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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.

“Faramede’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 Faramede’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.”

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