

# Chapter 21: Blood on My Hands

## Raimie

I wanted out. Out of this town, carved into the mountainside. Out of this new life with its uncertainties and expectations. Out of this turmoil, raging like a gale inside of me.

Unfortunately, I could only escape from one of those at the moment, and the dazed fog enveloping me, like I'd been thwacked upside the head one too many times, wasn't helping with that. A film covered my sight and hearing while fuzzy hands stopped me from running into walls and garbled voices indignantly shouted nearby.

Somehow, I made it outside, and the smack of a breeze returned a small amount of clarity to me. It was enough to see that I'd gotten lost in the woods with only the mountains at my side to serve as a beacon.

It was also enough to hear the white noise of flowing water nearby.

Naturally gravitating toward the creek, I soon stood beside it with its water pooling in a hollow at my feet. I crouched, reaching to take this life-giving sustenance for myself, and a rippling image disturbed its green and blue surface.

A stranger was looking back at me. I saw my body, but it wasn't mine, too tightly coiled like a snake set to spring. It was my face but not, too dazed like a boy who'd lost his mother. It was my eyes but not, with their color a hard contrast against the red splotched around them.

This was what I focused on: a dead man's blood drying in sprays across my cheeks, in clumps through a mass of hair, in a wide smear over a jaw. None of which could be mine.

But those features were mine. This stranger's face belonged to me, no matter what denial might say.

Trembling, I scooped water from the creek, splashing it on my face, but the red droplets that splattered across my reflection quickly dissolved into the pool, changing nothing in the image. So, I tried again, scrubbing this time, but still, a stranger stared at me from the water's surface.

Gritting my teeth, I drenched myself in water, bringing more to my face one scoop at a time. I rubbed my skin until I could swear that I'd dug into the bone beneath, making my palms' flesh crack, but nothing would clean the blood off of me. Nothing could remove the stain embedded into my essence.

I didn't stop trying, though, not until someone caught my wrists, holding them together.

"Stop. It won't help."

Jerking free of that grip, I shrunk away from Rhylix, who was crouching beside me. His expression was blank, as if he knew that anything else might make me snap. I'd forgotten he was following me.

"What won't help?" I croaked.

Shaking his head, Rhylix turned toward something lying behind him.

"You dropped this," he said.

When he extended Silverblade to me, a glint of light from its hilt beamed into my eyes, and I tore my gaze off of it, blindly reaching for the weapon. Curling my fingers around its grip, I pulled the sheathed blade atop my knees, staring through it to what it meant for me.

"Did you know?" I asked.

Shifting, Rhylix said, "I knew it was a possibility. Queen Kaedesa sends the worst of criminals to Allanovian for this purpose. But it was only one option out of the many that the Council could have chosen from. I hoped that you'd receive another test."

A criminal. I'd killed someone who'd already been condemned.

Why didn't knowing this help? Could anything relieve the aching guilt inside of me, compounding on what had happened in Fissid?

I lifted Silverblade, pulling a few inches of the blade free.

To this point, I hadn't considered what following my family's proposed course of action would involve, which had been a mistake. We'd be leading a rebellion, a struggle against an oppressor, a *war*, and what always happened during such violent events? How much blood would this sword spill before it was over or I was dead?

How would I handle the weight of so many lives ended?

"Have you ever killed someone?" I asked.

I doubted Rhylix had. He was a healer, someone who preserved life.

“Many people, a long time ago,” Rhylix said.

I jerked toward him, almost falling, and at my gaping stare, Rhylix nodded.

“Where I’m from, you start killing at a young age,” he said. “You have to.”

Rising to his full height, he offered me a hand, but once I was on my feet, I backed away from him. Despite the sorrow I saw in Rhylix, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be near someone who could admit to ending lives as a child.

“What kingdom forces something so horrible from someone so young?” I asked.

I couldn’t imagine such a place. Ada’ir had its cruelties, to be sure, but nothing like what Rhylix had described.

“Oh, I suppose I never told you,” he said. “I’m an Audish refugee. The place you’re asking about is the one you’re meant to save.”

I stopped breathing.

*Rhylix was from Auden? How had he reached Ada’ir? What could he share about the situation in that foreign nation?*

Above those questions, however, I found something of greater interest.

“The girl in my vision. Ren,” I said. “Who was she to you, and what happened to her?”

There must be a reason that she was no longer in his life.

