

# Chapter 9: See Here Your Ally

## Rhylix

*In fact, if anyone should take responsibility for it, it's me.*

I wouldn't make it in time. For hours, what had repulsed me had lingered in the direction of an incessant pull, and I'd pushed as quickly as I could toward that complicated miasma with disbelief growing the longer one of them had failed to snuff out the other.

Technically, I didn't need to separate the people causing this conflict. If allowed to fade, that compelling attraction would come again, but I'd rather not wait for that to happen.

It was past time I left Allanovian. It was past time I went home.

When I spotted an orange glow on the horizon, I knew I'd soon stumble upon what I sought. Opposites couldn't occupy the same space for long without causing a disaster.

Still, as I drove my borrowed cart to a creek bed with a raging wildfire constrained on the other side, I couldn't help but pause with soon to be blackened buildings stealing my attention. It was happening again. This moment, when everything began, would only cascade into further misery and death. It happened every time, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop it.

Not that I ever stopped trying.

Still. I looked upon a scene that should have left my mouth gaping, but the best my empty heart could muster was quiet resignation.

I left the cart and horse waiting by the creek, calming the animal down as best I could before following my outlined path. My targets were ripping at me now, so close had I come to them, which made planning how I'd resolve their tangle exceedingly difficult.

Thankfully, my ever-present nuisance had yet to appear with a suggestion. Perhaps I could do as I wished this time.

Sounds rose above the fire's distant roar. Grass swished as something moved it. A twang poured dissonance into a steadily droning background. I angled toward these noises, and soon enough, three figures made an impression on the night's dark.

Two of them were fighting, one of whom was an archer and the other...

The other peeled my lips away from my teeth while a quiet hiss meshed with the wind's rustle through a tree's leaves. Hopefully, I could reach those men before the archer met his inevitably gruesome fate, but he wasn't my priority. No, that honor went to the third figure, who was sneaking up on the archer's opponent.

Already at a full sprint, I winced at the archer's flight over the grassland, one that stopped beneath a tree. The way he'd bowed around that boot...

Still, he wasn't dead. Yet. The cloaked figure ambled to stand over him, and I knew I wouldn't make it in time to save his life.

It was to my great surprise, then, that the cloaked figure didn't move when he reached the archer.

What was he doing? Why didn't he satiate what I knew would be an irrefutably murderous desire? Such behavior was unusual for one claimed by-

The third figure, a soot-streaked teenager revealed in the moonlight, sprang onto the cloaked figure's back with a glinting... something thrown overhead. The addition of his weight toppled the cloaked figure, and no matter how much sick worry was boiling in my stomach, I snorted back a laugh. I'd gotten a tenacious fighter this time, huh?

When he regained his feet, the cloaked figure was still bearing his passenger, and something blacker than night swirled over his arm as he drove it into the kid's side. Tearing the chain around his neck free, he spun, kicking the kid so that he toppled, and I reached the archer.

"I'm borrowing this."

Never stopping, I snatched a bow and some arrows from the archer's side. With everything gathered in one hand, I leapt for the cloaked figure, adding something extra to that jump, before the bastard could drive his sword through the kid's heart.

As soon as we hit the ground, I rolled off of my enemy and to my feet. Nocking an arrow, I raised the bow but froze on seeing what lay at my feet.

With the cloaked figure's hood thrown back, the moon could illuminate the features of someone whose presence served as anathema to everything that lay in me.

"Enforcer Teron," I said.

Taking advantage of my distraction, the man jumped to his feet, pulling his hood back up.

"You know my name? How odd," he said. "If you know who I am, why would you attack me like this? You must also know that no norm can stand against me."

But I'd pushed my shock aside. I let my arrow fly, although Teron dodged it, and as he advanced toward me, I switched to bow to my offhand, unsheathing my sword. Our weapons met with the unnatural strength of Teron's swing nearly tearing my sword free.

The bastard meant to overwhelm me with force? Fine. I could play that game.

With every thrust and blow directed my way, I moved just far enough that the tip of Teron's blade kissed the air above my clothes. Teron swung for my head? My hair ruffled as I ducked. Teron jabbed for my heart? A dimple formed in my tunic as I leapt away.

Anything I couldn't avoid, I easily caught on my blade or the bow, spinning free of the attack before Teron could follow through with another, and his inability to land more than glancing hits clearly frustrated him. A persistent growl filled the space between us, and at the noise, I laughed.

I hadn't enjoyed an activity like this in... well. I couldn't remember when the last time had been.

Still. It got me no closer to where I needed to be, and the like to attract me was still lying motionless beside the archer.

So, I let Teron inside my guard, and I let burning heat slash across my back. With my legs numb beneath me, I dropped to the ground, rolling as best I could to face the sky. Prepared to meet a blade, I found only stars overhead while a crunch toward the fallen humans solved the mystery of where Teron had gone.

For a moment, I was helpless to do anything more than listen as his footfalls stopped, but then, I found the strength to stand, seeking the enemy.

Again, Teron hovered over the archer and a dirt-streaked teenager, but this time, he held no sword. This time, he raised his hands to either side, and I gagged as something repellant flooded into the world.

I'd never nocked, aimed and fired an arrow so quickly before. Dropping the bow and sword in favor of a dagger, I chased my projectile's flight. It streaked well ahead of me to bite into Teron's palm, and jerking, the bastard crashed into the tree at his side. The arrow shivered from where it had pinned his hand to bark. Scooping the enemy's blade off the ground, I quickly followed, slamming my dagger through another hand while driving Teron's sword through its master.

Fixed in place, he coughed with blood splashing from his wounds.

"This won't kill me," he gasped.

But I'd already bent to help the humans, running my hands over the kid in search of injuries.

"I'm well aware," I said, "but at the moment, I don't care to do the job properly."

When I pointed at him, an arrow and blade protested the new weight placed on them, and I let loose a sigh. Unfortunately, a squeak came after that, alerting me to the conscious state of someone nearby. Snapping my head toward the noise, I internally groaned at those predictably wide eyes and the cowering demeanor.

"You're a-" the archer began.

"*Don't* say it," I interrupted. "Not unless you want more like him chasing us."

I jerked my head toward an unconscious Teron, and after a moment, the archer cautiously nodded. Satisfied, I returned to my examination, although the injuries I'd already found on the teenager led me to believe that I only had one course of action available to take.

"Your name?" I asked the archer.

"Aramar," he said. "If I may, why are you-? How did you-?"

I was asked the same questions every time, but this time, they hadn't even been finished.

"I can't tell you how I found you, but I will say that I'm here for him," I said, nodding to the kid I was manhandling. "Gods, I can't save these by conventional means."

"So, you'll help my son?" Aramar asked.

His son. That made sense. From what little I could see of the two, they shared similar features: the plain face and drab hair.

But I should answer his question.

"Of course I will," I said, "even if I'm not sure of who he is anymore."

Because look at him. A click in his lungs with every breath. Bruises everywhere. Hands that would never hold a sword again.

Forget the pull that had dissipated as soon as I'd touched the boy. Forget the ferocity that I'd witnessed when he'd attacked someone clearly above his level. How could a teenager who was already so badly maimed be my ally?

If he was, then the world was doomed.

But when I looked up to ask Aramar for his son's name, the question died in my throat. Behind him stood two previously unseen figures: my twins sneering and smiling at me.

*Two?* That was impossible! How-?

My constant nuisance stepped into view from behind.

"He is the one you seek," it said. "You must save him."

Just fucking fantastic.

"Please, master p-" Aramar started before catching himself. "Please, sir. Will Raimie be ok?"

And I had a name. Raimie. What a strange one for a human.

Slowly, I lowered my gaze from the impossibility in front of me to a worried father.

"I will do what I can for your son," I said.

When I returned my attention to Raimie, though, I worried that I might be too late. Ducking, I held my ear above the kid's mouth, but no sound was rising from it, and his chest had failed to rise or fall for a while now.

And for the second time in as many days, something stirred in my empty heart.

"Shit," I said.

I'd known one of Raimie's lungs had collapsed. The click in his breathing had near guaranteed it, but a collapsed lung alone shouldn't stop his respiration like this. Maybe something else, something more system-wide, was aiding that condition in killing the kid.

It didn't matter either way. This had a conventional fix, one I'd use, because limiting Raimie's exposure to my other methods would save him trouble in the long run.

So, I extended a hand, *knowing* that I'd brought a syringe with me from Allanovian. Never mind that a typical me would never bring a fragile piece of equipment like that on such a hurried trip.

As expected, however, a glass tube filled my waiting palm, and I jammed its needle into the kid's side, pulling on the plunger. With pressure relieved on his lung, Raimie took a deep breath and just in time too.

As an energy drain washed over me, I sagged onto my hands, cursing on my head. For a moment, all I could do was breathe, grateful that my action's price hadn't knocked me flat on my back.

I hated godsdamned magic for a reason.

"So, you're also a..."

Aramar trailed off, and I lifted my head to peer at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," I said. "Is that a problem?"

Chuckling, Aramar shook his head.

"Not in the slightest," he said.

At that, I cocked my head. Acceptance wasn't the typical reaction to that revelation.

I couldn't consider it now, though, because now, I must do something I'd sworn I'd never do again. If this kid was to be my ally, we couldn't start this journey with one of us below full faculties, not if we were to succeed, but even with that requirement, it should be ok.

I could keep an eye on one teenager, right? I could keep Raimie safe from any consequences.

Resting a finger on each of his blistered palms, I Let Go, just a little, and with a dimmed flash, the kid's debilitating burns reduced to merely painful ones, injuries that would heal with no lasting effects. As the light vanished, searing heat ripped across my own hands, and I folded them into my lap until the sensation had faded.

"What was that?" Aramar asked. "What did you do?"

