

## Zarik's Visit

*Set approximately during chapter 28 of Ties of Frost*

### Zidra

I squinted against the bright sunlight as I pinned my wet laundry to the clothesline in the gardens at the back of Riverfront Haven. Voices drifted from inside the Haven and other parts of the enclosed gardens. Every bed was claimed by rengiri who had returned to Laedresh to attend my wedding, and I was getting a little tired of bumping into someone everywhere I went.

*Three days. Three more days, I'll marry Kyr, and then we can get away for a while.*

Smiling to myself, I started to hum under my breath. But then footsteps sounded from the backdoor of the Haven, and a woman called, "Zidra? There's somewhere here to see you."

I stifled a groan and hoped it wasn't one of the decorators or bakers again.

"Says his name is Zarik?"

My breath stuck behind my sternum. Should I invite him back here? No, I'd prefer some privacy...but it might look strange if I invited a strange man into my room—just mine, as River Front Haven only had one cot per room—for a

private conversation when I couldn't explain our relationship. At least, I assumed I couldn't explain, as Zarik hadn't announced himself as my nephew.

"Should...I tell him to leave?" the rengir asked.

Somehow, I found my voice. "Ask him to wait in the common room, please. I'll be there in just a couple minutes. Thank you." I stretched my suddenly stiff fingers, then rushed through hanging the rest of my laundry.

Nearly two weeks ago, I'd sent a letter and wedding invitation to Zarik at Harcos Academy. If Artur was right that Zarik didn't want anyone to know about our familial connection, showing up at Harcos would have made him uncomfortable. Zarik hadn't written back. A few nights ago, I'd cried to Kyrundar that even the one family member who didn't see the Order of the Rengir as pointless didn't want anything to do with me.

*It doesn't matter what Zarik is here to say, I reminded myself. I know and Iskyr knows that I have nothing to be ashamed of or to prove. So does Kyr.*

I placed the last stocking on the line, and though I didn't feel any more mentally prepared, I was out of time. I woodenly forced my feet to carry me inside the Haven.

The moment I stepped into the common room, Zarik cut off in the middle of whatever he was saying to a couple of rengiri and jumped to his feet. "Ah—Zidra. Hello." He

cleared his throat.

At least I wasn't the only one unsure what to do with myself.

"Hello, Zarik." My smile felt brittle. "Let's go for a walk, shall we?" I motioned toward the front door.

Relief flashed over Zarik's features.

"Aw," protested one of the rengiri, a light elf man with golden-blond hair. "You're stealing away our opportunity to regale new Academy blood with tales of the Academy four hundred years ago." He motioned between himself and a panthera woman sitting nearby.

His companion nodded. "Not to mention I so rarely get to talk to a wyveri. I imagine you were his inspiration for joining?"

"She was." Zarik smiled, and some of the tension in my back relaxed.

"See? I want to know how you two know each other!"

I rolled my eyes. "The Wyveri Islands aren't *that* big, Jasmeira. Excuse us. We haven't spoken in some time, and I only recently learned Zarik was in Laedresh."

I hurried my nephew out the door before anyone could trap us in conversation. Neither of us spoke as I led us around the wall guarding the Haven to the shaded path that ran along the wide, slow-flowing river.

Zarik had grown since the last time I saw him, probably

having finished growing only a few years ago. He stood far taller than me and had broad shoulders. Muscled forearms showed beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his dark-green shirt. His dark, wavy hair had grown down past his ears.

At last, with the bird calls overhead and the quiet rustling of the wide river making our conversation less likely to be overheard, I found the courage to break the silence. "It's good to see you. Congratulations on getting into Harcos."

An insecure part of myself whispered *and at over a decade younger than I was when I applied*. But Kyrundar had already chided me that a few years' difference hardly invalidated my own accomplishment in choosing my path in accordance with Iskyr's prompting.

"Thank you." His cheeks reddened. He adjusted his sword belt, crossed his arms, then put them back down at his sides. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I wanted to wait until I passed the tests, but then, well..."

I walked in silence, waiting for him to explain, although I could guess where this was going.

"Your name is on all of the top-score boards in Harcos," he said in a rush. "And it's not just bards and troubadours who talk about you. The instructors talk about you. I mean, many of them know you. The professors remember you, and two of the rengiri currently serving as instructors have stayed in Havens with you. One of them said you helped him take

down a nest of void-tainted giant spiders—”

I shuddered involuntarily, pushing the awful memory away. “Izhar is teaching? How is he at that?” The human metalmage tended to meander his way through any conversation, touching on a dozen points that weren’t necessary for his point, and I couldn’t imagine that making for an engaging teaching style.

“Yes. Well, he was. He just finished his year. We’ll have new rengiri instructors come autumn. He taught defense against human magecraft, and he did well, when he didn’t get sidetracked with long and difficult to follow stories. Like the spiders.” He chuckled. “I was indignant when Izhar said the spiders unnerved you, but by that shudder, it seems he was right.”

I made a sound of disgust. “Giant spiders are bad enough and reason for me to avoid the Verdanya jungles, but void-tainted ones are *horrifying*.” I held up my hands and shook my head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Zarik huffed out a soft laugh. “I think somewhere in the last decade I forgot you’re a flesh-and-blood person, not an impervious and untouchable legend.”

I cast him a sidelong glance in time to see his smile drop and his head bow forward. I’d spent so much time focusing on the ways I felt I hadn’t measured up, I didn’t even know how to react to that description of me.

His boots scuffed against the dirt path. “It’s been even harder to remember that you’re a wyveri the same as I am, not just an awe-inspiring hero, for the last five months. From the moment I arrived at Harcos for the mid-year admissions tests until the Dawning Festival, everyone was speculating about who would receive the Merit, and you were on everyone’s top contenders list. It was overwhelming.”

“Is that why you don’t want anyone to know we’re related?” I asked quietly. In my letter, I’d had to explain how I knew Zarik was at Harcos, so I’d also explained that Artur had mentioned Zarik was concealing our relationship.

His shoulders hunched. “In part. The moment the other students learned I’m wyveri, someone asked if I knew you. I panicked. I said we’d met but I didn’t know you well.”

My chuckle came out weak and shaky. “Certainly not a lie. I haven’t seen you in...probably thirteen years, and only briefly then. And even before that, we weren’t exactly close.” Relationally or in age, although at nearly thirty years younger than me, I was still *much* closer in age to Zarik than to his father, my older brother, but that was common with shifters’ long lives.

“Exactly!” He plucked a leaf off a low-hanging branch and fiddled with it while we walked. “I *don’t* know you that well, really. And the students and instructors compare us enough as wyvern shifters as it is. If they knew the full truth, I

can't imagine the comparisons. I'm—I'm not as good of a student as you are." His voice dropped to nearly a whisper, and he seemed to be avoiding my gaze as we walked. "Good enough to continue, but I...I don't want to embarrass you. What if I fail? Or what if I'm not good enough for the Order? And even before I arrived in Laedresh, I was worried people might think I was accepted to test or admitted to the Academy because you vouched for me and not on my own merit. I don't want anyone to treat me better or worse because you're my aunt."

*Merit.* The word struck me right in the heart. "We fall alone, or we fly alone."

He jerked a nod and tossed aside the half-shredded leaf. "It's a lie."

Zarik's head snapped toward me. "Pardon?"

I stopped and turned to face him in the shade of a sprawling oak. "First, I'm not embarrassed. I don't care if you're not the best student. I don't care what scores you get. As long as between you and Iskyr, you know you have given the best effort you can with sincerity and honesty."

"Sometimes I think I could have done better," he mumbled, avoiding my eyes. "Obviously I could have, or there wouldn't be a higher score possible, right?"

My own words echoed back to me.

*"You want to redo the obstacle course?" Sajan's voice*

*asked in my memory. "Why? You did well—"*

*"But a higher score is possible, so I didn't do well enough. I can do better."*

I'd been so upset when Sajen had refused. At the time, I'd thought his explanation was stupid. Looking back, I felt sorry for that Zidra. The one who thought *her* best meant *the* best, not merely her sincerest effort.

"You can do your best and be proud of your effort even if it isn't the best anyone has ever done," I said, hoping somehow Zarik would believe what it had taken me nearly fifteen years to accept. "You do the best you can without flying yourself to exhaustion, right?"

He nodded, well aware of the dangers of flying beyond one's capacity.

"That isn't only true if you fly too far or in too strong of headwinds, but that you can push yourself too far in studies or work or striving to be perceived in a certain way. Sometimes the consequence isn't that you fall and die. Sometimes the consequence is you end up alone, insecure, and angry, seeing the world through fragmented window, and hurting people who care about you without even realizing it."

"I'm...not sure I'm following."

I sighed, fighting my frustration with my family and clan and wyveri culture and my own struggles to communicate.

