

Half-Fulfilled

A novella, set halfway through *A King's Caution*. (Between Interlude 2: Arrogance and Chapter 58)

- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [3](#)
- [4](#)
- [5](#)
- [6](#)
- [7](#)
- [8](#)
- [9](#)
- [10](#)

1

The Boy

Victory wasn't supposed to feel like this.

Standing over Rhylix's sleeping form, I wondered how it should feel. Should I be exultant? Relieved? How should one feel at the culmination of a battle with zero casualties?

Not like this.

At least Rhylix didn't need to struggle with shape change anymore. He'd thought I'd never noticed how tiring he'd found playing human, but even with my own problems keeping me occupied, I'd seen it. Even with Hadrion's death dragging me into a pit of misery and self-hate. Even with a second life rattling around in my head, straining to replace false memories. Even with Ren...

It was good to see Rhylix's tall form and distinctive hair shade once more.

Hair with white in it.

Seeing this, I leaned closer. Had our efforts to restore Elisk's fighting pits aged my friend? Weeks ago, he'd shared with me how badly Ele had been weakened in recent years. Did that mean his typical invulnerability now had exceptions?

There was definitely something white there. What was it?

When I brushed the speck, I felt its familiar texture and jerked my hand away. Bone.

'A second gift, dabbler of both sides', written across the sand.

"Sir! Are you-?"

Hovering over me, Oswin had his hand extended, and I jerked away from it.

"I'm fine," I snapped. "Whoever cleaned Rhy up didn't do a thorough job, is all."

Glancing around me, I frowned. How had I gotten here, absently standing in a hall? Why did this sensation feel so familiar?

Shivering, I slumped against a wall, pressing my forehead to its cool resin with pitch black behind it...

The holding pens are empty. No, no, no! This can't be happening! Please. Maybe I missed someone, deeper in this hungry darkness.

"SIR!"

When I focused with a gasp this time, I frantically scanned my surroundings, again finding myself in a different part of the palace. Gods, I was losing time.

Not good. I had to raise my defenses, holding off this need to relive awful memories.

Maybe Ele could help with that?

Beside me, Bright said, "I wouldn't."

Their advice came too late. I reached for the peace behind my Ele source, but when it came as called today, fire scorched my veins, and I dropped to my knees, screaming. No matter what I tried, I couldn't cast aside the energy I'd summoned, and it scoured me, bristling thorns ripping along my skin's underside. Molten magma dissolving my brain beneath its-

"That was stupid, heart of my heart."

Even here, even now, Nylion wouldn't look at me, and I...

How terrible was it that this hurt worse than everything else I'd suffered in the last few weeks?

Hell, how I wanted to reach out and take Nylion's hand, promising that everything would be better soon, but I couldn't make myself move those few, needed inches. Instead, I turned aside, hugging myself.

"I know," I said.

Gasping, I scrambled across the floor until I hit a wall, frantically searching my body for wounds. I must have been hurt. Pain's echo was ringing so *loudly* in me, and blood was covering me from head to toe.

So much blood. It was cracking on my skin and stiffening my uniform, but this wasn't my blood. This was-

The Daevetch presence that's been flitting about Elisk stabilizes nearby, and I run toward that presence. In the pit, Rhylix is staring at a cube, a monstrosity that my mind refuses to accept, and as if dazed, he turns toward the palace. He lifts a hand in greeting to a man, standing high in the palace's confines.

The origin of the Daevetch presence.

This man gestures, and something in the world changes. Frowning, I search for the shift and find a wave of red, crashing toward me.

Hands were on my shoulders, digging into my skin.

“You need to stop screaming!” Oswin shouted. “Alouin, what if someone sees you like this?”

Shrugging off his hands, I stood from where I’d been huddled against the wall. My jacket was on the floor at my feet with its buttons popped and cloth torn. I didn’t remember taking it off.

This was *really bad*.

“I need a bath,” I said. “Immediately.”

With his face crinkling, Oswin said, “I- I’m sorry, sir. With the current chaos, I’m not sure we can accommodate that right now.”

“I’ll make my own, then,” I said.

Because this filth needed to come off of me. Now.

Oswin trailed me as I left the palace, soon entering the city proper. Along the way, soldiers and civilians stopped what they were doing to stare at me, but I could hardly blame them.

How must I look right now? Half-clothed with my scars—old and new—bared for the world to see, covered in blood and who knew what else, my eyes wild. Did they think I’d lost my mind? How many of these people were wondering if they’d traded one insane conqueror for another?

For once, I didn’t care what they thought, focusing on finding the closest public well. Only on standing atop its lip did I hesitate, gazing into its dark depths.

I’d made this plunge once before, years ago. Because of it, my mother had died.

That is not what happened, and you know it, Nylion said.

Gods, he’d sounded angry. Of course he was angry. Why couldn’t he understand…?

At least in this, though, Nylion was right. My mother hadn’t died after we’d fallen into a well, and my memory of it was as false as everything else in the first half of my life. As false as what I’d had with Ren.

“Sir, what are you-?” Oswin started.

I stepped off of the well’s lip. For a moment, wind whistled in my ears before water closed over my head. Its sharp cold forced a gasp from me, and liquid rushed inside-

The red wave slams into me, and within it, something solid strikes my cheek. At that, I suck in what should have been air, but instead of that, metallic saltiness flows over my tongue.

Blood. I'll drown on the blood of my people, crushed as a gift for me.

The blood in my lungs returns from whence it came with a howl.

Sputtering, I splashed to the surface. Floating there, I stared at a circle of blue, high above, while forcing myself to process these memories. Do it here, in the privacy at the bottom of a well, rather than let them rise, unbidden, while among others.

Because these memories had significance. Until that moment, I hadn't seen Doldimar as *my* foe. An enemy or something evil, certainly, but not my problem.

For some reason, this gift had made it personal. Not my father's paralyzation. Not having my normal life ripped away from me. Not the Kiraak, waiting for my mercy in the Birthing Grounds. Not even Teron's many attempts at killing me.

Doldimar had pulped hundreds of people into paste as a *gift* for me. Nothing would stop me from putting the mad dog down.

"Sir..."

Oswin's voice echoed to me with a sigh.

"I'll get a rope."

Ignoring him, I scrubbed my body until my skin was scarlet before pulling Ele to me. As before, pain accompanied this energy, but without awful memories to cloud my focus, pain was pain was pain. It had no hold on me.

Shooting Ele from my feet felt like having claws raked over my body's every fiber, but I maintained the stream until I'd gained the height needed to grab the well's lip. As I hauled myself over the edge, my muscles screamed at me. Oswin was there to help me to the ground, thank Alouin.

Once on my feet again, I flung water off of my arms while shaking it from my hair.

"Tell me, Oswin," I said. "What should victory feel like?"

"I-"

The spy looked so lost.

"I don't know, sir."

"Neither do I, but it doesn't feel like this," I said. "But that makes sense, right? Today wasn't a victory. Even if Doldimar has vanished, today doesn't mark our victory. He'll return someday, and when he does, we must be prepared for him."

2

The Girl

Freedom wasn't supposed to feel like this.

Standing over Hadrion's grave, I wondered what my little brother would think of the mess that I'd become, and his much-loved voice echoed in my head.

"Shouldn't have ended things with Raimie, silly. I know you love him. You certainly blabbered enough about it to me. Who cares if his marriage to Ada'ir's queen would serve Auden best? Do what's best for YOU."

"Like you have room to talk," I whispered.

When Kylorian had returned with Hadrion's body... Alouin, the sight of it.

Pale skin turning green from rot. Neck split unnaturally wide to reveal the tissue beneath. The wound's jagged edges.

As my lungs became a bellows for air, I slapped a hand over my mouth, biting my palm, and only unclenched my teeth on tasting blood. I wouldn't cry today, not when I'd shed so many tears in recent weeks.

"Why'd you do it, Had-had?" I said. "Did you think Raimie couldn't protect you? He could have! I know- I think-"

If he couldn't have, the remnants of Raimie might be laying here instead of Hadrion. Was that what I wanted? To trade the one I loved for my brother? It might be better than seeing him married to another woman.

I tasted blood again, and a sharp pain in my cheek made me release it from my teeth. Alouin, how could I think that?

"Ren, you ready?"

No.

"Coming, Ky!"

My older brother was waiting for me far distant from the grave, hugging his elbows.

Something was wrong with him. It had been that way *for a while*, but things had gotten worse since his trip to Nephiron: his way of grieving, I knew. He'd been jumpy and snappish, unlike his typical diplomatic self. Worse, he'd returned gaunt and hollow-eyed. Haunted. I was worried that he'd stopped eating properly, as he on and off had throughout our childhood.

To top it all off, he'd been avoiding both me and the rest of our family for weeks, which I didn't understand. Kylorian had always called upon the families of those who'd been lost in service to Tiro, but now, he was deviating from that pattern with those closest to him. I'd thought he'd want to spend as much time possible with us, especially given how often he was typically out in greater Auden. When he'd come to ask if I'd join him on his new planned trip, it had been the first time we'd talked since he'd come home.

As I approached him, I looked up and down his frame, noting the pack at his feet, the sturdy shoes, and the cloak around his neck. Did he mean to leave straight from here? I might have something to say about that.

"Shall we see Eliade and Dury before heading out?" I sweetly asked.

As always, Kylorian's eyes tightened when I mentioned our father's name. I could understand that, given the many times he'd talked about the lectures Tanwadur had given him and the thunderous shouting that I could sometimes hear ringing throughout our home.

Still, I was especially anxious to have those two say goodbye. My father had been *tense* throughout Kylorian's surprise trip to Nephiron, and I'd noticed that things were usually easier between the two whenever Tanwadur was more relaxed. I tried to make that happen as often as possible.

"We spoke earlier," Kylorian said, as if to spite me. "So, unless you have something you need to say to them?"

There. A way to get him home, at least for a little while.

"I do, actually."

I started down the path toward Tiro, soon glancing over my shoulder. Kylorian hadn't taken a single step.

"Coming?" I asked in a sing-song voice.

My brother's lips twitched with his fingers stretching, but he soon followed me out of the graveyard, and I smiled. He *would* see every member of our family before we left, even if I had to force it.

"Little bird!" Eliade said as we came through the front door. "And Ky! I didn't know you'd returned from your trip. How'd it go?"

He hadn't even told her he was back?

“It was...”

Kylorian broke off, looking anywhere but at Eliade.

“Productive Uneventful.”

Both Eliade and I stared at Kylorian until he sighed.

“I met my contact in Nephiron. Things didn’t work out so well between us, so I left. Found myself in a spot of trouble. Fortunately, my contact had a change of heart before I got in too deep. They came after me, and we worked things out.”

That was vague, for him at least. Kylorian usually regaled us with stories about his time on the road after he’d come home. What had happened to him while he was away to change that habit?

“I’m glad to hear you fixed things with your contact,” Eliade cautiously said before smiling. “Why don’t you two come to the dining room? I was making lunch when you arrived.”

As she gestured behind her, Kylorian shook his head.

“Actually, we’re in a bit of a hurry-”

“Nonsense! You always have time for my cooking, or so you always say,” Eliade said. “Right, Ky?”

Wincing, Kylorian said, “Yes, but-”

“Great! We should get going, then,” Eliade said. “Your father’s already at the table. Let’s join him, shall we?”

Kylorian’s frown deepened as he followed our mother, but still, I smiled at his meek shuffle. Eliade had been the only one, ever, to cow my brother like this, and I’d always found it entertaining to watch: the quintessential housewife conquering one of Tiro’s best warriors.

As we stepped into the dining room, Tanwadur, already at his seat, glanced up at us. There was a brief flash of... something—I wasn’t sure what—in his eye, but it was gone almost as soon as it had appeared. Getting to his feet, Tanwadur spread his arms wide

“Ky!” he cried. “You’re home!”

While he came forward, presumably to hug my brother, I punched Kylorian in the shoulder.

“You said you’d spoken with them!”

From the corner of his mouth, Kylorian said. “I may have fibbed a bit.”

“A bit?!”

With his attention fully on our father, Kylorian accepted his embrace, *obviously* ignoring me.

“How are you, Dury?” he asked.

My father’s thick arms squeezed, too tight, it would seem. Kylorian sharply inhaled, stiffening, but he quickly got ahold of himself.

“Better now that both of you are here,” Tanwadur said, “Come! Sit!”

As soon as he released my brother, the two of us joined him at the table. Eliade, who’d taken a detour on the way here, bustled inside. She held plates piled high with vegetable pies, bread, and roasted meat, and after placing each platter on the table, she sat down as well.

“Wait your turn, Hadri-” she absently began.

Her choked sob stopped what had once been a daily admonishment, and as it echoed in the room, everyone avoided looking at a conspicuously empty chair.

After a moment, Eliade whispered, “I’m sorry.”

I leapt from my seat, rushing to hold my mother. As I rocked her from side to side, she started crying.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I said.

The two men with us had, predictably, withdrawn, facing their pain with their typical clenched jaws and tightened fists.

Meanwhile, Eliade hid her face in her hands, shuddering, while I released her. This left me as the one to draw our meal back into something we’d find more comfortable.

Again, I bit the inside of my cheek. Didn’t they know I was hurting too? Why did I have to be the strong one?

“Take my role, big sis,” Hadrion whispered to me. “Be the beacon of cheerfulness and hope that this family badly needs.”

So, I forced myself to smile as I said.

“Alouin, this food looks amazing, mom! I didn’t know potatoes were in season yet!”

Eliade laughed into her hands.

“Maybe if you spent more time in the fields instead of traipsing through the forest all day, you would have known.”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Aren’t you the one who’s always telling me little birds fly where they will? I’d be too twitchy for farm work.”

“That’s true,” Tanwadur grumbled. “Don’t you go stealing her for your fields now, Eliade. The Terror of Da’kul couldn’t have earned her title if she’d kept to the role you intended for her.”

Eliade slapped the table, revealing a tear-streaked face.

“I never could stand against the two of you when you were united in purpose.”

After a moment more of glaring, she relented, waving at the table.

“Dig in. I know you want to.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice,” I said under my breath.

I joined Tanwadur and Eliade in serving my plate, Only Kylorian refrained from the free-for-all.

“Are you feeling all right, Ky?” I asked.

I could tell, just by looking at him, that he needed to put some foot into his body, one way or the other, and it concerned me that he didn’t look interested in a meal that he’d typically jump right into. Our mother’s cooking was one of the only forms of sustenance he tended to let himself enjoy.

Making a face, Kylorian said, “I’m fine. Just not hungry. Anxious to be on the road.”

Sure...

Taking aim, I meant to flick a pea at Kylorian as an opening salvo, one where I might eventually get him to relent, but before I could try, Tanwadur interrupted me.

“Kylorian of the line of kings!” he said. “Are you refusing to try your mother’s cooking?”

At that gruff question, my brother flinched, and I winced inside. Alouin love my father but sometimes, he could be entirely too harsh with Kylorian, completely unlike how he’d always been with me and... Hadrion.

“I wouldn’t dare,” Kylorian said.

Hesitantly, he filled his own plate. I studiously ignored him and our father as we all ate, starting the meal as many before this one once had.

Eventually, though, Tanwadur broke the quiet in a displeased grumble.

“What’s got you in such a rush?”

At his tone, I choked on the bite of vegetable pie that I’d been chewing. Any pleasant snips of conversation we’d been indulging in vanished, gone as if they had never been.

As always, Kylorian looked nonchalant about the change in our father’s mood, although I knew looks could be deceiving with him. He scooped up a bite as he said.

“Surely you’ve heard that Raimie’s recently taken Elisk without a single loss. Even I’ve heard the rumor, and I’ve been on the road for a while.”

Tanwadur started scowling.

“More like Doldimar gifted it to him,” Tanwadur spat.

Which made me flinch. I’d endured a lot of lectures during my time spent courting Raimie, so I hated that my brother had brought up the subject now.

“Well, yes. You and I know that’s what happened,” Kylorian continued, poking the air in our father’s direction with his knife, “but to the general populace, it doesn’t look that way. So, in the battle for their hearts and minds, Raimie holds the advantage right now. Since he’s acting like he’ll keep to our agreement, I mean to step forward in the populace’s mind as an alternative ruler. Hopefully, this will begin swinging things my way.”

Nodding, Tanwadur scooped peas and potatoes into his mouth, and despite the sensitive subject matter, I breathed a sigh of relief. My father had relaxed, which was good for all parties involved.

“How?” he asked around his mouthful.

“Raimie has his strengths, much as you might hate to admit it,” Kylorian said. “I have mine. While he runs around charming people with his good nature, I’ll play politics. It was what I was gathering Ren to do before our stop here.”

Tanwadur grew distant as he thought through my brother’s plan.

“You mean to speak with town mayors,” he said, “gaining their promises of support in exchange for whatever they might demand from you.”

“Sounds about right,” Kylorian said.

“And why do you need our little bird for this?” Tanwadur asked.

Every eye turned to me, which started a flush creeping up my neck. After Kylorian had explained his plans for the next week, during one of the rare spells he’d talked to me recently, I’d asked if I could join him on his trip. I’d only told Kylorian that I needed an excuse to leave Tiro, but I suspected he knew the real reason I’d asked to come with him. After all, he’d walked in on me and Raimie before I’d...

Anyway, I was sure he knew, as I was sure our parents did too, but I’d be damned if I’d admit that reason aloud.

Without any prompting on my part, Kylorian stepped forward to rescue me, as usual.

“Ren should see something of Auden besides our little piece of it, and she should do it now, while Doldimar’s gone,” he said. “Who knows when he’ll return with his Kiraak and his games? Let’s take

advantage of our freedom while we have it.”

“Hear, hear!” Tanwadur cried, slamming his tankard on the tabletop.

