

Chapter 25: Another Teacher

Raimie

On the third day of our trip beneath the mountain, I'd begun to think that I'd made a mistake. For what had seemed like forever, we'd followed a set of mine tracks deep beneath the earth, and with each passing day, something distinctly dangerous had rippled through the group.

Without the crossing of the sun or moon across the sky, keeping track of time had been difficult. We'd had to rely on people with so-called 'watches' to decide when the group should make camp or march. Considering that these devices mostly existed among the Zrelnach, the few civilians who'd joined us had become disgruntled, which had only been exacerbated by their control of the group's rations.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

Shivering, I rubbed my arms, scanning my surroundings for the thousandth time. I didn't know why I was doing this. The tunnel we were marching down, a square hole cleanly bored through stone, would never change, but even still, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was stalking the group, something that would once more rip the rug out from under me.

A hand landed on my shoulder, and jumping, I spun to meet the amused gaze of my new friend.

"You shouldn't sneak up on people like that," I hissed, "especially with everyone ready to snap right now."

"Mm. True," Rhylix said before going distant. "This tear's aura of panic is strong. I'd say we're within a day of reaching it. We'll need to be careful going forward."

Was that why the group had been so jumpy? I'd thought it was just the unease of being buried beneath a mountain, but that belief seemed foolish in retrospect. For their whole lives, every resident of Allanovian had lived in caves. This trip shouldn't be any different for them, no matter that I had a need to sprint, howling, back to the city.

"I'd been wondering about that," I said. "All of them, including my family, have been acting..."

"A little crazy?" Rhylix said.

Shaking my head, I said, "More than a little. I'm not happy about our circumstances either, but they're being *unreasonable*. Suspicious, irritable... it's annoying."

“That’s what tears do to most people,” Rhylix said with a shrug.

Halting, I eyed the other man.

“Then, why hasn’t it affected you?” I asked. “Hell, what about *me*?”

“Who knows?” Rhylix said. “Our world is terrible and strange. I stopped trying to explain it ages ago.”

With a sigh, I resumed my trek.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter why. We should count our luck that someone in this miserable group is keeping their head,” I said, “but you didn’t find me to listen while I ramble. Did you need something?”

“I’m playing fetch, as usual,” Rhylix said with a grin. “Eledis wants to discuss something with you.”

Clicking my tongue, I said, “Of course he does. Where is he?”

“I’ll show you.”

As we threaded through the Esela, I did my best to avoid jostling or otherwise startling them. I didn’t want a sword stabbed through my chest, and with the current atmosphere, not only did such unwarranted violence seem possible, I thought it likely.

The group’s march had slowed down, and people had started squabbling over where to lay their bedrolls. Despite this, they’d given a wide gap to those in the lead.

With their campsite already arranged, Eledis and Ferin watched as the rest prepared for bed, tensely chatting, but they fell silent as Rhylix and I approached.

My friend practically skipped across the last few feet.

“One ‘insolent teenager’, as requested,” he chirped.

While Eledis glared at my friend, I fought to stay silent. My grandfather had called me worse names before, but hearing him chastised for his less than silver tongue threatened to send me into peals of laughter.

“Thank you,” Eledis said through gritted teeth. “You may relax for the evening.”

Rhylix looked to Ferin for approval, and when she nodded, he shrugged, clapping my shoulder as he left.

Watching him plunge back into the group’s activities, I cursed under my breath. I kept meaning to ask him why he’d had Silverblade forged for me, but other tasks had pushed the question to the side, and when in my friend’s presence, I’d developed the irritating habit of forgetting about it.

It didn't help that with my training on pause while beneath the mountain, I hadn't gotten to spend much time with him. This continuation of my ignorance, however, had become a bother. I should fix it.

For now, though...

Rounding on Eledis, I asked, "Is dad scouting again?"

"Yes, he and his friends have gone ahead of us. I don't like it. If unsupervised, Aramar's likely to do something stupid," Eledis said, "but that's not why I asked for you."

Really now? I would *never* have guessed.

Crossing my arms, I asked, "What can I do for you, grandfather?"

"You mentioned that you were willing to learn more about our world," Eledis said.

"Yes?"

"After much deliberation, I've decided on a tutor for you."

Eledis gestured at Ferin, who raised two fingers in the air, and I wordlessly stared. Was he serious?

"Forgive me for asking, but what can you teach me, commander?" I said. "I'd assume you're well-versed in anything related to a fight but..."

Smirking, Ferin said, "I'm more knowledgeable than you might think, young warrior. Besides, your choices for a tutor are slim to none right now. If you want a head start on your education, you'll accept what I have to offer."

I didn't know how to reply. Everything Ferin had said was logical, and for that alone, I should eagerly accept this proposal but...

"Eledis, may I have a private word with him?" Ferin asked.

"Why not? It's not like you can murder him with so many witnesses nearby," Eledis said, "and I'd rather get comfortable for the night anyway. A good evening to you both."

He stomped toward his bedroll, and Ferin jerked her head toward an unoccupied section of the tunnel. When we reached it, she whirled on me.

"Say it," she demanded. "I know it's been on the tip of your tongue since your second trial, so come on. Ask your question."

Could I speak what had been churning in my stomach for days?

But why wouldn't I? Now that Ferin had asked me to speak, no social norms were keeping me from it.

