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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.

Revision #1

Created 2 November 2024 19:18:04 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable