

Chapter 22: Return to Society

Raimie

Everything hurt. All of my muscles were crying of overuse, and the small bruises forming under my skin would soon mark any slight damage I'd received. Still, I followed Rhylix with a spring in my step.

"So, what am I gathering again?" I asked. "Chamomile and aloe, right? Is there anything else?"

"That'll do," Rhylix said. "I'm guessing you know what the herbs look like?"

I chuckled.

"Of course I do," I said. "You have no idea how often I needed them while growing up."

Glancing askance at me, Rhylix asked, "Why's that?"

What a good question. I didn't know how to answer it without embarrassing myself, so I gave the Eselan an honest reply.

"When I was small, I played with an imaginary friend. Our antics usually ended with me hurt in one way or another, so I became well acquainted with healing herbs. I stopped such childishness after my mother died, though."

"I see," Rhylix said.

But how else was he supposed to respond? Who had an imaginary friend when they reached nine years of age? No one I knew. So, I cringed in preparation of anything more Rhylix might want to say.

Fortunately, Allanovian emerged from behind concealing trees at that moment, revealing my father pacing in front of the waterfall hiding its entrance.

"Raimie! You have to do something," he said as we approached. "Eledis has been shouting at Allanovian's Council for a solid half hour, and I don't know how much longer it can go without someone getting violent. I need your help to stop the argument before that happens."

Suppressing a groan, I met Rhylix's eyes before shrugging. The herbs would have to wait.

"Eledis is trying to get himself killed *again*? Alouin, when will he learn?" I said. "All right. Let's rescue him for the millionth time."

How many times had my father and I pulled the old man out of a bar fight or something equally as dangerous? How many times would we enable his incitive nature? Eventually, it would end with one of us hurt.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"I'll take you to them," my father said. "Will the healer join us?"

Shaking his head, Rhylix said, "The healer has better things to do than settle a squabble between a human and my people."

Grimacing, I waved my new friend on. How I wished I could escape with him.

"Off with you, then," I said.

Rhylix bowed to me and my father.

"I'd wish you luck," he said, "but I suppose two honorary Zrelnach don't need such a fickle thing."

Stiffening, I glared at Rhylix. Why would he remind me of the trial that I'd undertaken just a few hours before?

At Rhylix's words, however, my father went still, fixing his eyes on him as if asking permission for something. If he was looking for approval, the healer didn't give it. He merely rose from his bow and strode away.

Biting his lip, my father crossed his arms, keeping his eyes fixed on where Rhylix had disappeared.

After a moment, I cautiously asked, "Shall we?"

My father jumped, shaking himself.

"Yes, let's get to Eledis," he said, "preferably before he does something stupid."

He led me around the waterfall and through the cave entrance behind it, following in Rhylix's footsteps. Since I saw no sign of my friend, I assumed our paths diverged from there, but of others, I saw plenty.

They still stared at the humans in their midst, but no hostility radiated from them now. Instead, disquiet hovered over them, visible in their set shoulders and pinched eyes.

I resisted this aura with a bounce in my step, distractedly humming while I examined my surroundings. To date, I'd been contained in a portion of Allanovian that had been carved out of the

mountain. Its corridors had abnormally smooth walls with its chambers too regularly paced.

What my father and I were hurrying through looked more natural. The path meandered, bordering cavernous pockets that featured multiple cave formations, and where it plunged between these caves, its height and width varied, although it never got tight around the people who walked down it. Allanovian's citizens must have made it more comfortable over the years.

Ahead of me, my father said, "You seem better. Usually, it takes a newly initiated Zrelnach longer to recover from their second trial, especially when it's of the variety you underwent. Are you detaching again?"

I slowed down as all liveliness was stripped from me.

"What else am I supposed to do?" I asked. "Now that I've proven myself to this city's Council, I doubt we'll stay here for long, especially with everyone so eager to commence the foretelling. I won't have time to process what happened, not until we're on the open road again, and if I let myself dwell on it before then, I..."

I wasn't sure what would happen, but it wouldn't be pleasant for anyone involved.

Sighing, my father said, "You know I don't approve of how you repress yourself like this, but for once, I think you're right to do it, if only for a time. I'm here for when you want to talk."

"I appreciate that," I said.

I couldn't add more as at that moment, cacophonous screeching burst from a room ahead of us.

"This'll be fun," my father grumbled.

He started forward but halted when I threw an arm in front of him.

"That want me, right? Their blasted foretold leader," I said. "That's why they're refusing to hear whatever Eledis has to say."

My father reluctantly nodded, so I continued on.

"I'll deal with this. Considering how much you and Eledis don't get along, having you in the room probably wouldn't be helpful. Instead, can you...? I don't know. Maybe we can talk later? I'd like to-"

This weight on my chest needed to be lifted, and while Rhylix's first lesson in sword fighting, teaching me basic forms and disarms, had helped somewhat, he wasn't family. I needed someone I could share everything with, knowing I wouldn't be judged. I needed my father.

Resting a hand on my shoulder, my father squeezed it.

“An excellent idea. In fact, I have something to tell you too,” he said. “Find me in the Zrelnach’s common room once you’re done here, and we’ll discuss things over drinks. Do you know where that is?”

I shook my head.

“But I’m sure that if I ask an Eselan dressed in black, they’ll be happy to show me,” I added.

“That’s my smart boy,” my father said.

After patting my cheek, he lingered as if wanting to say more before putting the shouting match to his back. I faced it, gritting my teeth as I came closer. Without giving myself time to think about what I was doing, I entered the source of the argument.

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