

Chapter 12: Facing the Tribunal

Rhylix

I'm the one who pushed you toward our lives' destruction.

The human boy's body slackened into sleep, and I watched the first rise and fall of his chest with thin lips.

"You like this one," my constant nuisance said at my side.

"Perhaps."

I had yet to determine the answer to that question. It had been ages since my barren heart had held the capacity for even the most basic of connections, but Raimie had come close to nudging me into it. He was so earnest and in some ways, untouched by the world's evils, so lost in the face of his life's upheaval, but he also... wasn't.

I'd seen coiled violence in Raimie when we'd fist met. For a moment, the teenager's eyes had unfocused, and he'd looked like every experienced fighter I'd ever met.

"I don't know whether I should be horrified or pleased that your ally has made an impression this time."

Sinking onto the cot, my constant nuisance played its fingers in the air above Raimie's face.

"This one's fascinating," it said. "It's been centuries since I've encountered someone who's yet to pick a side."

"I saw your counterparts hovering over him earlier," I said, crossing my arms. "One of yours and one of theirs together. Shouldn't that be impossible?"

"Not as much as you might think," my constant nuisance said. "Don't you have a 'meeting' to attend?"

Well, that had clearly been a brush-off. Clicking my tongue, I spun in place, leaving the nuisance sitting beside Raimie. At my clinic's entrance, a Zrelnach trainee was shifting from foot to foot, and as I approached, his relief was palpable.

"Thank you for letting me finish here," I said.

"it was the least I could do," Dath said. "Is that the human?"

He peered into the clinic with sick fascination in his eyes.

"His name is Raimie," I said, "and yes."

As I started down the hall, I made sure to stare straight at today's shadow when I passed her. What was the point of feigning ignorance now? They knew that I was aware of their watching eyes. They had to, now that I'd snuck past them not only when I'd left Allanovian but also twice upon returning, once with Raimie and once with Aramar. They'd only noticed my intrusion with the older man, and only Aramar's mention of Gistrick, his friend among the Zrelnach, had saved his life in that tense moment.

I'd been wary of leaving someone who knew my greatest secrets with Allanovian's elite warriors. If Aramar decided to blab, fighting my way to freedom through the Zrelnach would be irritating, but at the moment of his departure, I couldn't think of a reason for him to stay at my side. I'd have to trust in his gratitude, the only thing keeping him quiet.

Maybe if I hadn't been so exhausted, I could have kept Aramar with me, but I was going on...

Frowning, I counted on my fingers. The daylight hours after leaving Allanovian. The night to complete my work outside of Fissid. Making the return trip. From morning until halfway through the afternoon, getting my human companions into the village. The rest of the evening, spent explaining what I'd done while waiting for Raimie to wake up. The teenager had done that as the sun had been setting, which meant...

A day and a half. I'd been awake for a day and a half, and my lack of sleep had begun to affect me, which wasn't good considering what I was headed to do.

"Um... Rhylix?" Dath said at my back. "You missed the entrance."

Stopping short, I took note of my surroundings while vigorously shaking my head.

"So I have," I said. "Thank you, trainee."

"No problem," Dath said.

He flashed me a toothy grin, which made me pause before entering.

"Why did they send you to fetch me, I wonder?" I said.

"I imagine it had something to do with this—"

Dath waved his splinted arm in the air.

"—and the fact that I'm the only person you've warmed up to in years."

They thought I'd made friends with this boy?

In a way, it made sense. I'd shared drinks with him and treated an injury that his instructors would have made him suffer through. To others, it probably looked like I'd become friendly with Dath, but I hadn't. I'd only done what had seemed right in each moment.

"I see," I said.

How could I divest myself of this boy before he got hurt?

"I was wondering if I might ask for a favor," Dath blurted.

Raising an eyebrow, I said, "You can always ask."

Dath squirmed in place, which had me tapping my finger against my thigh, but the trainee gathered his courage soon enough.

"My instructors told me about you. I never would have guessed..."

At my glare, Dath gulped.

"Will you please let me fight you?" he squeaked.

Predictable. Fight came easily to the eager, the quick-tempered, and the young. Those yet to be disillusioned.

This would, however, be an effective means of distancing Dath before I left. He'd want to train before our proposed fight.

"Why not?" I said. "But only after your arm heals."

"Yes!" Dath yelped. "Thank you!"

"It's nothing."

It truly wasn't.

"May I enter now?"

"Oh, right. I forgot why we're here," Dath said. "Good luck in there, Rhy."

And I tensed.

-lix. It was Rhylix. Why had people been insisting on shortening my name today?

"Hopefully, I won't need luck," I said.

Striding down the corridor we'd been standing beside, I soon entered the chamber at its end, and after reading the room's mood, I internally winced.

Oh, I was fucked. I'd expected they'd be upset but this...

Four people were waiting for me here, the varied members of Allanovian's Council. Ferin, my only ally, gave me a weak smile from the corner she was slouched in, and I returned it as best I could, ignoring the other three.

Shafoth, the Councilman in charge of feeding Allanovian, remained a relative unknown to me, as he'd been appointed to the position last year, but the man's previous decisions had trended more logical in nature, which might benefit me. I'd see soon enough.

The other two hated me, each for his own reason. Hemly, who oversaw the care of Allanovian's youths, blamed me for the disgrace of his cousin, the last Zrelnach commander. Yrit, Allanovian's arbitrator and treasurer, loathed me because I came from outside the city, a dislike that applied to anything that lay beyond these stone walls.

These men stood in a loose circle, chatting when I arrived, but as I took my position in front of them, they fell silent. The Council, including Ferin, seemed intent on ruining my ease, staring at me with not a word spoken.

Did they think I'd lose my patience and cause a scene? If so, I couldn't blame them for that. A short temper had been part of the persona that I'd presented in this city, but that presentation wasn't *me*, merely another layer in my mask. One they'd stripped away.

I wished they'd get on with this, though. Before Raimie woke up again, I'd like to get some sleep of my own, and more chores besides attending to the Council's pleasure awaited me before I could partake in that indulgence.

With fatigue eating at me, I rocked back on my heels, distractedly humming under my breath. Would my constant nuisance keep watch over Raimie until I could return? Already, that teenager seemed to attract trouble, and I wasn't comfortable with leaving him alone yet. I wouldn't be comfortable with that until after I'd assessed his capabilities.

"I'm sorry. Do you not understand why you're here?" Yrit snapped. "Troublesome brat that you are, you should be well acquainted with what we do in this room."

Cutting my hum off, I looked about the plain chamber and sighed.

"I have stood here often enough, haven't I?" I said.

Before Yrit could snap at me again, Ferin left her corner to join the men.

"Why don't you tell us what happened, Rhy?" she asked.

They didn't already know? It seemed obvious to me.

Maybe they hadn't questioned Aramar yet, though, or perhaps Ferin was hoping the details that only I could provide would help excuse my behavior. I sincerely doubted that would happen, but what harm was there in talking?

"I've been getting restless lately," I said with a shrug.

Technically true.

"Even years since I arrived here, I haven't gotten used to Allanovian's enclosed confines. As always when this happens, whether you know about it or not, I set out to spend time under an open sky, but I traveled a bit further than I usually do yesterday.

"Seeing flames on the horizon, I decided to investigate. With it being dry season, I was worried that the fire might rage long enough to reach Allanovian's forest.

"When I reached Fissid, I found the fire constrained by a surprisingly full creek. I also found the two humans that I brought back with me. With both badly injured, I thought returning to Allanovian would be best. Here, I'd have full access to my supplies, meaning I wouldn't need to rely on magic to heal them."

"You did this, fully aware of our policy about the inferior race?" Hemly snarled. "You've polluted Allanovian with their presences!"

I hadn't been finished with my tale, but this interruption might help my case more than the rest of what I'd meant to say.

Cocking my head, I asked, "How?"

"How?" Yrit sputtered. "You brought *humans* into our midst, spreading their filth through this city!"

"As far as I was aware, these humans have visited Allanovian before with nothing to stop them from doing it again," I said, "or has the Audish royal family's open invitation here been rescinded?"