"Rengiri are meant to support each other, to fight and fall



and stand together. We're meant to grow, not to be perfect. You don't have to be just like me or be whatever image you're picturing of the perfect rengir. And you are worth being helped and supported, no matter what anyone tells you. Do you understand?"

"All right." He nodded, but I knew that *all right*, that nod that was more about hoping the other person would move on than agreement.

Stifling another sigh, I turned and continued down the path. "We wyveri value wisdom, honor, humility, and self-control, right?"

He hummed his agreement, although he sounded a little confused.

"There is wisdom, humility, and honor in knowing when to not only offer aid, but to accept it. There is wisdom in rest and friendship. And humility..." I shook my head. "Striving to prove yourself is more likely to lead to pride, and an angry sort of pride that sees friends as threats to your value. Pay attention in your studies of the holy texts and strive to follow the Rengir vows with sincerity and humility, and maybe you can avoid making the same mistakes I did."

"Mistakes?" Zarik's baffled tone indicated doubt I'd ever made a mistake, which pulled a genuine laugh from me.

"I've made plenty, whether or not you've heard about them, and you'll make your own. Everyone does. But just..."

I stopped and caught his sleeve, waiting until he met my eyes to speak again.

“If you don’t remember anything else I’ve said, remember this. The other students, the people of the empire, the rengiri, our family, other wyveri, even the voices of condemnation in your own mind—their opinions don’t matter. Do what you know is right and true and good, use the talents and passions you’ve been given, and do your best to make sure you’re making choices for honorable reasons.”

Zarik considered this. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and tight, and a familiar pain shone in his eyes. “What if other people think what I think is right is wrong? What if I think I’m doing one thing, and someone else sees it in a completely different light?”

I hesitated. If only Kyrundar was here. He’d probably know what to say. Or Sajen—Sajen would definitely have far better words of wisdom than I did.

*You’re wiser than you give yourself credit for*, I could imagine Kyrundar’s voice saying, and it almost made me smile.

“I suppose that is a place where friends can help,” I said. “Or maybe we need consider who we’re listening to. There’s a difference between someone you know also is pursuing truth and righteousness and someone you know doesn’t share values.”

Zarik chewed on the inside of his lower lip. “I suppose some opinions might have more weight than others. Like the rengir instructors rather than...grandmother.” His throat bobbed.

A small part of me wished I was more like Kyrundar, that I felt comfortable pulling my nephew into an embrace. Instead, I continued to just stand there, hoping my expression and words conveyed my empathy and care.

“I’ll tell you what Kyrundar told me. In the end, only you and Iskyr know your purpose and motives. If you believe what you’re doing is honest and right and aligned with Iskyr, that is what matters. Not whether any mortal thinks you’re good enough or your path is impressive enough. Don’t waste the next decade chasing affirmation that may never come, like I did. I...I want better for you than that.”

Zarik nodded slowly, his gaze distant and thoughtful. Then he took a small step back, placed his right fist over his heart, and inclined his head. “Thank you for your wisdom, Aunt Zidra.”

I smiled faintly. “Thank you for listening to my rambling.”

He took a deep breath. “And thank you for the invitation to your wedding. I do want to go—I want to be there. I will be. But...”

A squeeze of heartache pulsed in my chest, but through

my sorrow, I understood. “We don’t have to acknowledge our family ties publicly. I don’t want to make things more difficult for you, either.” Being a lone wyveri in Laedresh was hard enough as it was. “You can keep telling people we met on the Islands, and if they push, you can just say you don’t want to talk about it.” I lifted a shoulder. “A bit of smoke on the breath usually makes people back down.”

Zarik laughed. “I forgot you had a mischievous streak beneath your impenetrable scales.”

Footsteps approaching us drew my attention, and Zarik must have heard them, too, because we looked back toward the Haven in unison.

Kyrundar jogged toward us, the dappled sunlight filtered through the trees flashing on his swinging silver earrings. He raised a hand in greeting, his sharp eyes swinging between us and a slight pucker between his brows. I grasped the heartbond and felt his concern and curiosity and sent reassurance back. Once, it would have bothered me that he felt the need to come make sure I was all right. Now, though, the fact he cared and didn’t want me to have to face anything, even just an uncomfortable conversation, on my own filled me with a pleasant, tingling warmth.

Grinning, I turned back to Zarik. “Speaking of the wedding, let me introduce your soon-to-be uncle.”