

8

The Girl

I'd never met a more intimidating man.

He was short enough that I could look down on him while his flabby muscles and loose skin made me wonder how he'd survived for so long in Doldimar's domain.

Or I did so until I met the man's eyes. Pure black, they dried my mouth, simply by resting on me as they were, and he had no need to do anything else to make me quail before him. I'd heard too many horror stories about Enforcers from Harvest refugees and had too many close calls with Teron for it to be anything less. So, when he smiled at me, tilting his head, I nearly ran screaming in the other direction.

When I managed to hold my ground instead, the Enforcer clapped.

"Well done, my dear," he said. "Most people would be sobbing on their knees before me by now."

Somehow, I ignored my pulse, fluttering in my ears, and my knees, threatening to knock together.

"Would that do me any good?" I asked.

"A defiant one. I like the defiant ones. I hope I don't have to kill her," the Enforcer said, presumably not to me. "Will he come in time to save her, do you think, Manipulation?"

He?

"I don't need someone to rescue me," I said.

With a faint smile, the Enforcer patted my cheek, and I fought to keep from recoiling.

"Of course not, dear," he said. "Well, come in. Let's begin."

He stepped aside, waving through the doorway as if in challenge. Did he expect me to willingly walk into what could only become a time of suffering?

But what else was I supposed to do? Get dragged inside and make a scene? That would only ruin the opening move that I'd made in this game.

As I strode inside, I ignored the Enforcer's chuckle behind me.

The room beyond was dark with candlelight only revealing what lay in the center of it. There, a rickety table stood with a candelabra and place settings for two atop it.

“Take a seat,” the Enforcer said.

Breezing past me, he claimed the chair closest to the room’s entrance, and I edged toward the second one. As I sat, a man sailed into the room with a platter full of food in his hand. He arranged his bounty in front of the Enforcer and me with sweat rolling over his forehead, and as he did so, he tipped my mug onto the floor. The clatter of wood on stone was loud in the stillness, all while the man froze.

Diving for the mug, he said, “I’ll get another one. I’m sorry. I’ll fix it.”

“Yes. You will,” the Enforcer said.

A black spiderweb shot out from the back of the man’s head, sweeping over his face until the skin over it was straining to keep those horrid vines contained. As this arrangement was held in place, the man suppressed a groan, but then, it vanished, and he skittered out of the room.

“Apologies for my staff,” the Enforcer said. “They’re not the most qualified of people, but they’re what I have to work with right now.”

Retrieving his utensils, he cut into his meat with each slice controlled and precise, but I couldn’t move. I could let my eyes track over what little of the room I could see, seeking advantages, but the rest of my body was stuck in place.

“You’re not hungry?” the Enforcer asked, pointing at my plate.

What should I do? Could I demand answers for everything I’d seen from this man?

A Kiraak who didn’t look like a Kiraak. Was this some new form of terror, devised by Doldimar? A way to create suspicion in the minds of a people who thought they were free? Was it a special modification found only in this Enforcer’s Kiraak? Or should I ask about him, getting at least a name from my captor? Could I ask questions right now?

There was no harm in trying.

“What did you do to my brother?” I made myself say.

Pausing in his chewing, the Enforcer considered me while something flickered in his dark eyes.

“What I must to survive. As we all do,” he answered. “You find yourself in mortal peril, and yet, your first concern is for him. How curious.”

“He’s my brother. Of course I’m worried about him, especially when he’s not acting like himself,” I said. “What *specifically* did you do to Kylorian?”

Sighing, the Enforcer set his fork down.

"I didn't infect him with Daevetch, if that's what you're worried about. I merely reminded him of his place," he said before making a face. "Do you mean to simply sit there? My staff went to such trouble when preparing this meal."

"It's hard to eat when I have nothing to wash my food down with," I said.

Better to mention that excuse than to admit how clenched tight my stomach was right now.

Unfortunately, the man who'd served us earlier rushed into the room with a new mug for me, as if summoned by my excuse. He set it on the table with its amber contents sloshing within it.

"You were saying?" the Enforcer said.

Woodenly, I reached for my knife and fork, and soon, chunks of meat were passing, untasted, over my tongue.

"Ask your questions," the Enforcer said. "The curiosity must be killing you."

The only thing gnawing at me was the image of my beaten brother, carved into my mind.

"I'd rather not," I said, "but you obviously want to share, so why don't you?"

A spasm crossed the Enforcer's face, which had him nearly dropping his utensils.

"Careful, my dear," he said. "I may be new to my power, not yet to the point where Daevetch has driven me mad, but I'm still *new*. I don't know my limits."

"Maybe I should push harder, then," I said. "If you mean to kill me, I'd rather it be now than after you torture me."

The Enforcer paused with his fork halfway raised to his mouth, flicking his eyes up to bore into me, and I flipped my grip on my knife, ready for a fight no matter how short I knew it would be.

"I have no intention of killing you, my dear" the Enforcer said. "Why would I kill my bait? It defeats the purpose."

At those words, the world slowed down around me with each sip of air growing steadily frostier.

"Bait?" I softly said.

"Mm," the Enforcer said. "You use it to lure another person, usually a loved one, into a trap. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"Of course I have, cretin," I snapped. "Who's the trap for?"

Lowering his hands to the table, the Enforcer shook his head.

"I had so hoped for a pleasant meal," he said.

As fire rose from within to combat the air's chill, I leapt across the table with the candelabra and dishes rattling to the floor. With one hand on the Enforcer's shoulder, I held my knife in front of his eyes, poised to strike.

"Who's the trap for?" I shouted.

The Enforcer lazily blinked.

"The one I've been ordered to kill," he said. "The one that I hope will kill me instead."

Who could kill an Enforcer? Someone who'd done it before, obviously. And who would Doldimar send an Enforcer to murder, knowing that the task wouldn't end in the waste of a valuable tool? Not my blood brother, Rhylix. He'd simply heal from what should be a killing blow, which according to my brother, Doldimar knew. That left...

"Raimie," I breathed.

"Precisely."

"But... he hates me," I said. "I broke his heart."

"Are you sure about that?" the Enforcer asked.

Such smugness and sadness there! I couldn't stand it.

Screaming, I plunged my knife forward and met empty air. With momentum careening me toward the ground, I tilted over the table's edge, but before I could fall, something caught the back of my tunic. My motion reversed, ending with me crashing on top of the table with a hand coated in Daevetch pointed at my face.

"Hold still," the Enforcer said.

Shadows swirled toward me, barely missing my head, and once the bolt had cracked into the wood beneath me, the Enforcer lifted a tuft of my hair into the air.

"Will this be enough, Manipulation?" he asked.

Oh, Alouin. He'd bring Raimie here, and if he didn't realize it was a trap, the one I loved would die.

"Please," I said. "Please, don't hurt him."

The Enforcer cocked his head.

"Nothing from you when your life's in danger, but you plead with me when I threaten him," he said. "You truly are a curious being, Ren."

As he was intimidating.

“Take her to her cell,” he called over his shoulder. “No harm is to come to her until we know whether the trap has sprung.”

He disappeared, and the bandit... the Kiraak who'd escorted me to this room grabbed my arm, dragging me up and away.

I had to escape and warn Raimie, no matter what seeing him again would do to me. But how? I was unarmed with only the clothes on my back to claim as my own.

Unarmed except for the one weapon that had always been mine.

Illusory, blinding light burst into the hall, but because it was my creation, I'd closed my eyes before its appearance. My escort, on the other hand, reeled away from that surge. While he struggled to recuperate, I stole his dagger from him, smashing its pommel into his temple until he dropped, senseless, to the floor, and I was left panting over him.

It was amazing the reckless lengths I'd go to if given enough motivation. Amazing how it rearranged my priorities.

Kylorian first. No matter how much the protective beast inside roared for me to run to Raimie and keep him from doing anything stupid, I wouldn't leave my brother here.

When I unlocked our cell's door, Kylorian barely stirred, making me hurry to him.

Tugging on his arm, I said, “Ky, we need to go. Get up.”

“Ren?” he said. “What are you-?”

I dumped the clothes that I'd stripped off of my escort onto him.

“Hurry and get dressed,” I whispered. “I don't know how long we have.”

Sitting up, Kylorian glanced from me to the open door before breaking into a grin and throwing the tunic on.

“I *knew* you'd think of something,” he said. “How could a measly Enforcer keep the Terror of Da'kul contained?”

“What about you?” I asked. “The brother I know would have escaped from here hours ago.”

Pouting, Kylorian said, “I had mitigating circumstances to contend with.”

“Like a beating's ever stopped you before,” I said with a snort.

Kylorian paused while donning the trousers.

“It did this time,” he said.

“Which makes it fortunate for you that I’m here,” I said. “If you’re ready?”

We snuck through the caves with little difficulty, only encountering the occasional bandit, but they were easily dispatched. Finding the exit took quite some time, and once we had, stepping out beneath a starry sky, I took a deep breath of free air.

“No time for celebration,” I said. “Let’s head for Vale, quick as we can.”

Because where else would Raimie be? Given how our lives were, I’d be surprised if he was anywhere else.

I took off into the forest, risking a fall or a branch in the eye with each step. Kylorian kept at my side.

After a moment, he breathed, “Huh.”

The exhalation had been so perplexed that I spared a glance at my brother. With his eyes squinted, he was fiercely rubbing his skin while slowing down.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. “We need to keep going.”

When I raced back toward him, Kylorian snapped his head up.

“Sorry, Ren,” he said.

He bashed the heel of his palm into the bridge of my nose, and for the second time in as many days, my brother sent me into unconsciousness.

Revision #1

Created 3 November 2024 17:51:11 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable