

# Chapter 16: The First Trial

## Raimie

Waiting in a small chamber beneath the mountain, I paced between its walls, rubbing my hands together while I chewed on my lip. Over a week had passed since I'd learned what Allanovian's Council expected of me, and the thought of it still had me weighing the option of fleeing the village instead.

I'd decided that these people were crazy, absolutely insane, but from everything Eledis had shared during his visits to the clinic, I didn't think I could ignore them. With Shadowsteal alerting Teron and anyone else of Audish descent to its return, its bearer would ever be hunted, and no matter how much I might want to, I couldn't abandon the sword, not when someone else could inherit my unfortunate fate. So, I was stuck with this hell unless I could change my circumstances.

At the moment, the best method of doing that was by challenging Doldimar, Auden's Dark Lord, for his throne, something that I couldn't do by myself. I needed an army, and Allanovian's Zrelnach would make a great base for one. They, however, would never follow someone they didn't respect, and the easiest way of earning that respect was to become one of them.

So, I'd undertake these trials. Even if they'd get me killed.

"This is stupid," I said.

I should run. At least then, I'd live through the rest of the day. *That* was the smart course of action.

"For the short term maybe," I said.

But what else did I have but the short term?

As I spun for the door, meaning to sprint through it and down the hall outside, it opened with Eledis on the other side. He strode into the chamber, making it feel cramped, and engulfed me in an enthusiastic hug.

"Look at you!" he exclaimed. "About to start something that I thought would never come. I'm so proud."

And there died all plans of fleeing.

In recent days, Eledis had oscillated between exuberance and petulance every time I'd seen him, and I was getting sick of having to predict his mood. Even so, I was glad to see him on this end of the spectrum instead of the opposite. When he was pleased, I could usually ask him more sensitive questions.

Like this one.

"Are you sure this is necessary?" I asked. "I don't know how to fight, Eledis. Dath will tear me apart."

I expected a lecture on believing in myself or some such nonsense, but I got a smirk instead.

"Your lack of training is why I've brought you this," Eledis said.

He unhooked the sword on his belt.

A week ago, I'd found my grandfather's armed state a bit odd. Considering humans weren't supposed to carry weapons in this city, the fact that my family members had been bearing a sword and a bow had niggled in my mind for days, but after much consideration, I'd concluded that Eledis and my father must be two of the humans Rhylix had mentioned, the ones privileged enough to break that rule. With a plausible answer in hand, I'd discarded my curiosity.

Still, after a lifetime of seeing nothing more dangerous than a carving knife on either of them, I went rigid when Eledis laid a sword, scabbard and all, across his palms, and it wasn't merely because of which sword he'd offered to me.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I tightly said. "The last time I touched Shadowsteal..."

Our lives had turned upside down.

"You need a weapon. Dath will have one, and during the trial, you'll be allowed one as well. What better sword for you to wield than *yours*, Raimie?" Eledis said. "Besides, every story about the blade says that its bearers become nigh invincible on the battlefield. Not indestructible, mind you. Merely undefeatable."

"And I'm supposed to believe a bunch of stories?" I said with my voice rising in pitch.

He couldn't be serious. Please, Alouin, say he wasn't serious.

Rolling his eyes, Eledis bounced the sword on his palms.

"What's the harm in using Shadowsteal, kid?" he asked.

Plenty. What if I saw the same thing that I had when I'd last touched the blade? If various shades of illumination came to overlay the world again, what was I supposed to do? I still didn't know what the phenomenon was or what had caused it.

But Eledis had made a good point. I was a novice warrior about to take on a well-trained opponent in what, at times, became a fight to the death. I needed every advantage I could get, no matter how small or unreliable it might be, and damn what might happen.

So, sighing, I wrapped my hand in my sleeve before accepting Shadowsteal from my grandfather.

“Thank you for bringing it,” I said, hanging the sword from my belt.

“Of course!” Eledis said. “I look forward to watching you fight. Kick the bastard’s ass.”

I didn’t want to, though. Once Eledis had left and I’d resumed my pacing, I considered all the ways I could have avoided this fight, primarily with how I’d responded to Dath in the first place. I wish I could simply apologize to the boy and make up for my offense, but Allanovian’s Council had spoken, and I doubted I could change their minds.

After what seemed like forever, an Eselan woman, clothed in the Zrelnach uniform, leaned into the chamber.

“We’re ready for you,” she said.

Well, I wasn’t ready, but I doubted I ever would be. Taking a calming breath, I followed my guide into the hall, and we threaded through several corridors, none of which I’d seen before.

When we entered a tunnel with a set of large doors at its end, I wrinkled my nose.

I knew this scene like I’d known the gray of Rhylix’s eyes. Where could I have seen it before, though? Partially shoved open, the stone doors hid what lay behind them, and as I reached the gap between the two, I examined them. Where had I seen these-?

Oh.

*“I need you to come with me.”*

*My father guides me down the village’s tunnels. Fever has loosened its grip on me, and although my head holds nothing but fuzz, I can walk without help. Even still, two gray-eyed men insist on doing that, pulling me along by the elbows.*

*I don’t like it. Their ‘help’ makes my father’s request seem more like a command, and something about that...*

*A wave of dizziness makes me stumble, slowing me down. All I want right now is to sleep. What’s the fastest way for me to get back to my cot?*

*Stopping in my tracks, I yank my arms free of the gray-eyed men.*

*“Where are we going, dad?” I ask.*

*My father clenches his jaw, gesturing, and the gray-eyed men grab my arms and legs. They lift me off of the ground, and in my shock, I fail to struggle. Only once I'm airborne do I scream and wiggle and shift. What's going on?*

*Before I can answer that question, we pass through stone doors, ones that slam closed behind us.*

How had I forgotten about that? I remembered the animal panic of that moment, the sense of betrayal.

I knew better now. At the time, my father had only been helping me, but hell, if the memory didn't still smart.

The Eselan woman cleared her throat, and giving myself a quick shake, I hurried into the room behind the doors.

Larger than I'd expected, the cavern contained what looked like a village-full of people. Instead of having scattered throughout the room, however, they were crowded on the ramps that rose around its perimeter, starting near where I stood. Wood planks, decorated with many a blade's scoring mark, lined the ramp's lower walls, and the circular arena in their midst had a thin layer of sand coating its floor.

The highest point of these ramps, set opposite the doors, stood about half of my height above my head. There, four Eselan, one of whom I knew, sat behind a table with paper atop it.

As I strode into this scene, so many eyes fixed on me that I nearly tripped. Desperately, I sought someone friendly among a host of hostile eyes, and eventually, I found this in sources both expected and not.

As he'd promised, Eledis was there, positioned near the foot of one ramp, and my father was standing nearby. Both of them gave me encouraging nods.

The one-armed Eselan beside my father watched me with seeming neutrality, but by chewing on his lip, he betrayed his anxiety, which was strange considering I didn't know him.

Rhylix was leaning against the wall further up the ramp with a bubble of empty space around him, and when my eyes landed on him, he fluttered his fingers in a wave.

Besides these four men, I saw only undisguised hatred, most especially coming from the people behind the table. Ferin, the one Council member I knew, looked bored, picking under her fingernails with a knife, and one of the men beside her had succeeded in concealing his emotions but the other two...

Shivering, I made for the chamber's center, and once there, I held perfectly still. If I did nothing, it shouldn't offend the Esela around me, right? Alouin, the further into this venture that I trod, the more it seemed like a horrible idea.

The crunch of footsteps soon led to a familiar boy coming to a stop beside me. He glanced at me without a single change in his expression, and at the sight of him, I shifted, resting one hand on Shadowsteal's hilt.

Better, always better, to be prepared for a fight, and I was ready. I felt ready, which was strange.

Frowning, I shook my head to clear it while one of the Councilmen started speaking.

"We have before us two trainees who have challenged for the right to become Zrelnach. Since all Council members find this challenge acceptable, we are gathered..."

Too tense to listen, I glanced at Dath, and the Councilman's voice faded to a distant murmur. Behind the boy, I picked out two familiar faces from among the people on the crowded ramp. Two twins of me.

The first, engulfed in black clothes, mimed a passionately given speech, one to match the Councilman's, while the second, draped in white, watched this display with pinched lips, crossed arms, and many a headshake.

After a few seconds, the one in black grew bored of mocking the orator, threading through the Esela to pinch and otherwise irritate them. With an eyeroll, the twin in white shifted toward the Council, presumably to give them its respectful attention, but instead, it met my gaze, which only sent me deeper into panic's grip.

Cocking its head, the twin in white said, "He sees us. Finally."

Ceasing all attempts at agitating the crowd, the twin in black scuttled to the ramp's edge, crouching with its wrists hanging from its knees.

"Would you look at that! You're right," it said. "Silly, that. Not only will we have to explain ourselves *all over again*, but he hasn't outgrown his poor timing. Fight's about to start."

Plopping to the ground, the twin in black thrust its legs over the ramp's edge, swinging them with a happy hum, and through my heart's loud jitter, I found the presence of mind to wonder what it had meant.

Huffing, both twins pointed to a spot in front of me, and dragging my gaze away from them, I gasped, barely jumping backward in time to keep from being cleaved in two. In my distraction, the rematch must have begun, and I'd started it on the wrong foot.

Backpedaling, I pulled Shadowsteal out of its scabbard before a second strike could land, and on catching Dath's blade, I frantically looked for an opening. This wasn't like my fist fight with the boy. Not only was it more deadly, but instinct wasn't guiding me this time, as evidenced by Dath nearly disarming me when he pulled away.

Alouin, this was bad. I knew from my reading that sword fights usually lasted a few seconds. Unless I got lucky in the next couple of heartbeats, I was likely living my last moments, so I took the only

course of action that might extend them.

I ran.

Not turn-my-back-and-flee running. No, I bolted to the side, leaving Dath stunned for a split second, and if I were a better warrior, maybe I could have taken advantage of the opening.

As it was, Dath snarled, chasing me more quickly than I'd expected. As he came near, he sent his fist flying, which had pain flaring in my jaw, and I spun, crashing into the ramp's wall.

Before I could move, fire lanced into my shoulder, and screaming, I tried to escape that searing pain, nearly as bad as what had once marred my hands. Unfortunately, something unseen jerked me to a stop, building the blaze.

While I glanced over my shoulder, applause filled the air, and at what I saw, a strange mixture of emotions turned my vision white. Dath was spinning in a circle nearby, accepting his people's praise, but what set my eye twitching was the sword—Dath's I assumed—sticking out of my shoulder.

Taking a deep breath, I reached behind me.

"Why the *fuck*—" I started with a growl.

When something popped in my shoulder, it almost turned my legs to water, leaving my arm a breath from becoming useless, but because of it, my reach extended, letting me touch the hilt of Dath's sword.

"—would you leave a weapon in an opponent who's still breathing?" I finished.

Tugging, I pulled the blade free. The world darkened for a moment while steel thumped into the sand, and with survival instincts pushing me, I whirled toward Dath in an already spinning room. Leaping on his back, I bit into his neck, and the sudden addition of my weight sent him staggering, toppling him face-first onto the ground.

With my opponent's legs trapped between my knees, I caught Dath's wrists, and as I dragged his hands to the middle of his back, my shoulder screamed. I balanced between these points of contact while Dath struggled, trying to buck me off, but that wasn't happening, not with him so securely pinned.

When the trainee fell still, the deepest silence I'd ever heard fell, broken only by our panting and the drip of blood from my wound, and in this hush, my twins strode into view. The one in black crouched beside Dath's face, and seeing the fury in the trainee's eyes, it pattered its hands together.

"Kill him!"

It flashed a beaming grin at me.

“You don’t need another enemy.”

The dark twin was right. So many people already wanted me dead. How could I let another one live?

With its arms folded behind its back, the twin in white stood over Dath, gazing upon him impassively.

“If you end him, you’ll make a foe of this community. You’ve passed your trial. Walk away from this.”

The bright twin was right. If I killed one of Allanovian’s sons, the city would tear me apart. How could I bring that upon myself?

But in the glare Dath was flinging my way, I saw the promise of death.

“You’re both right,” I said.

Hefting Shadowsteal, I lightly smacked its pommel into Dath’s temple, and his body slackened.

Getting to my feet was one of the hardest things that I’d done in ages. It was a miracle that I maintained my hold on Shadowsteal, much less tilted it the small amount needed to tap the sword’s point to my opponent’s neck.

“I give you Mercy,” I said.

Spinning, I stumbled to where the fight had started, trembling from head to foot while I waited for dismissal. From the corner of his eye, I noted Eledis’ approving nod, my father’s pinched eyes, and Rhylix...

Where had Rhylix gone?

The Councilman who’d begun the proceedings rose from his chair, leaving his fingers resting on the table.

“Well done, young one,” he said. “Rest up. We’ll summon you once we’ve prepared your second trial.”

He sat once more, and swaying in place, I fumbled with slipping thoughts, struggling to work out what I should do next. When someone took my elbow, I didn’t have the energy to flinch while the dullest pang of surprise bloomed in my chest.

Someone had snuck up on me? That hadn’t happened in years.

“This way,” Rhylix said behind me.

Ah. That was where he’d gone.

In shuffling steps, we made our way to the clinic with other Esela soon passing us, and the entire time, Rhylix muttered to himself.

“Stupid. It’s a miracle either of you is alive. *How the hell* did you dislocate your shoulder from that position? It shouldn’t be possible. Unless you’ve done it several times before? No. That’s silly. But this is why letting children play with weapons is a bad idea...”

When we stepped into Rhylix’s clinic, I said, “Are you always this much of a mother hen?”

“I’m not a-”

Rhylix breathed out through his nose.

“Sit down. I need to-”

“Hold this,” I interrupted.

I slapped Shadowsteal to Rhylix’s chest while a sudden urge to yawn overwhelmed me. As I did so, I lifted my hands overhead, reaching one of them toward the opposite shoulder, and again, something popped. Most of the heat that had been igniting my mind turned to coals, to be replaced with exhaustion.

“How did you-?” Rhylix started.

But I didn’t let him finish. The trance-like state that I’d assumed bade me to sleep, so I wove to a cot, pulled its blankets aside, and fell into it.

“That went... better than I...”

My body freed my mind from its pain.

## **TTS Chapter Sixteen**

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