

Chapter 11: Expectations

Raimie

As the memory I'd just re-experienced faded away from me, I stared at a familiar stone ceiling with a frown and my brow furrowed.

'...been here before?' I mouthed before speaking aloud. "The Esela aren't extinct."

A snort answered me while something clattered to the floor.

"Hardly."

After a moment, Rhylix leaned over me with something clutched in his fist.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

I was back on the cot with a blanket pulled over me. How had I gotten here? And...

Glancing to either side, I frowned. Where had Bright and Dim gone?

"Raimie?"

Right. The question.

"I'm fine," I said. "Confused but fine."

"Wonderful! I can check head injuries off of my list, then. I wasn't sure for a moment there."

I winced. My behavior before probably had seemed crazy. For a moment, I'd become like a feral animal.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have exploded on you," I said. "Can I make it up to you-?"

A crunch interrupted me, which had me whipping my head to Rhylix again. He dug at something in his closed fist before popping it into his mouth. With his brow furrowed, he chewed for a moment before extending what he was holding to me.

"Pistachio? They're pre-shelled. It's the last of my stash from when they last came through the nearby tear," he said. "I've been saving them for a special occasion."

My mouth was gaping open. I knew this, but I couldn't bring myself to close it. What the hell was this man doing?

Grinning, Rhylix jiggled his fist.

"Come on," he said. "You must be hungry."

Hungry was an understatement. Slowly, I lifted a bandaged hand, palm up, and Rhylix shook a few nuts onto it. Now to figure out how I'd get them into my mouth. While that conundrum occupied me, Rhylix walked out of view, presumably to retrieve something.

"You're a strange one, Raimie of the line of Audish kings," he said. "And I don't mean your purported bad behavior from before. The propensity for violence that you showed is normal for me but receiving an apology after the fact? That, I'm unused to."

Dropping a chair to the floor beside my cot, Rhylix plopped into it, leaning his arms and chin on its backrest.

"Also, I wasn't referring to how you reacted to me when I mentioned a head injury," he said. "That was mostly said in jest, although you did pass out for a moment."

I had? Maybe a spot of unconsciousness explained how I'd gotten on the cot again.

"Funny," I said.

Having chased nuts around on my palm this whole time, I gave up, slapping them into my mouth instead. Rhylix watched this with a faint smile, retaining any offers of help, as if he'd known that was what I'd wanted.

Once the snack was gone, he said, "You're taking the revelation of my people's existence rather well, all things considering."

"It's one of the least strange things I've learned recently," I said, meaning it. "How should I be acting?"

"Oh, I don't know."

Making a face, Rhylix clung to the chair's back as he dangled away from it.

"Showering me with disdainful comments like 'gray-eyed bastard'. Looking for a pitchfork. Secretly plotting my death. That sort of thing."

As Rhylix swung forward once more, beaming, I tried to fit his expectations into what I knew of the Esela and came up blank.

"Why would I do anything like that?" I asked. "The Esela are amazing! I loved stories about them growing up. Is- is it true that you can use magic?"

Rhylix's upbeat countenance fell from him like a stone over a cliff.

"Yes. Illusion work, conjuration or summoning, and shape change," he said in a hollow voice. "Please don't ask for a demonstration. I despise Esela magic."

Yes, I could see that.

"Then, I won't," I said. "I was mostly asking because bizarre things have been happening to me lately..."

Why was I sharing this, something that might get me ostracized or killed, with a relative stranger? People weren't accepting of oddities in this part of the world.

"You know what? It doesn't matter. Our world's second race, which I'd thought long-vanished, still exists. I'm glad to know it. Makes me curious about other lost phenomena, such as primeancers and the like," I said, wincing when I thought about what I'd said.

Most people didn't like to talk about the magic wielders from ages ago.

"But I was wondering if we could discuss something else. Namely... where I am and how I'm alive."

The bare minimum of life returned to Rhylix's face, and he cocked his head as if deciding which story to tell. An overabundance of giddiness returned to him as he lifted a finger to twirl it.

"You sit in Allanovian, last haven of the Esela in Ada'ir," he said. "I doubt you've heard of it, seeing as how you believed my people were extinct, but I have to ask..."

At his expectant look, I shook my head.

"I thought not. From what your father told me, your homestead lies outside the radius of our typical trading runs, although..."

Rhylix paused thoughtfully before making a face.

"Never mind about that. Anyway, Allanovian is a city burrowed into a mountain, led by a four-person Council. You'll have to convince them that you're worthy of staying here soon, but we'll get to that in a moment," he said. "As for how you're alive, that answer's simple. I saved you."

Grinning, he stopped as if that explained everything, and if I weren't so tired, I might have gotten up to shake the man.

"Care to elaborate?" I drawled.

Rhylix's smile grew, lengthening until his teeth showed from between his lips.

"No," he said.

"Will you please do so anyway?" I growled.

The smile slipped away, still present but with something infinitely sad behind it now.

"Where should IS tart?" Rhylix quietly asked.

"I don't know!" I said. "I was fighting a monster, trying to save my dad's life, but my story ends there. I must have blacked out."

"You did, but it was understandable, given what was done to you. Honestly, I'm amazed you stayed conscious for as long as you did," Rhylix said, "especially in the face of Teron's famed battle magic."

Teron. I had a name for the monster who'd massacred a town full of people.

"You know this Teron?" I asked.

Shifting in place, Rhylix said, "I know of him. He's fairly famous among the Esela because of his magic. Like I said."

That made sense. In a way. Did that make Teron an Eselan or simply another type of magic wielder? I wouldn't be surprised to learn that other thaumaturges existed.

"So, how did I go from helpless at Teron's feet to lying safely here?" I asked.

Rhylix shrugged, rocking his chin on the back of the chair.

"Luck mostly," he said. "I happened to be near Fissid that night. I happened to catch sight of your fight. I happened to surprise Teron, pinning the bastard to a tree."

A viciously triumphant grin cracked his mask for a moment.

"Then, it was a simple matter of fixing you and your father up, loading you into my cart, and returning to this place," he finished.

"Fixing... us... up," I said. "You're a healer."

Of course he was. Who else randomly showed up to a clinic when they weren't injured?

"Indeed," Rhylix said with a nod.

"Then, can you tell me...?"

Hesitantly, I lifted my hands, unsure if I wanted an answer to my unspoken question.

"Oh, those are fine," Rhylix said, waving away my concern. "Your ribs were of greater concern. They'd pierced one of your lungs, and wasn't that fun to fix?"

Licking my lips, I asked, "So, I'm not...?"

How to finish that question?

"You're whole, Raimie," Rhylix softly said, "and if I have any say in it, you will remain as such."

How did I fight this burn in my eyes? How could I express this growing gratitude?

As my view of the clinic misted over, I said, "Thank you. For saving my life. For helping me when you could just as easily have avoided danger. I am in your debt."

Pursing his lips, Rhylix examined me for a moment.

"Don't do that," he eventually said. "Never place yourself under someone's sway, especially not a stranger. You hardly know me."

"I know you well enough," I retorted. "No one with evil in their heart goes out of their way to help someone like you did."

Rhylix looked like he wanted to protest, so I continued to my next concern, never giving him a chance to speak.

"How's my dad?" I asked. "The last bit of his fight didn't look good."

"Aramar is alive," Rhylix said with a sigh. "I'm sure he'll come see you soon. Him and Eledis."

Fatigue fell from me as I shot upright.

"Eledis is here?" I asked.

Rhylix straightened in his chair, making a face as he did so.

"Unfortunately," he said. "He and the Council have been screaming at one another for hours. It's put Allanovian into an uproar."

Why was Eledis here? I hadn't seen him in Fissid. How had he known to come here if he hadn't followed Rhylix, and... where was here, relative to Fissid? How far had I been dragged from home? Most importantly, though-

"How long was I out?" I asked. "Also, you mentioned your Council before. Something about proving myself to them?"

"Yes. Yes, I did," Rhylix sighed.

He rubbed his face. Repeatedly. Almost as if he was delaying with his response.

"In answer to your first question, you've been asleep for about a day," he said through his hands. "It's nearly sundown once more."

Damn. I'd lost a lot of time. If I'd slept for so long, though, why was I still fatigued? Was it merely due to my weeks-long sleep debt, accrued from before this fiasco began, or did my body really need that much rest to heal?

Speaking of fatigue.

Swaying in place, I considered how I'd get my head on a pillow once more, and pulling his hands away from his face, Rhylix clicked his tongue, rising to help me.

"Maybe we should wait on the Council business for now-" he started.

"No. Please, don't," I interrupted. "I hate having things hanging over my head, and with the way you're acting, this thing seems like it'll be bad for me. So, just tell me what it is."

Slumping, Rhylix said, "Ok."

Flipping his chair around, he sank into it, crossing his legs and folding his hands on his knee.

"So you know, your attitude toward the Esela isn't typical for humans. Usually, our world's primary race treats my people with nothing but hostility," he said. "This conduct has fostered a certain stance among Allanovian's citizens, namely one of disdain for humans. Some here believe you're nothing more than scum in need of scouring from the earth, the idiots.

