

Chapter 29: Dealing with Teenage Boys

Rhylix

For when I next see you, I may not have control.

After the display with the tear two days ago, I could say, without a doubt, that this latest ally terrified me. When we'd been beneath the mountain, I'd run off after Raimie unsure what the hell the kid had been doing, and when he'd stuck his hand into a godsdamn tear...

Oh, my poor heart had just about stopped. I'd thought our quest was over and done with before it could truly begin, but then, Raimie had started... he'd started.

Gods, seeing tendrils of light and dark streaming from the tear to him had been an awe-inspiring moment, easily within the top ten events in my life, and Raimie had topped it off by doing something I'd never seen before. I was still unsure about exactly what he'd done, but the appearance of that silvery mist, a small window into what lay beneath, in his cupped hands had affixed the seedlings of hope in my shell of a heart, and finally, *finally*, I let myself think of a question that I'd left untouched for forever.

Could I use this to end the cycle?

Either way, sitting next to this teenager had my heart pounding in my ears with my mouth a dry desert, which was an interesting experience. I hadn't felt like this in... gods. I couldn't remember when the last time was.

"That's an interesting look on you."

Glancing up at my constant nuisance, I somehow contained a smirk.

"You're one to talk," I said.

Its Eselan guise had cracked, nearly revealing the creature of light hidden beneath, and it was trembling, clearly struggling to stay anchored on this plane. I might be more concerned by this if I

hadn't seen Raimie's splinters—I still couldn't wrap my mind around him having *two*—in this state.

Still. I had to ask.

"Should I be worried? Has Entropy gotten the upper hand?"

Glaring, my constant nuisance hissed, "If it had, would we be talking right now? Answer? No. I'd be running around this iteration with my brethren, fighting to stabilize its rate of deterioration. Will you ask a useful question now?"

Having pulled away from it, I raised my eyebrows, merely blinking for a moment, and when my constant nuisance didn't start fretting over its anomalous behavior, those eyebrows rose higher.

This sassiness was new. I begrudgingly liked it, which was strange. My relationship with this being had been steeped in hostility for so long that I wasn't sure how to handle a positive emotion getting added to the mix.

"Well, I'm glad we're not dying faster than we normally would. Good job, you," I sarcastically said. "Mind telling me what the hell Raimie did with the tear?"

My constant nuisance's face closed of.

"He closed it," was all it would say.

"Yes... I saw that," I said. "I was more interested in *how* he did that. Has anyone else closed a tear, or is he the first? And what did he do with the energies that he pulled to him? Did he combine them? Is that even possible? Have you stuck me with an ally who can *break reality* this time?"

For a long while, my constant nuisance said nothing, holding its typical motionlessness to an extreme. Then, it shifted, looking over my head.

"You've asked many questions of me," it said.

They were all things that I'd thought necessary to ask, ways to learn if my hope could become more than a seedling, and the fact that my constant nuisance wouldn't easily answer them was souring any enjoyment I might have taken from its changed mood. Based on its shuffling, I'd have to press harder to get what I wanted, so I readied myself and deliberately said my constant nuisance's name.

"Creation."

When a familiar face, riddled with cracks, whipped toward me, I released a breath.

"I need those answers."

I wouldn't beg for them, wouldn't lower myself to that indignity, but Creation would know what I was really saying.

Crossing its arm, it picked at the frayed fabric covering its elbow.

"So far as I know, no one has *closed* a reality rip," it said, "and your ally isn't breaking reality. Merging the wholes isn't unheard of."

Helpful.

"Why are you being so difficult with this?" I said. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were hiding something from me."

Gasping, Creation took a step back.

"Obscuring the truth is of the enemy," it breathed. "It doesn't matter if my access to the whole has been diminished. I need... I need to return there!"

"No. Wait! Don't!"

Creation vanished, and groaning, I thumped my head against a tree trunk. It had been acting somewhat tolerable again, but when it eventually returned to this plane, it would be back to acting like a constant nuisance.

Oh, well.

Leaning against the tree, I peered down my nose at the boy beside me.

Raimie had mentioned that he had questions for me? Well, I felt the same confused curiosity about him.

Unfortunately, I wasn't sure if my questions would be answered anytime soon. In fact, I was very much aware that Raimie had no idea he was causing those questions, and because of this, I wasn't sure if I could ask them.

It was amazing that such a peacefully sleeping face could stand at the center of the complete rearrangement of my life.

"He doesn't look crazy."

Jerking my head up, I found the owner of that voice, standing just outside of my reach.

"I'd hoped that his ability to mess with a tear would make having lost to him hurt less, but... I suppose I was being optimistic. I'll have to look elsewhere."

"*Dath?*" I said.

Scrambling to my feet, I stood over Raimie, and while I didn't lay a hand on a weapon, the Zrelnach trainee shrunk away from me as if scolded, hiding a sword behind his back.

"Hello," he awkwardly said.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "And... where are your splints?"

Oh. Since I'd been given the opportunity, I should probably shore up my ally's credibility too.

"Also, he's not crazy. Probably just addled from what happened beneath the mountain."

Clasping his elbow, Dath said, "Whatever you say, Rhy. But why are you so surprised to see me? Did you really think I'd stay in Allanovian? No way was I missing this once in a lifetime expedition."

'Even if it's let by *him*?'

Almost, I said this out loud, but adding to the antagonism between the boys didn't seem wise, especially when we'd soon be traveling through open country for quite a while.

"And your splints?" I asked instead.

"You told me to remove them while fighting the human," Dath said. "I thought the same would hold true for our fight."

Hell. I'd hoped the trainee would forget about that. Ah, well. Maybe if I feigned ignorance, Dath would let it go.

Furrowing my brow, I said, "What do you mean?"

Dath cocked his head.

"You promised I could test myself against you," he said. "Don't tell me you forgot."

"Right," I said, sighing. "Forgive me. I was planning to honor my promise after the initial chaos of travel subsides, if you'd come with us, but with what happened at the tear, it slipped my mind."

"I can't blame you for that."

The teeth of Dath's grin flashed in the limited moonlight.

"You were fixing up quite a few people afterward. I don't know how you managed the tempers of so many wounded Zrelnach. They can't have been pleasant to you."

"I've had plenty of practice dealing with irritable people. Trust me," I said with a soft laugh. "And I had help."

Thank the gods for Chela. I wasn't sure why that healer had left her comfortable life in Allanovian behind, but I was beyond grateful that she had.

The conflict beside the tear might have been short—perhaps a minute at most—but it had ended with far more casualties than anyone would have liked. Aside from the handful who'd been dead before I could get to them, another two had perished while I'd been tending to them, bringing back far too many unpleasant memories, and that had distracted me.

I wasn't sure if Chela had seen this, but she'd jumped in to assist me, and with her help, our group had escaped from that dark cavern within a few hours.

"Well, this is me, reminding you of your promise," Dath said.

He drew the sword at his side—a standard issue Zrelnach blade—while offering me the one he was holding. Pursing my lips, I stared at the weapon for a moment, running through my options, but in the end, everything I could contrive to escape from this path wouldn't be worth the effort of trying it. I took the sword, leaving my own blade and dagger where I'd hidden them.

"Let's not do this here," I said. "We wouldn't want to hurt any bystanders, would we?"

Dath didn't react to what I'd said. Maybe he was trying to be the better man, relinquishing any lingering hatred that he might feel toward our quest's leader. He'd certainly seemed eager enough about joining it.

Once we'd moved far enough away, I rounded on Dath, getting in his face.

"What are you hoping to gain from this?" I asked. "Would you like to see how far you've come in your training, or do you want to learn something new? When it comes to a fight, I can provide you with almost anything that you could ask for, but I need to know what you want from me first."

Leaning back, Dath blinked for a moment before stepping away.

"You realize how arrogant that makes you sound, right?" he said.

But there was no acid in his voice, merely curiosity to match the tilt of his head.

"You're, what? Twenty-four, twenty-five? No one that young should show such confidence with a sword."

Swallowing a sigh, I retreated a few paces, scanning my surroundings.

"I'm twenty-seven, actually. I think," I said, "and you didn't answer the question."

Shaking his head, Dath tossed his sword's scabbard away.

"I want to see for myself how good you are. From what our trainers say, you were the virtuoso of your class. With Lyli... I'm the best in mine," he said. "I want to know if the hu- if Raimie besting me was a fluke, but mostly, I want to see if I have a chance against you."

Great...

Like most boys Dath's age, he had contradictory desires: wanting a confidence boost while also having someone prove their superiority over him. I couldn't oblige both wants, and while this kid seemed nice enough, I had more than one person's wellbeing to consider when making this decision. As always, my ally's safety took priority over almost everything else, and because of that,

I'd use this fight to show Dath—a potential hostile—what sort of protector Raimie had.

"All right," I said. "Whenever you're ready."

With the branches overhead bobbing, moonlight revealed the trainee's consternation in swaying sweeps.

"Don't you need to stretch?" he asked. "Warm up or something? At least draw your sword."

I let one corner of my mouth lift.

"I'm good. Whenever you're ready."

Huffing, Dath said, "Fine."

He charged me, but of course he did. When one didn't know the abilities of one's opponent, Zrelnach training taught that one shouldn't waste time feeling out their skills. Although one should always look for other openings, one's best bet was to overwhelm one's opponent, especially when one was a warrior in the finest fighting force found on this side of the Narrow Sea.

As soon as Dath took off, I cast sparking illusions into his path, which he ignored. Impressive. Most people flinched at a sudden change in their environment, like flashing light.

But then, he was on me. With practiced precision, I blocked Dath's sword, using the hilt of my sheathed weapon. Grabbing the boy's wrist, I flicked my blade, and Dath's weapon was jerked out of his hand.

Giving him no time to react, I spun, leveraging the kid over my shoulder to slam him into the ground. With him laid out like this, I could easily finish it here, but I was trying to make a point. So, I released my hold on his wrist.

Of course, Dath scrambled to his feet, making for his sword, but before he'd taken more than two steps, he tripped over the root system of a nearby tree, a detail most likely missed because of his ruined night vision. With my toe, I flipped Dath onto his back and rested the tip of my sword on the hollow of his neck.

"Do you yield?" I asked.

With his shoulders heaving, Dath glared at me with glistening eyes, but he slowly nodded.

Damn. The expression on that boy's face. I hadn't meant to *hurt* him and...

Hell. There went my heart with its twinges again, bidding me to fix this. It was going to get me in trouble one of these days.

On backing away, I summoned the boy's sword, holding both blades in one hand.

"I'll hold onto these for now," I said. "You can retrieve them when you join me and Raimie for training in two days."

Dath, sitting up with his hands on his knees, tensed.

"What?" he said to the space between his thighs and chest.

"You have potential, and yes, you're ready to become a full Zrelnach. You could probably ask Commander Ferin for a second trial in the field, and she'd grant it," I said, "but I can make you better first."

Gradually, Dath raised his head, simply staring at me.

"I'm teaching Raimie how to fight," I continued. "If you like and if you're willing to work alongside an 'evil human', you could take advantage of my lessons too. I think they could help you, like I think Raimie will surprise you, Dath. You two have a lot in common, and you could learn from each other."

A curiously blank expression had fallen over Dath, one that sent a shiver up my spine. I'd seen this look before—of course I had—but I couldn't recall the last time that had happened.

But then, Dath broke into a spunky grin, erasing my unease, and I filed the incident under things to be investigated later.

"Why not?" he said. "At the least, it'll keep me busy. I can't- I can't be idle, Rhy."

He looked away, and I resisted the urge to slap myself. That was why Dath had collected on my promise tonight. It was why, now that *I took the time to look*, he looked so worn out. He was grieving. How had he slept since Lyli had died?

Fishing through a pocket, I winced at the small number of vials left there. I'd have to brew more tinctures soon, what with Raimie blowing through my supply.

Offering one to Dath, I said, "Here. This'll help you sleep."

Cautiously, the kid got to his feet before accepting the vial.

"Thanks, Rhy," he said.

"No problem," I said. "Now, go use it. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow, but I definitely expect your presence two days hence when we set up camp. I'm sure someone can direct you to where Raimie and I will be."

With his eyes fixed on his hands, Dath tightened his grip on the vial, making me worry that he'd break it.

"Seriously. Thank you," he said. "And I'm sorry."

Frowning, I asked, "For what?"

With a sigh, Dath lifted his head to the sky, letting moonlight bathe his face.

"I don't know yet," he said. "Good night, Rhy."

As he picked his way toward the greater group, I watched him go. What had that been about?

Shaking my head, I made my way to Raimie before settling beside him, preparing to keep watch for the night.

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