Yrit worked his jaw while Shafoth chuckled at his side.

"So, you've learned who they are, have you?" he said.

"With the village in an uproar over Eledis' arrival, it was hard not to," I said. "Am I wrong about their right to be here?"

"No."

Crossing her arms, Ferin watched me with an unreadable expression.

"Of all the humans in Ada'ir, this nations King or Queen and the Audish royals have always had leave to walk down our halls," she said.

"Because of a promise our ancestors made generations ago!" Hemly protested. "Surely they can't expect us to honor that promise three centuries later."

"Yes. They can."

As I'd spoken, each of my words had been coolly bitten off, which had the Council members jerking back toward me.

"The only reason you're here instead of suffering under Doldimar's reign is because of that family," I continued. "You owe your very existence to them."

At that, Hemly bristled as if to speak, but Shafoth cut him off.

"He's right," he said. "Auden's last king brought our ancestors with him when he fled his kingdom. He could have left them there."

"That doesn't mean we have to uphold a promise made-!"

"We can discuss it later," Ferin snapped. "Let's get on with our business. Rhy has provided a reasonable explanation for the crime you lot would accuse him of. Do we have any other reason to keep him from his duties?"

"We have plenty of them," Yrit growled. "This... man has admitted to leaving Allanovian without supervision, breaking an agreement he made with us and therefore breaking our laws. We should strip him of his healer status and put him to work on runs to the tear!"

"Technically, I broke neither your laws nor our agreement," I interrupted before Yrit could start frothing at the mouth in anger.

I glanced at the Council members over an examination of my fingernails.

"I promised to repay this community for everything you've given me, and I've done so through my efforts to keep your warriors in good health. I never said that I would stay in the village while doing that," I said. "I've endured your paranoia, ignoring the Zrelnach you've sent to monitor me over the years, and honestly? Having them looking over my shoulder hasn't been a bother. Don't, however, insult me by claiming that I haven't kept to a promise that I never made.

"As for your laws, I have always tried to respect them but remember. In my time here, I've never become a citizen of Allanovian. My loyalty has and always will be with my home. So, yes. I follow every rule and custom that you've laid down but only up to the point that they conflict with my home's safety.

"I understand your need for a scapegoat right now, though. To keep the city's populace appeased, you need someone to blame for the recent uproar. I can be that for you. I'll take whatever

punishment it needed to calm them down, so long as you remember that not only will it be a pretense but I'll be going with the humans when they eventually leave these halls."

"Leaving?" Yrit sputtered. "So, you mean to break your promise regardless?"

I took a calming breath. Why did this man always stoke my temper? That he affected me was annoying, and yet, I was grateful for the proof that something could stir my emptiness, even if it wasn't eh most pleasant of sensations.

As I cooled off, I summoned the words I'd need to soothe a stubborn bastard, but someone else beat me to it.

"He's given us eight years of service as a healer," Shafoth said. "That's almost a third of your life, is it not?"

With my lips curling, I said, "Something like that, Councilman."

Nodding, Shafoth faced the others.

"Such a length of time is more than enough payment for what Allanovian once provide, something that if we're to believe the reports, Rhylix never needed," he said. "We should take what he's offered and leave it be. Too many crises demand our attention to waste more time here."

Under his withering glare, Yrit and Hemly reluctantly nodded, all while Ferin grinned. She *would* enjoy this berating of two people she'd long considered her enemies.

"Rhylix, the Council would request that you remain within Allanovian's walls until this situation is resolved," Shafoth continued. "Acceptable?"

Bowing, I said, "As the Council decrees."

I caught Ferin's eyeroll as I rose.

"Get out of here, Rhy," she said with a chuckle. "I'll swing by with our pronouncement when I can."

"I look forward to it," I said.

Almost as much as I anticipated leaving this room. When it lay far behind me, I leaned against a wall, gritting my teeth.

Fuck politics. It and magic could dive straight into the void.

Shaking myself, I straightened, working to shuck exhaustion from me with a brisk stride. I had chores to complete before I could sleep.

TTS Chapter Twelve

