

# Chapter 23: Trip Planning

## Raimie

The chamber I entered was quite cozy, or it would have been if not for the room's occupants. Bending over a paper-strewn table, Eledis had gone red in the face, repeatedly jabbing a finger at the map below his hands. One of the men on the Council matched him in shade and volume while another had crossed his arms with a foot jittering, and the third watched everything from his chair, holding folded hands in front of his lips. The only woman in the room looked bored, inspecting her fingernails with a hand on the hilt of a dagger, but when I joined them, she flicked her eyes to me.

Our gazes met, gray to blue, and something in the back of my mind hissed its displeasure. To her credit, Ferin flinched when confronted with someone she'd recently made a murderer, which was good. I didn't like my chances if anger had had me attacking her.

Never removing my eyes from the commander, I cocked my head as if puzzled by the scene in front of me.

"What's going on?" I asked. "I thought we were finally on the same side. Why are we shouting at one another?"

Everyone in the room flipped toward me, which had too much attention turned my way, and the room distorted until strangers, filling the ramps on all sides, glared down at me. Locking up, I ran my eyes over those gathered here, unsure what new horror they might demand from me. I should retreat, fleeing as fast as I could through Allanovian, before they could hurt me again.

"Oh, Raimie. You're here," Eledis said. "Come. Join us. Maybe you can talk sense into these people, who should be *doing what we say now*."

And the hold on me broke.

"Why?" I asked.

Striding into the chamber, I absently ran a finger along a map of the Fractured Peaks. On noting that it was marked with new labels, ones I'd never recorded in my mental index, I lifted it higher, but after modifying the map in my head, I returned to holding Ferin's gaze.

"All I've done is prove that I'm worthy of becoming a Zrelnach, if I wanted to. My only other claim to this supposed foretelling is Shadowsteal, and let's face it. We can never be sure whether the sword that I found is the legendary blade in truth," I said. "And what have you done to garner the

Council's support besides be a descendant of the Audish royal line, grandfather?"

Eledis was glaring at me. I could feel it even as Ferin broke eye contact to exchange glances with the other Council members.

"Young one..." said one of the men. "None of us are in doubt about what you found. Why are you? Can't you hear its ringing?"

Everyone dropped their eyes to the sword hanging at Eledis' side, and I frowned. Was this what my grandfather had been talking about when he'd said Shadowsteal would draw the Audish to it for a time? And if so, why was it silent for me?

Should I truthfully answer the Councilman's question? If I did, my lack of something that only the Audish could hear might prove I wasn't who they thought I was. They seemed to believe their 'foretold one' would have Audish blood running through their veins, and if I didn't measure up to that expectation, I might lose their support.

Considering how awful I was at lying, though, speaking anything but the truth seemed like a bad idea.

"No, I don't hear anything like that," I said. "A ringing sound lured me to it in the first place, but since touching it, I've heard nothing."

A ripple spread over those gathered here, and I wondered how I'd disturbed them. They weren't reacting the way I'd expected.

"May I ask what you were arguing about?" I said, eager to change the subject.

Shaking herself, Ferin said, "Routes to the Narrow Sea, among other things."

"Other things being the number of Zrelnach who will accompany us and what sort of supplies Allanovian will provide, as per their long-held promise," Eledis grumbled.

At this, my frown became a smile. I'd heard of this promise, the one originating in Allanovian's founders. I didn't understand why a promise made by people long-dead should apply to their descendants, but voicing my doubt didn't seem wise.

After what Teron had done to Fissid, I was under no illusion that my family and I could stay here. I couldn't explain how or why we'd gone for so long without another of Doldimar's minions attacking us, but I was grateful for the lucky break, even while knowing it couldn't last.

We needed to leave. *Quickly*. And despite how much it made me squirm, I'd extract everything I could from Allanovian, especially if it meant my family had a better chance of surviving.

"I'm sure the Council knows how much their people can provide," I said, "just as I'm sure that my father's friends among the Zrelnach can verify their choice. Now, what's this about our route?"

Around the map I'd raised, I watched the Council members stiffen. Had they been planning to volunteer only the bare minimum of provisions, enough to get my family out of Allanovian?

If that was the case, why didn't it surprise me? Did I have so little faith in people?

Eledis, on the other hand, let his muscles loosen while a smirk crawled across his face. He *would* be pleased, so long as he got what he wanted. The old man had never cared how he achieved his goals, merely that he did.

