunate being, although I wasn't sure how I knew that. I couldn't make out her words, just her caustic voice as it boomed around me, and I wanted it to-

"Stop! Please, stop. I'm sorry! I didn't mean to be bad. Please... please, stop. I- I'm sorry. Sorry. Pleeese..."

Was that... my voice? Gods, why did I sound so *young*? Why...? What...?

I couldn't... think. Just... gibbering... in my-

"RAIMIE!" Nylion shouted.

From my far away perch, I watched him flickering in the air, kneeling in front of me with the most pained expression on his bruised face, and when he noticed me looking at him, he slumped, if only slightly.

Lightly, he touched my rocking form.

“It is ok,” he said. “Remember where we are. This is Da’kul, in Auden. We are far away from home and far off of the ground. Nothing bad can get us up here. We are alone, right? No one can hurt us...”

He kept repeating those reassurances, and with each one, I slid further into my body until I was slotted back into place. I *saw* the room at the top of the tower around me. I *heard* the crackle of flames in the fireplace. I *felt* the rough stone at my back and my still-moving lips, even as I clamped them together.

And I was so tired.

Drooping, I barely stopped myself from faceplanting.

“What-?”

Wincing, I licked my dry lips.

“What was that?”

I... am not sure.

Nylion had disappeared, which... had I just physically seen him? Gods. I was hallucinating on top of everything else.

“I’m losing my mind,” I said. “Or maybe that happened a while ago.”

After all, I’d been talking to an imaginary person in my head for as long as I could remember.

No. That wasn’t fair. Nylion was very real.

“Are you ok?” I whispered.

Maybe if I was quiet, it would negate how loud I’d been a moment ago.

I am fine, Nylion said. You should lie down before you collapse, heart of my heart.

Oh, fuck. I was about to fall over.

Gingerly, I curled up on the floor, enjoying the warmth of its typical stone.

It does feel good, does it not? Nylion said. Close your eyes, Raimie. I will keep watch for now. We are safe.

“But!”

What had happened...

Close your eyes.

Grumbling under my breath, I did as I'd been told, and as if waiting for that moment, sleep dragged me under.

I was at the bottom of a well again. Struggling to swim again. Cursing my broken arm again.

But this time, I was holding Nylion above the water's surface... or I thought it was him. He was lighter than I'd expected. Smaller. More... delicate.

Regardless, I couldn't focus on getting us out of the well, not with him screaming in my ear.

"It's not right! It's not right! It's not-!"

Something thumped to the ground nearby, and snarling, I leapt to my feet, pulling Daevetch to my hands. Where was the threat? I'd eliminate it, keep us safe. So, where-?

At the head of the stairs, Oswin had frozen in the middle of climbing the last of them, and with a jolt running through me, I snapped my hands down.

As heat rose in my cheeks, I said, "Oswin. I'm sorry. I didn't expect you. I fell asleep..."

Waving at the floor, I trailed off, realizing how silly sleeping there instead of the room's perfectly good bed must make me look, but Oswin didn't say a word about it.

Climbing the rest of the way into the room, he said, "Well, I certainly didn't mean to disturb your rest, sir. You'll have to forgive me for the noise. I'm a bit tired myself, but then, that's what happens when you spend hours searching for the charge you're supposed to be guarding."

Right. I'd forgotten how irritated he'd been with me for insisting on infiltrating Da'kul with only Rhylix at my side.

"You've found me now," I said, shrugging with an awkward smile. "Sorry for the inconvenience."

"Think nothing of it."

Striding to me, Oswin looked down at where I'd been lying.

"If I may, sir, why were you on the ground?"

"I-"

Shit. How should I answer that? I wouldn't tell him how I'd ended up there. Not only was I unclear about what had happened, but I knew how absolutely insane it would seem to him.

"I got cold," I said. "Moved closer to the fire and fell asleep."

"Huh," Oswin said before nodding. "Makes sense."

Thank the gods. He'd accepted that bullshit excuse.

As if nothing strange had happened, Oswin clasped his hands behind his back, launching straight into business.

"If you have the time, I'd like to introduce you to a few people," he said. "You've actually met them once before, but that meeting was brief, and they've been busy with work in the months since. This is the first time they've been gathered in one place since the battle on the beach."

Was I capable of meeting new people right now? I was still rattled and if possible, even more exhausted than I'd been before falling asleep.

I didn't have a viable excuse for getting out of this, though, not when these introductions would likely be quick.

"I have the time," I said, spreading my arms wide. "Bring them on."

Grinning, Oswin glanced over his shoulder.

"You heard the man," he called. "Come on up."

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