

Chapter 47: A Rescue Attempt

Rhylix

I would make a final request of you, my friend.

Watching the Zrelnach encampment, I despaired of ever sneaking into it in a conventional manner. They were too well-organized and from what I'd seen, on high alert as well. If I used an illusion or shape change to infiltrate the camp, they'd quickly pick up on the inconsistencies that were always present in a magical disguise.

So, how would I get in?

I'd rather not use Ele unless I must. The repelling knot that was Teron still felt far distant, but that distance was nothing to someone like him. Any significant pull of Ele to the physical plane—unlike the tiny sips of it I'd used to try reaching Sev earlier tonight—would orient the bastard in an instant, and I'd rather let whatever was slowing Teron down continue to do so.

If he changed trajectory toward Daira, where Kaedesa would surely be taking Raimie soon, then I'd light Sev up like a beacon for the monster but until then...

No Ele.

Which left me with a quandary. Without magic, I could either enter the camp as I normally would and hope Ferin hadn't spread orders about me through the ranks, or I could wait for a Zrelnach to wander off so I could take their armor. Neither of those options sounded good.

Right as I was about to step out to do gods knew what, I noticed a disturbance on the edge of camp. A group of Zrelnach was ambling through it, angling toward the dark hills around Sev.

They were chatting and laughing and playfully shoving each other, acting like a group of friends who'd been given the night to themselves, and as they came closer, I realized that was exactly what they were: friends. Friends I knew.

Someone stopped them before they could leave camp, and after a moment of discussion, the group pulled aside to reveal one of them leaning on a fellow Zrelnach.

I could imagine the conversation taking place. The group of friends was probably begging the guard to let their inebriated member sober up away from the other Zrelnach's watchful eyes, and it appeared as if the guard blocking them would have mercy. When she moved aside to let the friends pass, they headed into the darkness.

Rising from the grass, I dusted myself off before hurrying to intercept them.

Away from camp, the group behaved with far greater gravity, keeping their eyes on the move and their hands on their swords' hilts. This would make approaching them difficult.

I waited for them to stop, and once they had, they exchanged a few words before most of them headed back, leaving three behind.

"-grateful they helped me this much," I heard as I edged closer, "but I won't let them betray Allanovian for our friendship, especially when we can't know if Raimie... if he-"

"Come now. Don't do that. Raimie's strong, even if he's not as resourceful as he once was. He'll be fine, and you know it."

"I... yes, I know. It's just hard. Not half an hour ago, you hustled into my tent to whisk me away, and we don't know how Raimie's involved in this. If nothing happens to him in Sev, we can't know whether we'll catch him while he's on his way back. How do we help him when we don't know the enemy's plan?"

And there was my opportunity.

"I can help with that," I loudly said.

In a flash, two of the three had their swords drawn while the third had his bow leveled at me with an arrow nocked. He barely stopped himself from releasing said arrow, and I thanked my lucky stars that he'd restrained himself. Even half in shadows as I was, he was aiming at my eye.

Wordlessly, I lifted my hands above my head, and the other three relaxed.

"Rhylix?" Aramar asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Well..." I drawled, looking over the three friends. "I was coming to get you out of camp, but it looks like you lot had that well in hand."

"Of course we did, healer," Aya spat. "We're there for the people who need us, unlike you."

Aramar winced while Gistrick laid a hand on Aya's shoulder.

"I know you're tense, given what we've just done. I am too," he said, "but there's no need for hostility toward someone who seems willing to help us."

Huffing, Aya turned away from them, crossing her arms over her chest.

'Sorry,' Aramar mouthed.

I shrugged at him. Disdain like hers had stopped affecting me ages ago.

"You said something about Raimie's situation?" Aramar continued aloud.

"I did," I said. "I have news. I'm afraid you won't like it."

Setting his jaw, Aramar said, "It has to be better than living in the dark."

"Fair enough," I said with a half-shrug.

But I glanced toward Gistrick to ensure he was ready to steady Aramar, if this news proved too much for him.

When Gistrick nodded, I asked, "First, how much do you know about what's happened?"

"Not much," Aramar said. "Just that the conspiracy we were investigating has made its move tonight, and somehow, every Zrelnach has received orders that they're not to interfere. Most of them seem to be as much in the dark about this as us."

That made a lot of sense, actually.

"Ferin wouldn't have wanted to drive a rift through her people," I mused, caught in my own head. "If they knew the conspiracy was Council-sanctioned, it would force them to choose between Allanovian and a boy many of them have grown fond of over the last few weeks."

When a heavy silence fell, I realized how stupid it had been to say any of that out loud.

"*Ferin?*" Gistrick asked in a squeak.

With an eye half-closed, I nodded.

"She's the leader of the conspiracy," Aramar said, putting two and two together, "which means it's not a conspiracy at all."

"Unfortunately," I said.

"Well, shit."

Turning on his friends, Aramar looked over their tensed states and slowly breathed out.

"You should go back now," he said. "If you hurry, you might catch the others before--"

“No!”

Aya jerked her head toward him, sending her hair flying, and with a completely red face, she struggled to keep the fists at her side from trembling.

“Ferin and the rest of the Council are cowardly wastes of space. They don’t know what Allanovian wants when it comes to most things and especially not with this,” she hissed. “You, Aramar, are the father of Auden’s rightful king, and unlike Allanovian, Auden is our true home. More importantly, though, you’re one of us. Everyone in your family is, and while most Zrelnach can’t break their oaths of loyalty yet, you are our friend, which gives us the extra incentive needed to do what’s right. Gistrick and I will help you, whether you like it or not.”

In this single moment, Aya redeemed the Zrelnach for every wrong they’d ever committed against me, at least in my eyes. Aramar was struck speechless until Gistrick stepped forward to squeeze his shoulder.

“Raimie?” he said.

With a grimace, Aramar flailed his arm, knocking Gistrick’s hand off of him, but his immediate wince showed the reaction to have been unintentional.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s just this *thing*...”

He gestured to his waist, and I pursed my lips. Why was the device from the tear giving him so much trouble still?

“I’ll take a look at it soon,” I said. “In the meantime, you should know that Ferin doesn’t seem thrilled by the Council’s decision either. It’s why she saved Raimie’s life in the Withriingalm rather than letting him die like she planned.”

“*She* started that?” Aramar growled while scrunching his hands in front of his face. “Oh, *oh*, I’m going to...”

“Save your anger for worthier targets,” I said, “such as the person Ferin’s contacted to finish the job she couldn’t complete.”

I paused to let Aramar draw his own conclusions, and when he did, he stumbled backward until Gistrick caught him.

Swallowing hard, he rasped, “Kaedesa?”

I nodded, and Aramar shot upright, tearing at his hair as he paced.

“Fuck!” he hissed. “Oh, Alouin. Raimie... what will I do?”

“We will not panic,” Gistrick said. “We will *calmly* consider our options and form a plan.”

“I already have one, actually,” I said.

The other three turned on me with blank expressions, and I rolled my eyes.

“I know I’m primarily a healer to you lot, but you should know better than to think that’s all I can do,” I said.

Raising an eyebrow, Aya said, “All right, then. What’s your plan, healer?”

Gods. Yes, I’d fostered these people’s belief that I was useless in order to blend in better, but at times, dealing with it could be frustrating as hell.

Gesturing toward the city, I said, “We can’t enter Sev until morning, locked down as it is, so we use that time to rest up and prepare. In the morning, Aramar and I will go into the city and find Raimie. I have contacts there—Don’t look at me like that. I lived here for years before making my way to Allanovian—and they should be able to help us. Based on what they say, we can make further plans. As for our two native Zrelnach, you’ll return to camp and-”

Breaking off, I looked away, rapidly blinking while I considered how best to put this.

“Does everyone here know Dath?” I hesitantly asked.

Frowning, Aya said, “That’s the kid you were training with Raimie, right? I thought he disappeared in the Withriingalm.”

“He didn’t, actually. He’s been helping with our investigation since then,” Aramar calmly said.

But his face, rapidly draining of color, belied that calm state.

“What happened, Rhylix?” he asked.

Closing my eyes, I said, “Earlier today, Ferin confronted me, hoping to stop me from helping Raimie. Despite our precautions, she knew about Dath, using him as leverage, and I...”

Gods, it hurt, even knowing I couldn’t have done anything else at the time.

“I left him in Ona’s hands, planning to reach Sev before the gate closed,” I continued with a thick voice. “Obviously, I failed to do that. So.”

Taking a deep breath, I caught Gistrick and Aya’s eyes, one at a time.

“I was hoping the two of you could find out what’s happened to him,” I said. “If he’s alive, I beg you to get him out of there. *Please*. If not...”

If not, another tragedy could be attributed to my name.

After an agonizingly long period of silence, Aya said, “Of course we’ll look for him, and... if you don’t already know, you did the right thing. You made the choice that any good Zrelnach would

have.”

With a sharp glance at her, I struggled to identify what her change in demeanor had set boiling in my gut. It was with great difficulty that I found my voice and said.

“Thank you.”

Coming closer, Aramar clapped my shoulder.

“I like this plan,” he said. “Why don’t you and I discuss how we’ll get into the city while Gistrick and Aya head back?”

“Of course,” I said. “If my Zrelnach betters don’t mind?”

Rolling his eyes, Gistrick waved us off while Aya flat-out ignored what I’d said, but still, both of them started back toward camp.

Aramar waited until his friends had walked out of earshot before speaking again.

“I didn’t know that Allanovian wasn’t your home,” he led with.

With a faint smile, I said, “You had no reason to think otherwise, but no. My home lies far from here. We, however, should focus on Raimie, not me.”

Aramar gave me a look that showed how much he wasn’t buying my bullshit.

But he said, “How are we getting into Sev? No doubt Kaedesa’s spies will be watching for suspicious people, and they’ll have a good description of me.”

“Probably,” I said, making a face. “How good are you with sneak work, or rather, have you had any experience with it? If needed, could you get into Sev by yourself? Entering separately will lessen the chance of Kaedesa’s spies spotting us.”

Aramar regarded me with such amusement that I wondered what I’d missed.

“I can manage,” he said with an enigmatic grin.

“Wonderful. I can do the same,” I said. “So, let’s not worry about that problem. Once we’ve gotten through the gate, I’ll find you, but after we’ve met up? That’s when things will get tricky.”

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