

# Chapter 18: 'Appropriate' Punishment

Rhylix

*Before I lose myself again, I must set this into writing.*

Glancing over the gaping Council members in front of me, I lifted an eyebrow, ready to get this show on the road.

“I’m assuming one of you has the serum for the Joining?” I asked.

Lifting a flask into view, Ferin tossed it to me, and as I downed the liquid inside, I watched the Council.

Would they stay? I didn’t mind them observing something that most would consider a humiliating experience, but I’d truly meant what I’d said in warning. They wouldn’t like what I’d have to do.

At a shift in motion on the periphery, I noted a Zrelnach squad filling the nearby corridor and nearly snorted up the liquid I’d just drank. Did they think I’d run from this? If I did, where would I go? The means to my goal currently lay insensate in my clinic. I couldn’t leave Allanovian without Raimie, and Raimie needed the Zrelnach, a good foundation for the army that he must build.

So, no. I wouldn’t have run. I hadn’t run from something like this in ages.

Tossing the empty flask back to Ferin, I stalked to the chamber’s edge, sliding down its wall to the floor. Humming under my breath, I prepared what I’d need, looping the ring of a syringe’s plunger around a thumb while holding five darning needles between my teeth. Five *should* be enough.

“Last chance to leave,” I said around them.

I knew Ferin wouldn’t, given her crossed arms and the stubborn set of her shoulders. Seeing it warmed me, which gave me pause. When had I last experienced *that*?

As for the rest, I’d hoped that some would go, but no one moved. So, I plucked a needle from my mouth with a sigh.

“Can’t say I didn’t warn you,” I said.

I slid the needle under my thumbnail, listening while a clamor rose from the others, and Ferin shouted something indecipherable.

One.

*The woman I love bids me leave her to die, and I do, collapsing inside as the central support of my life is kicked free.*

NO! Fuck no! Anything but that memory. Hastily shoving it aside, I snatched a needle from between my lips while Ferin screamed at me.

Two.

*My brother is hanging from a tree, swaying in the breeze. Fortunately, his corpse hasn’t dangled long enough for it to bloat yet. Soon enough...*

*I’ll need to gather the others after I’ve cut my brother down. Hopefully, I can bury them before this sense of shock wears off.*

*Turning to my home’s gaping doorway, I trudge toward it. Its black hole is a suck on my essence, drawing me to the horror that I know waits within.*

Better. Something that I could willingly share. Too much pain for Raimie, though.

Motion had started in the chamber, a jitter of violence that I half-acknowledged as my middle finger gained my attention.

Three.

*“Get out of here, Rhy,” my father shouts, shoving me toward our bolt hole.*

*A group of Kiraak bursts into the house with the noise of their ecstasy chilling me to the bone. Drawing his sword, my father faces them, and with a snarling growl, I turn to help.*

*“GO, Rhy! Protect your mother and Ren,” my father yells. “Run!”*

*Helpless in my current state, I gape at this human, a man who’s chosen to become my father and will now die for that choice. Gods, I want to plunge into the fight but... I can’t.*

*Spinning, I run, cursing my eleven-year-old body.*

Almost. This memory would probably work for Raimie, but I didn’t want him to see how I’d abandoned my father, not when he had such a close connection to his own. Maybe one more needle would do it?

Activity was flurrying in the chamber now. Someone raced for me while the others reached to restrain her, which meant I should hurry.

Four.

*If I ignore how dangerous it is to sprint down a hill without control, I might reach my mother in time, not that she really needs my help. She's fending off her attackers with ease, dispatching the last of them before I've reached the hill's base.*

*"Mom!" I shout.*

*At my voice, she turns, and from behind, a horde descends upon her. Before she can react, they rip her limb from limb while I watch from the other side of a creek. With blood flying across the water, I gawk as they reduce my mother to meaty mash, and something fiery and unreasoning swells in me.*

*If I can get close enough without drawing the group's attention, I could steal a weapon from the one furthest back, climb onto his back, and slit his throat. The female closest to me should make an easy target as well-*

*The object of my interest flicks her eyes toward me, baring her teeth, and...*

*Ren. What about Ren?!*

*I flee.*

Nope. If I gave him that memory, Raimie would never leave Ada'ir, but it was close in time to one that would fit. A single needle more should do it. Please, gods, say it would only be one more.

A blur of black and peach loomed large in my glistening vision, and gritting my teeth, I pushed a needle beneath my pinky's fingernail.

Five.