"Even if Allanovian gave us all of its food, we couldn't skirt the Fractured Peaks to a viable harbor before our people started starving, and I don't like our chances of finding other sources of food along the way, not for a group as large as ours would presumably be," he said. "I'd like to set sail from Sev, the closest of the Robzul city states, as it would mean less interference from Queen Kaedesa. I don't know about you, but I'd rather not deal with charges of treason on top of everything else. That means circumnavigating the mountain range, which will add weeks to our travel time. Our honorable Council members have argued that we should choose a closer port to disembark from. I, respectfully, disagree. The risk of starvation will be worth escaping the notice of Ada'ir's Queen."

Lowering the map to the table, I hummed to myself. I had a possible answer for Eledis' problem, but I'd always liked gathering every detail about a problem before discussing solutions.

"Who would come with us?" I asked. "Zrelnach alone or will we have civilians joining us too?"

The red-faced Councilman turned a deeper shade of crimson.

"You want *more* than the Zrelnach to leave with you?" he snarled.

"Did I say that?" I asked. "I just want to know what sort of people my family will be traveling with. I know Rhylix has expressed interest in joining us. Has anyone else expressed a similar desire, or is it only him?"

"That coward?" one of the men said with a sniff. "Please. You don't need to worry about anyone following his example."

Pausing, I wrinkled my nose.

"Coward?" I said to myself. "Why would anyone think Rhy's a coward?"

In her corner, Ferin sucked in a quiet gasp, but the men presented me with expressions that ranged from incredulous to mildly curious.

"Forgive me, young one," the curious one said, "but during your recent trial, what vision did you see?"

What the hell did my second Zrelnach trial have to do with my question?

“I saw Rhylix rescue his little sister before fleeing an overwhelming force,” I answered with a frown. “A ridiculous number of people were coming from his hometown, trying to run them down, and I-”

I couldn't think about what I'd done after that.

“And behavior like that doesn't scream cowardly to you?” the irate Councilman said.

“No...” I drawled. “It seems perfectly logical. Why fight an enemy that will massacre you when you can live to fight another day?”

The men seemed to find what I'd said mighty disgruntling, but after a beat, Ferin burst into laughter.

“He's right,” she gasped. “Alouin help me for breaking the Zrelnach mold by saying this, but the kid's right. Given what we saw during the trial, Rhy's actions make the most tactical sense.”

...Given what they'd seen? Had people other than myself seen Rhylix's memory, and if so, how many? Why had he allowed such an invasion of his privacy?

“Can we return to the original question, please?” Eledis grumbled. “Should we expect civilians with us on our journey?”

Wincing, the annoyed Councilman said, “Doubtful. Why does it matter?”

“Every detail is relevant when making a plan,” I said before freezing.

Where had that come from?

“At least, I think it's so,” I continued.

The Council and Eledis were staring at me, but I wasn't quite sure what they wanted. I held perfectly still while a random ache of loss pulsed through me. When Eledis relaxed with a smile, I nearly collapsed at the release of pressure.

“Do you have a plan?” the older man asked.

“Not as such,” I said. “Only, I noticed a direct path beneath the mountains here.”

I jabbed my finger at the map that I'd recently lowered.

“Why would we skirt the Fractured Peaks when we have that?”

Fixing an indulgent smile in place, the irate Councilman said, “That's our route to Allanovian's tear. No one willingly traverses it.”

I cocked my head.

“Why not?”

I'd read of tears before, and because of that, I knew they were considered dangerous, but I'd never learned why. Based on the reactions I was receiving, I gathered that this knowledge might have been commonplace. If so, most authors wouldn't think to mention it.

"Forgive my grandson," Eledis said with a tight voice. "He's lived in isolation for as long as his memory stretches. He doesn't understand a tear's effects on people, much less what one is."

"Ah. I suppose that explains the suggestion," Ferin said before turning to me. "Tears are known to drive people mad, young warrior. Not many can escape one's influence. Even still, the exceptionally brave and reckless occasionally take their chance with one because they could find otherworldly items near a tear. Often times, these items are what bolster a nation or town's economy. All of which is to say that bringing a couple hundred Zrelnach near one would prove exceptionally foolish."

Dropping my gaze to the map, I weighed what the Zrelnach Commander had said, forcibly ignoring my resistance to her words.

