

Chapter 2: Awakening

Rhylix

If you're reading this, please know that I never hated you.

Considering the life I'd led, today should have felt like any other.

As usual, a Zrelnach warrior was berating me with her reddening face accenting her gray eyes. The light of the late afternoon sun blended her hair's brown tinge with its blonde hue, and I followed that stippled sunlight across my clinic to its entrance. There, a slightly bulkier Zrelnach was trying to keep a surreptitious watch on the proceedings, and he might have succeeded if the target of his monitoring hadn't been me. Further down the hall, someone was approaching, but I couldn't make out their features yet.

In some ways, I hoped they were bringing me a Council summons. Anything to get out of this situation. In other ways, I desperately hoped they weren't because despite the day's normal events and the dull humdrum around me, I was distracted.

It had started this morning. Halfway through breakfast, something had shifted in the world, a wrench in reality that had rippled from its origin, and ever since, a nagging irritant had nipped at the back of my mind.

A pull. A draw. A call of like to like.

And if past experience was anything to go by, this would only get stronger.

Even now, I couldn't ignore it. My gaze drifted away from the angry woman in front of me to a hole carved into the stone around us. Peering through the ivy covering it, I tried to cross the distance to this distraction's source, zooming however far I must so I could find the person who'd started it.

"Come," I would whisper. "Free me and let's begin."

But I didn't know if this shift in the world was what I thought it was. I needed to find a private corner so I could consult with-

The woman tangled her fingers in my tunic, jerking me away from my lean against the wall.

"Are you listening to me?" she shrieked through her teeth.

Blinking, I returned to present circumstances. Whatever I was feeling, I had to ignore it for now. I couldn't exactly do anything about it yet.

Glancing at the woman's hands, I lifted my eyes to her.

"Let me go," I said.

As if remembering herself, the woman stepped back, wiping her hands on her legs. She refused to meet my eyes, and I restrained an eyeroll.

"Did you finish the tonic I gave you?" I asked.

When she flushed, I pulled my hands out of my pockets, palming the remedy I'd been fiddling with since she'd stepped into my clinic.

"So, you were listening?" she asked.

"I heard every word. Your symptoms from last week have returned, which I find surprising considering you could hardly stand at the time."

Pausing, I dubiously ran my eyes over her while she flushed again.

"But no matter! We must always have the soldiers who protect us in tip-top shape."

I handed off the tonic, and lifting it to eye level, the woman stared at its contained liquid.

"Three sips a day until the bottle's empty this time," I said.

Meeting my eyes, the woman sputtered, "How did you...?"

"I had it on hand," I said.

No need to share that I'd had it prepared for *three weeks*. After I'd noted her first symptoms, it had taken her a while to report them, but when she'd eventually done that, I'd prepared two doses as usual, knowing she wouldn't follow my initial instructions. The Zrelnach never did.

A previously indistinguishable form stepped over the clinic's threshold, revealing the trainee uniform hanging from him, and I thanked my lucky stars for an escape from this conversation. It had grown tiresome.

"It appears the Council has need of me," I said. "If you have any other problems, please come see me again."

I breezed past the woman as a squeak escaped from her, and my lips twitched. How curious that such small pleasures still affected me, shining light into the dark, empty shell of my heart.

As the trainee and I passed the man who's been watching the confrontation, I avoided looking at him, just as I pretended that I didn't hear him padding along behind us. I shouldn't reveal that the spy had been spied. Instead, I focused on the boy in front of me.

"Do I get a clue about what they want?" I asked.

"Sorry. I can't tell you if I don't know myself," the trainee said before throwing a grin over his shoulder. "I heard a trading party returned a half mark ago. Maybe it has something to do with that."

Gods, I hoped not. Allanovian didn't need another of those trips to go wrong. The city's food stores were running low as it was.

"I'm Dath, by the way," the trainee said. "Figured I should introduce myself. If I pass my trials, we'll probably see each other plenty."

