

Chapter 22: A Pit Stop

Raimie

We were halfway through the third day of our journey to the Birthing Grounds when Oswin pulled everyone to the side.

“We’re being followed,” he quietly told us.

Which seemed to surprise only me. Kylorian, Little, and Ryvolim all nodded their agreement while I looked on incredulously.

“What do you mean someone’s following us?” I asked.

And at my side, Dim clicked their tongue.

“What? You didn’t notice?” they said, almost sneering at me. “I thought it was fairly obvious.”

Sighing, Bright said, “Don’t be such a brute. Remember. He’s a little less... *attuned*—we’ll call it—than usual still.”

I tried to ignore them. As I’d expected, my splinters had been irritable since I’d closed Da’kul’s tear. It hadn’t yet become a problem, but still, I’d rather not reward their bad behavior with my attention.

Glancing behind our group, Kylorian said, “Yeah, I caught signs of it this morning. Any idea who it could be?”

As Little shrugged, Ryvolim chuckled.

“I have a guess, but I’m not sure if I’m right yet,” he said. “Shall I go surprise our uninvited guest?”

Oswin waved a hand back the way we’d come.

“If you think you can do it without trouble, I don’t see why you shouldn’t,” he said.

Hmm. That had been less caustic than he usually was with Ryvolim. With him presenting another persona, had Oswin started getting over whatever had made him so antagonistic to my friend?

“I’ll be off, then!” Ryvolim said.

With a loose salute, he spun on his heel and strode into the nearby brush. While we waited for him to return, I took a moment to enjoy the scenery around me.

After leaving Tiro, we'd taken a loose march through the Cerrin Forest, heading north toward a passage through the mountains. After reaching the other side, we'd entered a new region, one governed by Enforcer Dalinasth. Thank the gods for my Hand, taking the time to figure out which Enforcers reigned over which regions, at least on the western fringe of Auden.

This region claimed the straggling remnants of the Cerrin Forest, but then, that thick clumping of trees gave way to a stretch of plains. My companions and I had been traveling along the trailing ends of this for the last day or so, heading toward a town where Kylorian wanted us to resupply. While there, he and the spies in our midst were also hoping to gather any new intelligence that might have spawned since we'd left Tiro. This town was the closest to the Birthing Grounds, or so they said.

Oo, Marcuse had not been pleased about this part of my plan, the one thing I'd left unmentioned during our meeting. He'd kept pushing me to stay with the army, continually repeating that I'd need their protection until we got closer to the Birthing Grounds. Eventually, I'd had to tap into some of my newfound 'authority' to stop him.

I still wasn't sure why he'd been so worried about me. He knew I could take care of myself.

Soon enough, a disturbance in the nearby forest led to Ryvolim striding out of it, dragging someone along by his tunic's collar.

"As I thought," he called. "One younger brother, as ordered."

While speaking those last words, Ryvolim lightly tossed his 'prisoner' into our midst, and after he'd stumbled to a stop, Little and Middle groaned while Kylorian froze, and I slapped a hand to my face. Seemingly satisfied with this display, Ryvolim leaned against a tree's trunk with his arms crossed.

Kylorian was the first to recover his voice.

"*Hadrian?*" he gasped. "What are you doing here?"

Wrinkling his nose, the teenager said, "Joining you, obviously. Oh! And Ren says hello, to you and Raimie both. She seemed exasperated about getting left behind again."

Groaning, Kylorian rubbed his temples.

"You *can't!* I just... ugh!"

Turning away, he banged on his forehead for a moment before spinning back toward his brother with a finger pointed accusingly.

"Does Dury know you're here?" he snapped.

That question seemed to make Hadrion uncomfortable. Shuffling in place, he looked anywhere but at his older brother.

“Technically? No,” he said. “I convinced him to let me train with those fancy Zrelnach that Raimie moved to the fortress. I was supposed to be headed there, but that wasn’t my real plan.”

He shrugged.

“I don’t know. He probably knows I went off-script by now. The Zrelnach were supposed to send a message to Tiro once I reached them.”

Squeezing his eyes closed, Kylorian muttered under his breath, probably meaning for no one else to hear it.

“Alouin damned little brothers...”

But then, he strode forward to grab Hadrion’s elbow.

“All right. I’m taking you back to Tiro. Right now,” he said.

“What?!” Hadrion said. “No! I want to help!”

“Not with this, you don’t,” Kylorian growled. “This group will be the first into the Birthing Grounds. We’ll be the most in danger during the battle, and I am not letting you walk into that. Not like this.”

Practically squeaking with outrage, Hadrion struggled against his brother’s grip.