"Very few of your race are allowed into this village, and when one is, they're forbidden from carrying weapons and must follow a strict set of rules. Even rarer is when one of you can so clearly display your worth that Allanovian considers you of equal status. This demanding accomplishment is what you must achieve once you've healed."

Was Rhylix serious? I was enjoying the 'hospitality' of people who didn't think I was a person. How was that possible?

The Eselan looked at me as if expecting an answer, but I didn't know what to say. Should I share that I didn't give a damn what Allanovian's people thought of me? That I understood, in part, how subjugation could turn the oppressed against the oppressor?

"I have two questions," I eventually said. "First of all, why? Why would I care to impress people who act as you've described? If they need payment for what they've provided, then I'll give it in whatever way I can, but then, I mean to leave. I don't need anything found in Allanovian. I don't think."

"You'll need the village's warriors," Rhylix said with amusement. "The Zrelnach are considered the most elite fighting force on this side of the Narrow Sea. Could be useful to you, yes?"

Frowning, I asked, "Why would I need that?"

The look on Rhylix's face gave me pause. Bewilderment quickly gave way to an interesting mix of pity and muted fury.

"Don't you know your role yet, Shadowsteal's keeper?" he said. "Surely someone's explained it to you by now."

Role? What was he talking...?

Oh.

"Do you mean the one where I'm supposed to stop an evil overlord because a foretelling says so? A little trite, don't you think?" is aid. "How do you know about Shadowsteal or who my family is? Did dad share?"

Without a word, Rhylix stared at me until I had to shift my gaze away, squirming.

"You're not taking this seriously."

Tensing, I flattened my body into the cot. Something had lain in the other man's voice, something dangerous and barely contained. Even still, I spoke what had been on my mind since stumbling into a light-filled clearing, keeping each of my words calm. Controlled.

"I don't know how to handle what's happened recently. From my point of view, I learned that I'm from a displaced royal line a few hours ago while the days between were spent in various states of consciousness. I'm still deciding whether I believe what my family has claimed, so of course I'm reacting to it like I do with every stressor: with flippancy

"How I'm acting and speaking, however, don't mean I'm ignoring the seriousness of my family's proposed course of action. I have every intention of doing as they say until I can decide what I think about their claim, but don't expect me to be rational, forward thinking, or put together right now. I'm- I'm barely-

Since finding Shadowsteal, I'd focused solely on each moment because if I looked at the big picture—*everyone in Fissid was dead*—I might fly to pieces. I'd nearly reached that state now. Only slow and steady breathing was holding me together.

"Ok."

Slowly, I turned to Rhylix, and he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, nodding at me.

"I shouldn't have pushed you like that. I'm sorry," he said, "and I'll do everything I can to help you through the next few days.

"Why would you go out of your way for me?" I asked.

Shrugging, Rhylix said, "Because you need the help. But you had two questions, yes? So, what's the second one?"

In the moment's tension, I'd almost forgotten about our original subject. What else had I wanted to know?

"How do I impress Allanovian's Council?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, you only have one way to gain their approval," Rhylix said. "You must undertake the Zrelnach trials."

Zrelnach... trials? As in the elite warriors he'd mentioned? As in an initiation rite of some sort?

"I do what now?" I squeaked. "Have you seen me, Rhy? I'm not a fighter."

A pained expression crossed Rhylix's face before he cocked his head with amusement blooming in its place.

"Perhaps you don't know what you're capable of," he said. "But we can discuss this in the morning. You need rest, and I'm late for a... meeting."

I didn't want to wait until morning, not with anxiety buzzing under my skin, but my body was protesting how long I'd stayed awake.

One problem lay in any of my attempts to fall asleep, though.

"I don't suppose you have a fancy tincture that'll keep me from dreaming, do you?" I asked. "I have... nightmares."

"I know."

After fiddling in a pocket, Rhylix offered a withdrawn vial to me.

"You mumbled and thrashed something fierce while on the way here. Aramar had to hold you down so you wouldn't worsen your injuries."

Flushing, I accepted the tincture.

"I'm sorry to have caused trouble," I said, fidgeting with the vial. "Will you tell my dad I'd like to see him? if you run across him, I mean."

We should talk.

"I'll let him know you've returned to us," Rhylix said with a smile. "Now, take your medicine, Raimie."

Downing it as bidden, I gagged at its awful taste before returning the emptied vial to Rhylix. While he rose from the chair, I struggled to lift the weights that were already dragging my eyelids down. As I lost this fight, Bright flickered into existence with its hum filling the air, but—

"No! Do not leave me-!" a familiar voice called in my head.

—what words might have formed in its buzz were wiped out by a glorious lack of dreams.

TTS Chapter Eleven

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