While he and Kylorian devolved into a heated discussion about travel plans and what resources he should pledge to which towns, I picked at the remnants of my meal. My brother had come up with a nice lie for why he needed me to join him on this trip, but it was just that. A lie. I knew why I really needed to leave this place.

Touches of Raimie were rife throughout Tiro, and they were driving me mad. Why was it that a broken heart hurt almost as much as a lost sibling? Was I that shallow?

“Not in the least, big sis,” Hadrion said. “I remember the things you said about him. How he made you feel, like a missing part of you coming home. I also remember the night you brought him to Tiro. As soon as I saw the two of you together, I knew that Ky had lost the battle for your heart. You and Raimie were made for each other, and while it hurts that I’m gone, never to be seen or spoken to again, the potential that you’ve lost with him hurts more. I know it does, Ren. You could never lie to me. It’s all right, though. I understand.”

“You’re a voice in my head,” I whispered while ripping into my last few bites of meat.

“What was that, sweetie?” Eliade asked at my side.

I flinched, huddling on myself.

“Nothing, mom.”

Eliade watched me as I finished eating. When I set aside my utensils, she laid a hand over mine.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” she asked. “I was here when Josenik left-”

Gasping, I stole my hand back, which made Eliade look miserable. I had to give her something else to focus on.

“I was just wondering what freedom feels like,” I said. “Do you know?”

If anything, my mother’s face fell further.

“Oh, little bird. What makes you think I would?” she said. “When I was a child, Doldimar had held dominion for almost two hundred years. Besides the pretense of it that we have here, I’ve never been free, but maybe we can learn how that feels together.”

Hmm.

“I’d like that,” I said, meaning to continue the conversation.

Shoving away from the table, Kylorian stopped that from happening.

“Thank you for the meal, but we really should be going now,” he said.

With nothing else, he stalked out of the room, and those of us he'd left behind exchanged a glance. That had been abrupt, but then, Kylorian was sometimes like that, usually after he'd finished an intense conversation with our father.

Like the one he'd just had.

“Or maybe not,” Eliade sighed. “Safe journey, sweetie. Thank you for bringing Ky here before you left.”

“It was no trouble,” I said. “Despite how he might be acting right now, please know that both of us are looking forward to coming home.”

“Oh, we know,” Tanwadur said. “Now, hurry after him, Ren. He'll be halfway across Auden by the time you catch up.”

Despite the warning, I took my time saying goodbye. When I did leave, I sprinted after my brother, and on catching up, I swatted the back of his head.

“Your bathing has gotten as deplorable as your manners lately. Is that something you picked up from your contact in Nephiron?”

Without stopping, Kylorian shoved me with a smile on his face, and for a split second, I saw the brother that I'd grown up beside.

“What's that supposed to mean?” he asked, sulkily pouting.

“You missed a spot this morning,” I said. “I swear, it's like dirt loves you; it clings to you so!”

“Really? Where is it this time?”

Kylorian twirled with his arms spread wide.

“Right along your hairline,” I said with a smirk. “Guess I can't blame you for missing it. I almost didn't see it myself.”

At my words, Kylorian slowed down, lifting a hand to his neck. A river of emotions flowed over his face, too fast for me to read them, but when they'd passed, my familiar brother was gone again, replaced by what he'd become since the battle for the Birthing Grounds.

“Huh,” he grunted.

3

The Boy

I didn't deserve this.

As another woman approached me with her gaggle of children, I groaned under my breath. I could already hear her words.

"Thank you."

"You've saved us!"

"Are you the one we've been waiting for?"

I'd heard so many variations of these phrases over the last few days, and I deserved none of it.

When the woman stopped, however, I faced her with a smile on my face because that was what she needed. It was what they all needed. By now, the whole of Elisk had heard that I was a primeancer. How much of their fears did I soothe with a single smile?

"Yes?" I prompted.

Keeping my voice pleasant was a struggle. In the last few days, I'd used a lot of Daevetch, and its effects were making themselves known. Rhylix and Bright kept telling me to ease up, letting Daevetch's hold on me loosen for a time, but I couldn't stand the sight of the eyesores outside of Elisk's wall. A visible reminder of what these people had suffered, they gnawed on me so badly that they'd begun infiltrating my dreams. I'd see these abandoned slums gone, even if I must destroy them by hand.

A cough drew me back to the woman and her children.

"Sorry," I said. "Did you need something?"

"I need your help," she said.

Four more beautiful words had never existed in the human language.

"Of course!" I said. "What can I do for you?"

The woman tangled her fingers in her skirt, looking at her feet, and I couldn't wait for her to gather the courage to speak, not with the pile of tasks on my agenda. Fortunately, one of her children

spared me the effort of dragging an answer free.

“Grandma’s in there,” he piped up, pointing at the stretch of slums that I’d meant to demolish over the next quarter mark.

Grandma? Could someone live to see one’s children’s children under Doldimar’s reign?

Wait. In *there*?

“Gods,” I said, turning to Oswin. “I thought you said they were empty!”

“The soldiers reported it so,” the spy said. “They may have missed something.”

“*May have?*”

“Please, Your Greatness,” the woman said, “may I convince her to leave before you exert your power?”

I winced.

“Don’t call me that. I’m not Doldimar,” I said. “Where is your mother, dear lady? Perhaps I can help her leave.”

“If you want to try, you can, although she won’t make it easy for you,” the woman said. “Mother insists that this place is her home. She’s vowed never to leave it while she breathes.”

“Of course she has,” I sighed.

I crouched to the children’s eye level.

“Who here can take me to grandma?”

Giggling and avoiding my eyes, the children sprinted into the slums, and I followed at a more leisurely pace with Oswin and the children’s mother beside me.

“Anything else I should know about her besides she’s crazy stubborn?” I asked.

“She’s liable to stab you if you drag her out,” the woman said.

“Violent too. Got it.”

Soon enough, the children and I were standing outside of a hovel no different from those around it. After thanking them, I moved toward its entrance, but Oswin held me back from stepping through it, shaking his head. Edging into the opening, the spy immediately ducked, but not before something hit his shoulder. He spun behind cover with his sword drawn and a hand pressed around the knife protruding from him.

“Son of a *bitch!*” he shouted.

“Oswin, there are children present,” I said with a chuckle.

Still, I hurried to his side, and when I reached out to assess the wound for myself, a memory careened into me.

“Alouin, Oswin! I’m sorry!” I yell.

I reach for the knife in my friend’s shoulder with Nylion doing the same, but Oswin bats only my hand away.

“It’s fine,” he hisses. “I was asking for it, daring you to make your throw with me standing in front of the target. We’ve only been at knife work for a week or so, but still, you’re usually better than-”

“What’s going on here? Where’s Bryruned?”

At the question, Oswin stiffens. I whirl, taking a step toward the door—“Dad!”—before stopping short. Both of us bow to the new arrival, although Oswin does so with a wince, while Nylion crosses his arms, fixing his eyes on the ceiling.

“Spymaster.”

“Well?” my father asks. “Why’s Oswin stuck with a knife, and where’s your tutor?”

“Bryruned stepped out for a moment,” I say.

“And you boys immediately got into trouble,” my father says, answering his own question. “What happened, Raimie? When I left, you showed promise with the knife.”

Hanging my head, I scuff the floor, scrambling for an answer, while Nylion keeps quiet. Only his huddle against me serves as proof of his existence. Fortunately, Oswin provides an answer for us.

“His throw seemed a little stiff, sir.”

Both my father and my friend turn their gazes on me, and I flush. They already know what I’ll say. I’ve used this excuse too many times to count. Must I say it again?

Clicking his tongue, Oswin moves toward me, and before I can retreat, he lifts my tunic’s hem, revealing the mottled bruises and welts that are spread along my back and side. At the sight, my father stiffens with his hands clenching.

“What happened?” he snaps.

“He-” Oswin begins.

“I fell,” I interrupt with Nylion assisting my lie.

I’m not sure how I hurt myself. A few days ago, my other half took control. The last thing I remember from before it happened was studying, happily chatting with Nylion at the same time,

when a shadow fell across the page of my book. I returned to control with our body lying in a rubbish heap in Daira's Audish sector. Maybe I took to the rooftops to get there, falling from one of them into the trash.

My father must have reached the same conclusion because he purses his lips.

"I know you love climbing, Raimie," he says, "but you need to be more careful while doing it."

"Yes, sir."

"I must make my report to the Queen. Fix Oswin up."

"Yes, sir."

And my father's gone. Turning to my friend, I'm smacked by the hurt on Oswin's face.

"I'm sorry!" I say.

Oswin cuts me off with a wave of his hand.

"It's fine. Just get this damn thing out of me!"

I blinked with one hand on the knife in Oswin's shoulder and the other on his chest. Friends? We'd been *friends*? That I'd known the man made sense, what with me training as a child to be in the same Hand, but friends?

Why did that fact shock me so much? I called him friend now, so why...?

"Sir?" Oswin said. "I can do it myself if need be."

Without a word, I slid steel from flesh, and Oswin gasped while a face from years before was superimposed over the one from the present.

"That's a lot of blood," I said, echoing the fading memory.

"Of course it's a lot of fucking blood, idiot!" Oswin hissed. "You just pulled a-"

He took a deep breath.

"Forgive me, sir. Would you please stop holding the wound closed so I can properly bandage it? You have something of your own to accomplish."

Right. The grandmother.

Shaking off the memory, I inched toward the hovel's opening.

"Watch out, sir. I think she likes sharp, pointy things," Oswin said, and I chuckled.

Huh. Maybe we *had* been friends long ago.

After ducking my head around the entrance, I retracted it back to safety, even without seeing a sharp edge flying for my face. As expected, a knife whizzed through the doorway after me.

“Leave me alone!” someone called from inside.

“You were right,” I panted. “She does like her sharp edges.”

From what little I’d seen, the woman we’d come to move was surrounded by blades. This might be tricky. Without knowing the lady inside, I didn’t have many ideas for how to handle this, so I approached the woman who’d alerted me to the problem.

“Does she have anything she likes?” I asked. “Besides knives.”

The woman looked lost, but one of her children shifted in place, plucking at her shirt.

“Do you have an idea?” I asked.

“Um, yes,” the girl said. “Grandma always likes it when I bring her flowers.”

“Perfect!” I said. “What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Ninia,” the girl mumbled.

“What a beautiful name!” I said with a broad smile. “Ninia, can you find your grandma some flowers? She could use some happiness in her life today, don’t you think?”

The girl eagerly nodded, sprinting off with several siblings in tow.

“Do you mean to use my children in this task?” their mother asked once they were out of sight.

Why had she sounded so hostile with that question? I wouldn’t hurt a child, although...

She had no way of knowing that, and the last person who’d claimed Elisk as his seat of power had never had the same... boundaries, we’d say, as I did.

“That depends,” I said. “How likely is your mother to hurt them? She didn’t look old, so whatever’s keeping her in her former home isn’t dementia, but battle fatigue can be just as dangerous to loved ones, and I’d say most of Auden has the condition. Wouldn’t surprise me to find it here.”

“My mother would never hurt her grandchildren!” the woman said.

If she’d known that, then why had she seemed to have a problem before?

“Then, I’d be grateful to you and your children if they delivered wildflowers to her,” I said. “Perhaps they can give her a message as well.”

The woman bit her lip, but she nodded.

“Thank you,” I said

Oswin was next. He’d finished applying a makeshift bandage to his shoulder, but his fingers kept playing over it.

“How’s it feel?” I asked.

“Like I got stabbed, sir.”

“This woman does have good aim, doesn’t she?” I said with a laugh. “Maybe I should recruit her.”

“Her aim’s certainly better than-”

Oswin snapped his mouth closed, and I found myself petrified in body and mind.

Finish that thought. Prove that what I saw is a true memory because Nylion has been refusing to speak with me for days, and I have no one else to confirm it. If we were friends and I’ve forgotten, I-

I don’t know what I’ll do.

“You!” I snapped at a passing soldier. “Dravenik, right?”

The soldier stiffened, which right now, meant a yes among my troops.

“Go fetch Rhylix, please,” I said.

My friend should be somewhere nearby. Earlier, he’d said something about needing to grab a pack from the palace. I knew he meant to check in with me after he’d retrieved it, and enough time had passed since then that my friend had probably finished the task.

“Yes, sir!” Dravenik shouted before trotting off.

“I don’t need a healer,” Oswin grumbled.

“Good,” I said. “He won’t be for you.”

The children pounded around the corner, and ignoring Oswin’s souring face, I crouched among them.

“I’d like you to give your grandma a message with the flowers,” I said. “Can you do that?”

When they bobbed their tiny heads, I told the children what I’d like them to say. They darted inside, but only a short time passed before they left again. The last one paused beside me.

“She says that she’ll see you with the discussed item,” he said. “Nothing and no one else.”

Nodding to the child, I disarmed myself, leaving Oswin burdened with my weapons and a host of protests. Stepping into the entryway, I spread my arms and spun in a circle before entering. The woman inside was reed-thin, almost gaunt, but her blue eyes sparkled with a wicked intelligence, and red still dominated portions of her graying hair.

Feigning nonchalance, I found a stool, dragging it to her bedside. Before sitting, I unhooked Shadowsteal from my belt, offering it to her hilt first, and she hesitantly took it.

“So, this is...?” she trailed off.

I nodded over my crossed arms.

“The sword of the Audish royal family,” I said. “If you like, I can show you some of its neater tricks once you’re done looking.”

Please say she’d refuse. I didn’t like holding that blade unless I had to. The only reason it was on me now was because Oswin had insisted on it, refusing to let me leave the palace unless it had been hooked on my belt.

Perhaps the woman had been too engrossed by the blade to hear my offer because she made no reply. She unsheathed the sword, widening her eyes at every bit of exposed steel.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “How’d you get it?”

“I found it, actually,” I said. “Kind of wish I hadn’t.”

The eyes that the woman turned on me were dead, empty of emotion.

“You found it,” she said.

Again, I nodded.

“At the time, I thought it was lying in a clearing,” I said. “Now, I know that it was ensconced in an Ele bubble.”

I still didn’t know why *I* had been able to reach into that bubble or even see it in the first place.

“You *found* it,” the woman repeated. “Who are you?”

What a good question. Even now, I had trouble answering it. Oswin usually did it for me, and he didn’t fail in the task now.

“You’re speaking to Raimie, the rightful claimant to the Audish throne.”

Grimacing, I jerked a thumb at the entryway.

“What he said.”

The woman reached under her blanket, but before she could withdraw whatever weapon she had hidden there, I grabbed her wrist.

"Please don't," I said. "I don't want to hurt you, and if we fought and you did manage to kill me, I wouldn't envy you when my soldiers discovered what you'd done."

I retrieved Shadowsteal from the speechless woman, letting her keep her knives.

"Now. Your daughter tells me that you won't leave this place for a proper home in the city," I said. "Why?"

"The city dwellers are Kiraak lovers, content with Doldimar's-"

I shook my head. There had been way too much heat in her voice with that answer, and she'd spouted it off near instantly, without thinking. I sincerely doubted it was the real reason she wouldn't leave.

"Nope. Why?"

"*You* ordered the move and I-"

Again, a head shake.

"Why?"

"This is my home! Mine and Adavrel's!"

Ah... there it was.

"Adavrel? Your partner?" I asked and when she nodded. "Tell me about them."

The woman shrank on herself.

"Why?" she said, flinging the question back at me. "Why does it matter if I leave this place or stay? What do the ghosts of the past have to do with this hardship you've asked of me?"

"I only want to understand," I said, spreading my hands.

Pursing her lips, the woman considered me, and when her words next came, they sounded dragged from her.

"Adavrel was wonderful, the best father and husband. He was so brave..."

Falling quiet, the woman looked away.

"When they took him to the pits for the fights, he tried to get away. Killed a few before they overwhelmed him," she continued with her voice heavy. "I don't know what happened to him in that awful place, but when he came home to us, he was different. We ignored it at first, simply

counting our blessings. Usually, no one comes home from the fights but-

She stopped, turning rigid, but I said nothing, afraid to interrupt her deluge of words now that it had begun.

"They'd turned him Kiraak," she whispered. "He tried to kill us all, got our youngest before I could put him down."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You can take your sorry and shove it up your-

"The pit's gone."

Caught off guard, it took the woman a moment to collect herself.

"Gone?"

I nodded.

"How?" she asked before chopping at the air. "Doesn't matter. I'd dearly love to see its ruins."

"Maybe you soon will," I said. "In the meantime, tell me about Adavrel from before the pit. Tell me about the life you built together."

"You'd... be interested in that?" she asked.

"Of course."

Why wouldn't I be?

So, she shared. The good times and the bad. The birth of their children. Their first grandchild. The story stretched for an hour or so with Oswin occasionally sticking his head inside. Knives chased him at first, but eventually, they stopped as the woman's tension eased.

Finally, she fell quiet with her story far from over, but overwhelmed, she couldn't continue.

"Why do you care?" she asked.

"I-

Why did they keep asking me this?

"You've suffered enough," I said. "I'd hear about it so that I know how to help you."

"But I'm one among many," she said, playing with her blanket's hem. "Why me out of all the Audish?"

Frowning, I cocked my head. Wasn't the answer to her question obvious?

"Because every Audish citizen deserves my care and attention," I said. "Gods willing, I'll have time for you all."

She squeaked, quickly snapping her mouth shut, and I wondered how I should continue with this conversation.

"Sir," Oswin called. "Rhylix is here."

Oh, thank Alouin. I could continue from there.

"Rhylix is my friend. May he join us?" I asked.

She inclined her head, and without further prompting, Rhylix came inside. He had to duck—the hovel had a low ceiling—while looking for another stool.

"You called?" he said on sitting.

"Sorry to drag you out here," I say. "Considering how long you were taking up there, I know you've were probably sulking in the palace again."

"I haven't been-!"

Rhylix groaned, lifting his eyes skyward.

