

Chapter 51: Time In Between

Raimie

As soon as I'd returned to my cell, I slammed my back into metal, sliding to the floor and bringing my knees up so I could cradle my forehead. Then, I released Ele.

As soon as it was gone, my thoughts started racing, ticking through everything that could go wrong, and with difficulty, I shoved this bubbling frenzy aside. Oh, my father wouldn't like me detaching like this, but he wasn't here right now, was he?

How was he doing? Had he and the Zrelnach been waiting beside Sev for this last week, trying to figure out what to do?

I hoped not. Kaedesa would probably have them wiped out soon. If they were smart, my companions would have scattered by then, although some would have stuck around regardless. Probably.

My father would be where we'd left him. He wouldn't move until he knew where I was, which made my heart hurt. He was the only member of our family left free, which meant he was the only one likely to survive. Again, probably.

I hoped he'd move on, but knowing that man...

Sighing, I shook my head.

I thought Rhylix would linger near Sev too. He was the type to sacrifice far too much for his friends, but I wasn't sure if we still were friends. Sure, during our 'argument' weeks ago, he'd insisted we were, but as time had passed, I'd gotten more uncertain about that. I'd hit him, after all, hard enough to send him flying.

I banged my head on the bars, aware that I couldn't focus on that conundrum right now.

As for Dath and Ferin, the trainee would likely stick with my father and Rhylix, but again, I didn't know about that. When Kaedesa had taken me and Eledis, the conspiracy hadn't been rooted out of the Zrelnach's ranks, and after Dath's betrayal, its members probably wanted him dead. If he was like most people, he'd stick with allies in such a precarious situation.

Even with that, though, I didn't know him well enough to anticipate what he'd do. He could have returned to his post, conspiracy or not.

Ferin was much easier to predict. Once she was certain Eledis and I were a lost cause, she'd march her people back to Allanovian, and I wouldn't blame her for it.

Grimacing, I banged my head against metal again. Why was I focusing on who'd been left behind? Perhaps with it, I was distracting myself, but if so, it wasn't helping. I should be planning my next move, not...

I rubbed my face. Gods, this saving people business was difficult.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" Bright asked.

It and Dim were crouched beside me with concern blazing from their faces.

"I don't know what else to do," I told them.

They exchanged a glance, but I wasn't paying attention. Laying on the cold floor, I tried to get some sleep.

The rattle of a key in its lock woke me up, and blinking, I sluggishly got to my feet. Eledis was in much the same state while a handful of guards were standing outside of my cell, intently watching me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

They didn't answer, of course, not even when Eledis started shouting variations of the same question. As soon as the door opened, they rushed me, pinning me to the bars of my cell, and I endured their pat-down of my body with many an eyeroll.

What did they expect me to do? Slaughter them? That wasn't possible or...

Glancing at Dim, I made a face. If I'd wanted to, I could probably kill everyone here without a problem, but that just seemed... wrong.

I didn't mention this as they marched me out of my cell, past Eledis with his red-faced shouting. We entered a staircase in the cellblock's corner, hidden behind a door.

After a long climb, we emerged into sunlight, and I lifted my hands to shield my eyes. Once they'd adjusted, I stared down a host of swords and hollow tubes, frowning as I *slowly* lowered my hands.

Since arriving in Daira, I'd noticed how every guard here had a bent metal pipe hanging from their belt, but I hadn't thought much of that, assuming those pipes were part of their uniform. From the way these people were pointing them at me now, they had to be a weapon instead.

I was a little confused, though. How could a tube kill me? Sure, the guards could beat the shit out of me with it, which would eventually accomplish that goal, but it would take a long time. Stabbing me would be much more efficient.

“I won’t attack you,” I said, displaying my palms.

Gradually, the guards lowered their weapons, and I was prodded into a garden.

Once it had surrounded us, I nearly stopped short, keeping my legs moving through sheer force of will. As we marched beside a manicured lawn, I kept my head on a swivel, barely aware that my mouth was hanging open, but awe wasn’t what had caused this reaction.

“I could swear I’ve been here before,” I said under my breath.

I watched a child version of me climb that oak tree, looking for a place to read, or race across the grass, laughing with his imaginary friend. It was a disconcerting sensation, one that wouldn’t relent. So, when a noise cracked through the air up ahead, I welcomed the distraction with relief.

As we moved along, the popping noises got louder until I realized we were headed toward it, and at my side, Bright shrunk on itself while Dim looked increasingly intrigued.

The guards led me into a section of the garden, cordoned off by trellises. Here, we found an archery range, although the practice dummies in it had blackened rings around their wounds and far too much straw spilling behind them.

Opposite this, a picnic table sat on cobblestones with a pair of attendants standing behind it. On the table, variants of the guards’ bent pipes lay in parallel fashion, but what rested above them, perpendicular to their pattern, zeroed my attention, toppling me into the most tunnel-visioned state I’d ever achieved.

Shadowsteal, the sword I’d abhorred since finding it, waited for me there, and I longed to touch it. In a blink, Dim and Bright were standing there, greedily devouring the table’s contents, before lifting avid eyes to me.

“This belongs in your hand,” Bright said.

“Claim it, Raimie,” Dim added.

I wanted to. *Gods*, I wanted to, even if temporarily.

But first.

Dragging my eyes off of Shadowsteal, I focused on the woman who was standing at the range’s ready line. Today, Queen Kaedesa was an entirely different person from the one who’d caught me and my grandfather in Sev. Rather than the commoner’s clothing that she’d favored then, she was wearing a magnificent gown, all silk and lace. Instead of a simple bun, her hair was piled into an intricate arrangement, and a regal air hung heavy on her now.

Hell. The Queen of Ada’ir had summoned me, not half a day since my jaunt outside of my cell. Did she know? Why had she brought me here? Oh, gods, if this was an interrogation and I was to do it alone—which really, I should have expected—then I was doomed.

Kaedesas finished fiddling with the hollow tube she was holding, pointing it at a target. She pulled on a lever, wedged into the crook of its angle, and a deafening bang ripped through the air, right as a target's heads was blasted off of its shoulders.

"Fuck!" I shouted.

Although with my ears ringing, my voice had been silent for me.

I stumbled backward, tripping on myself, and one of the guards caught me, as if expecting my reaction. What the godsdamn hell had that been? It- it-

Swinging my gaze between the decapitated target and the queen, I couldn't breathe; my heart was jammed so hard into my throat, and the sight of Dim, manically jumping in place, only mitigated this by a fraction.

When Kaedesas beckoned, an attendant hurried forward to take the weapon from her, all while she removed something from her ears.

"-one of Oswin's designs?" I picked out of the world's buzz.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Shaking her head, Kaedesas said, "I should have expected as much. All right. Send the prototype to the smithy. See if they can recreate it."

"And the rest?" the attendant asked.

Kaedesas glanced at the table with a frown.

"The same," she said, "but make sure they're lower priority."

Bowing, the attendant said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

She gathered the other tubes while Kaedesas faced me, clapping her hands in front of her nose.

"Ah, yes. My newest guest," she said.

Looking me over, she scowled.

"Why is he in shackles?" she snapped. "Take them off immediately!"

The guards exchanged a glance before one of them stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, based on what happened last night, your palace guard is hesitant to leave him unbound around you," he said. "Your safety-"

"I've read the report, sergeant. Even with that, I'm confident that I can defend myself," Kaedesas said, pulling a tube out of her skirt's pocket to show him. "Plus, Raimie wouldn't hurt me, would

you?”

When she turned her eyes on me, I stiffened.

“No. Causing you harm in your stronghold would be stupid. If I tried that, I wouldn’t make it out alive,” I said, “and I don’t hurt people. It’s the decent thing to do, after all.”

Something crossed Kaedesa’s face at that, but it quickly cleared, and she waved at the guards.

“You heard him. Release him and leave,” she said with the weight of a command behind it.

With many a quiet grumble, the guards did what she’d said, and rubbing my wrists, I watched them disappear behind a trellis.

“Please, join me,” Kaedesa said.

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