

# Chapter 31: Healing Duties

## Rhylix

*Every day, its madness overtakes more of my mind.*

It took a few hours, but when the sun was halfway to the horizon, we reached Paft. The farming village had seen better days. Half of its fields had been left untended for long enough that weeds had grown almost as tall as the crops, and as we approached the village itself, I winced at how dilapidated most of the buildings were.

A man, Paft's mayor most likely, was waiting for us on the village's outskirts, and in his shadow, several people with shoddy weapons looked ready to attack at the slightest provocation. While the Zrelnach arranged themselves in a better defensive position, I pushed through them to the royal family at the group's head. I arrived in time to see Paft's leader welcoming Eledis into a squat house, leaving the younger Audish royals outside.

Gistrick, standing at Aramar's side, nodded when I approached. A few days ago, he and his friends had haltingly apologized for their aggressive behavior near the tear, and we'd spent far too much time working out our differences, or at least, we'd done so enough that we could tolerate each other's presences again.

In other words, the two of us were back to square one.

Both Gistrick and I deliberately ignored the bow and two arrows that Aramar was loosely holding. We doubly ignored Raimie, who was staring at the door Eledis and Paft's leader had disappeared behind. With his arms crossed, he was tapping a finger on his elbow.

Hell, if both of those men weren't of Audish descent, I'd eat my sword.

"Aramar," I said, stopping beside the human.

"Hullo, Rhylix," Aramar tiredly replied. "You ready to fix up more people if it comes down to that?"

With my lips thinning, I examined him, noting the tension in his shoulders and how his eyes were skipping over Paft's people.

“You don’t think we can work out an agreement?” I said. “Allanovian certainly sent enough items from the tear with us, trying to get us out the door more quickly. We’re not without tradable resources.”

“A lack of resources isn’t what I’m worried about,” Aramar said under his breath.

His hand spasmed, almost sending one of his arrows into the dirt, and he winced. With an eye twitching, I laid a finger on the band around his waist.

“Come see me before you go to bed tonight,” I said. “If I must find you instead, I will make your life a living hell until you learn to cooperate with your healer. You’ve seen me working. You know that’s not an idle threat.”

Swallowing hard, Aramar nodded, and I removed my finger from his waist.

“Why only Eledis?”

Blinking, I switched tracks, turning to Raimie. The kid hadn’t moved, only narrowing his eyes a bit.

“That man, their leader. He greeted all of us by name, looking at me like he knew me,” he continued, “but I’ve never been on this side of the Fractured Peaks. Still, he looked at us, knew us, and only invited Eledis into his home. Why? And why didn’t Eledis have us accompany him?”

Interesting questions. Even more interesting: Aramar’s hitched breathing and Gistrick’s uncomfortably shifting feet.

“I don’t like this,” Raimie said, slapping his hands to his thighs. “We should make sure Eledis hasn’t made a mess again.”

He’d taken a step toward the squat house while Aramar had drawn a breath to speak when the door slammed open, letting Paft’s leader limp through it. The poor man looked awful with red splotches covering his exposed skin and his arm held at an unnatural angle. The villagers who’d been guarding the house hurried to him with a cry while Eledis serenely sailed around them.

When the older man joined his family, Raimie hissed, “*What* did you do?”

While keeping half of my attention on them, I slowly turned in a circle to watch the mass of villagers around us, and seeing the majority of them hefting their pathetic weapons, I rested a hand near where I’d hidden my blades.

“That was me getting what we needed without wasting our limited resources,” Eledis said. “We can’t afford to barter with every town we resupply in, especially one as down and out of luck as this one. We’ll need what we have to buy horses and carts later.”

“So, you played bully and beat up their leader instead,” Raimie said.

A string twanged, making several people flinch, although Raimie just glanced at the arrow jutting from a wall before turning back to Eledis. The projectile was quivering a breath from a man, one caught halfway through a step.

“Oops,” Aramar dryly said. “You’ll have to forgive me. I’ve been plagued with spasms in recent days. My finger must have slipped.”

Damn, that man was good with a bow. I hadn’t seen him nock or sight before the arrow had reached its target. The other villagers must have read something similar from the exchange because their hostility receded a fraction.

As if their conversation had never been interrupted, Eledis said, “Sometimes, you have to do things you don’t like in a negotiation. I did what I must so we could get what we need.”