"What do you want, Raimie?"

"How do you do it?" I asked. "The Restorations, I mean."

Rhylix fell still with his face going blank.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked.

I gestured at the woman in her bed.

"An infirmity is obviously keeping her there," I said. "I'd say it's the real reason she didn't evacuate with her family. Couldn't stand the humiliation, not after a life of such strength."

I met the woman's gaze.

"Because I'm sure she knows that Adavrel's memory lives on with his family, not an inanimate building."

Grimacing, the woman sighed, throwing her blanket back and revealing the shriveled legs beneath.

"His parting gift," she spat.

At the sight, Nylion, long retreated in his maelstrom of resentment, returned with a splash.

“We cannot assume this injury!” he shouted at me. “It will see us as immobilized like she is.”

Much as I *longed* to greet my other half, I ignored him, fixing my eyes on my friend.

“You’ll try to do it whether I teach you or not, won’t you?” Rhylix asked.

“What do you think?” I said.

Rhylix bit his lip before releasing a breath.

“No,” he said. “That’s one Ele skill I won’t teach you.”

He touched the woman, and while renewed muscles inflated her legs, Rhylix grunted. I caught a glimpse of his atrophied limbs before white light masked them. While the woman curiously touched her own restored legs, I again confronted my friend.

“That wasn’t what I wanted,” I hissed.

“I know,” Rhylix said, rubbing his calves.

His tone had me surveying him. Sturdy boots. Plain clothes. His trusty coat’s pockets stuffed to bulging. A previously unseen pack hanging from his shoulders. This wasn’t merely the single item that Rhylix had claimed he’d be retrieving earlier.

“You’re leaving,” I said.

Rhylix glanced up before returning his gaze to his Restored legs.

“Yes.”

I clenched my hands in my lap. Much as I’d suspected that might be what he’d say, I...

“Why?” I asked.

“I have to find Doldimar,” Rhylix said. “He’s not gone for good. You and I know it. I want to locate him before he returns with a vengeance.”

“And you didn’t plan on bringing me with you?” I growled.

Hell, what was this heat, turning a dark room bright red?

“You have Auden to care for now,” Rhylix said. “I can’t steal you from it.”

“But I’m not-” I snapped.

“Remember where you are, sir,” Oswin called from outside.

Pressing my lips together, I glanced toward the woman Rhylix had fixed. She must not have realized what had happened to her, or maybe she simply found our discussion more interesting. With her chin in her hands, she was scrutinizing me and Rhylix as if we were the most scintillating entertainment that she'd experienced in ages. Ignoring her was difficult, but I managed it, using the weight of her gaze to keep heat from rising in me again.

"Did you mean to tell me?" I asked.

Rhylix shook his head.

"I meant to check on you before going," he said, "but I thought it would be easier on you if I disappeared into the night."

"It wouldn't! Gods, Rhy, I'd--"

I crushed the words I wanted to say.

"When will you come home?" I asked instead.

"In a month or two? I don't know," Rhylix said. "Don't worry. I mean to check in when I can."

"You'd better," I said, "or I swear to Alouin and the gods, I will find you and *drag* you back here."

Whirling away from my friend, I stood, offering the woman a hand.

"May I help you to your feet?" I asked.

If she'd heard the threat I'd leveled at Rhylix, the woman pretended like she hadn't, making a face instead.

"Please. I haven't gotten out of bed in years," she said. "My condition won't let me do it."

So, even if she'd noticed her Restoration, she hadn't accepted it yet.

"Please, mistress. Trust me in this one thing," I said. "If I'm wrong, I'll leave you in peace."

"Since you put it that way."

When the woman snatched my hand, Rhylix helped her swing her legs over the bedside. He steadied her elbow, and I pulled her to her feet. As we retreated until she was standing by herself, something on her face changed. She threw a hand over her open mouth with trembling fingers.

"I'm..." she breathed before taking a step.

She shrieked, an expression of pure joy, and I smiled. Outside, her daughter shouted for her, and on rushing into the hovel, she stopped short at the sight of her mother standing. After a moment, they stumbled into one another's arms, clinging to each other and sobbing.

I snuck around them, followed by Rhylix. When the hot afternoon sun caressed my skin, I sighed. Now, if only I could escape before they tried to thank me or my friend.

Rhylix first, though.

“Are you sure you won’t stay?” I asked. “Help others like we just did?”

“I have to go,” Rhylix said.

Hell, I wanted to shake my friend into seeing how much *I* needed him, but I couldn’t let him leave with anger lingering between us. Turning, I gathered him in my arms, clapping his back before releasing him.

“See you soon?” I said.

“I’ll see you soon.”

White light flashed, chasing the tall Eselan as he raced at impossible speeds down the alley, and chewing on my lip, I watched Rhylix go until I saw no further traces of him. I could do this without my friend. I *could*.

Once I’d gathered myself, I headed in the direction opposite Rhylix. I’d give the women and children half a mark to leave this shantytown before spreading my Daevetch net.

“That was well done, sir,” Oswin said at my side before hissing.

When he reached for his shoulder, a twinge speared through me. Right. My friend’s wound, taken for me.

Abruptly, I veered to the side of the alley, pointing at the dirt.

“Sit,” I said.

Since it wouldn’t violate his role as my bodyguard, Oswin followed my order, and I joined him on the ground. Unwinding the spy’s dressing, I winced at the gash beneath.

“What are you doing?” Oswin asked.

“Trying something new,” I said. “Just... hush. And stay still.”

Well? I asked my splinters.

They’d know what I wanted.

“Hmm,” Bright said. “Eriadren calls using Restoration ‘Letting Go’, but I don’t think that analogy will work for you. You don’t have the aspect beneath your skin, chomping at the bit to be freed. For you... imagine his shoulder as it should be. Unbroken. Smooth. Then, will its return to that state. And prepare.”

For Oswin's injury on me?

"For his injury on you," Dim confirmed. "Are you sure-?"

Yes. No protests from you, Nyl?

"We owe him."

Short and terse. Like Nylion's mood had been toward me lately. How long would we remain estranged?

"Until Eledis, Marcuset, and Gistrick receive their due punishment," Nylion snapped.

And he disappeared, retreating to our shared dream again. Rolling my eyes, I pressed a hand to Oswin's shoulder.

"Sir, what are you-?" the spymaster started.

I tuned out my surroundings. All that mattered was how badly I wanted to see Oswin whole. How much I'd sacrifice for it. I reached for Ele, felt it form over my hands, felt it flow into my *friend*, and silently breathed my plea.

Pain stabbed into my shoulder, and I released Oswin to reach at it. *Gods*, it hurt, but seeing the spy's skin returned to perfection made me smile. Even the scar he'd always carried had vanished without a trace-

With Nylion anxiously hovering at my shoulder, I pull the knife out of Oswin's shoulder, tossing it to the side. At my friend's hiss, I reach for a length of gauze, wincing at the sight of the wound.

"That's a lot of blood," I say.

I wrap bandaging up and over Oswin's shoulder before circling it around his chest.

"You don't usually state the obvious," Oswin says through gritted teeth. "New habit?"

"Oh, hush."

I tighten the last wrap harder than necessary, and Oswin grunts, making Nylion wince.

"Was that necessary? We have already hurt him enough..." my other half whispers before a look of concentration takes hold of his face. "Or... is this a friendship thing? Do friends do this to one another?"

With a half-smile, I rock my head back and forth with a slight shrug, and Nylion looks between me and Oswin.

"I want to meet him," he says. "Can I, Raimie? Please?"

Glancing up at him, I cock my head before shrugging again.

“Oo!”

Jumping in place, Nylion excitedly patters his hands together with his eyes brighter than I’ve seen them in weeks.

“I cannot wait!”

“You’re doing that thing where you go absent again,” Oswin says.

Blinking, I focus on my friend.

“Sorry,” I say. “I don’t like seeing you hurt. Got me... thinking.”

“Well, stop doing that,” Oswin says. “Thinking’s what got a knife sticking out of my shoulder in the first place. You have to rely on instinct, Raimie. Instinct and muscle memory.”

Standing, he returns to his place in front of the archery target.

“Care to try again?” he asks. “Or does a royal not have it in them to play with knives? Are you too good for this, Raimie? Too high and mighty-”

Without getting up, I snatch the knife that I pulled out of Oswin off of the floor, tossing it at him again. It plunges into the target mere inches above his head, letting hair strands float to the ground.

Beaming, Oswin slowly claps.

“That’s more like it, YOUR MAJESTY.”

Oswin’s once cheery face clashed with his current look of fury.

“You don’t do that, sir. I’m your bodyguard for fuck’s sake!” he snarled. “It’s my job to take knives for you, not for you to take my wounds.”

“Friends don’t let friends get stabbed,” I mumbled.

Pain was making my mind foggy: pain from my shoulder and pain from the Ele raking along the underside of my skin. For once, I decided not to fight it. I deserved it, after all. I deserved it and more.

As if he hadn’t heard me, Oswin shook his head.

“I need to get you out of the city,” he said to himself. “Give you a task engaging enough to take your mind off of Ren. For a while, capturing Elisk seemed to be enough but...”

Look! Oswin was still watching out for me. Even after all these years. Even after how long I'd treated him like a stranger. Didn't matter that I'd called him my friend before the beach battle, months ago. I'd still treated him like an unknown back in...

"I see Daira sometimes, Oswin," I said. "Are those memories real or-?"

Oswin smacked me. Hard.

"Ow!" I yelped, raising a hand to my cheek.

"Sorry," Oswin said.

He didn't look it.

"I was about to tell you that I received a report about sightings of bandits near Vale, a town on the shores of Lake Lorne. In recent weeks, the miscreants have plagued the area so badly that traffic through it has stopped," he said. "Once you've finished with the shantytowns, I thought you could head there. Help them with their problem. What do you think?"

Bandits taking advantage of Doldimar's absence. If I left Elisk, I could escape the gratitude that I didn't and *would never* deserve. Maybe I could lose myself in the task, drowning my troubles in the act of helping people. Like I had with that woman.

"I think it's a great plan," I said.

4

The Girl

I deserved this.

Kylorian had gotten in my face with flushed cheeks, but he wasn't screaming at me. In many ways, I'd have preferred that.

But no. The words that he imparted were cool and collected, even if he looked anything but .

"What were you thinking?" he asked. "After we stopped in Nephiron, I thought you'd learned how deep hatred for the Esela runs in Auden. We're not in Tiro, where your heritage was tolerated. Here, stepping a toe out of line will get you killed."

I said nothing. How was I supposed to respond to that?

Shaking his head, Kylorian said, "Now, when Famede comes in here—"

I let the tirade wash over me, still struggling to understand. Why had the people of Vale gotten so upset by what I'd done? In Tiro...

But we weren't in Tiro right now. Leaving that city, running away from its many reminders, had been the point of joining my brother on his journey. I'd thought the escape would help, and it had. At first.

Seeing new places and meeting new people had been well and good, healing even, but I'd learned exactly how boring traveling to reach these things could be, and I wasn't used to idle moments. In the years since Kylorian had taken a more active role in the resistance, organizing and maintaining Tiro's defenses had run me ragged.

So, when I'd found myself riding alongside my brother with nothing to do but keep my horse's head pointed the right way, I hadn't known how to handle it.

Kylorian had refused to help with this. With him having been taciturn and surly since... Hadrion, he hadn't given me much in the way of conversation. If I'd wanted to talk as we traveled, I'd had to drive us from topic to topic, which had been *exhausting*. I'd quickly abandoned the effort.

This, however, had left my mind open to wandering, and when that had happened in recent times, the damn thing inevitably turned to the one topic I was desperate to avoid, the reason I'd left Tiro in the first place. Left to its own devices, my mind picked at the scabs of the wound that was

Raimie.

It was driving me crazy.

So, when we'd reached Vale, I'd given in to the only method I'd found that could distract me from such things. After accompanying Kylorian to the town's hall, making sure we were settled for our visit, I'd made an outing to the closest tavern, gotten thoroughly drunk, and set about propositioning every man who'd come through its door. I needed to get Raimie out of my system, and sex, harmless as it was, had seemed like a good way to do it.

The people of Vale hadn't seen my actions as harmless. They'd thrown me out of the tavern, probably meaning to beat me bloody or string me up, but even drunk as I'd been, I could handle myself. I'd shown them why I was called the Terror of Da'kul.

Fortunately for them, Kylorian had heard our commotion, quickly arriving to drag me off of my assaulters.

"Can you keep your mouth shut while I deal with this woman?" Kylorian said, snapping me back to the present.

...*Seriously?*

"I'm sorry. Have I been *bothering* you, Ky?" I asked. "Please. Forgive me for trying to talk to my *brother*, even if he's been acting like a brooding bitch for *this entire trip*."

Clenching his hands into fists, Kylorian took a deep breath.

"You're drunk, Ren. If you weren't, you'd know that now isn't the time to discuss this," he hissed. "Let me handle your mistake."

"Handle my mistake? Alouin, what mistake was that? Asking people for something that I needed?" I snapped. "Sure, you handle that, Ky. Maybe you can do it better than you've handled Hadrion's death."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I smacked a hand to my lips. I had *not* meant to say that, but there those words were, out in the open, and Kylorian rocked away from me as if I'd loosed a crossbow bolt at him.

"Ky, I- I'm sorry-"

He leapt to his feet, towering over me.

"Like you've done a better job?" he roared. "I *swear to Alouin*, Ren! You're having a more difficult time getting over Raimie than letting go of our little brother."

As I gasped, tears pricked at my eyes. Kylorian had had every right to say what he had, but that didn't make it hurt any less. I blinked, releasing those held tears, but when my vision cleared, I

shrank into myself, resting my hands on my weapons.

My big brother was gone. In his place, something... monstrous was standing. With his eyes wild, he leered at me, and a vein in his forehead was throbbing beneath his skin. Tensed, he looked ready to spring at me, and this sight sobered me more quickly than anything else could.

I'd raised my hands to calm him down when the door behind him slammed open.

"All right," growled the woman in its opening. "Where's the Eselan whore who-?"

Spinning, Kylorian unsheathed his knife, resting it against the woman's neck.

"That 'Eselan whore'," he hissed, "is with me. You'd do well to remember it."

Never flinching, the woman said, "Is this how you want to open negotiations? Over bared steel?"

But Kylorian made no move to back down, and I fought to reconcile what I was seeing with what I knew about my big brother.

Kylorian didn't have a temper. The only time I'd ever seen him visibly angry was when he'd first met Raimie, and that had been a special circumstance, coming home from abject failure as he'd been. Since childhood, he'd been trained to be the perfect diplomat, and now, he was holding a knife to the throat of someone who could only be Vale's mayor.

What was happening to my big brother?

Cautiously, I laid a hand on his shoulder, and after a moment, he relaxed. Sheathing his knife, he spread his arms.

"You're right, of course," he said. "I'd offer you my excuses for this offense, but everyone knows that those are less than worthless. Instead, I'd ask how I can rectify our mistakes."

As she considered us, the woman tapped her fingers on her legs.

"I'll think about it," she said. "For now, get some rest. In the morning, we'll speak again, when tempers aren't running so hot."

She left, and the door swung closed behind her. In the silence, I swallowed. Hard.

"Ky, I'm-" I started.

"Please," he said.

But his voice had sounded as if it had been dragged through broken glass.

"Please, Ren. Don't. Go to bed. I'll sleep against the door. Make sure we don't receive any other, unwanted guests."

I drew a breath to retort but thought better of it in the end. Dropping onto our room's tiny bed, I faced the wall, listening as Kylorian made himself comfortable.

The silence between us had me imagining different circumstances. In them, I begged for his forgiveness, sat beside him to keep watch, railed against him for being such an ass. In the end, though, I didn't try any of these things. Closing my eyes, I waited for sleep to come.

In the morning, Kylorian and I met with Vale's mayor, and as she'd said, she had her demand ready for us.

When he heard it, my brother said, "You want us to..."

He trailed off with shock written across his face.

"Clear out a bandit camp," Faramede repeated. "Seems fair recompense. Your reputation precedes you, sir."

Slowly shaking his head, Kylorian said, "I'm only one man. The reputation you speak of was built with the help of those under my command, people who haven't joined me on this journey."

"Still, it's what I want," Faramede said. "The bandits have holed up in a cave near Vale. People are getting robbed *before* my town's merchants get their chance at them, and I can't abide that. Get rid of the bandits, and we can talk about putting you on the throne."

"Did you not hear a word I said?" Kylorian asked. "You're demanding an impossible task. Be reasonable. Give me—"

"We can do it," I said from my corner.

I'd watched the conversation, holding my tongue for as long as I could, but Kylorian was being stupid. He turned to me, peeling his lips back, but I cut him off before he could speak.

"We can do it, Ky," I said. "Stop being obstinate and give the lady what she wants."

'Are you crazy?' he mouthed at me.

I merely raised an eyebrow. Hissing out a breath, Kylorian whirled on Faramede.

"I accept the task," he said.

After giving her a short bow, he left the mayor's office, grabbing my arm as he passed.

"What were you thinking?" he asked.

"I was thinking that Vale is worse off than it seems," I said. "It was stupid of me to go out last night, I know, but I got a good look at the place while doing that. Vale's supposed to be a busy trading town. That's not what I saw last night. The town was dead before my little commotion. These

bandits, whoever they are, are strangling Vale. We have to fix the problem, and don't give me the bullshit that you gave Faramede about being only one man. I've seen you carve through dozens of *Kiraak* by yourself. These bandits will be ordinary men, *and* you've got me."

I turned a grin on him, but he only met it with disappointment.

"I knew all of that," Kylorian said. "I was trying to push her into conceding more than forgiveness of our mistakes before accepting the task."

"Oh."

"Yeah..."

"Well, now I feel like a dumbass."

Kylorian snorted.

"Don't worry, Ren. When it comes to politics, that's your natural state. You're much better at *other things*."

Hearing that, I smiled. Hell, if he wasn't right. I was looking forward to doing said 'other things' soon.

A clerk gave us the bandits camp's suspected location, and we quickly rode for it. We approached the cave by foot, and the closer we came, the more prickles ran over my skin.

"This is a bad idea," I hissed.

"We don't even know if they're here," Kylorian said, "and what was it you said in Vale? We can do it? We can eliminate an entire bandit camp by ourselves?"

I wilted.

"We can," I insisted.

But uncertainty had been rife in my voice. Smiling, Kylorian snatched my hand, folding his fingers around it.

"I intend to try negotiation first, dummy," he says. "If that fails, then yes, you were right. We can handle a bandit camp alone."

"Such confidence."

An unfamiliar voice in hostile territory had me and Kylorian returning to the training of our youth. We slammed our backs against one another while drawing sword and *eshvik* alike. Scanning the trees around us, we searched for any movement.

Soon enough, we got it. Men and women slowly advanced on us with their bows drawn.

Alouin, *bows*. Those would make the fight more difficult, if it came to that. I could radiate illusions of myself outward, throwing the archers' aim off, but it would cost me. From the number of enemies I'd counted, the energy drain to distract them might knock me on my ass.

"You good?" Kylorian said under his breath.

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the enemy's trembling arms.

"I've been expecting you, Kylorian."

It was the same voice that had started this.

"Why did you keep me waiting?"

How did he know my brother's name?

"If you trying to scare me, it's not working," Kylorian shouted.

Liar. I could feel him shivering through our point of contact at my back. Not that I could blame him. Fear had me by the throat too.

We waited for someone to make a move, but all was still, save for the wind through the leaves. After what felt like an eternity, Kylorian raised his voice.

"What is this? I made you wait, and now, I must do the same? Seems petty," he said. "Why don't we stop with the posturing? Come out and we'll talk, get you and your men what you need to leave Vale alone."

Deep laughter rumbled in the clearing.

"Nothing could convince me to do that. You should know better. You're right, though. It's about time I revealed myself."

A man materialized in front of Kylorian, and my brother nearly bowled me over in his attempt to retreat. I swung around him to assess the new threat. Short, slight, the stranger didn't seem dangerous except for one thing.

His eyes were solid pits of black.

"Enforcer," I breathed.

Alouin, I was going to die. Both my brother and I. And it was my fault. I might deserve this but Kylorian...

I stepped between the Enforcer and my brother.

"I don't know why one of you bastards have teamed up with a bunch of human bandits, and I don't care," I said. "I volunteer for whatever torments you have planned. Just let my brother go."

"Oo, it speaks," the Enforcer said with a giggle.

A hand in the back of my tunic ripped me behind Kylorian, and he stepped toe-to-toe with the Enforcer.

"What do you want?" he hissed.

"I want you to drop your weapons."

With that prompt alone, Kylorian's sword fell out of his hand, and he raised the appendage with confusion wrinkling his face.

Confusion ruled me too. Kylorian and I had long ago learned that it was better to die fighting an Enforcer than to surrender to one. Who knew what sort of torture this one had planned for us?

"Now her," the Enforcer said.

Twirling on his heels, Kylorian marched toward me.

"Ren. Disarm. Now," he huffed through gritted teeth.

What was wrong with him? I wasn't sure, but I couldn't fix it until I was free, and that was looking increasingly unlikely.

For a split second, I raised my blades against my brother, but the futility of such a fight saw them lowering.

I deserved this. Enemies surrounding me, an Enforcer threatening my life, my brother coming to disarm me. I deserved to-

No. I *didn't* deserve to die. I'd fight. I'd live, and not even my brother could stop me.

I released a dozen illusory copies of myself, making the bandits flinch, but as I turned to run, I saw Kylorian reaching for his knife. I tried to escape him. Before I'd taken two steps, though, the knife's pommel smacked into the back of my head, and I lost consciousness before I hit the ground.

5

The Boy

For the first time in months, I felt like myself.

My companions and I had left Elisk three days ago, and since then, we'd made good time. Around us, spring was giving way to summer, leaving muggy air to chase us across every mile, but the grass of the plains around us had yet to be scorched, and while muggy it may be, I found that temperature comfortable. It reminded me of summers back home.

It was certainly better than the type of heat I'd encountered in Elisk.

My plan to leave hadn't been met with favor. In fact, Eledis had shouted at me for my 'selfish, stupid choice'.

Marcuset had been more respectful with his response, but it had also been disapproving. Their thoughts on the matter, however, hadn't truly mattered. I'd meant to go regardless of their opinions, only informing them in person to gauge whether I could trust them to keep from stabbing me in the back while I was gone.

Like they had with Nylion.

Gods, every minute that I'd spent with those two had tested my resolve to seek justice for how they'd shut him away instead of revenge. Not only was I fighting my own furious need to *make them pay*, but Nylion had made his feelings on the matter apparent throughout the meeting. When we'd eventually left, he'd again vanished, thoroughly pissed, and the dried streambed of our bond had become even more parched.

As for my grandfather and Marcuset, once it had become clear that I wouldn't change my mind, Eledis had asked who would hold Auden together while I was on my 'flight of fancy'.

"The most qualified person here," I'd said. "Kaedesa."

At that, Eledis had burst forth with protestations that I'd only half-listened to. I knew that I couldn't trust Eledis, but at the same time, I didn't think he'd attempt a coup while I was gone. No. He'd wait until I'd picked up Auden's pieces, reassembling them into a unified realm, before trying anything.

So, while Eledis had wheedled and reasoned with me, I'd watched Marcuset. When he'd eventually agreed with my decision about Kaedesa, I'd breathed a sigh of relief. I remembered what he was

capable of. Having him as an enemy would *not* have been fun.

“She’s Raimie’s betrothed, Eledis,” he’d said, “and she’s the queen of Ada’ir. She’s the best choice.”

From there, the only remaining question had been who would go with me on this journey, and boy, if that hadn’t been a struggle.

Glancing at the people around me, I decided I was happy with the compromise we’d eventually reached. Of these five, I’d grown up and trained with three of them, and the other two were pleasant enough, even the little one with his snarky attitude.

Speaking of whom.

Little leaned over to loosely take hold of my horse’s reins, and she stopped with what must have been her thousandth attempt to throw me out of the saddle.

“You know,” he said. “Middle and Ring told me that you were a terrible horseman, but this is worse than terrible.”

“Little,” Oswin grumbled, “You’re speaking to your king. Show some respect.”

“It’s all right. I don’t mind,” I said with a chuckle. “Besides, he’s right. I’m awful with horses.”

Pulling said beast to a stop, I leapt off of her back, greeting the ground with relief, before slapping her flank. I watched her gallop away with a silly grin in place.

“Great,” Little said. “Now, we’ll have to retrieve her. Unless you want us to walk to Vale?”

“Not at all,” I chirped. “Keep your horses.”

“And how do you plan on keeping up with us when you’re on foot?” Thumb asked.

It was a good question, coming from him as it had. Along with the other members of the Hand, Thumb had been scouting since our arrival to Auden, and he hadn’t joined Queen Kaedesa’s Hand until after my family and I had fled Daira. He’d never seen what his proclaimed king could do.

“I rather think that you lot will be the ones struggling to keep up,” I said.

“Alouin damnit all,” Oswin and Ring mumbled in sync.

I was too far down the road to catch more than that. With only slight prickles rising from its use, Ele coursed through me, and once the pace of hoofbeats behind me broke into a gallop, I let loose. I skated over a slippery surface with Ele the gel between me and the ground. As the road’s sporadic trees flashed by, I reveled in the peace and serenity flowing through me.

At some point, the Hand caught up with me, settling into a comfortable canter. I constantly tested them, pushing into a quicker pace or unexpectedly slowing, although I wasn't trying to escape them with this. It was just a game. Could I evade my Hand? Could they predict what I'd do next? Eventually, even they joined in with the fun, whooping and hollering to one another.

Gone was discipline. Gone was deference. This was simply them pitting their skill with the horses against my skill with primeancy.

Of course, the Hand might still be holding to the discipline that defined them. Perhaps they knew that this game, this fun, was what their monarch needed. Perhaps they realized how desperate I was for a moment spent free of troubles or concern.

The game ended as we were approaching the turn-off for Vale. Wrapped in Ele as I was, I felt the arrival of a Daevetch presence like a gut punch. I stopped short, stumbling to stay on my feet while using an Ele burst to keep from falling on my face.

What had *that* been? I'd never felt Daevetch from another source, or not this strongly, except...

Is it Doldimar? I asked.

Snorting, Dim said, "Does that feel like the avatar of my whole?"

It was weaker than what I'd felt on first reaching Elisk. If it wasn't the Dark Lord, then what was-?

"Sir?" Oswin said. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," I absently replied.

Scanning our surroundings, I looked for anything that might clear up this mystery for me. A tiny homestead lay not far ahead, but other than that and some trees, a sea of grass enveloped us.

"What-?" someone started.

I raised a hand for silence. Something was about to change. I could feel it. A shift in the world's dynamic, a change in flavor. The peaceful scene I was observing would transform, as it must with a Daevetch clump invading it, and I'd be here when it did. I wished it would hurry, though...

As if summoned, a group of thirty or so people, armed and armored, materialized like ghosts from the trees. They raced for the homestead, quick and quiet, and I unsheathed Silverblade.

"Try to leave a few alive," I said.

When I took a step forward, Oswin landed in front of me, resting a hand on my chest.

"Wait, sir," he said. "We don't know what's going on. Let's scout first."

A scream punctuated his suggestion, which had me raising an eyebrow.

"I think that's a fairly definitive answer, don't you?" I asked.

"He's right, Middle," Ring said. "Those are clear signs of violence."

Thumb, Pointer and Little were already casually inspecting their weapons, and at the sight of them, Oswin slumped, surrendering to the inevitable.

"We don't risk the horses. They'd more quickly end this, but we'll need them to get back to Elisk," he said. "Typical formation. Thumb out front, Right and Little watch his back, and Pointer mops up on the fringes. I'll find the ringleader and subdue them, then come to help once that's done."

"And me?" I asked.

"You stand back and watch, sir," Oswin said. "You'd only get in our way."

"I-"

Snapping my mouth closed, I reined in my tongue. I had yet to share with the spy that my memories of Daira had returned, unsure if I could. I'd forgotten my original friendship with Oswin and my kinship with the other spies for over *nine years*. That was...

I didn't have words for how unforgivable I perceived that transgression, and I needed my Hand. So, I didn't mention how I'd undergone the same training as Oswin and certainly couldn't remind my old friend of how many times I'd bested him while sparring during that time.

"If that's what you think is best," I said.

At my easy concession, the entire Hand gave me odd looks, but they said not a word while dismounting.

"Watch the horses, Raimie," Oswin said.

They took off, a deadly band of five against thirty.

Gods, no matter that they were my Hand, they didn't stand a chance. I had to help, be there to protect them if needed, but Oswin had been right about the horses. If I was going to help, I'd have to take care of them.

I tried the trick that Rhylix had once used on me in Tiro. There, my friend had bound me to a wall with nothing more than Ele at his command. So, I fumbled with that primal force for a bit. The horses shied away from the white light I sent their way, and eventually, I gave up. Shouts and the clash of steel were floating to me from the homestead, proof that the Hand had fallen upon the bandits.

"Gods damnit," I said. "Stay."

The horses walked off the road to graze at the grass alongside it.

“Gods damnit!”

Those screams... was that Thumb shouting?

I sprinted toward the homestead, heedless of anything else.

A scene of carnage awaited me there. Bodies were strewn over the dirt with the scent of piss and death already heavy in the air. A little less than twenty bandits were still breathing, facing Thumb, Little, and Ring.

And the spies were a thing of beauty. Every bandit who came to attack them was cut down with the most minimal of effort and motion. Pointer had already eliminated all the enemies who'd had a bow. Thumb had gone into a rage, killing his opponents with his fists alone while Ren and Little kept unseen threats from reaching the big man. Oswin, though...

Oswin was everything a soldier aspired to be. He moved among the enemy as if each was simply an inconvenience to reaching his goal. My friend had grown in the years that I'd been gone from his life.

All in all, I was surprised so many of the bandits were still standing. Seeing my Hand in action, my haste to help them seemed foolish, but I was here now. I might as well do what I could.

When I flung Daevetch at a man sneaking up on Pointer, though, I hissed. On pouring from my source and over my hand, that energy had felt like fire before its release. The consequences of overusing of it while destroying the shantytowns around Elisk must not have faded yet.

Ele it was. I flung myself into the chaos.

Thirty seconds later, it was done, leaving my Hand staring at spots where enemies had once stood. Little was the first to recover. Tearing his eyes off of the mix of unconscious men and corpses around us, he found me off to the side, panting with a faint glow under my skin.

“That’s cheating!” he shouted.

Cocking my head, I said, “I thought you loved primeancy.”

“Not when it makes us norms look like-”

“Cool, competent killing machines? The best at what you do?” I interrupted. “Because that’s what I saw.”

“Uh,” Little said. “I- Huh.”

“Good to know something stuck,” Ring said under her breath.

Nodding agreement, Pointer bent to inspect one of the casualties that I could claim. Meanwhile, Oswin emerged from where he'd ducked into the house.

"I found the-"

He broke off on catching sight of me.

"I thought I told you to stay with the horses."

"You did," I said. "I decided not to listen. I won't stand on the fringes while other people risk their lives. Not when I can help."

"Raimie..." Oswin said, rubbing at his eyes. "You're the king. It's your job to decide when other people's lives should be put in harm's way. You choose what goals are worth our sacrifice. You don't join us in risking danger like that."

"Except I'm not the king yet-"

"But you are!" Oswin snapped. "Maybe not of Auden. Maybe *never* of Auden, but you are for the people who followed you across the sea. You can't keep plunging headfirst into danger like this when *they need you*. Da'kul, the Birthing Grounds, and Elisk were bad enough but this, a random encounter on a roadside..."

He shook his head. What he'd said made a certain kind of sense, the kind I'd love to argue against but knew that I couldn't. The worst kind of logic.

To the side, Pointer flashed a hand sign at Oswin, one I'd have missed before the return of my memories.

'Ease up.'

Gods, I didn't need Pointer fighting my battles for me. Sighing, I threw my head back with my hands on my hips.

"Fine," I said. "What were you saying before my presence so rudely interrupted you?"

Silence hung heavy for a time, but Oswin eventually relented in his glaring.

"I found this group's leader, sir," he said with a tight voice.

"Then, I should talk to him," I said. "I can do that, right?"

Oswin held my challenging gaze for the span of three heartbeats before nodding.

"Excellent!" I said. "While I'm doing that, someone should wrangle the horses back together. I'm afraid they may have wandered off after I left them."

Quiet cursing came from behind me, followed by Thumb offering to tackle the task, and I smiled. If the horses had wandered off, Thumb would get them back on the road. From reports on his activities, I gathered that what he lacked in people skills was more than compensated with how he

handled animals. The horses that I might have trouble approaching would come to him like he was a favorite treat, nibbling included.

With one problem handled, I waved toward the house.

“Lead on,” I said.

The home’s interior was small and dark, but it wasn’t dark enough to hide the violence that had taken place here. Two bandits lay in swelling pools of their own blood while a third was sprawled face-down in a corner. The bandit leader, I presumed.

A family was huddled near the door, and when I saw them, I veered from Oswin’s chosen track. As I approached, I heard the telltale wheezing of a dying man emerging from the center of that cluster, which had my pace quickening, and soon enough, I saw what had killed a husband and father.

Several feet of steel had pierced the man through his guts. There was no coming back from such an injury. Even if he was stitched up, the wound would fester and rot from the inside until the man died, screaming for a knife’s mercy.

If Rhylix were here...

But he wasn’t. I was the only one who might save this man’s life.

As Ele came to me unbidden, white light illuminated the room, and Oswin’s fingers pinched into my shoulder, right where the wound that I’d assumed from him was still healing.

“Don’t you dare,” he growled.

I pried his hand off of me.

“I wasn’t planning on healing him in full. Ele has several applications for the sick and wounded,” I said. “Don’t you think you’ve lectured me enough for today?”

I didn’t see Oswin’s reaction, but he didn’t stop me when I leaned over and place a finger near the dying man’s wound. Leaking from me, Ele raced to circle the steel protruding from him, and almost immediately, his wheezing gasps eased up. When clear eyes gazed up at me with a question in them, I shook my head.

“Bricea, take the children outside,” the man said.

“But-”

“Do you want them to see this?” the man said.

Bricea—the wife—flinched, but she nodded. Taking her children’s hands, she headed for the door, stopping before the house’s walls could hide her.

"I love you," she whispered.

When it emerged, the man's answering chuckle was broken.

"I've loved you from the moment I first laid eyes on you," he said. "There's no need to repeat what we already know."

With a sob, Bricea darted through the door, and once she had, the man blinked hard, looking away.

Absently, I said, "Make sure they don't disturb us, Oswin."

While the spy followed orders, I crouched in front of the man.

"I'm sorry I can't do more," I said.

"Don't waste my time with useless sentiment," the man said. "Tell me who you are and what you want."

How... direct.

"My name is Raimie, and I've recently arrived in your fair country," I said. "My people and I were on our way to Vale when we saw these men attacking your home. I want to know why they did it."

"Recently arrived in..."

Trailing off, the man shook his head.

"These bastards attacked because I refused to pay their 'protection' fee. I didn't spend the better part of my life fighting off Kiraak to pay for protection."

He spat to the side, mixing blood and saliva. As the light circling his wound began to fade, I reached forward to replenish it, but the man caught my wrist.

"It's fine. Let the pain come," he hissed. "You did well, making me coherent enough to get my family out of here. Finish your questions. Quickly!"

I spread my hands wide. It was always best to honor a dying man's wishes. One never knows when one might be on the other side of that exchange.

"Were these bandits associated with the ones plaguing Vale?" I asked.

"Plaguing Vale?" the man asked, weakly laughing. "Sure, they're plaguing Vale, just like I'm hale and hearty."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

As the man drew breath to answer, Ele fled from him, and he coughed. He tried to speak again, but I stopped him.

“That’s enough,” I said. “You did well. Thank you.”

“My... family.”

The sudden return of pain must have made the man delirious because almost unseeing, he clutched at my hand.

“Please. My family...”

“They’ll be safe. I promise,” I said.

Drawing my dagger, I ignored my shaking hands. After finding the right spot on the man’s chest, I paused.

Could I do this? I had enough trouble with killing Kiraak. Could I kill someone who was free of Daevetch? Could I murder...?

No. This time, it wasn’t murder. It was a mercy.

“Your name,” I said.

When the man failed to answer, I worried that pain had once more conquered his mind, but after a second, he spoke up.

“Clerindel.”

“Good journey, Clerindel.”

I shoved on my dagger, and after a brief stiffening, a dying man succumbed to what had been stalking him. That was all it took. One thrust and a father, a husband, a brother, a son had died.

Hadrion...

Spinning toward the last living bandit in the room, I stabbed my dagger, wet with Clerindel’s blood, into the bastard’s hand. He woke up with a yell, scrambling backward on all fours once I’d removed my blade. Suppressing a wince, I pulled Daevetch to my hand and held it where the bandit could see.

“Do you know what this is?” I snapped.

The bandit stiffened, and when he spoke, his words emerged tight and tense.

“Some weird magical shit? I don’t know. Never seen its like. Who are you? Why did you *stab* me?”

I took a slow breath.

“Who am I? Who *am* I?” I said with a manic laugh. “What an excellent question. You know, before this, I was starting to feel like myself again. That’s long vanished, and once more, I must rely on

what other people say I am.

“The fucking destined king of Auden by birthright and foretelling. Gods, my own damn memories can’t agree on an identity. Am I a commoner with no grand life ahead of me or a trainee for Queen Kaedesa’s Hand, groomed to become its spymaster? Even my *splinters* argue over who I am. A dual primeancer, if you can believe it, stuck between Ele and Daevetch. I am one or possibly all of these. Take your pick.

“As for why I stabbed you, you and your compatriots descended on this homestead with the express purpose of murdering the family who lives here. You accomplished your goal with the head of this household, murdering someone whose only crime was wanting to live a normal life with his wife and kids, and *I want to know why.*”

Roaring the last bit, I lobbed my contained bolt oof Daevetch at the floor in front of the bandit, and the bastard scrunched up on himself, pressing into the wall.

“We do what we’re told,” he said. “We didn’t want to-”

“Save me the bullshit,” I snapped. “How many more are in your group? Who’s your leader? Where is your base?”

Throughout my questions, the bandit had grown increasingly uncomfortable, and by the time I was done, he was so violently shifting in place that it almost looked like he was sitting on an anthill.

“Please,” he begged. “Please, stop.”

“*Please stop?*” I said. “Did he ask for mercy before one of you stabbed him through the gut? He had a name, you know. Clerindel. A wife: Bricea. *Children.*”

Lunging forward, I slapped a shadow-coated hand over the split in the back of the bandit’s hand.

“Answer my godsdamn questions, or I swear to Alouin. I will employ a Vice for the first time in my life.”

“No, please,” the bandit panted, looking off into nowhere. “I did what you said! Please...”

He locked distracted eyes on me.

“Manipulation says to tell you that this one failed.”

As he squeaked on the last word, black lines sprang forth from under his skin. Snatching my hand back, I watched Daevetch swell in the bandit’s body until it broke through his skin and dissipated. The corpse left behind looked like it had been through a grater.

Breathing in the rancid scent of death, I lost control of my stomach, only exiting the house after my shuddering had calmed down. When she saw me, Bricea burst into tears, hovering outside of the door as she had been.

"I- I'm sorry," I said.

What else did one say to the wife of the man one's killed?

"I'll see that you're taken care of," I hesitantly said.

Leaping at me, Bricea threw her arms around my shoulders to sob into my neck, and I glared at Oswin, whose sword hovered an inch from her flesh. The spy, however, merely shrugged, sheathing his blade.

"Only doing my job, sir," he breathed.

Bricea hadn't seemed to notice the danger she'd been in, thank the gods. I patted her back until she drew away, scrubbing at her eyes.

"Thank you," she said. "I didn't have the strength-"

She looked away.

There was that unwanted thanks again, but I couldn't summon my typical irritation with it this time. When Bricea faced me again, I nearly took a step back from the intensity of her gaze.

"Did I hear you right?" she asked. "You're the one foreseen to save Auden?"

"That's what everyone keeps telling me," I said.

"Well, if what you did to that bandit is any indication of your capabilities, I think you'll make a fine king. I'll tell my neighbors what I saw, passing the news along if you will," Bricea said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Your Majesty, I must tend to my children."

Turning on her heels, she marched toward the little boys and girls waiting under Pointer and Ring's watchful eyes.

"What's she talking about?" Oswin asked. "I was too busy keeping her from entering to pay attention to everything that happened in there."

"Take a look," I said, jerking a thumb over my shoulder.

While Oswin investigated, I watched Bricea kneel before her children, gathering them close, just as I watched understanding pass over their faces. Their reactions to the knowledge of a parent's death were varied. Two of them burst into tears, one pestered her mother with questions, and one stalked off by herself.

"Did- did *you* do this?" Oswin asked behind me.

"The man with a sword in him is my work. I couldn't let him suffer. So, I used Ele to ease his pain while asking what questions I could before stabbing him so he'd have a quick death," I said. "The

bandit? Not me.”

Oswin released a long sigh before coming to stand beside me.

“Who, then?” he said. “Or what?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “The bandit mentioned Manipulation, which is a Daevetch aspect. That tells me that a splinter is involved, which means an Enforcer is too. We never saw them in Elisk or anywhere else on the way. Maybe Doldimar has spread them across the kingdom to do his work.”

“Alouin, I hope not. Can you imagine?”

Both of us shuddered at the idea.

“There’s more,” I continued. “Clerindel, the father, said something about Vale before he died.”

“Something?” Oswin asked with an eyebrow raised.

“It was vague, but it gave me reason to believe that things in the town aren’t what they seem.”

“Great.”

Laughing, I shoved Oswin.

“Like we haven’t faced worse together,” I said.

“That we have.”

Thumb strolled into the scene of carnage with four horses behind him, and throwing his hands into the air, Little rushed to him.

“Finally! Took you long enough,” he said. “Did you stop to analyze the pattern of every tree along the road?”

Thumb narrowed his eyes at Little.

“Why would I care about nature’s patterns?” he asked. “Humanity’s patterns are the only ones worth my time.”

“Are you kidding me?”

As they continued bickering, I drank it in. Despite the tragedy and death found here, this, the camaraderie found between those closest to me, reminded me of who I was. When I was with them, I felt like myself.

“Ready, sir?” Oswin asked. “Vale awaits us.”

“Let’s go.”

6

The Girl

For the first time in months, I felt alive.

The bandits had taken Kylorian. I'd woken up alone and in shackles that had been pinned to the wall. In fact, my shoulders' screaming protests had dragged me from sleep in the first place, and as soon as my disorientation had dissipated, I'd joined in with their screaming, shouting for someone to release me or tell me where my brother was.

Someone must have gotten tired of my racket because not long ago, a man had come to free me from my shackles. He'd punched me before doing it, eliminating any chance for me to escape and then, had left me in my locked room.

I'd been sitting in this improvised prison cell for hours with worry gnawing at me. Where was Kylorian? Why had the Enforcer begun his 'hospitality' with my brother? What torments had he already endured?

And why, for the love of Alouin, had he submitted to the bastard in the first place? I kept playing the scene of our capture in my mind. From the moment the Enforcer had arrived, Kylorian's behavior had changed. Before, he'd been his normal, if a bit broodier, self.

Afterward, he'd gone complacent, yielding.

My big brother didn't take orders, especially not from an Enforcer. He gave them, *and* he was the most argumentative son of a bitch I knew... except for when he was with Tanwadur, but I couldn't see how our adoptive father was anything like one of the evil, son of a bitch Enforcers.

What could have so thoroughly changed my brother? I had my theories, each more terrifying than the last, but when they flung Kylorian into the cell with me, those theories were forgotten.

"Ky!" I shouted.

While I dropped to my knees beside my adoptive brother, the cell door slammed shut and was latched, but I hesitated before touching him.

They'd stripped him down to his smallclothes, and over every inch of exposed flesh, a mottled red color was spreading with only his head spared from the beating. Where could I lay a hand without hurting him?

Groaning, Kylorian rolled to his back.

"Help me up," he whispered.

Leaping to my feet, I hauled my brother to his own. He winced the whole way, but once he was upright, he stumbled to the door, beating his fist against it.

"I'm still standing, assholes," he shouted with a ragged voice. "I'm still--"

All at once, the fight left him, and he collapsed.

"Alouin, it doesn't matter," he said. "Eventually, they'll win. They always do."

"Don't say that, Ky," I said. "We'll escape. I'm the Terror of Da'kul. You've been hailed king for years. We can take a few bandits."

After I was done, Kylorian's shoulders shook for so long that when laughter eventually burst from him, it sent goosebumps racing over my skin.

"Don't infect me with your optimism," he said. "It will only make our ends more painful."

I reeled back. This defeatism... it wasn't my brother, and seeing it, banished theories and suspicions crept back into my mind.

"You're not the brother I know," I whispered. "My brother would fight, tooth and nail, until death dragged him under. He would never surrender, even to an Enforcer, but the man before me has defied those expectations. Which makes me wonder, who are you, Ky?"

I waited for a moment in a tense silence before voicing my worst fear.

"Did someone ensnare you in a Vice while you were on your recent trip? Are you a Kiraak now?"

Kylorian shot his head up with a snarl fixed upon his face.

"Do you see Corruption under my skin?" he snapped. "If an Enforcer had put me in a Vice on my travels, that horrible stuff would have spread across my body by now. You know this. You've seen newly born Kiraak and how short of a time it takes for black vines to cover them. And in my recent spat of fun with our Enforcer captor, my skin wasn't breached, or can you not see that? Also, *I've never met Doldimar*. You know? The only one who can *make* Alouin damned Kiraak!"

"I--"

Swallowing hard, I stopped, working to find my voice.

"I know, but I have no other explanation for the changes I see in you."

With heat in his voice, Kylorian said, "We've been growing distant for years, Ren. That's what happens when I have to follow Dury's crazy plans all across Auden and you get stuck at home.

Over time, people *do* change. Maybe you haven't noticed the changes in me because I've been gone so often recently."

Shaking my head, I started pacing in front of him.

"No," I whispered. "This isn't some gradual change, taking place over the years. This is something sudden, something that's happened since Hadrion died. Is that it? Did Had-had's passing make you realize how vulnerable we are?"

"Don't you speak to me about Hadrion! Not when you-"

Kylorian choked on the words that I knew he'd been wanting to scream since returning from the Birthing Grounds, and I was sick of it hanging over us. If we died here at the hands of a sadistic Enforcer, wasn't it best to clear the air between us?

I missed the brother I'd grown up with, teased and played with, and trained beside. Who along with Hadrion and Eliade, had been my source of support after Josenik left me with a mistake in my womb.

So, I snapped, "When what, Ky? When I love the man you blame for Hadrion's death? Why do you blame *him*? I've heard the tale of the Birthing Grounds from multiple sources. I know how Hadrion died, and from what I've heard, Raimie can't be blamed for what happened. In fact, he did everything he could to save Hadrion, including offering to take our brother's place as the Enforcer's captive. Before the Birthing Grounds, you two seemed to have found some common ground. You looked like you might have become friends! So, tell me, Ky. What possible reason could you have for this sudden dislike? Why-?"

"*Alouin, Ren!* How can you be so oblivious?"

As Kylorian's shout rang in our cell, I barely had enough time to suddenly *know* that I didn't want to hear what he was going to say next, but I was helpless to do anything but that.

"It's like you push away everything that you don't want to see, both the relatively tame and the absolutely horrible shit going on all around you," Kylorian said. "I tell you *so much*, but you refuse to read between the lines, to see what I've been both hiding from you and silently screaming for you to notice. You've never seen what *he's* done to me for all these years but-"

A cough cut him off. I stared as he squeezed his eyes closed before continuing in a whisper.

"No. Let's not talk about that. Let's talk... let's talk about Raimie."

Opening his eyes, Kylorian directly met mine.

"You're wrong, ok?" he said. "It took me a while to realize it, but Raimie is a good man, and if nothing else, I admire him. I certainly don't hate him or blame him for Hadrion, like you've suggested. I don't like how he ended things between the two of you, especially when I..."

He clenched and unclenched his hands, all while I cocked my head. How Raimie had ended things with us? He hadn't-

Huffing out a sigh, Kylorian crossed his arms, standing so abruptly that I took a step back with my focus still fixed on him. He took hold of my shoulders, barely stopping himself from shaking me.

"I swear, Ren. I've done what I can to show you how I feel, even repressed it when that was what you needed, but *damnit*, how can you not fucking see it, even now?"

I rocked away from him. The fierce look on my brother's face scared me. I'd never seen him like this, and I wasn't sure if I liked it. I wanted to say the words that would calm him down, that would make this scorching heat between us die, but my traitor mouth refused to oblige me.

"See what?" I whispered.

Kylorian wordlessly shook his head before hiding his face in his hands.

"I-"

The cell door creaked open, making me and Kylorian tense as a bandit stepped inside. He gestured at me with a drawn knife.

"Your turn," he said.

Lurching forward, Kylorian stumbled between the bandit and me.

"That wasn't the deal."

Chuckling, the bandit said, "You think an Enforcer would keep any promises he made with you?"

Of course not. The only Enforcer known to do such a miraculous thing had been Teron, and even he'd been erratic on which promises he kept.

"I won't let you take her," Kylorian hissed.

With an eyebrow raised, the bandit looked him up and down.

"I doubt you could stop me," he said. "Sit down before I have to hurt you."

I tugged on my brother's shoulder, shaking off the intensity of our previous conversation.

"It's all right, Ky. I'll be fine."

Whirling toward me, Kylorian shouted in my face.

"It is not 'all right'. I-"

Crossing the space between them, the bandit smashed his knife's pommel into the back of Kylorian's head, my brother dropped to the ground, and I retreated from the two, hissing.

"You want me to hurt you too?" the bandit asked.

Standing there, unarmed and with my brother lying at an enemy's feet, the seconds slowed to a crawl with the pound of my blood filling my ears. *This* was living. Balancing on the razor's edge, toeing the line between mortal peril and manageable danger. The choices made in these moments not only determined someone's survival but also defined who they were.

This moment carried one, real question: could I take the bandit? If I attacked and won, I could call myself courageous. If I didn't, deciding to wait for a better opportunity instead, I could call myself wise.

Impulsivity had only hurt me in the past. Better to bide my time.

Crouching, I checked Kylorian's pulse before striding for the door.

When the bandit hesitated to follow me, I said, "Why aren't we leaving yet? Let's not keep our host waiting."

I left before he could recover. He'd catch up soon enough.

Play the game. I'd never participated in one so deadly before, but I knew how to do it. No rules, only me, an Enforcer, and my own cleverness. A game where one misstep would see me dead.

As the bandit trotted to get ahead of me, I hummed to myself. Rushing forward to test my mettle against one of Doldimar's Enforcers, I'd never felt more alive.

It didn't matter that the bastard would likely beat me black and blue in this first round. I could handle that. The opening salvo wouldn't matter in the long run because eventually, I'd find a chink in the armor of those holding me captive, and when I did, I'd worm my way out of here.

Either that, or I'd take Hadrion's route, denying the Enforcer his pleasure. However this turned out, I'd win.

7

The Boy

I'd never met a more intimidating woman.

With her laughing eyes and bored demeanor, Faramede reminded me of another woman from long ago, and the memory of her locked my tongue up, dragging my eyes to the floor. It also drew Nylion from wherever he'd been hiding in our head.

"I do not like her," he said.

Having popped into view beside me, he shot daggers at Vale's mayor, and somehow, I managed to conceal my flinch. Nylion's ability to visibly manifest hadn't settled for me yet, even if I welcomed the change with open arms.

She reminds me of our mother, I said.

"Yes..." Nylion hissed. "Hence my dislike."

The intensity of my other half's feelings for the woman who'd birthed us washed across our bond again, and feeling it, I gritted my teeth. The reason behind those feelings was a mystery I had yet to solve. True, she'd been one of the people who'd torn us apart, but she'd also died years ago, in some small part because of us. I'd released my hatred of her in the moment I'd learned what she'd done to us. Why hadn't Nylion?

Then again, Nylion had always been the more vengeful one of us.

We should give her a chance before judging her, I said. *She leads Vale, and Vale apparently carries significant sway in Auden.*

"Curse Oswin and his incredible ability to know the answers to the most obscure of questions," Nylion said.

Chuckling, I poured affection into our bond, and when Nylion accepted it, my heart soared.

Don't return to wherever you were hiding. Please. Stay with me. I need-

"Do you find my people's plight amusing?" Faramede asked, cold as ice.

Blinking, I dragged my attention to the mayor's office. Gods. Alone again with a woman who wanted to make me cower.

"Not at all," I said through a fixed smile. "It was only an aberrant thought. My apologies. You were saying?"

Faramede seemed to find my excuse insulting, but she didn't remark on it.

"I was explaining that other parties have claimed the task within their capabilities," she said instead. "In fact, one such party left only a few days ago. Why would your group be any different?"

