

Chapter 27: The Tear Beneath the Mountain

Raimie

After Rhylix and I had joined the others in our scouting party, I took note of their foreboding expressions and silently sighed. For two days, these people had encountered nothing on their quests into the dark, and something had come up on the day that I'd joined them. Of course. It was probably just the tear, which we'd expected, but still.

"We've reached the cavern that holds the tear," Gistrick said.

Oh, goodie. I'd been right.

"From here on, we should stick together, otherwise the tear might have us doing... bad things," Gistrick continued. "We should also send someone back to the main column, letting them know how far they are from this place. I'd volunteer Raimie and the heal- Rhylix for the job—"

Crossing my arms, I fixed the man with a flat stare.

"—but I get the feeling they wouldn't let that happen," Gistrick said with a chuckle. "Anyone else want the job?"

An unknown man raised his hand, and Gistrick nodded.

"Off with you, then. Aramar, am I forgetting anything?"

My father never moved from where he was staring into the black ahead.

"Whatever you do, don't approach the tear," he said. "I know that seems obvious, but we have newbies with us."

"And you haven't done this in a while," Gistrick said.

Relenting in his challenge of the dark, my father faced us.

"No, I haven't," he said. "Raimie, it's a straight sprint to the other side of the cavern, maybe half a mile's distance. It shouldn't take long, but do try to keep up."

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Dad, who’s been running around the forest for the last few years, and who’s been busy with playing house?”

“Fair,” my father said with a wince. “Hopefully, we’ll get lucky, and the others will catch up with us before we’ve finished recovering on the other side. If things seem normal in the cavern, I’d rather not cross it for a second time.”

Gistrick pounded my father on the back.

“None of us would,” he said, “but come now. Let’s get this over with.”

Making a face, my father moved as close as he could to the dividing line between light and dark, and after the group had formed around him, we ran.

I’d been skeptical about a sprint through pitch-black, but once we’d left firelight behind us, the soft illumination that it had hidden came to the forefront. A flickering white light brushed along every inch of the cavern—its floor, rolling like hills, and its unnaturally smooth walls, marred only by a far-distant hole—but I wasn’t sure where it was coming from.

The change in my companions slipped beneath my notice until we were almost halfway across. My father and Gistrick seemed fine, although they’d gritted their teeth and hunched their shoulders, and Rhylix appeared the same, if with a slight weave to his step.

The other Esela, however, had me pulling closer to my father. They were muttering under their breath, jerking their eyes across the cavern, but more concerningly, they’d rested their hands on their weapons’ hilts.

“We’re getting close,” Rhylix said with his words slurred.

Following the line of his gaze, I found a corona of brilliant, white light capping a hill at our side. A sliver of black peeked between the stone’s crest and this arch, but before I could ask if what I was seeing was the tear, buzzing burst on my ears.

When I jerked toward the noise, my stomach fell through the floor. Several feet ahead, Dim and Bright had appeared, and they did *not* look happy with one another. Of course, they usually didn’t, but this was different. Watching them brought to mind an image of two armies lining up for battle.

Then, Bright opened its mouth, and the resulting screech echoed in the cavern.

Stopping short, I clapped my hands to my ears, cringing. *Damn*, that had hurt. A sharp sliver of ice had been driven through my ear and into my head, and as the noise continued, I almost crumpled to the ground.

“Raimie?”

My father’s voice sounded like it was coming through water, garbled and muffled.

“We need to keep going. Now, before-”

“*There’s something in the shadows!*”

An Eselan—Aya, I believed—had halted between Bright and Dim, drawing her sword as she spun.

“Don’t you see it?” she shouted. “How do you not see it? Unless...”

“Aya, calm down,” Gistrick said. “This is the tear talking.”

He moved toward the woman with his hands raised, and she wavered, lowering her sword with a question in her eyes. Seeing it, I let out a breath. I should deal with Bright and Dim before they made this situation worse.

Before I could decide how I’d do that without adding to the aura of insanity hovering over me since this morning, my anomalies resumed their screeching match, advancing on one another. As if in response, Aya snapped her blade back up, and Gistrick retreated toward my father.

“I hate to suggest it, but we should leave her here,” he said under his breath. “Once everyone’s on the other side, we can return for her.”

Perhaps Gistrick had been trying to stay quiet, but it hadn’t been enough. The second, unknown Eselan leapt away from us, bringing his weapon to bear as well.

“No Zrelnach leaves another behind,” he hissed. “How could you suggest such a thing?”

“He did *what?*” Aya growled. “Maybe I’m right, then. Maybe Doldimar’s swayed him... somehow. All of us know the stories of what that bastard can do, and with *them* here, Allanovian might have drawn his attention.”

“And who would have brought that focus here?” the second Eselan said. “Who’s been acting strangely since he returned?”

They turned on me, and around them, Dim and Bright ceased their bickering. Both of them looked my way, which was bad.

“He *has* acted nothing like the Raimie we knew,” Aya said. “Less of a ruthless edge.”

“What are you saying?” my father snapped.

He stepped between the Esela and me.

“Do you actually think Raimie could hurt people like you?” he continued. “That’s ridiculous.”

I didn’t know how these strangers could know me well enough to answer my father’s question, but when it seated doubt in them once more, I didn’t scrutinize it. Before my twins could cause more problems, I ducked around my father, hurrying to the instabilities in our midst with my hands

raised.

“You have valid concerns, ones that we should discuss,” I said, “but let’s do so when we’re safe. Far from the tear.”

“He’s... right,” Aya breathed.

Beside her, Dim crossed its arms, inclining its head while it buzzed.

“But what if it’s not Raimie?” the unknown Eselan said. “What if it’s him?”

He pointed, and behind me, Rhylix released an exaggerated sigh.

“Hell,” he breathed. “Really?”

Bright started jabbering, marching toward Dim with a finger pointed in accusation.

“That would make sense,” Aya said. “Raimie’s been under his care since returning to us.”

“You’re.... right,” Gistrick said before violently shaking his head. “Aya. Dozat. We can’t discuss this here. This is the *worst possible place* to have an argument.”

“And I’d have noticed if Rhylix was manipulating me,” I say. “Stop this! I know Rhy’s not your favorite person, but this is ridiculous. Let’s *stop shouting at each other and get somewhere safe.*”

I glared at Bright and Dim while saying that last part, but they didn’t hear me. They circled one another with dusk and light in their hands, and seeing no change in them, a string of curses ran through my head.

“What’s going on here?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I sucked in a breath. Another group was approaching us, and with blood draining from my cheeks, I angled my body so I could see both parties. One, my twins, was a known danger. I wasn’t sure what to expect from the other.

Ferin strode toward us with more Zrelnach behind her.

“Rhy?” she asked as she got closer.

Wincing, Rhylix closed one eye as if in preparation.

“The tear’s manipulating them?” he hesitantly said.

Spinning, Dim roared at Rhylix, and Bright took advantage of the opening, tackling its counterpart. Unlike with their other fights, they didn’t disappear after making contact, scuffling on the ground instead with many a scratch and bite.

“We’re not-!” Aya growled. “No. It doesn’t matter. All unknowns are a threat, especially the humans. We should kill them.”

“Excuse me?” Gistrick said.

But the other Eselan, Dozat, had no words like his ally. He raced for his closest perceived foe, and I backpedaled, drawing Silverblade. Unfortunately, everything I’d recently learned about fighting had fled from my head, so my sword was less than useless, and I didn’t know if I could run with an enemy this close.

“Fucking... gods... damnit!” someone shouted, getting steadily closer.

Dozat swung at me, and with a dry mouth, I raised Silverblade, unsure if I could block the strike. Something tugged on my tunic—

“Get behind me!”

—and as I stumbled away, I watched Rhylix bat Dozat’s blade aside before punching him in the face.

Spinning, he shouted, “Go! I’ll cover you.”

I didn’t think to question him. Finding the closest empty spot, I sprinted that way.

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