Rhylix stiffened with his jaw clenched.

Turning away from me, he said, “She was my sister, and she died. Because of me.”

And my wariness of Rhylix puffed into smoke. Well did I know that look. It was one that I wore every time I remembered a horrible, defining moment from nine years ago.

*What happened behind the stone doors has cured my fever, and I skip behind my father as we return to our quarters.*

*“I’m sorry I fought those people, dad, but they scared me,” I say. “Were they angry?”*

*“No, Raimie. I think they expected you to fight.”*

*Hearing that makes me feel better. I hate it when someone’s unhappy with me. My father’s right as well, though. Considering how long I’ve been sick, it’s no wonder I fought.*

*Just how long have I been sick? The days may have been blurred, but I remember them. Considering that, I know we’ve stayed in this underground city for about five days, which means...*

*Today's my birthday!*

*At the realization, I unintentionally infuse a bounce into my step, and my father's silence takes on a new meaning.*

*"Where are we going?" I ask.*

*"To see your mother."*

*My glee gets smaller at that. My mother, still caught in fever's grip...*

*Her state doesn't change what today is, though, and I'll enjoy every second of it.*

*A hush holds my mother's room captive with our footfalls like claps of thunder in it. A gray-eyed woman rises from beside my mother's bed. Claspng her hands in front of her, she meets my father's gaze.*

*"I'm terribly sorry."*

*She says nothing more, and my father falls to his knees. I bounce my eyes between the adults, and when my father grinds the heels of his palms into his eyes, I go to the bed.*

*On it, my mother lies still.*

*"Mama," I say, jostling her.*

*She needs to wake up. She needs to sing her homeland's special birthday song, but she won't move.*

*"Mama, wake up."*

*Resting a hand on my shoulder, my father says, "She won't wake up, Raimie. She's not with us anymore."*

*What a strange thing to say. I can see her right there.*

*"If she's gone, where did she go?" I ask.*

*With a strangled noise, my father whisks me out of the room.*

*"Son, she fought the fever like you did, but in her case, it won and she-"*

*A sob momentarily cuts off the explanation.*

*"She died."*

*Furrowing my brow, I ask, "Mama's dead?"*

*My father jerks his head in a nod, and I continue.*

*"I killed my mother?"*

*Taking a step back, my father gasps with his voice gone.*

*"I killed my mother," I repeat.*

*Spinning, I run from a newly made source of pain.*

"My sister and I fled the Kiraak, those black-vined people you saw," Rhylix said, "but not long after that, she-"

I flung a hand up to stop him.

"You don't have to explain yourself," I said. "It's my fault that my mother's dead, so I understand."

"Oh."

Wincing, Rhylix faced me once more.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to bring up something like that."

"It's... fine. My mother's death can distract me from what happened earlier," I said.

A mashed-to-pulp face sprang into my mind unbidden, and bile surged up my throat, barely swallowed.

How had I done so much damage to that man? Through a battle surge?

What else could it have been? A bare fist couldn't cave in a skull like mine had. I didn't think.

Shaking my head, I said, "So, you're Audish, huh? What's that like?"

Relaxing, Rhylix grinned at me.

"You tell me," he said. "You're Audish too, if distantly."

Well, that had *obviously* been an attempt to duck the question, but I didn't mind. Every second spent talking to Rhylix lessened the force of the storm beneath my calm façade, slowly pulling me into a drowning haze. So, I happily moved on to my next question.

"How did you get to Ada'ir?" I asked. "As far as I know, the last surge of Audish refugees ended a few decades ago."

"True, but that hasn't stopped pirates and the occasional smuggler from visiting my homeland," Rhylix said. "I was lucky enough to connive my way aboard one of their ships, and after many struggles, I made my way to Allanovian about ten years ago."

Ten years. Which meant that, if I was right about visiting this city when my mother had died, Rhylix would have been here for that. I didn't remember seeing him among the people who'd treated us then, though. So...

"Have you always been a healer here?" I asked. "I've noticed the way the other Esela despise you, and that can't be because they dislike your profession. They're not nearly as hateful toward other healers."

"Ah, yes. That," Rhylix said, making a face.

He said nothing more, seemingly lost in thought, and I resisted the urge to snap my fingers in his face.

"And?" I drawled.

