

# 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.”

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