

# Chapter 15: Explain Yourself

## Raimie

Over the course of my fight, several Esela had crowded into the hall, forming a person-high barrier on either side. Opposite me, the boy—my opponent—was glaring daggers my way, restrained by my father.

My father who was looking at me like I was a monster.

Shrinking on myself, I noticed that someone had wrapped their arm around my chest, which was perhaps the only reason I wasn't on the ground. Craning my head to see its owner, I met gray eyes in a pasty face with red and green hair framing it.

"Rhylix," I rasped.

Giving me a quick smile, the Eselan lifted his chin toward a commotion with his features turning grim.

"What in the void happened here?"

A woman with a purple sheen to her hair pushed through the onlookers. She was wearing the same outfit as the boy and the other woman. Considering this was the third time I'd seen it, I wondered if that sheathe of black leather could be a uniform of some type.

When in the cleared space between once brawling teenagers, she rested her hands on her hips, looking between us with a raised eyebrow.

"Well?" she snapped.

The boy squirmed in my father's hold, getting nowhere in the process.

"I was just returning the human to where it belongs, commander," he said before once more struggling to break free. "Let me go, you- you-"

"Honorary Zrelnach?" my father said.

"What?" the boy squeaked. "That can't be-"

"Dath! Stop talking," Rhylix growled.

Against my back, his body felt tense, transmitting that apprehension directly into me. What sort of mess had I gotten myself into, and how did I get through it unscathed?

The commander transferred her gaze to me, and I shivered. Damn, she'd mastered the scornful look.

"What say you?" she asked.

Oh, hell. What should I say? What would have this commander blaming the fight on Dath, keeping myself from punishment as a result?

No. What was the *right* answer?

"It was my fault. I provoked him, but he ignored me, would have gone about his day if I hadn't challenged him. I attacked first. In the context of Allanovian's culture, he was completely in the right," I said. "The only thing that I might say in my defense is that I'm not completely in my right mind at the moment, but that's no excuse for my behavior. I'm sorry for it, and I'm sorry, Dath, to have caused you trouble."

My last word faded, letting a heavy silence fall. Dath looked like he wanted to break it, but Rhylix's rebuke kept his mouth shut. Meanwhile, Rhylix had gone even more stiff while the corners of my father's eyes had crinkled, the only sign of his worry.

"Hmm," the commander said. "Everybody out. Trainee, go to your quarters."

The hall emptied so quickly that I was half-curious if someone had seen signs of an eminent tunnel collapse. Meanwhile, my father reluctantly released Dath.

Huffing, the trainee straightened his uniform before joining the people streaming away from the site of conflict, and when most onlookers had disappeared, Rhylix loosened his grip on me. I clung to his arm before he could let go.

"Please, don't," I said. "I'll fall without your help."

Rhylix released a heavy sigh, contorting his body to where my arm was slung over his shoulders, before taking halting steps toward the commander. Once the four of us had converged, she made to speak, but my father got there first.

"What really happened?" he said. "I know you, son. You don't lose your temper lightly."

*Hi, dad. So glad to see you're alive. How did you find me in Fissid?*

These greetings were laid aside. Maybe I could return to them soon but for now...

"It happened like I said," I insisted. "He stopped me while I was looking for you, and I needled him because... well, like you said, you know me. He was the better person, tried to walk away, but while he did, he said some unkind things about Fissid, and I lost it, attacking him. He managed to subdue

me, I apologized, meaning to leave, and... you can gather the rest.”

Crossing his arms, my father turned on the commander.

“See?” he said.

“Mm,” was all she said.

She stared at me as if trying to peel away layers, but I didn’t have many to shed.

“Let the first trial decide it, Ferin,” Rhylix said. “It’ll save everyone face.”

She narrowed her eyes with calculation taking place in them.

“As always, you provide the best suggestions, Rhy. We’ll do as you say,” she said. “Get your patient ready for it. How long do you think the human will need?”

“*Both* of my patients will need time to heal,” Rhylix said, “but they’ll be ready for the trial within a week or two.”

Sharply nodding, Ferin said, “Very well. Let me know when we can start.”

With nothing more, she marched off, and after she rounded a corner, I badly wanted to jump at my father, hugging him to make sure he was really ok. Before I could, however, Rhylix started us back toward the clinic.

When I opened my mouth to ask a question, he said, “Let’s get you in a cot first.”

After checking whether my father was trailing us, I decided to oblige the request. Once in the clinic, though, I waited until my father was close by so I could make an unsteady leap for him, one that he barely caught.

“I’m so glad to see you, dad,” I said. “I thought for sure that something terrible had happened to you, and if it had, I wasn’t sure what I’d do.”

My father stiffened, and as he did, something around his waist poked into my stomach. Before I could ask about it, though, he plopped me onto a cot.

“I’m glad to see you too, Raimie,” he said, “but how could you do something so stupid?”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I said, “I know, I know. I’m an idiot.”

After dropping a chair beside the cot, Rhylix pointed my father into it before helping me get propped against a wall.

“I’m more interested in why you were awake in the first place,” he said. “The sleeping tincture I gave you should have kept you out until the morning at least.”

For the briefest moment, what I'd fled this clinic to escape slammed into me, and I avoided looking at my father as I shrugged.

"Something woke me up?" I said. "I don't know."

"Hmm."

Oo, Rhylix looked like he knew I'd lied to him, but thankfully, he didn't press it. Perhaps once my father had gone, I could elaborate for him, but for now, he'd have to deal with uncertainty.

"I have questions," I said.

Slumping in his chair, my father said, "I figured you would. Go ahead and ask them. I'll answer as many as I can."

But where to start? So much of the confusion swirling through my mind dealt with things that I couldn't share.

Who would understand the strange *knowing* that I'd experienced about certain topics, the reason I'd never doubted the story about my family's origins?

In this abandoned corner of the world, where the unusual was violently rejected, how could I speak a word about Bright and Dim? I didn't want to get strung up for something I had no control over. So, what else could I ask about?

"For how inquisitive you were earlier, you're certainly quiet now," Rhylix said.

He was fiddling with supplies on a desk near his cot.

"I'm gathering my thoughts, thank you very much," I said, "but you're right. I should get started. So, dad. Why do you have friends in a place I've never visited before today? Why are you an... what did you call it? Honorary Zrelnach?"

Scrunching his eyebrows together, my father said, "That's not where I thought you'd start, but in answer, you have visited Allanovian before. When you were small, we'd come here every year, but that stopped in your youth. I'm not surprised you don't remember.

"As for the Zrelnach thing, it's something that everyone in the family has done since Allanovian was founded, our way of showing our Eselan subjects that we're still dedicated to taking our kingdom back."

I wanted to ask *why* we'd stopped visiting, why I hadn't been expected to become a Zrelnach too, and why my family had isolated itself as much as we had, but something else seemed more important.

"About the whole wresting Auden from Doldimar thing," I said, "do we have a plan for that, or are we rushing in willy-nilly? I'm already hesitant to challenge someone who was powerful enough to

overthrow our family before.”

With a sigh, my father pinched his nose.

“You’ll have to ask Eledis about that,” he said. “I gave up on the Auden side of our lives years ago, but he never has. I’m sure he has a plan that will get us across the Narrow Sea, at least. Alouin, I never thought this would happen in my lifetime.”

Leaning on his knees, he rubbed his face, and I realized that my father was probably just as lost as me. He might know more about our family’s history, but while we’d lived in the woods, it had never come up, falling to the wayside for him. Shadowsteal’s discovery had uprooted his life as much as it had for me.

“Ok. Let’s set aside the big picture for now,” I said. “Rhy told me that I’ll be participating in trials of some sort, and that Ferin woman mentioned them too. What exactly am I expected to do?”

My father’s face darkened, but before he could say a word, Rhylix glided to us from his desk, laying a hand on my father’s shoulder.

“May I?” he asked.

With a nervous chuckle, my father gestured to me.

“Please,” he said.

Nodding, Rhylix sank onto the end of my cot, folding his hands in his lap. He stared at them for a moment before lifting his gaze.

“The Zrelnach trials are how Allanovian tests a trainee’s aptitude as a warrior,” he said. “There are two of them, the first of which you’ll undertake as soon as I declare you fit for it. I’ll give you all the details I can on them, although some parts are kept secret from the examinees. So. The first trial...”

## **TTS Chapter Fifteen**

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