

# Chapter 57: Staying Alive

## Raimie

Once I was inside the castle, I crept through it on silent feet, perfectly aware that while I might be invisible, other people could probably still hear me. When I ran across my first guard, I froze while she strolled past, yawning. I cringed in place until she disappeared around a corner, and after she had, it took considerable effort not to release my held breath in a burst.

I was invisible. Actually invisible. That was... gods.

As I hurried toward my goal, I could swear I was on top of the world. Every time Ele and Daevetch started to feel commonplace, another application came around to remind me that *I had magic*.

Hell, if only the Raimie who'd just learned he was a primeancer could see me now. It was amazing how drastically using primal energy had changed my view on it. I'd never forgotten what a death sentence it would be, if I was ever found out, but before that happened, I *would* enjoy this.

Once I reached my destination, I leaned against the wall opposite a set of doors, waiting for the coming guard change. I'd been here a few times before, but it had always been with an escort. Fortunately, figuring out the castle guard's shifts had been fairly simple, which had surprised me. Shouldn't security for a queen be... *better*?

For a little while, I'd thought the patrol patterns were so predictable because Kaedesa's famed spies, most notably her Hand, gave her an extra line of defense, but in the time I'd been here, I hadn't seen a sign of one.

Keeping to the shadows was, of course, part of a spy's job, but seeing nothing in three months? That seemed strange.

What did I know, though? Court life and political intrigue were still new to me.

The next shift's guards soon arrived, but before the two they were replacing could leave, the new arrivals had to secure their assigned room. When they entered it to make their check, I slipped in behind them. I waited until they'd left before letting my source retract to its starting point.

"All right," Dim said beside me, rubbing their hands together. "This will be fun."

Rolling my eyes at them, I started my search of Queen Kaedesa's bedroom. Hopefully, I'd find Shadowsteal here.

I'd looked everywhere for it: the throne room, the entrance hall, Kaedesa's personal weapons collection. Nothing. When the queen had first summoned me here several weeks ago, I'd noticed the plethora of finely crafted weapons scattered across her bedchamber, but I'd never gotten a chance to inspect them, and I'd delayed with searching this place because.... well.

*It was the Queen of Ada'ir's bedroom.*

But with things looking desperate, I found myself here, breathlessly examining a familiar room in the dark of night. Without light to illuminate it, it felt more cavernous than it had in the past, and I took trepidatious steps across its woven rugs, starting a slow circuit of the room.

I passed a wardrobe, vanity, and divider, flushing at the memory of when I'd accidentally seen Kaedesa changing behind that last piece of furniture. As always, when I passed King Belqarim's portrait, I bowed, ever giving respect to the man who'd led this kingdom when I was born. Kaedesa, of course, got much more of my esteem, given all the shit that she'd had to put up with in the years since, but even still, I bowed to her deceased husband.

As I made my way to the doors that led onto the balcony, I found many wonderful and fantastic instruments of death, but none of them were what I sought. Before I knew it, I was a few paces from the room's bed, and the sight of Kaedesa, asleep with her hair splayed around her head, stopped me short. I'd never seen her so unguarded before.

"Go on. You know you want to get in there with her," Dim said with a wicked grin. "Imagine what that smart mouth of hers could do if you gave her the right nudge."

I snapped my head to the splinter, half aware of Bright popping from behind Dim to my side.

*"You're disgusting,"* we hissed together.

Dim only laughed, as if they'd told a brilliant joke, and I wanted to *slap them silly*. Before I could, however, Bright puffed up, seeming to tower over Dim, and the Daevetch splinter took a step back.

"No," Bright growled. "I will... *ignore* many of your despicable habits, but you will not do or say things of that nature when around me, or our association is over. NO."

With saucers for eyes, Dim slowly raised their hands.

"Ok. Understood," they said. "I'm sorry."

*No, you're not,* I said.

But then, I squinted at a small table beside the bed. A stack of journals, much like the one Kaedesa had used during our first meeting, was sitting on it. Over the last three months, I'd seen her using those on and off. I'd always wondered what she was recording in them.

Flashing a grin, Dim said, "I'm glad at least *you* understand me."

“Ugh. I can’t even-”

Vigorously scrubbing their face, Bright released a frustrated shriek into their hands while I glided around the bed.

*Stop, Bright. They can’t help their nature, I said, and now that they know how deeply we dislike that sort of behavior, they won’t do it again.*

Picking up the topmost journal from a stack of them, I flipped it open, frowning at what I found. Unintelligible scrawl filled the page—a shorthand, maybe?—but it was organized into entries, each labeled by date. Unlike with most private journals, however, there was a lengthy entry for every day of this week, and as I continued flipping through the journal, this trend continued. How curious.

Disappointed that I wouldn’t get a deeper look into Queen Kaedesa’s mind, I replaced the journal.

“Balancer,” two voices breathed behind me.

I jerked toward my splinters so quickly that I nearly knocked the journal stack over. Dim and Bright were staring at me with the same aura of fragile awe that they’d worn months before, apparently having forgotten their recent argument, and a shiver ran down my spine.

*Don’t do that, I snapped. If you insist on turning into resentful assholes every time I bring that word up, then you don’t get to talk about it either.*

I’d gotten past the sitting area in the room’s corner before either of them replied.

“I suppose that’s fair,” Bright said.

*You SUPPOSE?*

Something about a weapons display, hanging from the wall ahead, caught my eyes, and I hurried toward it. This search was taking too long.

“It *is* fair,” Dim sighed.

Rolling my eyes, I said, *Thank you.*

But then, I recognized the sword in front of me, and I forgot my splinters. Reverently, I lifted Silverblade off of the display it had been hanging from with my lips parted.

How had this gotten here? That Zrelnach... Jeme had said she’d get it into good...

A slip of parchment, attached to the sword’s cross guard, fluttered to the ground, and for a moment, I stared at it, scowling. How had I missed that?

Absently, I tucked Silverblade under my arm while retrieving the piece of paper. Unfolding it, I froze when I saw that the note inside was addressed to me, but then, my eyes were flying over its words.

Raimie,

*It is with great sorrow and regret that I must inform you I've come to a decision about your status in my kingdom.*

*First, I want you to know that this was not my first choice. I've thoroughly enjoyed having you here. Hearing about everything you've done while in Daira—my librarian's outrage at your intrusions in their workplace my favorite bit of mischief by far—has been a joy, and as I've come to know you, I've grown to like who you are. Your intelligence, ingenuity, and wit put my courtiers to shame, and from the glimpse of it that you've shown me, I know your kindness is vast. I would hate to deprive the world of such a talented youth.*

*I'm afraid, however, that this is what I must do.*

*Outside forces have pressured me into this decision, people who believe you're a rebel. After our time together, I know that even if you are one, it was a role you unwittingly accepted, but I haven't convinced others to share my certainty.*

*Thus, this note. I'm hoping that soon, you'll come to collect what's yours, and when you find it missing, you'll accept this gift, along with my message, instead. I know it's not the blade you wanted, but it's what I can surrender for now.*

*Raimie, please heed my words. Flee while you can. Leave the old man behind because he isn't who you think he is. Unlike you, my decision about him was made long ago.*

*So, I beg you. For once, think of yourself first, and save your life.*

*Thank you for the most diverting few months that I've had in years. May we meet again under more favorable circumstances.*

*-Kaedesa*

"Shit," three voices muttered together.

I dropped the note and ran. Bursting through the doors, I heard guards shouting for me to stop, but I'd soon left them behind, careening through the castle.

Frantically, I pulled my source around my body. Yes, my slapping feet were echoing down the corridor, but if a possible hostile couldn't see where I was coming from, it would give me a slight advantage.

When I reached the hall my room opened onto, I didn't stop. I barreled for the guard stationed outside of it, even as he turned toward my clatter. At the last second, I dropped my bubble, and the guard's eyes sprang open, right as I tackled him.

I was upright the second we hit the ground. Taking hold of the guard's head, I smashed it into the flagstones until he went limp. Then, I pressed my fingers into his neck. On feeling a steady pulse, I

slumped over him for a moment, catching my breath, but as soon as I could, I leapt to my feet.

Barging into my room, I shouted, “Eledis, that plan of yours better be ready because we need to-”

Clicking my teeth together, I pulled up short, teetering in place. In front of a cracked-open window, Eledis was sitting in our only chair, and a man wearing a military uniform was standing over him.

## **TTS Chapter Fifty-Seven**

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