

Chapter 17: Sentence Handed Down

Rhylix

Please, Eriadren, forgive yourself for something you had no control over.

Left holding a sword as familiar to me as my body, I thanked my lucky stars that I'd remembered to keep the damn thing away from my bare skin, clutching it to my chest with sleeve-coated arms. I didn't know how Raimie had been able to touch it without experiencing its typically imparted ability, but the utterly delightful bafflement that the teenager had presented around every corner only watered the small seedling of hope that was growing in me.

As expected, people soon started bustling into my clinic with Eledis and Aramar coming first. While Aramar hurried to his son's bedside, I approached Eledis, extending Shadowsteal to him from between my wrists.

"Here. Take this," I said.

Eledis gave me an odd look, but he accepted the sword, thank the gods.

"How is he?" he asked.

"Besides a severe case of idiocy that makes me constantly wonder at his continued breathing state?" I said. "He's fine. I'll dress the shoulder wound soon, but I expect more people besides you to crowd this clinic in the next hour."

Folding his arms, Eledis said, "Idiot he may be, but I thought Raimie fought fairly well back there, considering his lack of training."

Yes. Everyone in this family insisted that Raimie was a baby fighter, but I was finding that claim increasingly difficult to believe. Some of the moves he'd pulled in the two struggles I'd watched only came with a basic understanding of how to subdue one's opponents.

But sure. Raimie had never learned how to fight.

“He has Audish blood in him, that’s for sure,” I said. “Only certain types of people understand the value of survival over fighting fair, and he’s one of them, thank Alouin. He’ll do well in Auden once he’s adjusted to life there.”

Casting a sidelong glance at me, Eledis asked, “What do you know of Auden?”

With a smile as my only answer, I gathered Aramar from Raimie’s cot.

“He’ll be fine, I assure you,” I said. “I’ll get him ready for his second trial, but in the meantime, you two can’t be here. Allanovian’s Council would have a fit if they found you in this clinic. They’d claim you were helping him cheat.”

“We wouldn’t do that! I only want to be beside my son, damnit,” Aramar hissed.

“I know that you could never be so conniving, but I’m not the one you’d have to convince,” I said. “Trust me with your son, Aramar. Since we met, I’ve fixed him up when he’s been injured, haven’t I?”

After giving me a piercing stare, Aramar sighed.

“Ok.”

He rubbed his face before slapping his hands to his thighs.

“Ok,” he repeated. “Let’s get out of here, Eledis.”

But the old man lingered after Aramar had departed.

“If you hurt Raimie,” he said, “I *will* kill you.”

Oh, gods. We’d already gotten to that part, had we? Struggling to keep from laughing, I displayed a pleasant smile for Eledis.

“You’ll try,” I said.

Sniffing, Eledis followed Aramar, and I started gathering the supplies I’d soon need.

“Are you there?” I said.

At the prompt, my constant nuisance stepped into view.

“I’m always here,” it said.

Lowering my tools, I leaned on my desk while glaring at the pesky annoyance.

“What in the void is wrong with my ally?” I growled.

Cocking its head, my constant nuisance asked, “Whatever do you mean?”

Lifting a scalpel, I advanced on it, jabbing the sharp edge into its face.

“Don’t play coy with me. You know what I mean,” I said. “He has *two* of you lot, one from either side, and their appearances have been intermittent and *distinctly not right*. Gods, he’s calling on the power behind them *without knowing what he’s doing*. It’s not right. *He’s* not right, and you know it. So, tell me why, or I swear to the gods, I will banish you from the physical plane for the rest of this cycle.”

For the length of my rant, my constant nuisance had merely blinked at me, and once I was finished, it slowly shook its head.

“I don’t know. Truly,” it said. “You know where I come from. You know I cannot lie. I’m telling you, I... we have no clue what to make of this human.”

Well, fuck. Its ignorance was both terrifying and exhilarating. Finally. Something new.

“Will you watch him, please?” I asked. “At least until his splinters...”

Hmm. What was the best word to describe what I desperately hoped would soon happen to them?

“Stabilize?” I said.

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” my constant nuisance said.

“Good,” I said. “Because I’ll likely be... busy for the rest of the day.”

“I know,” my constant nuisance said with sorrow in its voice.

It was sorry? It and its many cohorts had forced me into this life...

Holy hell. Wait a second. Was that anger?

Giggling, I waved my constant nuisance out of view. Damn, this go ‘round kept getting better and better.

Eventually, someone brought Dath to me, and I treated both boys, wondering when the expected summons would come. When it did, it arrived by means of someone I’d least anticipated.

“Hey, Rhy,” Ferin said from my clinic’s entrance. “How’re the idiots?”

Hiding my surprise, I pointed to each boy in turn.

“Concussion from where Raimie tried to smash his head in. He’ll be out of commission for a few more weeks, so please, don’t put him through his second trial until then,” I said. “Minor lacerations and a hole in his shoulder. I’ve packed it and stitched up his cuts. He’ll be good to go as soon as he wakes up.”

“Fantastic. The Council’s ready for this catastrophe to end,” Ferin said before shifting in place. “They’d like to speak with you.”

“I know,” I said.

I finished collecting everything I might need while Ferin gaped at me.

“You *know*?” she squeaked.

“Mmhmm,” I said with a nod. “Pretty sure I know what they want with me too.”

“And you’re... ok with it?” Ferin asked with her voice strangled.

I snorted.

“No, of course not,” I said, “but I doubt I can change their minds, especially since *you* came to retrieve me. I might as well get it over with.”

“Rhy...”

“Ferin, the people of Allanovian despise me,” I said. “No matter how demeaning doing this might typically be, it won’t change their opinions of me, and as you said, it’ll move this farce along.”

“But the reason they hate you is stupid,” Ferin said. “It’s not fair.”

Finished with my preparations, I rounded on her, letting some of my weariness peek through my mask.

“Who told you life’s fair? It’s not. Never has been, never will be,” I said. “Look, there’s no point in discussing this. Can we please just go?”

Swallowing, Ferin said, “Sure.”

She led me to the same room where the Council had put me on trial a little over a week ago, the room where I’d offered to act as a scapegoat for them. It seemed they’d decided how I could serve in that capacity, but then, I knew of only one ‘punishment’ that would satisfy the Council’s needs.

The three men on the Council were clustered together like they had been before, and when I entered the room, a gleam filled Hemly and Yrit’s eyes. Before either of them could open their mouths to gloat, Ferin cut them off.

“He already knows what you want,” she snapped.

Hemly spun on her with his teeth gritted.

“You told him?” he hissed.

“No, he knew before I got to him. Gussed it even,” Ferin said. “I suppose you and Yrit are just that predictable.”

Shafoth, having never taken his eyes off of me, cocked his head.

“She speaks the truth?” he said.

Nodding, I said, “To your utter surprise, I’m sure, Raimie has passed his first trial, which means his second is imminent. If I remember correctly, it requires a Joining, something that I hoped you’d modify, considering he’s human. Who knows what a Joining will do to him? In the past, Allanovian has altered the second trial for those of his race. Why not for him? Is it because if he passes, you’ll have to admit that he’s the foretold child? I know how much of an upheaval that would bring to this city.”

No one would answer me, so I shook my head.

“That’s what I thought,” I continued. “In any case, no Allanovian citizen will volunteer to Join with a human, and on top of that, no one here has true combat experience, not like I do. Despite how much you might protest it, all of you want to test Raimie’s aptitude, in case he is what you think, and so, you turn to me.

“As you wish, I’ll Join with Raimie, but to gain a memory appropriate for what you desire, I’ll have to resort to... extreme measures. Most of you will insist on staying while I do this, of course, but I’d advise any of you who are squeamish to reconsider. I don’t want to cause you undue stress.”

I was already dealing with enough of my own tension as it was. Ever, I’d excelled at compartmentalization, but the first step in this type of Joining—extracting a traumatic memory, written into my blood—might collapse the walls I’d built around myself.

If they came down, my past would crash over me, and I wouldn’t pass through it entirely sane. In fact, I’d become a gibbering husk of myself for far too long afterward. It had happened often enough before.

“You got all of that from Ferin coming to retrieve you,” Shafoth said, as if it were a question.

No, I’d predicted this from the moment I’d made my offer to the Council, but judging from the looks on Yrit and Hemly’s faces, it was probably best to keep that close to heart.

“Yes,” I said instead. “Shall we get started?”

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