Maybe we would. Or maybe after that shift in the world...

Jerking my mind away from such thoughts, I shook my head.

"Don't get close to me, trainee," I said. "Nothing good ever comes of it."

Glancing back, Dath shrugged.

"Whatever you say."

The trainee led me across the breadth of Allanovian, strolling passed scooped-out homes and natural caverns aplenty, until we reached the clinics reserved for the average citizens. Absently nodding, I thanked Dath before striding inside, rolling up my sleeves.

I hurried toward a clump of people, huddled around two cots. On one, a Zrelnach warrior was lying, still as death. A blood-soaked bandage covered the stump of his arm, and sweat had plastered his hair to his forehead. Beside another cot, three healers were fighting to keep a trainee from thrashing out of bed.

"What happened?" I said.

"Typical trading run gone to hell," one healer gasped. "We think the humans' weapons were poisoned, considering-"

The trainee jerked upright, silencing the healer, and he slammed her back into the cot.

"You see what I mean?" he asked.

Unfortunately, I did. The Council had given me a test today.

"I'll need a needle, gut string, alcohol, and a scalpel for now," I said. "Let me know when the girl's restrained."

Kneeling beside the man, I peeled away layers of rust-stained cloth. Before I could fully expose the wound, someone offered me a tray, covered with my requested tools, and when I viewed massacred flesh and muscle, I winced. Even well knowing the answer to my question, I couldn't help but wonder how something this awful had happened.

Gods, it would be so simple to Let Go, removing uncertainty from both the man and the girl's futures...

But no. Never again. Treating a wound like this was easy. I just needed to take it step by step.

Step One: Soak the exposed innards with alcohol to fight infection.

Liquid had saturated the cot's flimsy sheets before I was finished with the bottle.

Step Two: Remove necrotic tissue.

I should've asked for a bucket. Whoever cleaned this clinic would have a hell of a time with scrubbing its floors today.

Step Three: Suture the wound closed.

This was the only part of the healing process that I took pride in. My sutures were the envy of Allanovian's many healers.

Step Four: Hope for the best.

"Wrap him in blankets for the chill. If he wakes up, give him plenty of water. After so much blood loss, he'll need to replenish his fluids," I said. "Can you cover the wound for me?"

The assistant crouching opposite me had already pulled a roll of gauze off of our tray in answer.

Scrubbing my hands on my thighs, I spun to the trainee at my back. Halfway through my treatment of her superior, she'd stopped making noises, and on examining her, I could see why.

Thin, leather straps were holding her to the cot, and beneath them, she feebly thrashed with glazed eyes and a near-silent mumble on her lips. How long had she been lying like this?

Snapping my head up, I said, "I wanted to know when you'd restrained her!"

"You seemed busy with Gistrick," one healer said. "We didn't want to interrupt you."

"And why would you think that he needed me more than she does?" I snarled. "Do *you* know what poison caused this girl's symptoms or how long it takes to kill someone?"

When the grouped healers stepped back, I cut myself off, taking a slow breath. Anger had no place in a clinic like this.

"It doesn't matter," I said under my breath.

Because the girl probably wouldn't survive now, not that I'd let her fade away without a fight.

Shifting to the head of the cot, I extended a hand, certain I'd brought the antidote I needed with me. It was lying in my empty palm. I knew it was.

When glass touched my skin, I closed my fingers around the antidote's bottle before ripping its stopper off. Holding the girl's head in the crook of my elbow, I poured its contents into her mouth, fighting through a wave of exhaustion.

She didn't like that, but of course she wouldn't. Violently jerking, she tried to escape from my grip, but I held firm until sickening coughs started bursting from her. Then, I tilted her head to the side so vomit could leak from between her lips. Once her heaving had finished, I swiped her mouth out to ensure her airway was clear before standing and gesturing to the wounded.

"They're all yours," I said.

