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The Boy

As they moved through the forest, Pointer and Little made no noise, none that I could detect at least. If I didn't know differently, I'd think they were ghosts, gliding through the trees.

I, on the other hand, could make no such claims to stealth. Those skills had rusted to flakes after half a lifetime with no practice. Lessons with Rhylix and Ferin might have resuscitated what I'd long ago learned about diplomacy and combat but stealth? I'd had no help with that.

I did, however, have something that my companions did not. It was the only thing that had won me my argument to join the fight today.

When I'd brought the topic up, Oswin had said, "You staying in Vale, sir."

"Am I?" I'd said. "How do you plan on keeping me here? Can you stop someone you can't see?"

Gods, Oswin had been cranky since conceding that I was right.

Slowing down, Pointer raised a hand, pressing it down toward the ground. He and Little sank to their bellies while I pulled my Ele source around my body, disappearing to everyone outside the bubble. Again, Pointer moved his hands, flashing signs toward Little.

'Patrol sighted. Fifty yards, dead ahead,' they said. 'Stay with asset.'

Asset? Really?

Now that Pointer had pointed him out, I saw a man's head bobbing above a crop of bushes. Little levered himself to his feet, but by the time he'd attained them, I'd found the patrolling man's eyes. It would be a difficult angle but...

I shot Ele at the man, and with a gasp, he collapsed into sleep. At the sound, weapons were in my spies' hands, and I walked between them, rolling the patrolling man over with my toe. Shooting more Ele into his eyes, I reinforced the command for sleep. Once I was sure he wasn't getting up, I dropped my Ele bubble.

"What was *that*?" Little hissed.

'Quiet,' I said with dancing fingers.

Drawing Daevetch to my arms, I hoisted the unconscious man off of the ground, carrying him to a denser patch of foliage before dumping him into it. Turning to the spy, I smiled at Little's wide-eyed stare, even if Pointer's speculative look stole something from the moment. I waved for the older spy to take the lead again.

Both of them seemed reluctant to move ahead, but when I rolled my eyes, continuing without them, they were quick to follow. Soon enough, the three of us reached the cave that we believed to be the bandit's hideout. The lumps sitting outside of its entrance told me that the rest of my Hand had already arrived, although they appeared to have moved on without us.

When Pointer looked at me, I signed, 'Advance.'

As we passed the fallen bandits, I knelt to check their pulses. One of them was unconscious while the other one was dead.

I'd told the Hand to leave the enemy alive as much as they could. If an Enforcer was leading them, they were likely Kiraak, which meant they had little control over their actions. I hadn't decided what I'd do with them once this was over, not with Clerindel's face still fresh on my mind, but for now, I didn't want these people dead.

We moved like ghosts through the cave, and with every yard we crossed sans opposition, the lightning crackling under my skin strengthened. After ten minutes without sight of another person, I halted, huddling with Little and Pointer.

"Trap?" I said.

"That's what it feels like, doesn't it?" Little whispered before frowning. "When did you learn our signs, sir?"

I fought to keep my mouth still. We were deep in enemy territory with danger all around, and despite that, Little couldn't keep his curiosity contained. How typical for him.

"I learned them when I was a boy," I said. "In Daira."

Stiffening, Pointer opened his mouth, probably to ask what I meant, but I shook my head.

"I shouldn't have said that. Now's not the time, but holding it in has been killing me," I said. "Please, don't tell Oswin yet, 'Sin. Let me do it."

As always, it didn't matter that I'd dropped a bomb on the older man. Quickly regaining his composure, he swatted Little when the younger spy tried to speak.

"Of course, sir," he said. "What are we doing about the obvious trap?"

"Walking into it, of course," I said.

I paused as the sounds of combat rang from down a narrow hallway.

“First, we’ll help whoever that is.”

We didn’t have to go far to find the source of the noise. A group of scruffy-looking men was attacking a single combatant not much further down the hall. As we rounded the corner, the single man ducked under a blade before rising to sink his dagger into his attacker’s neck.

I didn’t consider who might be my enemy or my friend. I saw uneven odds and leapt to the defense of the losing side.

Sprinting through the massed men, I spun to meet surprised eyes and flicked Ele from me at multiple angles. Nearly all of my bolts hit their targets, but one man, someone within striking distance, avoided his. Before I could shoot another Ele bolt at him, the man swung his sword, sending a sharp edge plummeting for my face, and a memory had me crashing to the floor.

“Stop fidgeting,” Lysinthir hisses.

Grimacing, I try to keep still, but I have so many questions and so much energy. I need to release it somehow.

“How is watching Auntie’s door stealth work?” I whisper. “Shouldn’t you be teaching me how to sneak past guard patrols or something? Or maybe how to assassinate someone without getting caught like you did with-?”

“It’s the QUEEN’S door, Raimie,” Lysinthir rasps, “and this IS stealth work. Now, hush and keep still.”

Biting my lip, I follow my instructions. Time flows by like sap from a tree, and after another hour of waiting, I’m ready to scream. Right when I’m about to pester Lysinthir with more questions, I hear a noise. It’s soft, the merest breath of a whisper, but after years of hearing it, I intimately know how a body sounds when it’s been lowered to the floor.

Lysinthir glances back at me.

‘Scout,’ his fingers flash.

Nodding, I make a bubble around my body and step out of cover. I noiselessly slide my feet across the palace’s slicked, tile flooring, and as I approach the corner that the noise came from, I draw a knife.

Peeking around it, I see two people wrapped in black cloth with a palace guard lying behind them. They’re kneeling in front of a contraption that I could swear I’ve seen before, but where could that have been? I rifle through my mental index of books while one of the intruders lights a match, and when I find the page that holds a drawing of this contraption, my heart flies into my throat.

Dynamite. And an intruder is lowering a flame to its fuse.

There's no thought. I fling my knife, never judging the distance between me and my target and with no aim to it. Fortunately, my skill with knives has improved since accidentally stabbing Oswin years before. The blade bites into the intruder's hand, sending the match that they were holding flying.

The intruder makes no sound, even with pain surely coursing through them. They merely rip my knife free, throwing it back toward me. I duck with wind ruffling my hair, and when I glance up, the other intruder is swinging a sword at my face.

I freeze. How did this person see me? Have I dropped my bubble-?

Metal clangs as a sword blocks the blade coming to kill me, and I roll to my feet, drawing my own short sword. Meanwhile, Lysinthir stabs at an intruder's gut.

Spinning, I again catch my first target trying to light the dynamite's fuse. Splashes of light chase my abnormally quick sprint to them. I tackle them as the match touches the fuse. After punching my sword through cloth and flesh, I roll off the intruder with their dying gasp muffled by a crackling noise.

Lysinthir's opponent hits the ground, and the older spy races for the dynamite, intending to do who knows what with it. Before he can reach it, I send two bolts, one of shadows followed by one of light, toward explosive death. The first bolt shears the lit fuse from its inactivated length while the second sends it spinning away, where it burns out within seconds.

Gasping, I collapse on the floor, trembling. I've been in many sticky situations since beginning my Hand training, but Alouin, that one was close.

"Good work," Lysinthir rasps.

He offers me a hand up, which I take.

"You saved my life," I say. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me," Lysinthir rasps. "You'll be my spymaster one day and a damn good one at that. Plus, you're royalty as much as Kaedesa is. Of course I did what I could to keep you safe."

"So, you didn't help me because you like me or anything," I say with a laugh. "I see how it is."

When a sword point touches my neck, I look down the length of its blade into Lysinthir's cold eyes.

"I like you, little Raimie," he rasps. "That's why I further abuse this ruined voice to give you a warning. The next time death's coming for you, don't freeze. I might not be there to save you."

Slowly, I nod, and Lysinthir lowers his sword.

"Let's clean up. No trace of our presence can remain when dawn breaks."

Steel burst through my attacker's chest, and I scrambled backward to avoid a toppling body. As if in echo of the memory, Lysinthir... Pointer stepped over the corpse, offering me a hand to my feet.

"I taught you better than that," he said.

"You did," I said with a grimace. "What can I say? My skills have faded over the years."

Nodding, Pointer said, "That's what happens when a father takes a pupil out from under a skilled tutor's care."

"Yes..." I drawled, unwilling to talk about my father at the moment.

Fortunately, a distraction quickly presented itself.

"Little! What are you doing?"

Moving among the people I'd sent to sleep, the spy was taking the time to crack each of them over the head.

"I'm making sure they stay down," Little said. "I fucking hate Kiraak. They give me the heebie jeebies."

