

Chapter 5: A Push Out the Door

Rhylix

You weren't to blame for our conflict.

The rare times when Allanovian's Council let me step outside of the city, giving me a taste of fresh air, came as a welcome relief from my regulated life. I enjoyed escaping the weight of a mountain pressing down on me, figuratively and literally. I enjoyed my brief splashes of freedom, no matter how false they might be.

I'd hoped to take advantage of this outing to slip free of my observers, racing toward what was drawing me toward it like a bee to a flower's pollen, but with who'd accompanied me today, I couldn't try it.

Besides, for once, the attraction pulling on me was moving my way. Maybe I wouldn't have to give chase this time.

"You keep looking toward the north. Is something wrong?"

Shaking my head, I said, "I'm distracted is all."

I turned to my companion, wincing to find her looking down her nose at me.

"Since when do *you* get distracted?" she asked.

Huffing a sigh, I considered how best to answer this woman.

Ferin. The only person in Allanovian who'd wormed her way past my defenses. The only one I might call a friend, if I allowed myself such attachments.

Also, a member of Allanovian's Council and the commander of the Zrelnach.

"Everyone has bad days," I said. "Mine happens to be today."

Ferin tossed her head so that the purple accents in her hair stood out against their blonde background.

"Do you expect me to believe that?" she asked. "Rhylix, top of his class, whose trainers swore held back when sparring with them, the one man I've met who won't let me sneak up on him, is having such an off day that distraction has claimed him? That sounds like the setup for a bad joke."

"And yet, that's what's happened," I said.

Restraining a wince, I moved away from what was whispering for me to *go*, focusing on the forest instead. Focusing on my task.

I'd told the Council that I was running low on the herbs that were essential for my craft, and so, they'd sent me to gather them. Finding the damn things might have been more frustrating if not for the fact that it forced me to leave Allanovian. That liberation was the only reason I hadn't cultivated a garden patch near the city.

As far as today's task had gone, I technically had everything I needed in the pouch at my waist, but I wasn't ready to return to my unspoken imprisonment.

Speaking of which.

"Why did you come with me today, Ferin?" I asked. "You have plenty of subordinates who'd have done it."

"I can't enjoy an afternoon with my friend?" Ferin asked.

Raising an eyebrow, I glanced over my shoulder at her, and she threw her head back, spreading her arms wide.

"Fine, you caught me," she said. "I needed a break from Council business."

That was more what I'd expected.

"Food problems?" I asked.

"Amon other things," Ferin said.

She was quiet for a moment, leaving the silence between us heavy, before breaking it again.

"The trainee you treated died."

"I know," I said.

I'd checked Lyli's status as soon as I'd woken up this morning.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you did your best, so don't agonize over it," Ferin said. "Her death has caused some problems in this year's crop or trainees, though, and-

She clicked her tongue before her grip on my shoulder spun me toward her.

"I came out here to escape my problems, not revisit them," she said.

"Again, I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to cause you trouble."

"You didn't."

With her hand still on my shoulder, Ferin chewed on her lip, and I silently begged her not to say what was on her mind. My hopes, of course, only existed to be dashed.

"Are you sure you won't indulge me?" Ferin asked. "No one's watching us, Rhy."

She waved at the empty forest, leaning toward me in invitation.

My love, whispered a ghost, long dead.

When I placed my hand on her arm, it stopped our lips from touching.

"Again, you honor me," I said, "but again, I must decline. I won't sully your reputation, Councilwoman, even if it seems like no one's watching us."

Pursing her lips, Ferin said, "You're too honorable for your own good, Rhy."

Honor wasn't what had stopped me from accepting her offer, but if that was what she chose to believe, I wouldn't stop her. I shrugged instead.

"I'm only doing what I must," I said, quickly changing the subject. "I have the herbs I need. Shall we get back home?"

"I suppose," Ferin sighed.

As we made our way back to the waterfall that hid Allanovian from the world, she maintained her pout, but once we'd entered the city, it vanished. She flung herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"I love you no matter how you choose to classify our relationship," she whispered in my ear. "If you just want friendship, I'm happy to provide it. I'm sorry that I press you for more than you can give."

And here we were again, at the start of the rotation that our association always took. I didn't mind it. Most of the time, Ferin provided me with support and companionship. Knowing that she wanted more had never bothered me.

Patting her back, I said, "It's ok, Ferin. Nothing you did hurt me, but we both have tasks to finish, yes? You throughout Allanovian and me in my clinic. Care to escort me home, or can I do that

alone?"

Pulling away from me, Ferin said, "I trust you not to do something stupid."

She quirked her lips into a smile, and I returned it, as expected.

After we'd parted, I hurried to my clinic. I needed to collect my belongings, abandoned when Ferin had retrieved me this morning, before I could leave. The source of my distraction might be coming toward me, but I'd rather make this meeting go as smoothly as-

A figure draped in white stepped out from behind a corner, and I jumped, so accustomed had I become to its absence.

"The enemy is moving," it said. "Do you feel it?"

Frowning, I reached out and...

Pulling to the side of the tunnel, I dry-heaved into a fist, and once that was under control, I panted with unfocused eyes.

"Shit," I breathed.

"Indeed," the figure said.

When I glared at it, it stepped out of sight, and I pushed off of the wall, ignoring the people staring at me. If that *wrongness* in the world was true and not a perceived excuse for me to escape, then I needed to leave Allanovian. Now.

The distance between me and a temporary home vanished in a flash, but when I sprinted into my clinic, a final distraction was waiting to slow my departure. Dath was huddled on a cot, curled around himself, while his hissing respiration set the beat to his rock back and forth.

"What are you doing here?" I snapped.

The trainee raised a tear-streaked face, which slowed down my racing steps and thoughts.

"I didn't know where else to go," he said.

Hissing, I rearranged my priorities before advancing on Dath. I crouched, gently extending the arm he was clutching. Clearly broken, it spurred a pained groan from him.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious? I got into a fight," Dath growled. "I heard someone say that Lyli wouldn't have cut it as a Zrelnach, and you can guess what happened after that."

"You got the shit beaten out of you?"

Straightening, I headed for my supplies, retrieving a bite block and splints.

"I'm surprised you let them break a bone when you don't have a single bruise on you," I said.

I turned to the trainee, who'd wrapped himself in a dense aura of sulkiness, and rolling my eyes, I bent in front of him, handing him the bite block. Once it was in place, I set the bone before arranging the splints to support my fix.

"This needs to rest for a few weeks," I said.

Dath jerked his head up.

"How am I supposed to explain that to my trainers?" he asked.

Patting the boy's knee, I stood, gathering the innocuous supplies I'd need for my coming trip.

"Tell them you risked a sparring session with me," I said. "They'll leave you alone after that."

"Why?" Dath asked. "You're a healer. Even a Zrelnach trainee could best someone like you."

Pausing in my packing, I graced the boy with a twisted smile.

"I wasn't always a healer," I said. "Now, get out of here. I need to prepare for tomorrow, when one of you lot inevitably requires my services."

Watching me with the most dubious of glances, Dath left the clinic, and with no more spectators present, I was free to retrieve the supplies that no self-respecting healer would own. Kneeling beside my bed, I lifted its thin mattress, revealing the weapons lying on its slats. With an almost reverent air, I lifted my sword and crudely replicated dagger into the air, and thus prepared, I snuck out of my clinic.

As I'd always known it would be, bypassing Allanovian's security measures was simplicity itself, and once I was standing beneath an open sky, I shot toward a point of resemblance, heeding the draw that had been spawned scant days before.

No one noticed my absence. Not yet.

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