"Does it matter if we have what it takes?" I asked. "We're willing to tackle your bandit problem for you. If we can't handle it, you lose nothing, and if we succeed, so much the better for us both."

"Fair enough," Faramede said. "What form of payment would you like if you complete the task?"

Pausing, I furrowed my brow.

"Payment?"

Beside me, a laughing fit bowled Nylion over, leaving him slapping at his knees, and even confused as I was, I watched my other half with a glow in my heart. I liked seeing Nylion happy.

Faramede frowned at me.

"...For services rendered?" she said.

"Services..." I said. "Oh. I don't want anything. I'm just happy to help, but I suppose if you insist on a reward..."

What should I request? The one thing that I wanted above all else was forevermore beyond my reach, and besides that, did it matter what I wanted? I'd already get that with the distraction that Vale's problem had presented me with. So, how did I respond to the question of payment?

"You can ask the people with me what they'd like if you want," I said. "As for me, all I want is to see Vale and the rest of Auden at peace. So as payment for ridding you of these bandits, you can promise that you'll govern your people well."

For the first time since I met her, Faramede cracked a smile, making me shiver.

"That's... *kind* of you. I'll be sure to ask your companions as well," she said. "Feel free to make use of the guest rooms in town hall until you're ready to depart. When will that be?"

With something rising in me as if to a challenge, I matched her smile. It banished the ants crawling over my skin, an instinctual response to a perceived threat.

"I couldn't say," I drawled. "We'll need time to prepare first."

“Of course,” Faramede said. “Take all the time you need.”

And it was gone. Whatever had triggered my danger reflex vanished, leaving me more than a little disoriented.

“Anything else?” I asked.

At her negative, I marched for the door, ready to put something between me and her, but as I reached for the knob, Faramede cleared her throat.

“If I may,” she said. “Tales of your agreement with your distant kin, Kylorian, have reached us, even here. Ever since hearing of it, I’ve had a question I’ve wanted to ask, but with no way of getting an answer, I’d resolved to remain curious about it. Then, you appeared on my doorstep.”

When she failed to continue, I glanced over my shoulder at her.

“Your question?” I asked.

“I understand Kylorian’s reasons for contesting the throne,” Faramede said. “Considering how indoctrinated those of us exposed to Tiro’s rebellion have been to the idea of him as king, it makes sense that the man himself would think the title was his by right, but what’s your reason? Why do you want the throne?”

Oh. Was that all she wanted to know?

Chuckling, I said, “I don’t want it. If you’ll excuse me.”

Yanking the door open, I practically sprinted away from the office, flashing down corridors until I’d reached the room that had been assigned to my people. When I slammed that door closed behind me, collapsing against it, Little and Ring glanced up at me from their game of cards.

“I don’t know what’s wrong in Vale,” I gasped, “but whatever it is, that woman is a part of it.”

Stepping in front of me, Nylion gently nudged my chin until I met his eyes.

“It is ok. She is not here,” he said. “Are you sure you are not simply reacting to her resemblance to our mother?”

“For a second, I felt *Daevetch* on her,” I told him. “It was only there for a moment, gone as soon as I noticed it, but it was there.”

“Hmm.”

Furrowing his brow, Nylion stepped aside, hugging his chest with one arm, and with him out of the way, I could see the spies behind him. They were on their feet, giving me odd looks, and I tried to swallow, even with my mouth dry.

"If that's what you felt, then we should watch her," Ring said. "In the meantime, are you well, sir? You're shaking like a leaf."

She approached me as if I were a wild animal, and at the sight, a memory careened into me from out of nowhere.

I stumble into the barracks set aside for potential Hand members, although I have no clue why I've come here. I don't have a bunk in this place but when that woman earlier had...

I can't go home yet.

"Little Raimie," Silivren sleepily mumbles. "What are you doing...?"

She trails off as I tumble to my hands and knees. I can still see a fist coming for my face...

My stomach heaves, soon followed by sickening coughs that fill the barracks. Is anyone else here? Bad enough that Silivren is witnessing this, but if any of the others see...

Shaking, I crawl to a corner and curl into a ball, making myself as small as possible. With my head buried in my arms, I listen as Silivren crawls out of bed and cleans up my mess, but all I can see is that fist, and I can't move to help. I'm trembling too hard.

Beside me, Nylion makes no move to touch me, although he crouches to where I can see him. Just letting me know he's there.

"I am sorry," he quietly says. "I did not catch it in time."

Why is he apologizing? I'm the one who should do that. I failed the- failed the-

"You were doing our weekly check-in with the thieves guild heads, weren't you?" Silivren whispers.

Lifting my head takes all my strength, so I only raise it to where my eyes can peek over my arms. Silivren is crouched opposite me, spreading her arms as she slides one foot my way.

"What happened?" she asks. "Did one of the guild heads make a move on you?"

I can't bring myself to speak. Maintaining eye contact with Silivren makes a voice, distinctly feminine, screech in my head.

"Don't hurt me! Please, don't hurt me!"

Considering those words are all that's filling my thoughts, what would happen if I opened my mouth?

Silivren slides another foot forward.

"Was it the Jackals?" she breathes.

Sucking in a breath, I tense.

“You don’t frighten me, boy.”

Faster than I can track, her fist shoots out, and I fall to the ground, skittering out of her office before my brain can catch up.

“Raimie,” Silivren says, “I’m going to hug you now.”

She drapes her arms around my shoulders, creating a prison of flesh, and for a moment, I become stone. As she strokes my arms, though, my paralysis gradually weakens.

“I don’t know why I was so panicked when she hit me,” I say into her skin. “I’ve taken worse while sparring. Hell, you’ve hit me harder than she did.”

Chuckling, Silivren tilts my chin toward her.

“The difference is that you trust me not to hit you harder than you can take. Because I never would, Raimie. I never would.”

Why was Silivren... Ring approaching me like she had back then? As if triggered by the memory, I felt my heartbeat leaping in my veins, my lungs pumping like a bellows, and the shudders racing over me. Why was I having such a hysterical reaction to Faramede, a seemingly harmless woman?

Easing away from the door, I took a few deep breaths, and my body’s heightened awareness slowly ticked back to normal levels. Nodding to me, Ring flopped onto a bed.

“So, we watch Faramede,” she said. “What else?”

“Middle, Pointer, and Thumb have already left to investigate the town,” Little said. “Our orders were to wait for you, and it sure took you long enough to finish with that mayor lady. I’m bored. So, tell me we’re doing something fun now. Sir.”

“That depends,” I said. “Are you old enough to drink?”

Pouting, Little crossed his arms.

“I’ve been drinking ale since I was six,” he says.

“That might explain why you act like such a moron sometimes,” Ring said under her breath.

“Hey!”

“Stop,” I said, even as I grinned. “Well, if your age won’t be a problem, Little, then it’s time for us to partake in a spy’s most time-honored tradition, finding the nearest tavern and getting drunk off our asses.”

I hadn't meant for us to get literally drunk, but that was what Little appeared to be doing.

"Another," the spy said, slurring his words as he tapped on the bar top.

Once his mug was refilled, he weaved toward the group of new friends that he'd made in the last hour, and I watched him all the while.

Sipping at her own drink, Ring said, "Don't worry. He's not nearly as drunk as he looks. Of the five of us, Little's always had the greatest tolerance for this piss."

"I wasn't worried," I said.

"Sure," Ring said with an eyeroll. "You and Middle get the same look in your eye when you think someone's in over their head. Look at him, sir. How often has he dodged one of those other sodden fools, trying to trip into him? This is Little's element. Let him enjoy it."

Raising two fingers, she got the barkeep's attention, and he slid her more wine. Glancing at the empty glasses in front of her and remembering all of Little's refills, I licked my lips.

"I probably should have thought of this before now," I said, "but how are we paying for this?"

Ring snorted into her drink, slamming it down on the bar top to giggle into her hands.

"Alouin, sometimes I forget how bad you are with money," she said. "We have coin, sir, and if we don't have enough for what we'll drink tonight, I have other forms of payment."

Fluttering her eyes, Ring leaned over the bar with her tunic's neckline gaping until the barkeep approached her.

"My drinking companion here is being such a bore," she said. "Will you get him another brandy so he can be on his way? I have much more delightful prospects in mind for tonight."

She ran her eyes up and down the barkeep's body, and flushing, he hurried to fill her order. Exchanging my empty glass for a full one, Ring leaned in for a parting kiss on my cheek.

"Stay inside, sir," she said. "Middle won't be happy with me if I lose you tonight."

Whirling back toward the barkeep, she resumed flirting with the poor man, and dazed, I pushed and shoved my way toward an empty chair. I'd always known the members of my Hand were good, even when my memories of them had been locked behind a spell, but this was my first time seeing them in the field in a while. They'd steal Vale's secrets, and none of its citizens would be the wiser.

Meanwhile, I was left to drink alone, and while the brandy was good and the tavern cheery, I couldn't stop my thoughts from turning to what or rather, who I could never have.

"-Eselan bitch," someone said, which caught my attention. "I know we're not supposed to talk about what happened until our current crop of 'saviors' disappears, but she got me in trouble with

the missus. I tried to tell her that the bitch flung herself at me but no..."

Striding to the one who'd been speaking, I dropped my chair between him and his companions before flopping into it.

"This Eselan," I said. "Black hair, slender frame, fierce as a wildcat when threatened?"

Because I knew of no other Eselan who'd be randomly wandering through Auden.

"Sounds about right," said the speaker. "Do you know her? Also, who are you? I haven't seen you around here before."

I laughed under my breath.

"Do I know her?" I said. "I once did, but... what am I doing? Ignore me, gentlemen. Sorry for the interruption."

Checking that Ring and Little were still occupied by activities, I slipped out of the tavern to collapse into the weeds growing around the building.

Ren had been here. When had that happened? Had she walked down these same streets?

"Lovesick fool," I said, banging my head against the tavern's wall.

"You cannot help who you want," Nylion said.

Dropping to the ground, he rested his head on my shoulder, pressing our arms against one another. It was the most 'physical' contact that Nylion had allowed since we'd started growing apart on the way to Elisk, and almost, I launched into another conversation about why that had happened, but doing it for the thousandth time seemed like a bad idea right now.

My other half was here with our bond open and in use, and the relief of this was...

I didn't have words for it, but if I tried, I'd say it was like taking a breath of fresh air, never having known how thin it had been before. It was a bit like what I imagined a reunion with Ren would feel like, which was...

Huh. That was something I'd need to ponder. Later.

Never mind Ren, I said. Did you hear what that man said? 'Until our current crop of 'saviors' disappears.' How many other people have come to handle this bandit problem?

"I suspect we will learn soon enough," Nylion said.

Doesn't make me any less curious.

"Of course not. You would not be Raimie if the vaguely ominous did not attract you like... well, like Ren does."

Harsh, Nyl.

“Also, true.”

When a figure crunched through the sand to block my view of the stars, I squinted as if that would somehow bring their concealed features into focus.

“You’re finally here,” the stranger said. “I thought you’d never come, despite Manipulation’s assertions otherwise.”

Manipu-?

I scrambled to stand, reaching for Silverblade, but cold steel, pressed to my forehead, froze me in place. A pistol. Where had one of Doldimar’s people gotten ahold of a *pistol*?

“Don’t get up,” the stranger said. “I’m only here to deliver a message.”

Digging into his clothes, the man placed something feathery in my hand, curling my fingers around it.

“Doldimar says hello,” the stranger said before cocking his head, “Or was it ‘enjoy another gift, dabbler of both sides’? I can’t recall. Ah, well. My task is completed. A fair evening to you, Raimie.”

He disappeared with a wash of Daevetch prickling over my skin.

“Raimie, we need-”

An Enforcer, most likely *the* Enforcer controlling Vale’s bandits, had caught me unaware, and I was still breathing. Why had he left me alive? Did it matter, considering what I was holding?

Another gift, like the ones waiting for me in Elisk and the Birthing Grounds. Please, gods, no.

“We need to get-”

Lifting my hand, I blazed Ele into the night before unfurling my fingers. On my palm lay a lock of hair. Black hair. I clenched my hand into a fist.

“We need to get the Hand,” Nylion and I said together.

When I reached the tavern’s doors, I swung them open so forcefully that the glasses behind the bar rattled.

“Ring. Little. We’re leaving. Now.”

Several yards from the tavern, they fell in beside me, drawing breath to speak. Probably to ask questions I didn’t want to answer now.

“What did you learn?” I asked before they could.

“Farmede’s definitely involved with the bandits,” Little said. “At least a dozen groups have come to Vale to remove the threat, something that wasn’t mentioned by the woman who came begging for your aid. The mayor’s luring people to the bandits, but I have no clue why. Sir, what-?”

“I suspect that she’s a Kiraak, taking orders from her Enforcer master, but she’s repressed Corruption’s spread somehow. She’s truly as intimidating as I thought,” I interrupted. “I’ll take care of it when we return. Anything else?”

“If Farmede’s a Kiraak, it’s safe to say that other Kiraak are mixed in with Vale’s citizenry,” Ring said. “Why else would these good people allow this to continue? Sir-”

“I’m beginning to see why everyone hates primeancers,” I said. “I certainly hate this one.”

Growling, Little stepped in front of me, lifting a hand to plant in my chest.

“Sir. Where are we going?” he asked.

Giving Little a funny look, I brushed his hand aside.

“To our beds, of course,” I said. “We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

8

The Girl

I'd never met a more intimidating man.

He was short enough that I could look down on him while his flabby muscles and loose skin made me wonder how he'd survived for so long in Doldimar's domain.

Or I did so until I met the man's eyes. Pure black, they dried my mouth, simply by resting on me as they were, and he had no need to do anything else to make me quail before him. I'd heard too many horror stories about Enforcers from Harvest refugees and had too many close calls with Teron for it to be anything less. So, when he smiled at me, tilting his head, I nearly ran screaming in the other direction.

When I managed to hold my ground instead, the Enforcer clapped.

"Well done, my dear," he said. "Most people would be sobbing on their knees before me by now."

Somehow, I ignored my pulse, fluttering in my ears, and my knees, threatening to knock together.

"Would that do me any good?" I asked.

"A defiant one. I like the defiant ones. I hope I don't have to kill her," the Enforcer said, presumably not to me. "Will he come in time to save her, do you think, Manipulation?"

He?

"I don't need someone to rescue me," I said.

With a faint smile, the Enforcer patted my cheek, and I fought to keep from recoiling.

"Of course not, dear," he said. "Well, come in. Let's begin."

He stepped aside, waving through the doorway as if in challenge. Did he expect me to willingly walk into what could only become a time of suffering?

But what else was I supposed to do? Get dragged inside and make a scene? That would only ruin the opening move that I'd made in this game.

As I strode inside, I ignored the Enforcer's chuckle behind me.

The room beyond was dark with candlelight only revealing what lay in the center of it. There, a rickety table stood with a candelabra and place settings for two atop it.

“Take a seat,” the Enforcer said.

Breezing past me, he claimed the chair closest to the room’s entrance, and I edged toward the second one. As I sat, a man sailed into the room with a platter full of food in his hand. He arranged his bounty in front of the Enforcer and me with sweat rolling over his forehead, and as he did so, he tipped my mug onto the floor. The clatter of wood on stone was loud in the stillness, all while the man froze.

Diving for the mug, he said, “I’ll get another one. I’m sorry. I’ll fix it.”

“Yes. You will,” the Enforcer said.

A black spiderweb shot out from the back of the man’s head, sweeping over his face until the skin over it was straining to keep those horrid vines contained. As this arrangement was held in place, the man suppressed a groan, but then, it vanished, and he skittered out of the room.

“Apologies for my staff,” the Enforcer said. “They’re not the most qualified of people, but they’re what I have to work with right now.”

Retrieving his utensils, he cut into his meat with each slice controlled and precise, but I couldn’t move. I could let my eyes track over what little of the room I could see, seeking advantages, but the rest of my body was stuck in place.

“You’re not hungry?” the Enforcer asked, pointing at my plate.

What should I do? Could I demand answers for everything I’d seen from this man?

A Kiraak who didn’t look like a Kiraak. Was this some new form of terror, devised by Doldimar? A way to create suspicion in the minds of a people who thought they were free? Was it a special modification found only in this Enforcer’s Kiraak? Or should I ask about him, getting at least a name from my captor? Could I ask questions right now?

There was no harm in trying.

“What did you do to my brother?” I made myself say.

Pausing in his chewing, the Enforcer considered me while something flickered in his dark eyes.

“What I must to survive. As we all do,” he answered. “You find yourself in mortal peril, and yet, your first concern is for him. How curious.”

“He’s my brother. Of course I’m worried about him, especially when he’s not acting like himself,” I said. “What *specifically* did you do to Kylorian?”

Sighing, the Enforcer set his fork down.

"I didn't infect him with Daevetch, if that's what you're worried about. I merely reminded him of his place," he said before making a face. "Do you mean to simply sit there? My staff went to such trouble when preparing this meal."

"It's hard to eat when I have nothing to wash my food down with," I said.

Better to mention that excuse than to admit how clenched tight my stomach was right now.

Unfortunately, the man who'd served us earlier rushed into the room with a new mug for me, as if summoned by my excuse. He set it on the table with its amber contents sloshing within it.

"You were saying?" the Enforcer said.

Woodenly, I reached for my knife and fork, and soon, chunks of meat were passing, untasted, over my tongue.

"Ask your questions," the Enforcer said. "The curiosity must be killing you."

The only thing gnawing at me was the image of my beaten brother, carved into my mind.

"I'd rather not," I said, "but you obviously want to share, so why don't you?"

A spasm crossed the Enforcer's face, which had him nearly dropping his utensils.

"Careful, my dear," he said. "I may be new to my power, not yet to the point where Daevetch has driven me mad, but I'm still *new*. I don't know my limits."

"Maybe I should push harder, then," I said. "If you mean to kill me, I'd rather it be now than after you torture me."