Glancing up at me, he quirked a smile.

"Sir," he added, "shouldn't you deal with the man we rescued?"

Of course I should, but when I turned to offer them my greetings, I stopped short with my mouth gaping.

"I didn't need your help," Kylorian tiredly said.

Sheathing his blade, he limped deeper into the cave, leaving me tripping after him. I hadn't seen Kylorian since I'd last left Tiro, and considering how that meeting had gone, I wasn't sure how to act right now. Did my... friend still want me keeping my distance? Were we still friends?

"Ky! Why are you here?" I said. "Wait. Were you with Ren? Do you know where she is?"

Please, say he'd have information about her. I had to know if she was ok.

Kylorian stopped short with his shoulders rising toward his ears.

"Ren?" he asked.

"She's here, isn't she?" I said. "Are you looking for her?"

Heaving a sigh, Kylorian started forward again.

“Ren’s in Tiro, where she’ll stay until we’re sure Doldimar is truly gone,” he said. “I’m here to solve Vale’s bandit problem.”

She wasn’t here! The Enforcer’s gift must have come from someone else’s head, which meant the panic gnawing on my guts could loosen. So, why did a revelation that should have had me slumping with relief leave me bitter with disappointment instead?

“If you’re here on Vale’s behalf, you’ll need my help,” I said. “These people have an Enforcer controlling them.”

Chuckling, Kylorian said, “I know. He gave me a solid beating yesterday.”

Which explained why he looked so battered. Should I offer him sympathy?

“Is that what you would want in his position?” Nylion whispered.

Shooting a glance at my other half from the corner of my eye, I tried to figure out when he’d appeared but decided it didn’t matter. Nylion was, as always, right.

“Do you know where I can find the Enforcer?” I asked.

“Headed to him now,” Kylorian said. “Come if you want. It’s not like I could stop you.”

“I will,” I said, hesitating before I continued. “And Ky? About... Hadrion-”

Spinning, Kylorian grabbed my tunic.

“You *do not* speak to me about my brother,” he said before deflating. “Really, Raimie. It’s important. I’m doing my best to move on from what happened, but it’s still too soon to talk about it.”

Squeezing my eyes closed, I fought to clear away the image of a youth with a gap-toothed grin that had appeared on the back of my eyelids. I’d started forgetting the hurt of what had happened at the Birthing Grounds, and right as it had been fading, Kylorian had appeared, as if to remind me that I *couldn’t*. If not for me, that bright spark of life would never have been extinguished.

“It is not our fault,” Nylion said. “That is what we said, remember?”

I do, Nyl. I do.

It didn’t make me feel any less guilty.

“Unhand him,” Little said. “*Now.*”

The young spy was holding a blade to Kylorian’s throat with his free hand jerking the other man’s head back. Slowly, Kylorian released his grip on my tunic, and Little looked to me for what he should do next.

He was so young, no more than sixteen. When would my decisions get Little killed, like they had for Hadrion?

“Not our fault.”

I needed to remember this, and I'd try to do so in the future, but for now, what should I do about Kylorian? He hadn't *attacked* me, *per se*, and given the nature of what I'd said, I was actually surprised by how mild his reaction to it had been.

Besides that, I still considered him my friend. I didn't want to alienate him, not any more than I already had.

“Let him go,” I said. “He's taking us to the Enforcer, right?”

With a hesitant smile, Kylorian said, “That's right. Looking forward to watching you crush him.”

With an order given, Little stepped away, letting Kylorian take the lead for us.

Sidling up beside me, the young spy whispered, “Are you sure it's a good idea to trust him, sir? He could be part of the trap.”

“Maybe, although I highly doubt that,” I said. “Even if he was, though, we mean to walk into either way, remember?”

We trailed behind Kylorian, encountering occasional bandits, until we stumbled across our first patch of already unconscious enemies. The group lay in an intersection of hallways, right in front of where the caves opened into more livable quarters.

Crouching to examine one, I said, “Oswin's work?”

“And Thumb's,” Pointer said.

He pointed to a woman with a broken arm and a busted face.

“I wish I had a way to tell the others that they don't need to keep searching for Ren,” I said. “We'll probably need their backup before this is over.”

“If we do, Middle will be there,” Little said. “He has an uncanny ability of showing up whenever you need help, sir.”