Groaning, Raimie rubbed his face.

“There are other ways to get supplies,” he said with a muffled voice. “You didn’t have to be so brutal.”

With a smirk, Eledis crossed his arms.

“And I suppose you’ll show me these other ways now?” he said.

“Sounds about right,” Raimie said. “Dad. Rhy. Would you join me, please?”

Exchanging a glance, we followed him to Paft’s leader. That man’s guards stepped between us, but while Raimie stopped at their unspoken threat, he also ignored them.

“Hilderel, right?” he asked, addressing Paft’s leader. “I’d like to introduce my friend.”

He clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“This is Rhylix,” he said. “He’s the best healer I’ve ever met, and if you’ll let him, he can take a look at your arm.”

Glancing up, Hilderel sneered at Raimie, but his eyes were also glazed with a faint tremble running through his body.

“Why would I do that?” he growled. “Just... leave town and we’ll send your food along soon. You’ve hurt us enough.”

Raimie’s expression went from concerned to flat, sending a chill down my spine.

“Much as I love him, I am *not* my grandfather, good sir. If I’d known what he planned to do, I’d have insisted on joining you in your home, no matter how much you didn’t want me there. All I’m doing is cleaning up the wreckage left in Eledis’ wake,” he said. “ So, accept Rhylix’s expertise, if you want it. Let me and my people help Paft, if you like. But if you want us to stand idly by while you

gather the supplies you've promised, we can do that too. It's your call, Hilderel."

The village's leader would be stubborn. I saw this in the set of his jaw and how he was drawing himself up, and while I was all for people making supremely poor decisions if they wanted to, that didn't mean I'd let them do it easily.

"I can ease your pain," I said.

When Hilderel swung his head to me, he loosened his jaw, releasing a breath after a moment.

"All right," he said. "Tarnavis can direct your people where we most need help, but you'll have to excuse me if I retire to my home until you've gone. I don't want to see anyone in your family again."

"Of course," Raimie said, folding his hands in front of him. "And our supplies?"

Making a face, Hilderel said, "Again, Tarnavis can help you with that. May I go?"

"Please," Raimie said before bowing. "Many apologies for your suffering."

Hilderel ground his teeth together, but whatever scathing reply he'd wanted to make, he retained it, shuffling into his home. Without prompting, I went with him, smirking on hearing Aramar murmur.

"Nicely done, Raimie."

A closing door blocked off any further words.

Before Hilderel could collapse at the cottage's table, I took his good elbow, guiding him to the bed on the other side of the room, and once I had Hilderel settled, I rummaged through my pockets, perfectly aware of the other man examining me.

"Take this," I said.

After placing a pill in Hilderel's palm, I handed the man a water skin, carefully watching him swallow his medicine. I almost never used these 'painkillers', certainly not on the Zrelnach and even more certainly not on myself. The small number I had were given only in the worst of cases, like when someone had burns as bad as Raimie's had been after Fissid. This man, however, had been hurt in a way that might have him blaming the injury on the kid, and I wouldn't have my ally making an enemy. Not this early.

So, I knelt in front of Hilderel and did what I could to prep while waiting for the pill to take effect. As I spread a salve across the worst of the man's bruises, he shifted in place, drawing my gaze up, and when our eyes met, the town leader looked away.

"You're Eselan?" he asked with a tight voice .

Ah. That explained why he looked so uncomfortable.

Lowering my head to my work, I said, "Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

Hilderel didn't speak for a long time. Too long.

"No," he eventually said, "but only because you're actually being useful, unlike the rest of your race. Also, *that* family vouches for you."

I contained my laughter, wondering if this man knew that almost every stranger outside of his door was Eselan. Would the acid in his voice disappear if he understood the disparity in numbers between the humans and my people in this town right now?

"Why would you care what Raimie and his family think?" I asked instead. "One of them just beat the shit out of you."

"Sure, but in Ada'ir, everyone who's anyone knows about that family," Hilderel said. "I may have retired to this back-end-of-nowhere village, but most of my life was spent in the capital. I even considered joining one of the rebellions in my younger years, so I know who those three are, and if someone of their repute says an Eselan deserves to live, it will be so."

Frowning, I took Hilderel's broken arm more gently than I wanted to.

"But they've been in hiding," I said. "How are they known in Daira?"

