

Chapter 14: Unpleasant First Encounters

Raimie

I wasn't sure what woke me up. Save for the occasional spatter of water outside, Rhylix's clinic was silent as the grave, and yet, a frustrated scream was ringing in my ears. In my head.

And I could swear that I knew this voice. Listening to its noiseless echoes, I wondered why I felt different, why that voice made me...

Whole.

The sense of *wrong* ever hovering over me wavered while a trickle filled the hole inside, but when that bouncing shout faded, what I'd known for my entire life snapped back into place, and I whimpered. Alouin, for a moment there... for a moment...

I couldn't stay here.

After struggling to my feet, I glanced through the cave's slotted windows, frowning when I saw distant stars over a darkened forest. Had I slept through the day again, or had that silent scream overcome Rhylix's tincture?

That silent scream...

Spinning on my heel, I tottered toward the clinic's exit. A hall lay beyond it, and using its wall as a support, I slowly made my way forward, out of breath when I reached the end.

Damn, but I was drained. Maybe I should have stayed in bed, but if I had, I'd have tossed and turned while trying to sleep. I'd eventually have lain awake thinking about the scream in my head. Thinking about a brush with a sense of completion. Thinking about how... wrong, broken, torn, *wrong*, INCOMPLETE-

Gasping, I turned onto the next corridor. I hadn't gnawed at the emptiness inside of me for years, learning to ignore it through trial and error. Learning how to keep its existence a secret the hard way.

And every time it shoved its way into my awareness, I'd looked at it and *known* something should go there.

But I didn't know what that could be, and I doubted I ever would. So, as I'd done every time this had happened in the past, I ran from it. Or stumbled in this case.

Soon enough, Esela started filling the warren around me, and I forced myself to focus on the strangeness of their existence rather than other things. Every new color combination in their hair tugged at my jaw, trying to make my mouth gape.

Years before, I'd read a text that had discussed how the pigment typically found in a human's eyes was leached into an Eselan's hair, leaving gray behind, but while I'd believed the story, the embodiment of it didn't match what I'd visualized.

So, I stared, but my rudeness didn't bother me as much as it normally might because the Esela returned my attention just as avidly. Several stopped short when they spotted me, continuing to stare as I passed, and I wondered if they did that out of alarm for having a human walk down their halls or concern over my shambling state.

At the next corridor's crossing, I encountered an Eselan wrapped in leather armor, leaning in a corner. Other Allanovian citizens kept a respectful distance from her, but for some reason, I felt drawn to this stranger, which was strange. She looked like a warrior or someone equally as hardened, someone I'd normally avoid, but still, comfort bloomed in me the closer I came to her. For her part, she merely watched me approach with a raised eyebrow.

"Hello. I hoped you could help me," I said. "I'm looking for my father or maybe Eledis. They'd be the only other humans here. Do you know where they are?"

The Eselan woman merely stared at me, giving no indication that she'd understood what I'd said.

"Look. I know your people don't like humans, and you have every right not to. We can be pretty awful at times," I said, trying again. "I'll return to Rhylix's clinic as soon as I find my family. I need to speak with them. So, if you know where one of them is, would you kindly tell me? You don't have to speak, just point me in the right direction."

For a moment, I thought she'd remain an immobile statue, but she removed one arm from their fold to point down a hall.

"My thanks," I said.

I bowed as low to her as I could before shuffling in the indicated direction, hissing all the while. After getting further down the hall, I tripped into a wall, leaning my weight into it as I panted.

This was bad. I didn't know if I could make it back to the clinic without help. Hopefully, my father was nearby, otherwise-

"What are *you* doing here?"

Wincing at that high-pitched yelp, I looked for its source, finding it in a young man about my age. He was wearing black leather like the woman from before, although his set of armor was missing a few pieces, and one of his arms had been splinted, hanging in a sling.

Broken? Had Rhylix treated it?

Before now, I hadn't been sure how fury's heat could shine through an Eselan's colorless eyes, but I learned how it was done with this boy. Pressing myself further into the wall, I tentatively smiled at him.

"I'm looking for my family," I said. "I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"None of your business, human," the Eselan spat.

They truly didn't like my kind here.

"Ok. How can I help you, mysterious stranger?" I asked.

Gritting his teeth, the Eselan hissed, "You can go back to where you belong."

"I'd love to," I said, "but I'll need help with returning to the clinic. Would you lend me your aid?"

That had been a minor provocation, and I knew it, but I couldn't stand it when people let preconceived notions color their vision. It drove me up a wall. Seeing it in the woman hadn't been so bad because she'd eventually helped me, as any decent person would, but this boy was acting like he'd heap nothing but derision onto me.

"I meant," the Eselan slowly said, curling his hands into fists, "that you should return to whatever filthy corner of the world you crawled out of."

"Hey! The forests bordering Ratchav aren't... well. I suppose they are rather dirty by nature, aren't they?"

Chuckling, I gleefully watched the boy redden. For a moment, I thought he'd attack me, but after taking a calming breath, he spun to storm away, and that might have been the end of it if I hadn't heard him mumbling under his breath as he passed.

"Alouin damned humans with their Alouin damned social conventions. I bet it came from Fissid. Only that waste of a town--"

And my exhaustion fell away from me.

Straightening from the wall, I yelled, "Fissid was *not* a waste. Its people were kind and generous and... they didn't deserve to die!"

The boy stopped, slowly turning, with the taunting grin that I'd previously worn transferred to his lips.

“That’s right. You were there when it burned to the ground,” he said. “You probably know how the fire started, don’t you?”