Taking a deep breath, Rhylix said, "And when I first came to Allanovian, I joined the ranks of the Zrelnach trainees. Because of my past, I excelled there, but for reasons I'd rather not discuss, I refused initiation after my trials. I left the Zrelnach to take up the only other profession I've had, and Allanovian has reviled me since."

A Zrelnach. He'd been one of the superior soldiers that I was trying to recruit, and he'd admitted that they hated him. I should distance myself now, removing the possibility that they might transfer that disdain to me but.... I couldn't. Why?

Deflating, Rhylix nodded, as if to himself.

"You're wondering why you shouldn't cut your feeble ties with me," he said. "It's smart, and I wouldn't blame you for doing it. I'll only impede this part of your quest."

I sucked in a breath while fire flashed through me.

"My quest. *My* quest?" I squeaked. "It's not fucking *mine*. I'm going along with it because I have to, but hell if I wouldn't abandon it the first chance I get, especially after... that."

I waved toward Allanovian with a roar building in my ears and heat stinging my eyes. Something unwanted took hold of me, forcing long-retained words into the open.

"I don't want to- to kill anyone, and that's what this godsdamn quest will force from me. And for what? Some kingdom I've never seen where *children* learn how to kill? I'm sorry, Rhy. I know it's your home, but *I don't want to save it*, not when it means more blood on my hands. Not when working toward that goal means losing the first friend I've made since--"

Since when? And why had I called Rhylix my friend?

Crashing back into my body, I found him looking at me with clinical detachment. The same intimidating aura from when I'd last challenged my so-called destiny was emanating from him, and when he cocked his head, I flinched.

“You consider me a friend,” he said with his voice dead. “Why?”

That was surprising. I’d thought for sure that concerns for Auden would next come out of his mouth, but no. Rhylix had echoed my unspoken question, which meant I had to answer it now.

“You saved my life. You’ve fixed me up multiple times. You’ve been nothing but kind and caring toward me,” I said. “I actually like you, which is unusual for me. Why wouldn’t I call you my friend?”

Still blank, Rhylix said, “Is that what friendship is? Two people who enjoy one another’s company enough to spend time together?”

“What else would it be?” I asked.

Granted, I didn’t have many examples to go off of, but why did that matter? Wasn’t it enough that I didn’t want to lose Rhylix because of a stupid social stigma?

“Huh. It’s been a while since anyone... it’s been a while,” Rhylix said. “My last friend was like a brother to me, but I suppose it takes time and effort to get a relationship to that point.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I wouldn’t know.”

I ducked my head, barely catching Rhylix’s smile.

“We’ll have to find out together, then, won’t we?” he said.

Raising my head, I shot a questioning look at Rhylix, and he nodded.

“Over the last week, I’ve grown to know you fairly well, and I think we could be great friends, Raimie,” he said. “I also think this quest is more yours than you realize. Once you reach Auden, you might find that you relate to the people there. They’re more like you than you realize. Also, you missed the most important part of me being a Zrelnach in all but name.”

I wanted to address Rhylix’s assertions about Auden, but I didn’t think he’d allow it. So, I responded the only way I could.

“What’s that?”

“I can teach you how to fight,” Rhylix said. “I can show you how to resist a hostile long enough to retreat, if such a thing is possible. If you mean to travel to Auden, even if only to satisfy your family, you should learn the skill.”

He was right, much as I hated to admit it.

“You’d be willing to teach me?” I asked. “Even after everything I said about Auden?”

Nodding, Rhylix said, “Even still.”

“Then...”

What should I do? I'd never wanted to learn how to fight, perfectly happy with my ignorance, but with Auden as a guaranteed part of my future, I should at least learn the basics. Right?

"I'd be grateful for any lessons you can give me," I said.

"Let's start, then," Rhylix said.

He whipped a sword from beneath his cloak, and I skittered backward with my lungs set into overdrive.

Once I realized I wasn't in danger, I panted, "Now?"

At my display, Rhylix raised an eyebrow.

"Do you have something better to do?" he asked.

Remembering everything waiting for me in Allanovian, I grimaced.

"I don't," I said. "Teach me. I suppose."

I hefted Silverblade, and Rhylix showed me a feral grin.

"I bet you can't disarm me," he said.

A growl escaped from me while something animalistic rose in response to the challenge.

"I'll take that bet," I said.

Instinct wasn't guiding me, but it didn't matter. I attacked.

## **TTS Chapter Twenty-One**

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