“That he does.”

From the far hall, Kylorian called, “Hurry up! I won't wait forever.”

“Fair enough,” I called back.

Damn, he was in a *hurry*, but I could understand that, given how deep we'd ventured into enemy territory.

We passed through three more intersections before Dim popped into being in front of me.

“One of mine is nearby,” they said. “Can you feel them?”

Yes.

I'd felt the Daevetch snarl since encountering Oswin's work earlier, only letting Kylorian stay in the lead because it seemed to make him happy.

“What will you do once you find their human?” Dim asked.

I thought that was obvious.

“He is mine as well as yours, imbecile,” Bright said, appearing beside their counterpart.

“And that means he'll kill someone that my whole has claimed?” Dim asked. “Why hasn't he killed Eriadren at my whole's behest, then?”

Stop, I said with a mental sigh. *Is there another way to eliminate the threat, Dim? If so, I'll gladly take it. You know I don't like killing people.*

The splinter paused before saying, “No.”

There you go. I'll do what I can to kill this Enforcer and hope that I've learned enough since fighting Teron to stay alive in the process.

Sighing, Dim crossed their arms.

“Manipulation won't be happy with me,” they said, “but if they wanted to keep ahold of someone they've claimed, they shouldn't have pitted them against me. Chaos trumps them every time.”

They gave me a fierce grin with a glint in their eyes, one that I had to smile at in turn. When someone jerked me to the side, I almost passed through the splinter.

“Stopping now, sir,” Little whispered. “Tell Bright and Dim I say hello.”

Both splinters popped to the spy's side, ruffling his hair. Both bristled when their fingers touched.

“He's more mine than yours,” Dim growled.

Hissing, Bright raised illuminated hands, seemingly about to start an actual fight, and I sighed under my breath.

Stop, I said.

Immediately, the splinters returned to my side, placid and unmoving, which was good. The Daevetch snarl was waiting ahead, somewhere around the next bend.

I needed to *erase* it, protecting Vale in the process.

“Why are we stopping?” I hissed.

“For one thing, because Kylorian collapsed,” Little said.

What? When had that happened?

Glancing over my shoulder, I noted Pointer crouched over Ren’s brother and winced.

“Is he hurt?” I asked.

“I suspect the beating that he mentioned was more extensive than he implied,” Pointer said. “He’s not getting up any time soon.”

“Good,” I said. “I won’t need to worry about watching his back while fighting an Enforcer, then. You two-”

“Don’t you dare order us to stay here,” Little snapped before adding. “Sir.”

There went that plan.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said. “Let me handle as much as I can, though. Focus on the Kiraak with him.”

“Sir...”

“Little, that’s an order,” I said.

“Fine,” the spy said, biting off his words. “Can we at least wait for Middle and the others before engaging?”

And bring more people into a fight between primeancers?

“No.”

Striding around the corner, I ducked as a Daevetch bolt hurtled for my head. I heard Little and Pointer’s feet scraping behind me, but fortunately no bodies dropped. Quick to recover, the spies sprinted to the room’s fringes where Kiraak aplenty were waiting with their weapons bared.

The squat man in their midst looked nothing like the Enforcer I’d faced in the past, radiating none of the menace that they usually did, but the Daevetch snarl originated in him, and he bore an Enforcer’s characteristic black eyes.

Glancing over the carnage already unfolding around him, the man wrinkled his nose.

“You brought friends. How unfortunate,” he said. “This setting won’t do now.”

At his words, the Kiraak went stiff, dropping their swords and daggers as their hands clenched. Black lines snaked under their skin in one eyeblink, and in the next, those black lines had cut through their barriers and into the open air. Bodies limply slumped to the floor, leaving Pointer and Little frozen over enemies turned into mutilated corpses.

Meanwhile, the Enforcer had vanished, leaving me wondering if he'd fled, before reappearing right next to me. He wrapped his arms around my waist, and I caught a glimpse of Pointer and Little running for me before black subsumed the world.

It picked at me until the essence of who I was shattered, but somehow, I still heard a familiar voice yipping in warning at what the shards of me were floating through. Then, sunlight splashed on my skin, and I was whole once more.

Coughing, I aimlessly stumbled, hunching as the world spun.

What was that? Gods, what happened?