The Enforcer paused with his fork halfway raised to his mouth, flicking his eyes up to bore into me, and I flipped my grip on my knife, ready for a fight no matter how short I knew it would be.

"I have no intention of killing you, my dear" the Enforcer said. "Why would I kill my bait? It defeats the purpose."

At those words, the world slowed down around me with each sip of air growing steadily frostier.

"Bait?" I softly said.

"Mm," the Enforcer said. "You use it to lure another person, usually a loved one, into a trap. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"Of course I have, cretin," I snapped. "Who's the trap for?"

Lowering his hands to the table, the Enforcer shook his head.

"I had so hoped for a pleasant meal," he said.

As fire rose from within to combat the air's chill, I leapt across the table with the candelabra and dishes rattling to the floor. With one hand on the Enforcer's shoulder, I held my knife in front of his eyes, poised to strike.

"Who's the trap for?" I shouted.

The Enforcer lazily blinked.

"The one I've been ordered to kill," he said. "The one that I hope will kill me instead."

Who could kill an Enforcer? Someone who'd done it before, obviously. And who would Doldimar send an Enforcer to murder, knowing that the task wouldn't end in the waste of a valuable tool? Not my blood brother, Rhylix. He'd simply heal from what should be a killing blow, which according to my brother, Doldimar knew. That left...

"Raimie," I breathed.

"Precisely."

"But... he hates me," I said. "I broke his heart."

"Are you sure about that?" the Enforcer asked.

Such smugness and sadness there! I couldn't stand it.

Screaming, I plunged my knife forward and met empty air. With momentum careening me toward the ground, I tilted over the table's edge, but before I could fall, something caught the back of my tunic. My motion reversed, ending with me crashing on top of the table with a hand coated in Daevetch pointed at my face.

"Hold still," the Enforcer said.

Shadows swirled toward me, barely missing my head, and once the bolt had cracked into the wood beneath me, the Enforcer lifted a tuft of my hair into the air.

"Will this be enough, Manipulation?" he asked.

Oh, Alouin. He'd bring Raimie here, and if he didn't realize it was a trap, the one I loved would die.

"Please," I said. "Please, don't hurt him."

The Enforcer cocked his head.

"Nothing from you when your life's in danger, but you plead with me when I threaten him," he said. "You truly are a curious being, Ren."

As he was intimidating.

“Take her to her cell,” he called over his shoulder. “No harm is to come to her until we know whether the trap has sprung.”

He disappeared, and the bandit... the Kiraak who'd escorted me to this room grabbed my arm, dragging me up and away.

I had to escape and warn Raimie, no matter what seeing him again would do to me. But how? I was unarmed with only the clothes on my back to claim as my own.

Unarmed except for the one weapon that had always been mine.

Illusory, blinding light burst into the hall, but because it was my creation, I'd closed my eyes before its appearance. My escort, on the other hand, reeled away from that surge. While he struggled to recuperate, I stole his dagger from him, smashing its pommel into his temple until he dropped, senseless, to the floor, and I was left panting over him.

It was amazing the reckless lengths I'd go to if given enough motivation. Amazing how it rearranged my priorities.

Kylorian first. No matter how much the protective beast inside roared for me to run to Raimie and keep him from doing anything stupid, I wouldn't leave my brother here.

When I unlocked our cell's door, Kylorian barely stirred, making me hurry to him.

Tugging on his arm, I said, “Ky, we need to go. Get up.”

“Ren?” he said. “What are you-?”

I dumped the clothes that I'd stripped off of my escort onto him.

“Hurry and get dressed,” I whispered. “I don't know how long we have.”

Sitting up, Kylorian glanced from me to the open door before breaking into a grin and throwing the tunic on.

“I *knew* you'd think of something,” he said. “How could a measly Enforcer keep the Terror of Da'kul contained?”

“What about you?” I asked. “The brother I know would have escaped from here hours ago.”

Pouting, Kylorian said, “I had mitigating circumstances to contend with.”

“Like a beating's ever stopped you before,” I said with a snort.

Kylorian paused while donning the trousers.

“It did this time,” he said.

“Which makes it fortunate for you that I’m here,” I said. “If you’re ready?”

We snuck through the caves with little difficulty, only encountering the occasional bandit, but they were easily dispatched. Finding the exit took quite some time, and once we had, stepping out beneath a starry sky, I took a deep breath of free air.

“No time for celebration,” I said. “Let’s head for Vale, quick as we can.”

Because where else would Raimie be? Given how our lives were, I’d be surprised if he was anywhere else.

I took off into the forest, risking a fall or a branch in the eye with each step. Kylorian kept at my side.

After a moment, he breathed, “Huh.”

The exhalation had been so perplexed that I spared a glance at my brother. With his eyes squinted, he was fiercely rubbing his skin while slowing down.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. “We need to keep going.”

When I raced back toward him, Kylorian snapped his head up.

“Sorry, Ren,” he said.

He bashed the heel of his palm into the bridge of my nose, and for the second time in as many days, my brother sent me into unconsciousness.

9

The Boy

As they moved through the forest, Pointer and Little made no noise, none that I could detect at least. If I didn't know differently, I'd think they were ghosts, gliding through the trees.

I, on the other hand, could make no such claims to stealth. Those skills had rusted to flakes after half a lifetime with no practice. Lessons with Rhylix and Ferin might have resuscitated what I'd long ago learned about diplomacy and combat but stealth? I'd had no help with that.

I did, however, have something that my companions did not. It was the only thing that had won me my argument to join the fight today.

When I'd brought the topic up, Oswin had said, "You staying in Vale, sir."

"Am I?" I'd said. "How do you plan on keeping me here? Can you stop someone you can't see?"

Gods, Oswin had been cranky since conceding that I was right.

Slowing down, Pointer raised a hand, pressing it down toward the ground. He and Little sank to their bellies while I pulled my Ele source around my body, disappearing to everyone outside the bubble. Again, Pointer moved his hands, flashing signs toward Little.

'Patrol sighted. Fifty yards, dead ahead,' they said. 'Stay with asset.'

Asset? Really?

Now that Pointer had pointed him out, I saw a man's head bobbing above a crop of bushes. Little levered himself to his feet, but by the time he'd attained them, I'd found the patrolling man's eyes. It would be a difficult angle but...

I shot Ele at the man, and with a gasp, he collapsed into sleep. At the sound, weapons were in my spies' hands, and I walked between them, rolling the patrolling man over with my toe. Shooting more Ele into his eyes, I reinforced the command for sleep. Once I was sure he wasn't getting up, I dropped my Ele bubble.

"What was *that*?" Little hissed.

'Quiet,' I said with dancing fingers.

Drawing Daevetch to my arms, I hoisted the unconscious man off of the ground, carrying him to a denser patch of foliage before dumping him into it. Turning to the spy, I smiled at Little's wide-eyed stare, even if Pointer's speculative look stole something from the moment. I waved for the older spy to take the lead again.

Both of them seemed reluctant to move ahead, but when I rolled my eyes, continuing without them, they were quick to follow. Soon enough, the three of us reached the cave that we believed to be the bandit's hideout. The lumps sitting outside of its entrance told me that the rest of my Hand had already arrived, although they appeared to have moved on without us.

When Pointer looked at me, I signed, 'Advance.'

As we passed the fallen bandits, I knelt to check their pulses. One of them was unconscious while the other one was dead.

I'd told the Hand to leave the enemy alive as much as they could. If an Enforcer was leading them, they were likely Kiraak, which meant they had little control over their actions. I hadn't decided what I'd do with them once this was over, not with Clerindel's face still fresh on my mind, but for now, I didn't want these people dead.

We moved like ghosts through the cave, and with every yard we crossed sans opposition, the lightning crackling under my skin strengthened. After ten minutes without sight of another person, I halted, huddling with Little and Pointer.

"Trap?" I said.

"That's what it feels like, doesn't it?" Little whispered before frowning. "When did you learn our signs, sir?"

I fought to keep my mouth still. We were deep in enemy territory with danger all around, and despite that, Little couldn't keep his curiosity contained. How typical for him.

"I learned them when I was a boy," I said. "In Daira."

Stiffening, Pointer opened his mouth, probably to ask what I meant, but I shook my head.

"I shouldn't have said that. Now's not the time, but holding it in has been killing me," I said. "Please, don't tell Oswin yet, 'Sin. Let me do it."

As always, it didn't matter that I'd dropped a bomb on the older man. Quickly regaining his composure, he swatted Little when the younger spy tried to speak.

"Of course, sir," he said. "What are we doing about the obvious trap?"

"Walking into it, of course," I said.

I paused as the sounds of combat rang from down a narrow hallway.

“First, we’ll help whoever that is.”

We didn’t have to go far to find the source of the noise. A group of scruffy-looking men was attacking a single combatant not much further down the hall. As we rounded the corner, the single man ducked under a blade before rising to sink his dagger into his attacker’s neck.

I didn’t consider who might be my enemy or my friend. I saw uneven odds and leapt to the defense of the losing side.

Sprinting through the massed men, I spun to meet surprised eyes and flicked Ele from me at multiple angles. Nearly all of my bolts hit their targets, but one man, someone within striking distance, avoided his. Before I could shoot another Ele bolt at him, the man swung his sword, sending a sharp edge plummeting for my face, and a memory had me crashing to the floor.

“Stop fidgeting,” Lysinthir hisses.

Grimacing, I try to keep still, but I have so many questions and so much energy. I need to release it somehow.

“How is watching Auntie’s door stealth work?” I whisper. “Shouldn’t you be teaching me how to sneak past guard patrols or something? Or maybe how to assassinate someone without getting caught like you did with-?”

“It’s the QUEEN’S door, Raimie,” Lysinthir rasps, “and this IS stealth work. Now, hush and keep still.”

Biting my lip, I follow my instructions. Time flows by like sap from a tree, and after another hour of waiting, I’m ready to scream. Right when I’m about to pester Lysinthir with more questions, I hear a noise. It’s soft, the merest breath of a whisper, but after years of hearing it, I intimately know how a body sounds when it’s been lowered to the floor.

Lysinthir glances back at me.

‘Scout,’ his fingers flash.

Nodding, I make a bubble around my body and step out of cover. I noiselessly slide my feet across the palace’s slicked, tile flooring, and as I approach the corner that the noise came from, I draw a knife.

Peeking around it, I see two people wrapped in black cloth with a palace guard lying behind them. They’re kneeling in front of a contraption that I could swear I’ve seen before, but where could that have been? I rifle through my mental index of books while one of the intruders lights a match, and when I find the page that holds a drawing of this contraption, my heart flies into my throat.

Dynamite. And an intruder is lowering a flame to its fuse.

There's no thought. I fling my knife, never judging the distance between me and my target and with no aim to it. Fortunately, my skill with knives has improved since accidentally stabbing Oswin years before. The blade bites into the intruder's hand, sending the match that they were holding flying.

The intruder makes no sound, even with pain surely coursing through them. They merely rip my knife free, throwing it back toward me. I duck with wind ruffling my hair, and when I glance up, the other intruder is swinging a sword at my face.

I freeze. How did this person see me? Have I dropped my bubble-?

Metal clangs as a sword blocks the blade coming to kill me, and I roll to my feet, drawing my own short sword. Meanwhile, Lysinthir stabs at an intruder's gut.

Spinning, I again catch my first target trying to light the dynamite's fuse. Splashes of light chase my abnormally quick sprint to them. I tackle them as the match touches the fuse. After punching my sword through cloth and flesh, I roll off the intruder with their dying gasp muffled by a crackling noise.

Lysinthir's opponent hits the ground, and the older spy races for the dynamite, intending to do who knows what with it. Before he can reach it, I send two bolts, one of shadows followed by one of light, toward explosive death. The first bolt shears the lit fuse from its inactivated length while the second sends it spinning away, where it burns out within seconds.

Gasping, I collapse on the floor, trembling. I've been in many sticky situations since beginning my Hand training, but Alouin, that one was close.

"Good work," Lysinthir rasps.

He offers me a hand up, which I take.

"You saved my life," I say. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me," Lysinthir rasps. "You'll be my spymaster one day and a damn good one at that. Plus, you're royalty as much as Kaedesa is. Of course I did what I could to keep you safe."

"So, you didn't help me because you like me or anything," I say with a laugh. "I see how it is."

When a sword point touches my neck, I look down the length of its blade into Lysinthir's cold eyes.

"I like you, little Raimie," he rasps. "That's why I further abuse this ruined voice to give you a warning. The next time death's coming for you, don't freeze. I might not be there to save you."

Slowly, I nod, and Lysinthir lowers his sword.

"Let's clean up. No trace of our presence can remain when dawn breaks."

Steel burst through my attacker's chest, and I scrambled backward to avoid a toppling body. As if in echo of the memory, Lysinthir... Pointer stepped over the corpse, offering me a hand to my feet.

"I taught you better than that," he said.

"You did," I said with a grimace. "What can I say? My skills have faded over the years."

Nodding, Pointer said, "That's what happens when a father takes a pupil out from under a skilled tutor's care."

"Yes..." I drawled, unwilling to talk about my father at the moment.

Fortunately, a distraction quickly presented itself.

"Little! What are you doing?"

Moving among the people I'd sent to sleep, the spy was taking the time to crack each of them over the head.

"I'm making sure they stay down," Little said. "I fucking hate Kiraak. They give me the heebie jeebies."

Glancing up at me, he quirked a smile.

"Sir," he added, "shouldn't you deal with the man we rescued?"

Of course I should, but when I turned to offer them my greetings, I stopped short with my mouth gaping.

"I didn't need your help," Kylorian tiredly said.

Sheathing his blade, he limped deeper into the cave, leaving me tripping after him. I hadn't seen Kylorian since I'd last left Tiro, and considering how that meeting had gone, I wasn't sure how to act right now. Did my... friend still want me keeping my distance? Were we still friends?

"Ky! Why are you here?" I said. "Wait. Were you with Ren? Do you know where she is?"

Please, say he'd have information about her. I had to know if she was ok.

Kylorian stopped short with his shoulders rising toward his ears.

"Ren?" he asked.

"She's here, isn't she?" I said. "Are you looking for her?"

Heaving a sigh, Kylorian started forward again.

“Ren’s in Tiro, where she’ll stay until we’re sure Doldimar is truly gone,” he said. “I’m here to solve Vale’s bandit problem.”

She wasn’t here! The Enforcer’s gift must have come from someone else’s head, which meant the panic gnawing on my guts could loosen. So, why did a revelation that should have had me slumping with relief leave me bitter with disappointment instead?

“If you’re here on Vale’s behalf, you’ll need my help,” I said. “These people have an Enforcer controlling them.”

Chuckling, Kylorian said, “I know. He gave me a solid beating yesterday.”

Which explained why he looked so battered. Should I offer him sympathy?

“Is that what you would want in his position?” Nylion whispered.

Shooting a glance at my other half from the corner of my eye, I tried to figure out when he’d appeared but decided it didn’t matter. Nylion was, as always, right.

“Do you know where I can find the Enforcer?” I asked.

“Headed to him now,” Kylorian said. “Come if you want. It’s not like I could stop you.”

“I will,” I said, hesitating before I continued. “And Ky? About... Hadrion-”

Spinning, Kylorian grabbed my tunic.

“You *do not* speak to me about my brother,” he said before deflating. “Really, Raimie. It’s important. I’m doing my best to move on from what happened, but it’s still too soon to talk about it.”

Squeezing my eyes closed, I fought to clear away the image of a youth with a gap-toothed grin that had appeared on the back of my eyelids. I’d started forgetting the hurt of what had happened at the Birthing Grounds, and right as it had been fading, Kylorian had appeared, as if to remind me that I *couldn’t*. If not for me, that bright spark of life would never have been extinguished.

“It is not our fault,” Nylion said. “That is what we said, remember?”

I do, Nyl. I do.

It didn’t make me feel any less guilty.

“Unhand him,” Little said. “*Now.*”

The young spy was holding a blade to Kylorian’s throat with his free hand jerking the other man’s head back. Slowly, Kylorian released his grip on my tunic, and Little looked to me for what he should do next.

He was so young, no more than sixteen. When would my decisions get Little killed, like they had for Hadrion?

“Not our fault.”

I needed to remember this, and I'd try to do so in the future, but for now, what should I do about Kylorian? He hadn't *attacked* me, *per se*, and given the nature of what I'd said, I was actually surprised by how mild his reaction to it had been.

Besides that, I still considered him my friend. I didn't want to alienate him, not any more than I already had.

“Let him go,” I said. “He's taking us to the Enforcer, right?”

With a hesitant smile, Kylorian said, “That's right. Looking forward to watching you crush him.”

With an order given, Little stepped away, letting Kylorian take the lead for us.

Sidling up beside me, the young spy whispered, “Are you sure it's a good idea to trust him, sir? He could be part of the trap.”

“Maybe, although I highly doubt that,” I said. “Even if he was, though, we mean to walk into either way, remember?”

We trailed behind Kylorian, encountering occasional bandits, until we stumbled across our first patch of already unconscious enemies. The group lay in an intersection of hallways, right in front of where the caves opened into more livable quarters.

Crouching to examine one, I said, “Oswin's work?”

“And Thumb's,” Pointer said.

He pointed to a woman with a broken arm and a busted face.

“I wish I had a way to tell the others that they don't need to keep searching for Ren,” I said. “We'll probably need their backup before this is over.”

“If we do, Middle will be there,” Little said. “He has an uncanny ability of showing up whenever you need help, sir.”

“That he does.”

From the far hall, Kylorian called, “Hurry up! I won't wait forever.”

“Fair enough,” I called back.

Damn, he was in a *hurry*, but I could understand that, given how deep we'd ventured into enemy territory.

We passed through three more intersections before Dim popped into being in front of me.