“Let me *go!* You don’t understand. I have to-!”

“You know... if you take him back to Tiro, you won’t catch up with us,” Oswin drawled. “You’ll leave Ryvolim without someone watching his back, like we originally planned, and maybe he can handle whatever comes his way, but maybe not. Do you want to be responsible if something happens to him?”

I narrowed my eyes at Oswin. The spy knew that my friend wouldn’t need any help in the coming battle, not with all of the special tricks he had up his sleeve. From what I understood, Ryvolim had accepted Kylorian’s offer of help simply to build upon my ties with the other man.

But Kylorian didn’t know this. Stopping short, he looked torn, and hell, if I couldn’t understand that. What did one do when one was caught between protecting a loved one and following through on a promise?

“Hey Ky, can I talk to you for a minute? Alone, preferably,” I said. “The others can watch Hadrion while we do that. He won’t be going anywhere.”

Slowly, Kylorian nodded, and as he released his younger brother, Little casually stopped at the teenager’s back, widening that now-horrid smirk of his.

I couldn't spend too long looking at his healing scars, though. I knew they weren't my fault, that Little had chosen to accept them as part of his duties, but still, looking at them made me feel guilty, and I didn't know what to do with that.

Fortunately, Kylorian joined me quickly, and we walked a few paces away from the rest, far enough that they wouldn't overhear us.

Huddling closer to him, I said, "Why not let him come with us, at least for a time? We won't reach the Birthing Grounds for a couple more days. Surely in that time we can find somewhere safe to ditch your brother, and once the battle's over, we can pick him up on our way back to Tiro."

Kylorian took a moment to look back at his brother before wincing.

"I don't like it... but yeah, you're right," he said. "Still. Had-had's always been the one Ren and I look out for, the one we... we *have* to keep safe. He's already been through too much. I won't let anything bad happen to him again, if I can help it."

"I get that," I said, "but this way, we can make sure he's safe, *and* he'll feel like he's helping us in some way."

Sighing, Kylorian nodded, as if in defeat.

"I'll go tell him he can stay," he said. "The rest of you should get ready for the afternoon's outing."

Ah, yes. That. I hadn't been looking forward to our venture into Sanc. The last time I'd introduced myself to unknown Audish citizens, it had ended with most of them reviling me and a days-longer threat of death hovering over my head. If I somehow messed up during today's visit, revealing my identity, how would it go this time?

You will be fine, heart of my heart, Nylion whispered through my mind. *And I will be there to help.*

Fair enough, I said with a smile. *Besides, I have Bright and Dim around for if things truly turn to shit.*

...Right, Nylion said.

When I turned back toward my companions, I found Hadrion jiggling in place.

"I can come?" he excitedly said.

Rolling his eyes, Kylorian said, "This might be the worst mistake I've ever made, but yes. You can come."

Cheering, Hadrion ran in a little circle before breaking into a flailing dance, which I watched with amusement. I was glad he was happy.

“Yes, yes, much hurrahs and all for joining up with a deadly mission,” Little said. “Can we get back to the march now? I’d like to reach this new town before dark.”

Mm, that was a good idea. I doubted Sanc’s residents would appreciate strangers appearing in their town during the night, given the many Harvests and other travesties that took place in Auden.

Gods, there were so many things I’d have to fix once Doldimar was out of the picture...

Or maybe not, Nylion said.

He got me to flick my eyes to Kylorian, and I nodded at the unspoken reminder. At some point, he and I should talk about how we’d handle our succession when... or *if* that eventually came. Maybe I could bring it up when we set up camp tonight.

But first, we had to get through the day.

Fortunately, the sun was still high in the sky when we reached Sanc. As my companions and I stepped into the town’s outskirts, people watched us with wary eyes while a few came out onto their home’s stoops or the street.

As planned, this was when Kylorian took up position in front of us. He’d made sure to roll up his sleeves as much as possible, showing off his Corruption-free skin. Earlier in the day, I’d changed into a set of plain trousers and a tunic, and while this would have been perfectly fine for me in the past, it had become less comfortable over the last few months. In that time, my uniform had become a sort-of second skin for me, and being without it made me feel... antsy, for some reason.

But both Middle and Ryvolim had said it would draw too much attention while in Sanc, and having those two agree on something had been a powerful argument to follow their suggestion.

Our presentation seemed to have worked for these townspeople. As we traveled deeper between the buildings, families and individuals returned to what they’d been doing, and we were allowed to reach a small marketplace unimpeded.