"That, frail human, is what you lot call shade melding," Dim—the familiar voice from before—said. "You momentarily stepped beneath the world's skin and into the place where my whole holds dominion."

"Get yourself together, Raimie," Bright snapped. "The enemy's still alive."

Groaning, I struggled to right myself. Where was I? Outside the caves, judging from the sun warming me, but where?

Trees were ringing me with an empty space between them. A clearing.

And a Daevetch primeancer was in front of me.

"You killed the Kiraak who were under your control?" I gasped. "Why?"

Cocking his head, the Enforcer said, "The Dark Lord ordered that there should be no witnesses, should I succeed with my task. If I manage to kill you, I don't want to return to those awful caves."

"So, Doldimar *is* still watching us," I said.

"Did I say that?" the Enforcer said. "No, I received my orders before he left. I have no idea what the bastard's doing now."

The loathing in his voice gave me pause, but before I could voice another question, the Enforcer flicked a Daevetch bolt at me. I skipped to the side, avoiding a sudden, gaping hole in my chest.

"Good. You've recovered," the Enforcer said with a smile. "We can begin."

When he disappeared, I wrapped myself in an Ele bubble, sprinting in no particular direction.

Bright? Dim?

“Emerging from the shadows in front of you... now,” Dim said.

Blasting Ele in front of me, I took great pleasure in watching the Enforcer tumble end over end away from me. The man gained his feet before I could reach him to finish the job, flinging shadows at me. I dodged the first two bolts, but the third hurtled for me with no way to avoid it. Desperately, I reached for the Chaos and Destruction racing my way, making it mine. Catching the bolt, I tossed it back, and it whizzed through empty air.

Huh. That was interesting. I hadn't known I could do that.

“One hundred degrees to your right,” Dim said.

Whirling, I caught the Enforcer's dagger on Silverblade, spinning my sword until the other man's weapon flew away. I followed that up with a fist to the face. Bone crunched beneath my knuckles, and screaming, the Enforcer stumbled backward, clutching at a gushing nose.

Spraying Daevetch in an arc between us, the Enforcer scrambled for the shadows beneath the trees. With a single thought, I parted the wall of shadows racing toward me, and as I sprinted after my adversary, I threw a knife at him. Only the man's fortuitous stumble stopped the blade from claiming his life. Instead, it embedded into his shoulder, and he howled as he merged with the shadows, right as I reached him.

This was getting ridiculous. Sure, everyone should exploit every advantage when in a fight, but having an enemy continually run from me like this was...

Well. It was irritating.

Beside me, Bright hissed, but I ignored the splinter's sudden discomfort. Instead, I stuck my hand into the shadows.

My arm disappeared up to the elbow while something tried to drag the rest of my body inside, but I held firm, casting out a line for what I sought. When something tugged on that line, I pulled back, and the Enforcer flew out of the shadows to land at my feet. Before he could flee again, I pinned him to the forest floor with Silverblade, dropping to my knee to lay a shadow-coated hand over his face.

“See, Manipulation?” the Enforcer coughed. “I told you he could do it. I'm free of you before I can cause too much damage.”

Again, I paused. Had this been what the Enforcer had *wanted*? Why deny the power that one could gain as a Daevetch primeancer? And why did the idea that this man might want an escape from that power annoy me so much?

“You've greatly overused the enemy whole, as I've been warning you since Elisk,” Bright said. “Release what you're holding, unless you want something truly horrible to happen.”

“What are you waiting for?” the Enforcer below me gasped, as if in agreement. “Kill me.”

“Gladly.”

I shot Daevetch through flesh, bone, and muscle, carving a hole in the Enforcer’s head. Air whistled from the mouth that was left behind, but I didn’t notice this. As shadows flew from me, they tore through my body with tiny knives laughingly dragged in their wake. I screamed, long and not at all silent like my companions had been in the forest before. If it had been unaware of our passage through it before, it definitely took notice of me now.

As I collapsed beside the man I’d killed, the part of my brain unoccupied with pain took note of my splinters holding a casual conversation above me.

“Do you think he’ll balance now?” Dim asked.

“Let’s hope so,” Bright said. “He’s used far too much of us in recent days, and if his balancing doesn’t resume soon, I fear that he won’t serve our purpose.”

Then, black dragged me under.

Revision #1

Created 3 November 2024 18:57:02 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable