

# Chapter 20: The Second Trial

## Raimie

After waiting for several minutes to regain my energy, I felt ready to stand again. Someone ruined this before I could try.

“Hell, you’ll be one of *those* types, won’t you?”

A sigh filled the air, quickly followed by.

“Again, I ask. Why are you out of bed?”

Smiling to myself, I lifted a finger toward the other cot.

“Dath threw his pillow at me,” I said. “I had to return it.”

“Of course you did.”

Hanging my wrists from my knees, I waited for the question that I knew was coming.

“Can you stand?”

And there it was.

“Maybe with some help,” I said.

Something clinked on stone, and after a moment, someone clasped my forearms, pulling me up.

“Thanks,” I told Rhylix.

Damn, he looked sour. He was normally so cheery, silly almost. What could have changed that?

“I have a gift for you,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Really?” I asked. “What type of gift?”

After ensuring that I could stand on my own, Rhylix strode for his clinic’s entrance, retrieving what he’d left there. When he returned, he lifted it to rest on his palms, and my eyes popped. He was

offering me a scabbarded sword, nearly identical in appearance to Shadowsteal.

Hesitantly reaching for it, I asked, "May I?"

On receiving a nod, I slid the blade free a few inches before biting my lip.

"This is well made," I said.

"I should hope so," Rhylix said. "I paid quite a lot for its forging."

I shot my eyes up to him, dropping my hold on the sword.

"*You* did?" I asked.

With a faint smile, Rhylix said, "Yes. It's my gift to you, remember?"

And something hissed inside of me. I took a step back.

"Why?" I asked.

Rhylix furrowed his brow.

"Because I could," he said. "Because you'll want a weapon after you pass your second trial and also for reasons that I will tell you *after* you've passed it. But for now, you'll have to believe that I'm giving this to you with no strings attached."

He slammed the sword into its scabbard.

"Speaking of your second trial, Allanovian's Council has finished preparing for it," he said. "I'm supposed to bring you to them."

"Already?" I squeaked before lowering my volume. "What am I thinking? Of course they wouldn't give me time to recover."

Softly laughing, Rhylix said, "You're learning."

Without another word, he led the way out of his clinic. I'd been mentally mapping every route that I'd taken in Allanovian so far, and while it was by no means complete, I understood most of the city's layout by now. So, when we turned onto a hallway and doors made of stone came into view, I wasn't surprised.

Rhylix stopped before we could enter the arena beyond, and when he turned around, his face was fixed in an atypical state of severity.

"I'm sorry for what you'll experience within," he said. "Please, know that it wasn't my choice."

At this, the hair all over my body stood on end.

"I understand what it's like to be forced into an unwanted situation better than most," I said. "Why are you so tense about it?"

Shaking his head, Rhylix said, "I can't tell you."

Without looking behind him, he rested his gifted sword against one of the doors.

"Silverblade will be waiting for you once you've finished," he said, "and after you walk back through those doors, you'll be a Zrelnach, able to carry weapons in Allanovian to your heart's content. So don't worry about that stricture. Now. You'll need to drink this."

Withdrawing a flask from his cloak, he offered it to me, and I took it with trepidation. Why did this trial that had the Eselan on edge?

Still, I uncorked the flask and drained it. While its contents tasted like water, they were oily in nature, which had me coughing. Rhylix took the emptied flask, guiding me toward the gap between stone.

"Good luck," he said. "I'll be watching, as will the rest of Allanovian, unfortunately."

Why did he sound so irritated about that?

No matter. I had bigger problems to handle right now.

After the long hike here, I felt more recovered from Bright and Dim's unveiling of their natures, but something in the core of me felt.... drained. I didn't know how else to put it. Hopefully, this second trial wouldn't require much combat because otherwise I was fucked. Again.

The scene inside the arena was much the same as before: the whole of Allanovian gathered with four Eselan sitting behind a table at the ramps' apex. The only difference I noticed were several bowls, burning red, sitting around the arena while a haze from them rose into the air.

I tried to embody confidence as I strode to the arena's center point, but it probably didn't carry to the people watching. Sites of darkened sand, places where my blood had been spilled, kept drawing my gaze, no matter how much I tried to focus on the Council.

Once I'd stopped, the woman in their rank rose.

"Here, we have a human who's proven it has the martial aptitude to join the Zrelnach's ranks," Ferin said. "Now, we shall test its mental fortitude. Challenger, approach me."

I narrowed my eyes at her.

"You... want me to cross the room," I said. "Is that all?"

Ferin inclined her head, and gritting my teeth, I stepped forward, expecting all manner of trap to spring. As I advanced, the red haze from the bowls thickened, coalescing in front of me, and when

I'd reached the halfway point, it sprang into physical being.

A wall of flames spread across the arena to impede my progress. Springing forth almost in front of my nose, it had me tripping backward until I fell into the sand. Panting, I glanced along it, noting no safe way through.

"Seriously?" I gasped. "Fire? Again?"

The Council didn't respond. Their faces had gone rigid while their eyes were fixed on something that I couldn't see. Glancing over the other Esela, I noted the same reaction from them with a frown. What was happening?

Clambering to my feet, I approached the wall of flame, but no heat emanated from it. Was it an illusion? The Esela were capable of magic like that, but I couldn't be sure if that was what I was seeing here.

Still. What choice did I have? I needed the Zrelnach to follow me, and gaining their loyalty meant passing through a possible illusion. If it wasn't what I thought, could I handle the burns that I'd surely gain? I knew from experience how debilitating those could be now.

Swallowing, I retreated a few steps. I took a deep breath and dashed into the blaze.

*Flames flicked around me, tickling as they passed. When agony failed to assault me, I almost burst into tears. I hadn't been sure that I was right, and if I'd had to relive Fissid...*

*I shuddered.*

*The roar flooding my ears reduced to a hum, and I heard someone singing. For some unnatural reason, her voice raised an echo of bliss in me.*

*The fire surrounding me parted, and I found myself standing over a child, lying on a brook's bank. Her eyes were closed, and a song was on her lips.*

*On the other side of the creek, a village peeked through the trees. The girl's home, perhaps?*

*That didn't matter, though. Not yet. The peace that I'd found here soaked into me, and for the first time in a long while, I relaxed.*

*I didn't know if this was part of my trial, but for the moment, I didn't care. I'd enjoy this tranquility while I could, but the idea of leaving the girl unaware of my presence made my skin crawl.*

*So, I leaned over to nudge her, and when I did, the world fuzzed over, sending me—*

—to Allanovian where four Eselan were staring down at me. Shaking my head, I took another step toward them and—

*—a drum's steady beat shattered the forest's stillness. The girl's eyes snapped open, staring through me, and a heartbeat later, I barely dodged her leap to her feet. She faced the village with her features set into an expression that I'd never seen before, but when I followed her gaze, I understood.*

*The village was burning. Like Fissid had. Figures were running from their homes, only to be cut down in the street. Much like Fissid's residents. The girl's mouth parted, and the scream that she surely meant to release howled through me as well.*

*Someone I recognized burst out of the brush further down the stream's bank. On reflex, I stepped between the girl and a boy, scarred by violence, but I relaxed once recognition fully clicked.*

*Rhylix dashed through me, leaving me flinching for an impact that was never to come, and when he reached the girl, he took hold of her hand.*

*"What are you doing, Ren?" he shouted. "Run!"*

*With a sob, the girl abandoned her home, and Rhylix shoved her toward safety before spinning to watch the town collapse. A dazed look took hold of him, but soon enough, it shifted, and he took a step forward, throwing his arms back. He released a roar so savage that I was locked in place until it stopped tearing through the air. When the noise petered off, Rhylix lowered his head, wiping tears on a sleeve, and sniffing, he whirled to run after the girl.*

*When he was far distant, though, he paused, glancing over his shoulder, and the world blurred again, making me see double. The plain beyond the boy and the arena overlapped one another, and a child merged with an astonishingly tall healer.*

*"Raimie!" he yelled. "Watch your back!"*

*Spinning, I caught sight of people leaping out of the trees. Their eyes were empty, devoid of life, and black vines crisscrossed under every inch of their skin. They flowed around me, chasing after their prey, and almost, I tried to stop them so I could help the children.*

*I couldn't, however, distract so many on my own. I wasn't sure that was humanly possible. So instead, I stood stock still, stuck between wanting to do everything possible to save the kids and needing to save my own life. I should run in the opposite direction, trying to keep these hostiles' attention off of me, but the kids!*

*Hell, the hand on my throat was heavy.*

*It seemed my decision would never have mattered in the first place. Just like the children had before, the monsters chasing them passed right through me, not once looking my way. Right as I started realizing these monsters might not be able to see me, one of them stopped short and—*

*—a pair of Zrelnach escorted a man through the arena's stone doors. He shuffled forward and—*

*—the monster faced me, sniffing the air. The mad light of violence filled its eyes, and flinging its head back, it raised an ululation to the sky. It sprinted at me and—*

*—the man saw his chance to rush me and—*

*—I tried to sidestep it, but its shoulder clipped me. We collapsed in a pile of limbs with each of us struggling to gain the upper hand. The monster won, perching on my chest as it pressed down on my throat, and I slapped at the ground for a means of defense.*

*I found nothing.*

*Panicking, I grabbed at grimy fingers, slowly prying them apart. Gasping, I pulled one of my hands away from the enemy before smashing my palm into its chest. White light flared all around us, and the monster flew away from me, but it wouldn't escape me so easily.*

*It had attacked me. It had killed ALL OF THOSE PEOPLE, the same as Teron had with Fissid. It had meant to chase after and probably murder a pair of CHILDREN, for Alouin's sake! I followed it with heat spilling over inside, and when I reached it, I rained shadow-covered fists on its flesh until its face was pulped.*

*Panting, I struggled to rein in this uncontrollable BURN, licking along every inch of my body, but by the time I'd manage that, it was too late. The monster's body was limp, and I knew it was dead.*

*The village's fire spread, quickly reaching the stream. It surrounded me, and the familiar agony of burning flesh filled my mind.*

When the arena gained dominance once more, I was kneeling in its sand. The world was so... *crisp*, like what I'd known before stepping into the fire except- except-

Something sticky was coating my face, but when I wiped it clean, it was only transferred to my fingers. Absently, I rubbed them together while processing everything around me.

The Esela, including this village's Council, were staring at me. Yes, that was right.

Rhylix was watching me with pity. Yes.

My family's eyes were transfixed on me with horror. No.

That was wrong.

Why were they looking at me like that?

The gumminess between my fingers attracted my attention, and when I wiped it away on my clothes, my gaze followed my hand down.

Where a man was lying beneath me.

What...? Why was he there? Why were his eyes-?

His eyes were empty.

For one dumbstruck moment, I glanced between that blank stare and my red-stained fingers before choking on a scream. Panic took control, guiding my movement, and when I pushed the emotion down, I was leaning against a ramp's walls with my stomach contents splattering on the ground.

I kept repeating the same question in my head.

*What? What?*

My mind's eye kept skipping to the same image.

*Dead eyes peering above a caved-in face.*

And I raised my fist, coated in red with rust more deeply engrained in its knuckles.

I- I- I-

Roaring, I sprinted for the dais with its table and the Councilwoman who'd started this. When I reached the arena's edge, I leapt for my target, surprised by the height I gained, but before I could get anywhere close to Ferin, the Zrelnach on either side of the table moved, slamming into me as they fell. When they pinned me to the ground, I snarled at them, fighting their hold with all my strength, and a boy yet to understand what had happened screamed at the top of his lungs.

"Let me go! Gods, please. Let me go!"

Something thumped beside me while a face framed by blonde hair drew closer.

"I'm so sorry," Ferin said. "Welcome to the Zrelnach ranks."

She disappeared before barking for my captors to release me, and I was left sobbing on the ground.

Distantly, I heard someone dismiss the crowd. Distantly, I listened to the tromp of feet as the arena was emptied. Distantly, I saw family and friends hover over me. Distantly, I watched someone tell the only people I loved to give me space.

And from a distance, I climbed to my feet. I stood over the man I'd killed, both seeing and ignoring the mess I'd made, before trudging to the arena's stone doors, aware somewhere in the back of my mind that Rhylix was trailing me.

Once outside, I retrieved a sword that had been set aside. Rhylix had been right. I very much wanted this weapon in my hand, now that my second trial was over.

## **TTS Chapter Twenty**

---

Revision #3

Created 19 August 2024 19:40:47 by FatalisticFable

Updated 18 March 2026 21:51:35 by FatalisticFable