Sanc looked similar to Paft and the other towns that sat near Ada’ir’s Withriingalm. Wood-board houses with the occasional shed lined the thoroughfare with a few homesteads standing apart from the rest. The road itself was dusty and well-traversed, judging from the evenly spaced ruts forged down the center of it, and there was a mix of open-air booths and enclosed shops in town square.

What was completely different from Ada’ir, however, were the people. While the Zrelnach and I had been traveling through Ada’ir last year, the occasional armed party might have greeted us, but at the time, we’d been a veritable army, moving through relatively uninhabited land. Here, six people, or six visible ones at least, made up my party, and on seeing us, these people had hurried to hide their children in houses or grab any weapons within arm’s reach.

Scared. They seemed much more scared than anyone I’d met in Ada’ir or even Tiro.

When we reached the marketplace, I didn't approach shopkeepers and the like. Not only was I not very good at negotiations—not ones like this, at least—but I wouldn't be the best choice for it in the first place. That honor went to Kylorian, who knew this land's customs best, and the spies in our midst, who could fake their way through anything they didn't know.

So, instead of talking with merchants or trying to get intel, as Ryvolim had taken off to do, I stood in the middle of town square, probably looking like a lazy lout. In reality, though, I was taking the pulse of this town, just... feeling what it was like to be here. Trying to put myself into the mindset of the average Audish citizen.

If I'd been born here, what would it have been like? Would I have looked over my shoulder for a Harvest or the next disaster to drop? Would I have felt like I was in constant danger, prepared for death to come at any moment? From what I understood, that was what Sanc's citizens faced on a daily basis. Why was it so easy and somewhat *familiar* to imagine what that would feel like?

Dim interrupted my introspection before I could get too deep into it.

"That kid you took on has gone wandering," they said. "Headed toward something delicious smelling too."

Great.

Turning in a circle, I found Hadrion before taking off after him. He'd disappeared behind a house's corner, and as I approached that point, I heard thuds and the clash of steel coming from nearby.

Hell. Had we somehow wandered into a fight for this town?

That idea had me putting on a burst of speed, which made running into Hadrion once I'd turned the corner hurt much worse than it should have. Somehow, I stayed on my feet, reaching for the teenager as I rebounded.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't looking where I was..."

I trailed off, unable to speak a single word more.

A small, fenced-in yard lay behind the house, and in it, a group of children had formed a ring around two of them, both of whom were *pummeling* each other. I took a step forward, meaning to stop whatever form of bullying this was, but stopped when I saw the adult sitting on a nearby fence post. With her arms hanging from her knees, she was calling out to the kids in the center, carefully watching them. Why... why wasn't she stopping the fight?

"I was wondering where I'd find this," Hadrion quietly said.

I turned to him with my mouth gaping before slowly closing it.

Clearing my throat, I said, "Hadrion. What the hell is going on here?"

He glanced at me with a half-smile.

“What do you mean ‘what’s going on?’” he said. “Don’t you have training yards where you’re from?”

“Well, yes. Of course we do,” I said. “Pretty sure every kingdom has one somewhere in it. Why?”

Gesturing to the kids, Hadrion said, “That’s what this is.”

...What?

With every muscle locked in place, turning my head back toward the group of children was a fight for me. I watched one of them straddle the other, raising a fist back to punch the kid’s face and- and-

“How can this be a training yard?” I asked.

But as they’d emerged, those words had sounded far away, and I could swear fuzz had coated my tongue.

“No one in there looks older than what? Six-years-old?”

That couldn’t be right. Gods. It couldn’t... be right. Couldn’t!

“That’s right,” Hadrion said. “You start learning how to fight practically from birth here. Is that not how it’s done in...?”

The rest of his question vanished into the background. Instead, the words ‘from birth’ echoed on repeat in my head, and for reasons I couldn’t begin to comprehend, this made my stomach *lurch*.

Slapping my hand to my mouth, I took one slow step back. And then another.

I didn’t understand. Why was this happening? I shouldn’t want to run, shouldn’t-

It was just some children, doing what they must to-!

“*Gods*,” I panted against my hand.

“You ok, Raimie?” someone... maybe Dim... asked.

Forcing my hand down, I swallowed while curling my hands into fists.

“I’m... fine,” I dazedly said.

Had to be fine, must always look strong, could never let anyone see an opening into-

GET AWAY FROM THERE NOW, Nylion shouted in my head.

Nodding to him, I pointed behind me.

“I’m just... going to...” I numbly said.

At the edge of my vision, a man appeared, flanked by several other people in uniform, and they were *there* but they *weren’t* but they *were* but they *weren’t*.

Barely keeping from screaming, I rattled out, “I’ll be right back.”

And then, I promptly ran the fuck away.

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