“One of mine is nearby,” they said. “Can you feel them?”

Yes.

I'd felt the Daevetch snarl since encountering Oswin's work earlier, only letting Kylorian stay in the lead because it seemed to make him happy.

“What will you do once you find their human?” Dim asked.

I thought that was obvious.

“He is mine as well as yours, imbecile,” Bright said, appearing beside their counterpart.

“And that means he'll kill someone that my whole has claimed?” Dim asked. “Why hasn't he killed Eriadren at my whole's behest, then?”

Stop, I said with a mental sigh. *Is there another way to eliminate the threat, Dim? If so, I'll gladly take it. You know I don't like killing people.*

The splinter paused before saying, “No.”

There you go. I'll do what I can to kill this Enforcer and hope that I've learned enough since fighting Teron to stay alive in the process.

Sighing, Dim crossed their arms.

“Manipulation won't be happy with me,” they said, “but if they wanted to keep ahold of someone they've claimed, they shouldn't have pitted them against me. Chaos trumps them every time.”

They gave me a fierce grin with a glint in their eyes, one that I had to smile at in turn. When someone jerked me to the side, I almost passed through the splinter.

“Stopping now, sir,” Little whispered. “Tell Bright and Dim I say hello.”

Both splinters popped to the spy's side, ruffling his hair. Both bristled when their fingers touched.

“He's more mine than yours,” Dim growled.

Hissing, Bright raised illuminated hands, seemingly about to start an actual fight, and I sighed under my breath.

Stop, I said.

Immediately, the splinters returned to my side, placid and unmoving, which was good. The Daevetch snarl was waiting ahead, somewhere around the next bend.

I needed to *erase* it, protecting Vale in the process.

“Why are we stopping?” I hissed.

“For one thing, because Kylorian collapsed,” Little said.

What? When had that happened?

Glancing over my shoulder, I noted Pointer crouched over Ren’s brother and winced.

“Is he hurt?” I asked.

“I suspect the beating that he mentioned was more extensive than he implied,” Pointer said. “He’s not getting up any time soon.”

“Good,” I said. “I won’t need to worry about watching his back while fighting an Enforcer, then. You two-”

“Don’t you dare order us to stay here,” Little snapped before adding. “Sir.”

There went that plan.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said. “Let me handle as much as I can, though. Focus on the Kiraak with him.”

“Sir...”

“Little, that’s an order,” I said.

“Fine,” the spy said, biting off his words. “Can we at least wait for Middle and the others before engaging?”

And bring more people into a fight between primeancers?

“No.”

Striding around the corner, I ducked as a Daevetch bolt hurtled for my head. I heard Little and Pointer’s feet scraping behind me, but fortunately no bodies dropped. Quick to recover, the spies sprinted to the room’s fringes where Kiraak aplenty were waiting with their weapons bared.

The squat man in their midst looked nothing like the Enforcer I’d faced in the past, radiating none of the menace that they usually did, but the Daevetch snarl originated in him, and he bore an Enforcer’s characteristic black eyes.

Glancing over the carnage already unfolding around him, the man wrinkled his nose.

“You brought friends. How unfortunate,” he said. “This setting won’t do now.”

At his words, the Kiraak went stiff, dropping their swords and daggers as their hands clenched. Black lines snaked under their skin in one eyeblink, and in the next, those black lines had cut through their barriers and into the open air. Bodies limply slumped to the floor, leaving Pointer and Little frozen over enemies turned into mutilated corpses.

Meanwhile, the Enforcer had vanished, leaving me wondering if he'd fled, before reappearing right next to me. He wrapped his arms around my waist, and I caught a glimpse of Pointer and Little running for me before black subsumed the world.

It picked at me until the essence of who I was shattered, but somehow, I still heard a familiar voice yipping in warning at what the shards of me were floating through. Then, sunlight splashed on my skin, and I was whole once more.

Coughing, I aimlessly stumbled, hunching as the world spun.

What was that? Gods, what happened?

"That, frail human, is what you lot call shade melding," Dim—the familiar voice from before—said. "You momentarily stepped beneath the world's skin and into the place where my whole holds dominion."

"Get yourself together, Raimie," Bright snapped. "The enemy's still alive."

Groaning, I struggled to right myself. Where was I? Outside the caves, judging from the sun warming me, but where?

Trees were ringing me with an empty space between them. A clearing.

And a Daevetch primeancer was in front of me.

"You killed the Kiraak who were under your control?" I gasped. "Why?"

Cocking his head, the Enforcer said, "The Dark Lord ordered that there should be no witnesses, should I succeed with my task. If I manage to kill you, I don't want to return to those awful caves."

"So, Doldimar *is* still watching us," I said.

"Did I say that?" the Enforcer said. "No, I received my orders before he left. I have no idea what the bastard's doing now."

The loathing in his voice gave me pause, but before I could voice another question, the Enforcer flicked a Daevetch bolt at me. I skipped to the side, avoiding a sudden, gaping hole in my chest.

"Good. You've recovered," the Enforcer said with a smile. "We can begin."

When he disappeared, I wrapped myself in an Ele bubble, sprinting in no particular direction.

Bright? Dim?

“Emerging from the shadows in front of you... now,” Dim said.

Blasting Ele in front of me, I took great pleasure in watching the Enforcer tumble end over end away from me. The man gained his feet before I could reach him to finish the job, flinging shadows at me. I dodged the first two bolts, but the third hurtled for me with no way to avoid it. Desperately, I reached for the Chaos and Destruction racing my way, making it mine. Catching the bolt, I tossed it back, and it whizzed through empty air.

Huh. That was interesting. I hadn't known I could do that.

“One hundred degrees to your right,” Dim said.

Whirling, I caught the Enforcer's dagger on Silverblade, spinning my sword until the other man's weapon flew away. I followed that up with a fist to the face. Bone crunched beneath my knuckles, and screaming, the Enforcer stumbled backward, clutching at a gushing nose.

Spraying Daevetch in an arc between us, the Enforcer scrambled for the shadows beneath the trees. With a single thought, I parted the wall of shadows racing toward me, and as I sprinted after my adversary, I threw a knife at him. Only the man's fortuitous stumble stopped the blade from claiming his life. Instead, it embedded into his shoulder, and he howled as he merged with the shadows, right as I reached him.

This was getting ridiculous. Sure, everyone should exploit every advantage when in a fight, but having an enemy continually run from me like this was...

Well. It was irritating.

Beside me, Bright hissed, but I ignored the splinter's sudden discomfort. Instead, I stuck my hand into the shadows.

My arm disappeared up to the elbow while something tried to drag the rest of my body inside, but I held firm, casting out a line for what I sought. When something tugged on that line, I pulled back, and the Enforcer flew out of the shadows to land at my feet. Before he could flee again, I pinned him to the forest floor with Silverblade, dropping to my knee to lay a shadow-coated hand over his face.

“See, Manipulation?” the Enforcer coughed. “I told you he could do it. I'm free of you before I can cause too much damage.”

Again, I paused. Had this been what the Enforcer had *wanted*? Why deny the power that one could gain as a Daevetch primeancer? And why did the idea that this man might want an escape from that power annoy me so much?

“You've greatly overused the enemy whole, as I've been warning you since Elisk,” Bright said. “Release what you're holding, unless you want something truly horrible to happen.”

“What are you waiting for?” the Enforcer below me gasped, as if in agreement. “Kill me.”

“Gladly.”

I shot Daevetch through flesh, bone, and muscle, carving a hole in the Enforcer’s head. Air whistled from the mouth that was left behind, but I didn’t notice this. As shadows flew from me, they tore through my body with tiny knives laughingly dragged in their wake. I screamed, long and not at all silent like my companions had been in the forest before. If it had been unaware of our passage through it before, it definitely took notice of me now.

As I collapsed beside the man I’d killed, the part of my brain unoccupied with pain took note of my splinters holding a casual conversation above me.

“Do you think he’ll balance now?” Dim asked.

“Let’s hope so,” Bright said. “He’s used far too much of us in recent days, and if his balancing doesn’t resume soon, I fear that he won’t serve our purpose.”

Then, black dragged me under.

10

The Girl

I made no noise as I moved through the forest.

I was a wraith, haunting those who'd wronged me. Intent on finding Kylorian and *shaking answers out of him*.

He'd hit me. Again. I didn't know how often it was safe for someone to lose consciousness like I had—and in such a short time period too—but I thought I might be approaching that line, and both times I'd experienced it had been at my brother's hand.

Was it terrible that I wanted to strangle him as soon as I saw him again?

Before vanishing, he'd moved me into a part of Vale's bordering forest that I didn't know. When I'd woken up, I'd had to spend the better part of an hour simply getting my bearings. At least, an hour was how long it had felt. I had no way to keep track of time, not in this forest that wasn't mine.

Then, I'd gotten lost. I hadn't wanted to admit it, but after having passed the same weirdly knotted tree four times now, I felt like I could say it.

"I have no clue where I am."

Spinning in a slow circle, I tried to make a plan that would get me to a familiar place, but everything I considered was something I'd already tried.

Going in a straight line until the trees were at my back? I'd gone in circles instead.

Bending twigs to mark the path I'd take? I'd come across a broken twig again in no time.

Follow a creek until it reached Lake Lorne, nearby? That might be helpful if I could find any damn sources of water.

Honestly, it was making me doubt my skills as a woodswoman. Then again, my pounding headache, amplified by any direct sunlight, probably wasn't helping with that.

Could I have a concussion? That would be unfortunate.

A nearby howling scream interrupted my train of thought. Throughout the length of it, I stood stock still, pinned in place by that awful noise, but as soon as it cut off, I sprinted toward it. Anyone in

that much pain was bound to need help, and I was desperate for any human contact, even if it came from someone who might be badly beleaguered by a wound.

After what felt like an eternity of running, I was starting to worry that I might have lost my way again, but right when I planned to give up, I burst into a clearing with the sunlight filling it making my eye water. So, at the least, I'd found a new place to get lost in.

When my vision cleared, I scanned my surroundings, searching for whoever might have made that scream, and my eyes landed on four forms. Two lumps were lying in the clearing's tall grass while another two, nearly identical people were standing over them.

Bright and Dim. Raimie's splinters.

I wasn't aware of running. The next thing I knew I was kneeling over a face that I'd been dreaming of every night since he'd returned from the Birthing Grounds. He was pale with sweat rolling over his skin.

And very definitely unconscious.

I didn't know what possessed me. It was a violation of privacy that I wouldn't normally indulge, but maybe because of my probable concussion or maybe because of the stress I'd accumulated over the last few days, I kissed him.

And it felt wonderful, even if Raimie didn't respond to it. Gasping, I tangled my fingers in his hair and kissed him again, fully aware that I might be bruising my lips on his. Alouin, I'd missed this. I'd missed *him*.

Why had I thought leaving him was a good idea?

"You should run."

Groaning, I sat back on my heels, squinting at Bright.

"Why are you talking to me?" I said. "I thought the policy was to ignore the unclaimed anomaly who can see you."

"The stick in the mud is right this time, much as it pains me to admit it," Dim said. "You should run."

Glancing between them, I frowned.

"Why?"

They merely pointed at Raimie, which had me scanning him once more. Now that I wasn't so distracted by... *him*, I noticed how distressed he looked. He was mumbling in his sleep and...

Light and shadows were dancing under his skin, a war to fascinate the eye and terrorize the mind.

“Not good,” I breathed.

“Run,” the splinters said as one.

Springing to my feet, I fled Raimie once more, although no noble gesture was driving me this time. No, this time, fear nipped at my heels. Fear for what would happen, fear for my life when it did, fear for Raimie...

Raimie.

Grinding to a halt, I reversed course, meaning to go back as quickly as possible, and something *slammed* into me. I went flying with branches and leaves tearing at my skin and hair. The trees around me groaned until several released sickening *cracks*, and as I tumbled across the ground, something heavy crashed beside me.

With a hiss, I fluttered my eyes open, flinching when my lashes brushed a tree’s trunk. One that was lying right in front of me. I skittered like a beetle away from it, on all fours when I stopped.

What?

The question wouldn’t stop circling through my head as I picked my way back toward the clearing. Wreckage was littered across my path: fallen branches, uprooted plants, and felled trees.

What?

In the clearing, only Raimie remained. The other lump, once lying at his side, was gone, and his splinters had vanished. I approached him, ready to bolt at the first sign of... anything, really, but when I stood over him, I only found a peaceful face, completely ensnared by sleep. All signs of his turmoil had been wiped away.

“WHAT?” I screeched.

The noise prompted no reaction from Raimie, only more soft snores, and I wasn’t sure whether I should wake him up. On the one hand, he might help me find a way to Vale, and *I had questions*. On the other, I didn’t know what a reunion between us might look like and...

What the *hell* had that been?

I didn’t know how long I stood there, undecided, but when a hand landed on my shoulder, dragging me back to conscious thought, the sun was grazing the horizon.

“Ren, we’ve been looking everywhere for you,” Oswin said. “Are you... well? I’ve called your name several times.”

Of course Raimie had his Hand with him. One of them had always been hovering over him, even when in the safety of Tiro.

As I blinked, I realized that I was staring at empty ground where a body had once lain.

"Where's Raimie?" I asked.

Sighing, Oswin crossed his arms.

"Thumb's carrying him to Vale," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I... heard a scream. Ran to it," I said. "How did you find him?"

Oswin pointed.

"We followed the path of destruction."

Right. A forest devastated. Something that had sent me flying.

"What was that?" I whispered. "He... he..."

"I imagine this was the Enforcer's work," Oswin said, surveying the mess. "Whether it was caused during their fight or afterward, I couldn't say."

The Enforcer. The man who'd led Vale's bandit infestation. That must have been the second lump. Yes, that bastard might have been the origin point of what had happened here. But then, there was Bright and Dim's warning to me...

"Ren, you know I can't let you near him, right?" Oswin said. "At least, not if you mean to commit to this separation you've insisted upon. He's barely holding it together as it is."

Did I want to continue along as I had? Could I live the rest of my life without him?

No. I couldn't.

But.

I also couldn't be around him now. Since Hadrion's death, I'd become a box of broken pieces, only just beginning to put myself together once more. I wouldn't come crawling back to Raimie like that. The pieces must further meld before I could hope to beg for forgiveness.

Plus, whatever *that* had been, the force to fell a copse of trees, I needed time to process it. If it had come from Raimie, then I might need to redefine what I thought of him. I wasn't sure about that yet.

So, I said, "I have to find my brother."

"Already done," Oswin said. "Pointer and Little took him to a homestead, near the turnoff for Vale. He's probably recovering there. I can take you to him."

“Thank you,” I said, “and Oswin? I don’t plan on staying away from Raimie for forever. When I’m ready, I’ll return to him. If he’ll have me.”

A faint smile crossed Oswin’s face.

“Oh, he will. Once the stubborn fool has his heart set on something or someone, he never lets it go,” he said, “and much as I might resent the pain you’ve caused him, I think you’ll do him more help than harm, in the long run at least. I’ll set aside my anger for my friend’s happiness.”

“That’s... forgiving of you,” I said.

Oswin’s grin turned sharp.

“Don’t test that forgiveness. If you hurt him again, I’ll murder you with my bare hands, and I won’t feel a thing once it’s done,” he said. “Now, let’s get you to your brother.”

“So, that’s been my last few weeks,” I said. “Pretty intense, right?”

Pausing, I glanced in the direction of Tiro. Home. Or what should have been home.

“I understand Ky’s reluctance to visit us now. Having returned after seeing more of Auden, I know how *small* Tiro is, and... I feel your absence more keenly, Had-had.”

Blinking back tears, I cleared my throat.

“Anyway, I should finish my story. By the time Ky woke up, Raimie had not only removed Corruption from Faramede, Vale’s mayor, but accepted her and the town’s undying gratitude for saving them. Kylorian wasn’t happy about that, but then again, I doubt Raimie was either, the idiot.

“You were right, little brother. I shouldn’t have ended things with him, but don’t worry. I’m planning on taking your advice. I will do what’s best for me, but it’ll be in my own time.”

Far distant, Kylorian called, “Ren, are you almost ready?”

Puffing a sigh, I blew hair out of my eyes.

“Give me a minute, Ky. Alouin, you’re impatient sometimes.”

Crouching, I laid a hand on Hadrion’s grave.

“I’m off again, Had-had,” I said. “I’ve got to keep Ky safe, even if it’s from himself. I’ll be the shield for him that I failed to be for you because I love my brother. I love you both. See you soon.”

Rising, I brushed off of my hands as I hurried toward Kylorian.

“*You*,” I said, pointing at him, “are very rude.”

"I'm sorry, but we have a schedule to keep," Kylorian said.

"I know that," I said, rolling my eyes. "So? Let's get to it."

I strode forward, but when Kylorian started after me, I whirled on him, poking his chest.

"You owe me two unbidden trips into dreamland," I said.

Kylorian made a face.

"I said I was sorry and explained why I did it-"

"Trying to protect me is *not* a good enough excuse for something like that," I said.

When I shoved him, he rocked back.

"The next time you do *anything* like that, I will leave you in whatever scrape you've landed in, and I won't look back," I said. "Do you understand me?"

At his sides, Kylorian clenched his fists. I probably hadn't been meant to see the motion, close as I was, but I had, and it made me wince. I'd never actually follow through on my threat. Kylorian must know that, but I had to establish how little I needed him to keep me safe. What I'd said wouldn't, however, help him with whatever internal battle he'd been fighting since Hadrion's death, and I hated adding to its difficulty.

"I understand," he eventually said through gritted teeth.

"Good!"

Wrapping my arms around my brother, I squeezed until he returned my hug, and after a moment, I escaped from him, dancing away.

"Come on, Ky! Let's go convince a bunch of suspicious, twitchy survivors that you should be king!"

Together, my brother and I left home and the grave of our youngest sibling behind.