

Chapter 24: The Start of a Journey

Raimie

I followed my twin anomalies through Allanovian. Presumably because I'd invited them to stay, Bright and Dim didn't vanish when other people filled the corridors, but they never spoke a word to distract me, which was good.

Because the further along we traveled, the more a sense of familiarity raised its head. Was another memory of this place, buried beneath fever and ignorance, about to come forth?

My twins soon stopped beside a narrow cleft in a rock wall, gesturing toward it, and as I approached, I made a face. This would be fun.

Shimmying into the cleft, I sidled sideways while its walls brushed along my shrunken profile. What was this supposed to be? A bottleneck? That *would* make sense for the entrance to the Zrelnach common room.

Dragging myself through the last bit of rock, I stumbled into the open, panting from the effort of it. I found myself in a cavern filled with tables and a wall made of kegs. Another wall held several wood-burning stoves with a counter separating them from the cavern's open space. As they did throughout Allanovian, bracketed torches provided light here, although a handful of chandeliers were hanging between the stalactites overhead.

And all of this was swarmed by Esela, swathed in black leather.

Abruptly aware of how out of place I was, I backed toward the exit, but I couldn't reach it before several people in the room noticed my presence. Their stares nailed me in place as surely as an illusion of Teron might have while a wave of quiet traveled through the cavern. The Zrelnach impassively watched me, and almost beneath my notice, I shifted into a defensive stance, resting a hand on Silverblade's hilt.

A woman close to the entrance stood, raising her mug overhead, and one by one, the other Esela followed her example until hundreds of deadly people were saluting me.

"Welcome, worthy one," the woman said.

The words echoed from dozens of lips, and the Zrelnach took a drink from their mugs or goblets.

And then, they sat. And they ignored me. And I relaxed, if only a little bit.

“Raimie!”

A hand lifted from among a dense group of people found deeper in the cavern, and I wandered toward it, eventually finding my father at a table with several other Zrelnach.

“How’d it go?” he asked. “Is Eledis still alive, the stubborn bastard?”

“Yes, thank Alouin,” I said. “I managed to cool down tempers before anything bad happened.”

“Well, that’s all right then,” my father said. “Sit, sit! I’ve got a mug of your favorite for you.”

Taking the only available seat, I eyed the Zrelnach around me. I’d wanted this to be a private conversation. My father had seemed to understand that, so why was I surrounded by strangers?

“These are friends from my time here,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind them joining us. They’ll act as a buffer between us and the other Zrelnach.”

“Ok. I get that, I guess,” I said. “Their names?”

Grinning, my father pounded the back of the man beside him.

“This is Gistrick, one of the finest warriors you’ll ever meet,” he said.

Wincing, the man said, “That’s not true anymore, though, is it? Not with this injury.”

He gestured toward a part of his body that I couldn’t see, and my father rolled his eyes.

“Ignore him,” he said. “He’s always been modest. Now. This is...”

He continued introducing the others, but I stayed stuck on the first one. This stranger was the one who’d offered me support before my first trial, the only Zrelnach to do so, and without knowing anything about the man, I already felt... distinctly uneasy around him. Despite having never seen him in my life, I could still swear I’d met him before, which was impossible. I hadn’t known Esela existed before meeting Rhylix so why...?

Something slid across the table to me, and I reflexively caught it, wincing when amber liquid splashed over my hand. I hated this stuff.

“I propose a toast,” my father said.

He lifted his mug high, and the Zrelnach at the table joined him.

“To Raimie, the best son a father could ask for and a man resilient enough to overcome the challenges raised against him,” he continued.

“To Raimie!”

Mugs were clunked together, although I kept mine on the table. I did, however, drink with them when the time called for it. Closing my eyes, I savored the taste. No matter how much I might hate most forms of alcohol, including brandy, I had to admit that this one was all right.

Better to think about that than how the coming conversation would negate my father’s toast.

“So,” he said, “from what you said earlier, I gather we need to talk, both of us. Why don’t you go first?”

But how should I do that? How did I share a weakness with people who would one day leap into danger with me?

“It’s ok, Raimie,” Gistrick said. “All of us have been where you are, at least partially. Talking about it is healthy, and no one will judge you for it.”

How could this *stranger* know what I was dealing with? Almost, I laughed in his face but... but...

Opening up to these people might show greater strength than rejecting their offer of companionship.

“I need someone to share how they’ve dealt with their guilt,” I said, “or to help make sense of my new life, at least. I need...”

I didn’t know what could fix the mess that I’d become over the span of a week. Maybe nothing could, but before we set off on a journey that was sure to be fraught with danger, I’d like something or someone to anchor me. Otherwise, I’d continue drifting, and that would see me killed.

No one at the table would meet my eyes, though, and I clenched my hands around my mug. Would they refuse to help me with this? Where was my father with his constantly promised advice?

After slowly breathing out, I said, “I know none of you have been in my situation. I don’t expect you to help me with it, not fully. You’ve probably never learned that your family has kept a secret from you for your whole life, and I don’t expect you’ll relate to the sense of betrayal that goes with it.”

Jerking his head to me, my father opened his mouth, but I barreled over him.

“Nor do I expect anything useful for when everyone’s determined your future for you. You can’t understand the helplessness that comes with knowing you can’t change it,” I said. “Maybe some of you can help me grapple with how my presence led to the massacre of everyone I’ve known, but I know, I fucking *know*, that all of you have killed before.

