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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.

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