When I flinched, the boy rested his fingertips on his mouth.

“Oh ho, you do! Tell me what happened. Did one of the cockroach humans light a blaze too close to drying grass? Did one of them knock a lantern over, an idiotic mistake that killed everyone it knew?” he asked. “Or maybe you had something to do with it. Oh, that has to be it, doesn’t it? Did you kill all of those humans-?”

I’d been trying not to lose my temper. I’d gripped its trailing end with a persistence I hadn’t known I possessed, digging my heels in, but as this boy had spoken of people I’d once known, their faces had flashed into my mind’s eye.

Teron cut Arabella’s throat again. She fell into the dirt again, and her blood stained it.

And I lost my hold.

I didn’t scream or yell. I didn’t throw a punch. White hot fury ate through my thoughts, through me, and everything I was became instinct.

Chopping at the boy, I drove him into a wall, rolling to press my forearm into his neck. I pressed down, cutting off his air supply, but the Eselan didn’t panic like most people would. He jabbed at my ribs near their break, and with my eyes watering, I stumbled back with a hiss. Almost, I leapt onto the boy again, but the shock in his eyes dampened the burn in me, enough for me to hesitate.

“You attacked me,” he said.

Again, the fire in me receded, and I opened my mouth to apologize.

“I guess humans *are* just animals, like we’ve been told,” the boy continued. “Eating, drinking, fighting, fucking. That’s all you care about. Was there a girl in Fissid that you were rutting? Or maybe a boy. Who am I to judge? Did you get your fuck partner killed?”

Was he trying to make me attack again? Because I wouldn’t.

Sure, the world had taken on a red tinge, but I’d learned my lesson. Hell, when was the last time I’d flown off the handle like that? I couldn’t remember.

I knew the best way to resolve this situation, the one I should have taken when the boy had first confronted me.

Bowing to him, I said, “I’m sorry for my behavior and for giving offense. I’d offer to make it up to you, but I’m fairly certain you wouldn’t want that. So, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll remove myself from your presence.”

With my hand on a stone wall, I headed in the direction that I'd been walking before, waiting for exhaustion to overcome the rush that I'd found in anger. I'd have to shuffle again soon enough.

The scrape of leather on stone gave me a split second to know that the boy wouldn't let me walk away. With a quiet groan, I half-turned to apologize again, but it was too late. He wrapped his arms around my waist, and I went down. I hit the ground with the boy landing on top of me, and my ribs, having barely begun the healing process, splintered further.

With a muted shriek, I bucked against what had pinned me, but that did nothing. The boy straddled my waist, swinging a fist at my face, but because I jerked my head to the side, the blow only glanced along my cheek. It still *hurt*, but even with that addition of pain, I was aware enough to hook my leg around the Eselan, shifting my hips, and losing his balance, he tumbled away from me.

Freed, I rolled in the opposite direction, frantically picking at the bandages around my hands. If the boy truly meant to fight, I couldn't be impeded by this cloth, no matter how much more damage exposing my wounds might do.

I'd gotten halfway through unwinding one bandage when the boy came at me again. As his blurry body careened for me, something that looked like Bright flickered into being beside him. I barely had time to notice this before jumping out of his path.

"Please, stop!" I cried. "I don't want to fight you."

Behind the boy, the Eselan woman from before sauntered into view, and I frantically waved. She, however, merely grinned and leaned her shoulder against the rock.

Did everyone in this damn place want to see me hurt? Well, everyone but Rhylix.

In range again, the boy snarled, swinging for my face.

"Lyli's dead," he growled, "because of humans. Because of *you*."

"Are you kidding me?" I snapped.

No more playing nice, not when the boy refused to do the same. With one hand free, I grabbed for his sling and *tugged*. As he stumbled toward me, I stepped to the side, seizing his splinted arm. I hauled against it in the opposite direction, and howling, the Eselan backpedaled until he hit the wall.

Driving my fist into his stomach, I shouted, "It's not my fault! None of it! Fissid. Your Lyli. Stop blaming me for things I didn't do."

The boy dropped to the ground, becoming a limp pile at my feet, and my next punch, already sent flying, drove my knuckles into stone. I bit my lip to keep from crying out, and when the boy smashed into my legs, toppling me, my teeth nearly came together while a trickle of blood dripped down my throat.

We were back where we'd begun, and as I gazed up at the boy's misty form, wondering if we'd repeat everything that we'd already done, figures of shadow and light coalesced on either side of him.

Dim and Bright? What were they-?

An expanding patch of darkness preceded sharp pain in my nose and cheeks, and throwing my hands over my face, I growled, finished with this fight, finished with people who would judge me for things I'd never done, finished with life's sudden desire to turn me into its sparring dummy.

"LEAVE. ME.-" I began in a roar.

Weight was lifted off of me, and something hooked under my arms, jerking me upright. A voice, both new and familiar, was shouting at me, but the words had become fuzz when faced with the rush of furious power coursing through me.

Where was the threat? I had to see it neutralized, destroyed, wiped from existence. Distantly, I was aware of air pushing through my throat, scrubbing it raw, and the awful noise booming around me, but this bottled-up anger had to go somewhere. I couldn't keep hold of it forever. I had to leak it from me, force it out, throw it like an arrow at the person-shaped blob opposite me.

From out of nowhere, peace splashed into me, and slowly, gradually, it beat back the storm that had me in its clinging grip. To the time of my slowing heartbeat, I regained awareness of my surroundings, and on noting them, I flinched.

What the hell had I just gotten myself into?

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