“Why did you make me a murderer?” I said. “Rhy’s told me there are other options for the trials, so why did you pick the one that you did? Were you simply that determined to see me fail? Why stain my essence as you have?”

As I’d spoken, Ferin had listened with the most serious of expressions, and at the end, she nodded.

“We did have other ways of testing your claim to the Audish throne, yes. I wanted to use one of those for your second trial, but I was overruled,” she said. “In the end, I hope some good can come of it, despite how much I hate what happened to you. If you continue along this path, young warrior, you’d have become a murderer eventually. Best for everyone involved if you made your first kill in relative safety. And Raimie?”

As if afraid I’d attack her, she hesitantly rested a hand on my shoulder.

“However it might seem, whether because of my past decisions or what might occur in the future, the last thing I want is to see you fail. My dearest wish is that you will defeat Doldimar with as little trauma done to you as possible, all so you can claim the throne that’s rightfully yours. I need you to understand this.”

Swallowing my questions, I said, “I do. I hope you can understand that, despite my acceptance of your explanation, I may harbor ill-will toward you for a while yet.”

Drooping, Ferin let her hand drop from my shoulder.

“Of course. It’s only to be expected,” she said. “In the meantime, can we work together to prepare you for what’s coming?”

With a nod, I said, “I think that’s for the best, despite the arrangement’s difficulties.”

That perked Ferin up. Grinning, she extended her hand, and a book appeared in the air over it. After she’d caught it, she threw it toward me, and as I scrambled to keep it from falling, Ferin summoned more. Once she was finished, I was haphazardly holding three books, all while a part of me clapped with glee. Even after weeks spent in Allanovian, this had been the first time I’d seen an Eselan use their magic.

“Your assignment,” Ferin said. “Study the highlighted portions of those books. I expect you to have learned their principles by the time we reach the other side of the mountains.”

“That seems... manageable,” I croaked.

“Does it?”

Ferin tossed another summoned book my way.

“Take a fourth, then,” she said. “Good luck, young warrior.”

Humming to herself, she strolled to join Eledis in bedding down, and I released a long breath.

“She’ll be fun to work with,” I said to myself.

Yawning, I meandered between Zrelnach who’d already fallen asleep. Carefully crossing mine tracks, I found a cart sitting on them, and after wedging my pack between it and the tunnel’s wall, I drew my knees up, flipping through one of the books.

Most of its text was underlined, but I didn’t think the marks would hinder me. Despite them, I should have the book’s contents absorbed into my mental index by day’s end tomorrow.

As I turned to the first page, scanning line after line, I reached into a pocket, making a face when I found it empty. I’d forgotten about using the last of Rhylix’s sleeping tinctures last night, and finding my friend to ask for more seemed like a hassle. I could deal with bad dreams for one night.

For now, my body and mind were buzzing with energy, so I tackled my assignment. I read for hours: through when my father and his scouting party returned, through when he checked on me, through when the rest of the camp fell still.

“I can’t believe you agreed to work with *that woman*.”

Glancing over the top of my book, I smirked at Bright and Dim.

“Hello, there,” I said.

Quietly, I set the book aside.

“How are you two feeling today?” I asked. “Any changes?”

Making a face, Bright said, “No, and there won’t be any until you’ve left the break in your reality behind.”

“That should happen soon,” I said. “Another couple of days at most.”

“Thank *me*,” Dim hissed. “Getting this close makes it difficult not to revert to -zzz-.”

With a buzzing growl, it strangled the air while Bright looked on with amusement.

“We could always return to fighting one another in our quest for his -zzz-.”

Snapping its teeth together, Bright clicked its tongue before buzzing a few garbled words.

“Hey! Don’t start bickering yet,” I said. “Who knows when today’s march will catch up with me? Let’s focus please.”

Sighing, Bright said, “Do you really want to tackle our communication hurdle again? It’s getting more dangerous for us to appear to you.”

Pausing, I narrowed my eyes at it.

“Dangerous how?” I asked.

“Let’s just say that if you call for us any closer to the break in your reality, something *super* fun might happen,” Dim said, bouncing in place.

When I looked at Bright for confirmation, it nodded with a look of distaste.

“Well, shit,” I said. “That would have been nice to know before we headed toward the tear.”

“We didn’t exactly get a chance to share before leaving Allanovian,” Bright grumbled.

And the beginnings of a fire in me were snuffed.

Making a face, I said “Fair. I’m sorry.”

Bright and Dim seemed confused by my apology, so I forged onward without waiting for their reply.

“If you might endanger the people around us, staying out of sight might be best for right now,” I said. “Can you appear to me when you think it’s safe, though?”

Giving an order to these two, even softly phrased as mine had been, made me want to squirm. Over the course of our nightly conversation, I might have grown more comfortable with these anomalies, but I still didn’t know what they were, besides incorporeal and mortal enemies.

“And we see sense in him again,” Dim said. “I wondered where it went.”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Will you do as I’ve asked, then?”

“It’s a good idea,” Bright said with a pointed glare at Dim.

“Fine, fine,” it said. “Don’t get into trouble while we’re gone.”

“Thank you,” I told the empty air.

Sighing, I made myself comfortable, diving into the book again. Its words were beginning to swim in and out of focus, but surely, I could get a little further before-

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