Fixing the man in place with my gaze, I said, "I saved your son's life. Now, good sir, you know my greatest secrets. Secrets that could see me killed if they were shared. What will you do with them?"

Aramar appeared conflicted, which I'd expected. Everyone, without fail, despised and feared what I was. Would the fact that I'd saved his son's life overcome that extreme prejudice, and if it wouldn't what would I do about it? I'd prefer to remain as Raimie's anonymous helper for a while longer, but if revealed, I could work with it.

But Aramar deflated, and I knew I wouldn't have to.

"I'll keep your secrets. It's the least I can do. Raimie means everything to me," he said. "May I ask. Now that he's stable, what will you do?"

That was a good question. Obviously, I had to get Raimie away from Teron before the bastard woke up, but what then? Should I keep the kid in the dark or have The Conversation with him now, and if I did share my story, how much of it should I tell? Should I bring Aramar with us? If I didn't, would Raimie react poorly to his father's absence? Most importantly, where should we go first?

I settled on a safe answer, the common theme in all of my considerations.

"I'd like to stay by your son's side until I know whether he's recovered," I said. "If you'll allow it, of course."

Barking a laugh, Aramar said, "Allow it? I'd hoped you'd say that. Oh! I suppose I should thank you for what you've already done, Master...?"

Which of my many names should I give this man? Switching to a new one would be like changing clothes for me, but in the end, I decided to keep it simple.

"Just Rhylix, no Master about it," I said, "and I have no need for your thanks. Anyone with my skill set would have done the same for your son."

Aramar looked doubtful about that, so I hurried on to the next issue we should tackle.

"So. Why were you in Fissid, Master Aramar? Was it your final destination or simply a stop on a greater journey?"

Aramar glanced toward the fire, quickly spreading on the other side of the creek, and both he and I winced. So many people...

I was under no illusion that Teron had let the residents of Fissid flee before setting their homes ablaze. I knew what I'd find among those flames if I dared to brave them, and no matter how many times I saw such a sight, it never failed to tear at me, pulling another thread free in my gradual unraveling.

"Fissid would have been where we slept tonight, but that bastard took Raimie from our home before we could leave," Aramar said. "We ran after him, splitting up when we saw a fire on the horizon. I came here, and Eledis headed for Allanovian to get help. That's where I meant to go if I rescued Raimie."

In body and mind, I'd frozen. Eledis. Aramar. Raimie. I knew those names, although a fourth one seemed missing from the list. And they knew about Allanovian.

"How have you heard of my home?" I asked.

I already had a sneaking suspicion about the answer I'd receive, but I needed to hear it anyway.

"You're from Allanovian?" Aramar asked. "What am I thinking? Of course you are, what with the-"

He waved at me and on receiving a pointed glare, gulped.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend," he said.

"You didn't," I said. "My question?"

"Right. Up until nine years ago, my family frequently visited your city," Aramar said. "That's how I know about it."

Which made the two men before me-

"Of the Audish royal family," I said.

The corner of Aramar's mouth twitched.

"Yes?" he drawled.

But again, I'd turned away from the man, centering my glare on my constant nuisance.

"Really?" I hissed. "A bit prominent, don't you think?"

"He is who he is," it said with a shrug.

Is who he... the hell did that mean?

Taking a deep breath, I put the conundrum out of my mind.

"So, we go to Allanovian?" I asked. "Meet the head of your house?"

"He's not the head of my-!" Aramar snapped before sputtering to a stop. "Yes. I think reaching your home would be best."

Throwing my head back, I peered between a tree's branches to the great void beyond.

"Just when I thought I'd gotten free of that place," I said.

After looking Raimie over once more, I rocked to my feet.

Extending Aramar's bow to him, I said, "I'll retrieve my cart. Keep an eye on the Enforcer. He shouldn't wake up before I return, but if he does, can you keep him occupied for a time?"

"I don't..."

Trialing off, Aramar pushed himself upright, precariously balancing in place. After testing whether he could draw the bow from there, he stuck several arrows into the ground at his side.

"I'll do what I can," he said.

"In that case, I'll return soon so I can help you into the cart," I said. "Then, we can leave this wretched place."

With an indignant look, Aramar asked, "What makes you think I'll need your help?"

I gave him time to review what he'd said before crouching to his eye level.

"Master Aramar, I serve Allanovian as the Zrelnach's healer," I said. "I can help you with your... problem once we reach the city, but until then, I need you to work with me."

For a moment, Aramar looked at me with his back straight and his body stiff.

"You are most kind," he eventually said.

Sighing, I rose.

"No," I said. "I'm really not."

As I hurried to complete my assigned task, I poked at the foreign sensations swirling through my empty heart. An ally who would throw us into the limelight *and* claimed two splinters? Such a situation had never happened to me before, and I find the novelty of it... refreshing.

But it also stirred something much more dangerous in me, something I'd discarded years ago. Something that, if trampled once more, would utterly crush me.

Hope.

## **TTS Chapter Nine**

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