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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."