“So, tell me. How do you bury that? How do you stop seeing your victim’s face when your eyes shutter closed? How do you make this sickening self-hatred, one that’s tearing into you with every second, *go the hell away*? How do you live with yourself when you’ve *ended someone’s life* before their time? How... *how?*”

Stretching my hands in front of me, I flinched at the red stickiness covering them.

Hadn't I cleaned these? I had. I knew I had and yet...

Hugging myself, I pretended that I wasn't hiding murder weapons or clawing my fingers into my sides. Meanwhile, the people at the table shifted, looking for help with answering my plea, but when someone tried to do that, it didn't come from the Zrelnach in front of me.

"It's a process."

Glancing over my shoulder, I wanted to bristle at the sight of the woman behind me, but here, at the end of this long day, I was too wrung dry to acknowledge my distaste.

"With time, the guilt will fade," Ferin said. "At times, the process may seem to take forever, and throughout your life, slivers of remorse will make resurgences into your life, but each relapse will hurt less. Eventually, the face you see will go fuzzy, but honestly, young warrior? I find it's better if that never happens. To me, remembering those faces is my way of honoring my victims. But unfortunately, there's no quick fix for self-loathing. The best thing you can do tonight is get thoroughly drunk *with friends*. Don't do it alone."

With a soft smile, she patted my shoulder before continuing toward a counter. Watching her place an order, I wondered what she'd meant that to be. Had Ferin been easing a guilty conscience? And how had she been behind me at the precise moment when I'd needed her advice?

"The commander is wise. You'd do well to heed her advice."

Turning back to the table, I stared Gistrick down, wondering if he could understand the internal struggle I'd been grappling with.

"Raimie... I had no idea that you thought Eledis and I had betrayed you," my father said. "We never meant to hurt you-"

"I know," I interrupted.

Grimacing, I decided to take Ferin's advice, lifting my mug to down its contents. When I slammed it, empty, onto the table, one of the Zrelnach stood, presumably to retrieve another.

"I know that your intention was to keep me safe," I continued, "and I don't blame you for it. I even accept it, intellectually, but I've never been the best at controlling my feelings. You know that."

Lifting his mug, my father mumbled into it.

"You'd be surprised how much control you have when compared to others."

How was I supposed to respond to that? Fortunately, the Zrelnach from earlier quickly returned, handing off another drink.

“Thank you,” I said before turning to my father. “What did you want to tell me?”

Making a face, he said, “That’s a subject best saved for another time.”

“So, you’re going to keep a secret from me. Again,” I said.

“It’s not like that! I’d rather wait for a better-”

“Just tell him, Aramar,” Gistrick sighed. “It’ll hurt him either way. Get it over with.”

A crater formed in my stomach. Hurt me? What did my father mean to share?

Swallowing, my father flicked his eyes over the cavern while spinning his mug between his hands.

“The fight with Teron,” he said. “Something happened during it.”

He clenched his jaw, and I couldn’t move from the awkward position I was sitting in. What had that evil bastard done?

Gistrick nudged my father, and he puffed out a sigh.

“The Enforcer broke my back,” he said. “I’m paralyzed from the waist down.”

A heady combination of numbness and detachment blasted through me, leaving me adrift outside my body. This couldn’t be real, could it? It had to be a cruel joke.

“But I’ve seen you walking around since then,” I said. “If you were paralyzed...”

He couldn’t walk, could he?

“Your friend, Rhylix, set me up with a contraption that came through Allanovian’s tear, something from another world,” my father said. “It lets me walk, but doing so isn’t... pleasant.”

Standing, he lifted his tunic a fraction, revealing the metal band circling his waist, before sitting once more.

“I’ll eventually get used to the twinges but for now...”

My father shrugged, and the pit in my stomach carved deeper into me.

“I’m sorry, dad,” I said. “If I’d been a little faster-”

“Don’t you dare,” my father snapped. “This is, in no way, your fault. Teron can have all the blame, thank you very much. The only reason I’m telling you about it is so you’ll know that I can’t move as quickly as I used to. It might be best to leave me-”

Still watching myself from a distant perch, I shot to my feet, scraping my chair across the floor as I did.

“Hell no!” I shouted. “You’re my *father*. Don’t you dare suggest that I abandon you.”

Warmth sprang into my father’s eyes, even as he darted them over the cavern.

“Raimie...” he said.

Crashing into my body, I noted the dead silence around me and the eyes staring my way. I sank into my seat, shrinking on myself, until conversation resumed in the cavern, but as if to contradict my dread over a perceived mistake, the people around the table—all of them except my father—grinned at me.

“Nicely done. That’s solidified the loyalty of many people here,” Gistrick said.

Had he meant that genuinely, or had it been intended as an insult?

“Thank you?” I said.

“Seems the toast you gave wasn’t an exaggeration, Aramar,” a woman beside my father said.

When she elbowed him, he chuckled.

“You doubted me?” he asked.

“No!”

“We could never.”

“It’s not like you’ve said similar things about people, only to have them proven false later,” Gistrick said. “You’re too trusting at times, my friend.”

My father stiffened, glaring at the Eselan.

“How dare you,” he said. “I’ll have you know that I’m an excellent judge of character!”

“Sure you are.”

Since the people around the table seemed finished with me, I watched them banter with one another. Almost, I left to find a bed but decided against it in the end. Who knew when I could drink with friendly people in a safe place again? I’d take advantage of it while I could.

After all, tomorrow would mark the beginning of a long journey and the next phase in my life. May it be as kind to me as the first once had been.

TTS Chapter Twenty-Four

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