As I marched toward the clinic's exit, its healers descended on their patients. Now that the bulk of the work was done, they'd treat minor injuries before monitoring the Zrelnach warrior and his trainee.

Dath was waiting for me outside, shifting in place. He seemed... worried, which was strange. Did he know one of my patients?

"You didn't have to stay," I said. "I can find my own way back."

And I didn't need another set of eyes on me.

"Oh. Um," Dath stuttered. "No. I heard... That's not why I..."

He flicked his eyes over my shoulder, swallowing hard.

"I hoped you might tell me how they are," he said.

Oh, hell. The kid did know one of them. But which? And what should I say? Should I tell Dath the grim truth or give him empty platitudes?

An easy enough question to answer. Before long, the kid would know what had happened, one way or the other.

"Your superior, Gistrick, has a good chance of making it. If he does, he'll have a long road to recovery ahead of him, but he should serve Alluvian once more," I said. "Unfortunately, the prognosis for your fellow trainee isn't as good. I did what I could for her, but her poisoning had

progressed significantly before I could treat her. I don't know if I administered the antidote in time. I'm sorry."

Clapping his hand to his mouth, Dath stumbled into the tunnel's wall, and I took his elbow before he could sink to the floor. After a quick scan, I found my observer, subsequently placing my body between him and Dath, and just in time too. Tears drizzled over the kid's cheeks while he muffled quiet sobs with his palm.

"Lyli," he gasped.

Gods damnit.

"You're together?" i asked.

After a quick nod from the kid, I found myself bearing more of his weight. Dath slowly peeled his hand off of his face.

"Will you report me?" he hiccupped. "Relationships between trainees are forbidden."

I should follow his suggestion. I really should. Doing otherwise could cause me headaches.

But I looked at this trainee, and my empty heart stirred. That didn't happen often, and even if I'd learned long ago that indulging the broken thing would only hurt me, I couldn't help doing it anyway.

"No one should be punished for who they love," I said.

Dath jerked his body toward me, and I shrugged.

"It's true," I said. "Now, dry your eyes and come with me. We'll raise a glass to Lyli's health, and you can tell me about her."

After scrubbing his face, Dath stepped away from the wall's support, and I gestured for him to lead the way. The boy headed toward the Zrelnach's common room, silent until we stood outside of the cavern. Turning on me, he lifted brimming eyes to mine.

"You said that I shouldn't get close to you," he said. "If that's what you want, why are you helping me?"

What a good question, one that I didn't know how to answer. It truly was best if Dath kept his distance. Nothing good came to those I cared for.

Not only that but if I continued down this path, I'd soon enter the safe haven of Allanovian's armed forces, somewhere I wasn't typically welcomed, and I'd do it while distraction was plaguing me. If I were smart, I'd abandon Dath here, seek a quiet corner, and consult with my ever-present nuisance about what this drag on my focus meant.

Instead, I laid a hand on the kid's shoulder.

"I couldn't stand to watch you suffer," I said.

And Dan sniffled while a chuckle brought light to his eyes. And my shell of a heart filled the slightest amount.

Several hours later, I escorted a stumbling, incoherent trainee to his quarters before wandering toward my own. My overly persistent observer followed me, so I playacted a weaving trudge until I entered my clinic. Only then did he leave me alone for the night.

Huffing at his diligence, I started stripping my clothes off, wrinkling my nose at their blood and ale-soaked state. I'd gotten my tunic over my head when a brilliant bolt streaked by my shoulder, dissipating when it hit the wall. Stiffening, I spun on its source.

Sitting on my cot was a figure wearing a visage as familiar to me as my own. Draped in white, it leaned on its knees, rubbing its hands together as it stared at me.

I turned aside, carefully folding my tunic before laying it on my desk.

Grazing my fingers on its stone surface, I asked, "Am I right?"

"When are you not?" the figure said. "Yes. Your ally has been chosen."

A slow smile spread across my face. The seeds of excitement, long scattered in the wind, had been sown.

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