*Tears streak across my cheeks as I race toward my sister. She's lying on the creek bed, singing to herself, and hysterical laughter flies from me.*

*How has she missed our home's destruction? Is she too trapped by the worlds inside her head to notice the end of our very real one?*

*As I open my mouth to scream her name, something—probably my laughter—alerts her to my presence, and she leaps to her feet. Crying for her brother, she stands unharmed, and for the first time since this morning, I let myself believe that something good can come of this day.*

Finally, a memory I could safely share with Raimie.

Unhooking the syringe from my thumb, I struggled to slide it into a vein. Gods, how my hands were shaking!

In the end, I managed it, beginning my blood draw while Ferin dropped to her knees in front of me. She sounded like she was choking on something, repeatedly reaching toward and away from my injured hand, and I ignored her until the syringe's vial was filled. It trembled as I held it between us.

"Here you go," I said. "Be mindful of the needle."

She didn't appreciate my joke. Snatching the syringe from me, Ferin stored it while I yanked darned needles out of my fingers, clutching my hand to my chest once I was finished.

"What the fuck, Rhy?" she snapped. "What in the fucking *void* was that?"

Tiredly, I shrugged.

"Because of events in my past, my mind has learned how to ignore—how do I put this?—*high* levels of pain," I said. "You needed a memory of violence, and we can only extract those when the donor has endured enough hurt to relive an awful moment in their life. I did what I must to give you what you needed."

Ferin's face had gone ashen, and limply, she sat on her heels, revealing the people behind her. The remaining Council members, even the ones who hated me, looked stricken, and the Zrelnach in the corridor were struggling to maintain their impassive demeanor.

"What?" I snapped. "You'd better get used to scenes like this because they're an everyday occurrence in Auden, and you'll likely be heading there soon."

Slowly, Shafoth shook his head.

"We know this. Stories from Audish refugees have reached even this remote corner of Ada'ir, and while some here choose to ignore them, most of us know what to expect across the Narrow Sea," he said. "No. It's- it's you. How can you do something like that *to yourself* and never flinch?"

Oh. Right. In situations like this, I'd always struggled to keep my mask in place.

"I feel it, if that's what you're asking," I said.

Gods, the sear of molten lava that had flowed down my arm! I'd forgotten how near debilitating it was.

"But like I said, this sort of thing—"

I wiggled my bloodied fingers in the air.

"—is commonplace in Auden," I said. "And my past has been comparable to the lives of that kingdom's citizens. I adapted."

“Alouin, Rhy,” Ferin said, “no wonder you always seemed amused when the other trainees and I complained about running laps.”

“I would never have belittled you. Just because I think of burning muscles as a mild irritant doesn’t mean that you do, and I could never laugh at someone else’s pain,” I said, nudging her chin. “Now. May I go? I have errands to run and would prefer to leave here as soon as possible.”

Ferin mutely nodded, and after I climbed to my feet, no one protested as I left the chamber.

I took a different route to my clinic, both to throw off anyone who might have followed me and to swing by Salma’s shop. Days ago, she’d sent word that she’d finished Raimie’s sword, but this was the first moment I’d had to retrieve it.

As I moved along, I looked for an innocuous place where I could rest, and on reaching the children’s ward, I knew I’d found it. Kept separate from the rest of Allanovian, the young Esela were used to their caretakers changing every day. None of them commented on my entrance, not even when I slipped into an occupied classroom.

This class’s instructor had dragged a table toward the back wall with a gaggle of children standing between it and the entrance. They craned their necks for a better look at what rested on it, and after a single, narrow-eyed glance at me, the instructor ignored my presence, continuing with her lecture. With each sentence she spoke, she moved tiny models across the depicted battlefield.

Bracing against a wall, I released the illusion that I’d held since ripping needles out of my hand, and the bruised appearance of my fingernails faded to a healthy color. Energy drained from me, and while I waited for it to return, I watched the instructor become more animated, all while the modeled battle came to its conclusion.

History lessons like this never failed to sadden and amuse me. I’d never understand how humans and Esela kept making the same mistakes, and yet, no matter how many times we destroyed ourselves, we always got back up.

As soon as I could, I left the children’s ward. I should be quick with retrieving Raimie’s sword. Now that Allanovian’s Council had everything they needed for his second trial, they’d start it soon, eager to finish with this inconvenience. I should be ready for that because once it was over...

Well. Everyone needed someone with them after the second trial of a Zrelnach’s initiation.

## **TTS Chapter Eighteen**

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