"It seems my general education is lacking. Perhaps over the next few months, someone will see fit to fill in those gaps," I said, "but for now, I'd ask whether the chance of this proposed disaster is more or less likely than starvation while skirting the mountains. Let's start there."

The only calm Councilman lowered his hands to the table, narrowing his eyes.

"He's made a good point," he said.

Wait, what? I hadn't been trying to make a point, merely gather more information, but Ferin cautiously nodded agreement while the incensed Councilman whipped his head between them with his mouth agape.

"You can't be serious, Shafoth," he said. "Ferin?"

The Zrelnach Commander shrugged.

"Why should you care what route we take, Hemly?" she said. "You won't be joining us."

...Us?

"I'm sorry," I cut in before anyone else could speak. "You're coming along?"

Something besides boredom took residence on Ferin's face while guardedness flickered to life in her eyes.

"Why wouldn't I?" she asked. "I'm the commander of the armed force that you mean to take. It's only logical that I accompany you."

It was. That didn't mean I wanted it. Did I have a feasible way of refusing her help, though?

“Forgive me. I thought your duties on the Council might keep you here,” I said. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“Oh, I’m not offended, just confused,” Ferin said, “but you cleared that up for me. Not to worry. If I have my way, the remnant of Zrelnach left here won’t be large enough to warrant a Councilor any longer.”

“I see,” I said.

How unfortunate.

With a slight smile, Ferin turned to Eledis.

“Do you object to taking the path under the Fractured Peaks?” she asked. “We could traverse it as slow or fast as you like.”

Making a face, Eledis said, “Fast would be better. I’d rather get as far from Allanovian as possible before another of Doldimar’s minions descends upon us.”

At that, my lips twitched. Well played, mentioning the threat this city was under while my family inhabited it. He’d done it after extracting a promise of support from its leaders as well. Maybe in the future, Eledis could teach me how to negotiate.

Slapping the table, Ferin said, “It’s decided, then. We’ll go under the mountains. A good suggestion made by our soon-to-be king.”

The others murmured agreement, nodding to me, and I stood stock still, somehow keeping myself from cocking my head.

What had that last bit been about? King? Surely Ferin hadn’t meant me.

“Shall we discuss logistics, then?” Eledis asked.

“I think that’s only fair. After all, Allanovian will need to ensure its own survival once you’ve left,” Hemly said. “Does the young one have any ideas for that discussion?”

Still caught on what Ferin had said, I half-heard the question.

“I... do not,” I said. “In fact, I’d like to retire for the evening. Long day and all. Unless another topic will turn this venerable group of people into squabbling children again?”

Several faces soured at that, but I hardly noticed, already making my way out of the chamber.

“Good night, Eledis,” I said.

As I turned the corner, I heard him making apologies for my behavior, but I didn’t pause long enough to listen. After finding an empty corner, I put my back to it, thunking my head on stone as I

gasped. Shivers ran over me, and I rubbed my arms, trying to fight off chills.

“You did well.”

Focusing my eyes, I grimaced on seeing Dim and Bright.

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate that.”

Because throughout that conversation, I’d felt barely in control.

“I’m also glad to see that you’ve returned to these twin guises,” I continued. “What you showed me before... I don’t want to see it again.”

Losing control like that hadn’t been pleasant.

As Dim and Bright went unnaturally still, I rolled my eyes. At the moment, I couldn’t handle the puzzle of them. I’d only sought solitude to calm my nerves, not to consult with beings that I barely understood.

Alouin, did the people of Allanovian actually expect me to be a *king*, or had that been... a slip of the tongue? It was a flimsy explanation for what I’d heard, but I couldn’t consider anything else. Too many issues were stacked on my plate. I couldn’t add *ruling a kingdom* to them.

Too many other issues... *Too many...*

Roughly shaking myself, I whispered, “I really need to speak with dad.”

I’d taken a step toward the corridor when Bright popped in front of me.

“We can lead you to Aramar,” it said.

“If you like,” Dim added.

Meaning I wouldn’t need to speak with someone else?

“I would like that,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Of course, Raimie.”

### **[TTS Chapter Twenty-Three](#)**

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Revision #3

Created 19 August 2024 21:12:45 by FatalisticFable

Updated 18 March 2026 21:53:04 by FatalisticFable