Hilderel burst into laughter, wincing when his arm bounced in my hands. The pill must be working if that was his only reaction to a jostled broken bone.

"Is *that* what they're saying?" he gasped. "That's... Alouin, that's hilarious but... it would explain why the kid's acting strangely. He could have lost his cruel edge while 'hiding'."

Ok. The pill was definitely working. When I tried to imagine Raimie as cruel, I almost laughed out loud. It was interesting the delusions that this medicine brought out in people, such as believing oneself important enough to have known the Audish royal family.

At least it had kept this man from attacking me. Now, I only needed to avoid doing the same to him, and everything would be fine and dandy.

"Bite this," I said, handing Hilderel a strip of leather.

The pill might have dulled his pain, but it couldn't completely cover what happened when a bone was set, as evidenced by Hilderel's scream a few seconds later. He *fainted*, leaving me scrambling to catch him and hold the bone in place.

Cursing, I left Hilderel at an awkward angle while placing splints. I considered abandoning him like that, but shaking my head, I shoved him into bed, dragging a blanket out from under him to lay over his sleeping form. Breathing hard, I slammed a jar of salve on the table before storming

outside, grumbling under my breath all the while.

With the foul mood that their leader had left me in, my bedside manner took a sharp turn downward while attending to the citizens of Path. A lot of people were sick here, more than there should have been, and that, combined with the rundown state of the village, made me wonder how hard of a time Paft had fallen on.

Fortunately, the sun quickly fell below the horizon, and I was released from healing duties. I picked my way through the impromptu celebration that had started in the village square. Someone had pulled an out-of-tune lute and a pair of drums from storage, and subsequently, raucous music was now filling the air.

Apparently, an afternoon spent laboring together was enough to erase prejudices for a time.

While looking for Raimie, I noted the evidence of why these people were celebrating. I could see places where people had laid fresh thatch on several roofs, and many doors looked repaired, enough so that they wouldn't fall off their hinges at least.

Hopefully, these changes would help ward the villagers against winter's coming freeze. How many people might survive because of the help we'd provided today?

I found Raimie with his father and some Zrelnach friends. Wildly gesturing, the kid was walking around the group's perimeter, telling a story. Pausing, he whirled in place, painting shock on his face, and his audience laughed, starting a barely audible chant when they could breathe.

Worrying at my lip, I watched this and considered what I meant to tell this kid, my friend. Gods, Raimie looked so happy, and it was perhaps the only time I'd seen him like this.

Maybe I should delay. One more day wouldn't hurt, would it?

Before I could leave, though, Raimie caught sight of me, gesturing for me to join them, and I sighed. Tonight, it was.

Striding to them, I put on my practiced smile.

"Well, this looks fun," I said. "Why wasn't I invited?"

One of the Zrelnach straightened with pursed lips, but her disgust dissolved beneath Raimie's exuberance. With his face a bright beacon, he stepped between Gistrick and Aramar to clasp my shoulders.

"We couldn't find you, of course," he said, "but you're here now. Will you join us?"

Here was another chance to delay. It would be so simple to acquiesce and sit in the circle but...

"Actually, I was hoping I could borrow you," I said. "You had questions earlier? I should finish answering them before they get swept aside again."

Widening his eyes, Raimie drawled, “Riiiiight. I forgot.”

He twisted to the others.

“Does anyone mind if Rhy and I pop off for a bit?” he asked. “I was hoping he’d walk me through a technique he showed me today.”

At the question, so many hooded eyes stared at me, but leaning back on his hands, Aramar looked genuinely pleased with his son’s request.

“Go, go! And have fun,” he said. “Gistrick. Aya. Would you accompany them? Keep your distance, of course, but I’m not sure how safe we are, even after this afternoon.”

“Probably a good idea,” Gistrick said.

Rising, he brushed himself off while Aya stretched, soon to join him. Meanwhile, Raimie rolled his eyes.

“Like I need an escort,” he sighed, “but thanks, dad. I guess.”

“You’re welcome,” Aramar said with a teasing grin. “I love you, son.”

With his mouth dropping open, Raimie turned a brilliant crimson, and even I had to laugh at the sight of it.

Raimie snapped his teeth together.

“I love you too,” he hissed through them before striding into the dark. “Come on, Rhy!”

I hurried after my friend.

## **TTS Chapter Thirty-One**

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