

Chapter 24: A Friend's Story

Raimie

By the time dinner rolled around, I was exhausted in a way I hadn't been for a long time. My fucking *brain* was hurting, right alongside my aching calves and feet, but still, I did what I could to get our nighttime meal prepared before settling around the fire with my companions.

As soon as everyone was comfortable, I said, "So, what did we get?"

I'd much rather focus on our efforts to gather information than any other strange things that might have happened today, no matter how much they might concern me in a variety of ways. Nylion had disappeared shortly after... then, and I wasn't sure where he could have gone.

"Well..." Little drawled, "we might have a problem when it comes to the Enforcers side of things."

He took a moment to chew a bite of his food while the rest of us impatiently watched him.

"I was talking to some people in that town's tavern. Nice folks. They were super sympathetic to the 'poor orphan boy who got his scars from a rogue Kiraak'," he continued, batting his eyes as he shared his cover story. "Anyway, they told me that Doldimar's left two Enforcers behind for this year's trek to the capital instead of just the one. There were also rumors of a third too, but most of the tavern regulars didn't take them seriously."

"Any idea of which ones he's left?" Ryvolim asked.

He was sprawled across the ground, propping himself up on an elbow, and contrary to Kylorian's bug-eyed look of terror at his side, he looked perfectly at ease with the idea of handling twice as many Enforcers as we'd originally planned.

"My source mentioned Adrinusk, like we'd originally heard, but apparently, some girl named Arabelna has stuck around as well," Little said. "The rumors of the third came from the fact that Foln apparently has yet to return to her home roost of Nephiron, but that doesn't mean she's stayed in the Birthing Grounds. Not for sure."

"She has, by the way. Stayed there, I mean."

Grimacing, I snapped my gaze to Dim, hovering around our group's periphery.

“Dim. Are you telling me you could have let me know about this *insignificant detail* of the plan before now?” I said. “Because if that’s so, why the hell did you wait to share it until now? What was the point of visiting Sanc?”

Lifting an eyebrow, Dim said, “Besides getting more food so you lot don’t starve?”

As I continued glaring at them, I tried to ignore the stares coming from the distinctly real people around me. Soon enough, though, Dim made a face.

“Look, I thought visiting the town would be fun! Ok?” they said. “I didn’t expect you to go all panicked rabbit on me.”

As I jerked away from them, Bright hissed, “Really? Why bring that up *now*?”

Fortunately, Oswin was quick on the uptake for what had happened, drawing my attention back to him.

“One of your splinters confirmed the rumor?” he asked.

“In the snarkiest manner possible, yes,” I grumbled, vaguely wishing I could smack Dim.

They seemed to find that idea amusing, chortling into their hand.

“That might throw a kink into the plan,” Oswin said. “Ryvolim, will you be able to handle three Enforcers, possibly all at once?”

Making a face, Ryvolim said, “Probably? It’ll be much more difficult, and I’ll need a lot more time than I originally thought, but since I’ll have some help—”

Here, he nudged Kylorian with a mischievous smile.

“—I’m pretty sure I can manage it.”

“You’re ‘pretty sure’?” Oswin said. “I’d rather if you were definitely sure, considering how much of Raimie’s plan hinges on you taking out the Kiraak’s Enforcers.”

Abruptly, Ryvolim dropped any sign of enthusiasm or mischievous behavior, letting a piece of his true personality peek through.

“They will be handled, Oswin,” he said. “Of that, I can assure you.”

After a moment of intense scrutiny, Oswin shrugged.

“Fine, then,” he said. “Did we learn anything else of note? I know we were mostly interested in who Doldimar left behind but...”

On looking over the blank and unresponsive faces around me, I huffed.

"I don't know about you, Oswin, but I'm happy to have the information we needed," I said. "That seems like enough to me."

Making a face, Oswin said, "Fair."

"Mm!"

Kylorian finished with his bite before grinning at me.

"I figured out one way we could implement *our* plan while in Sanc," he said. "We don't have to talk about it now, but I thought I should let you know."

Oh, good. I was glad he'd been thinking about that because I'd been a bit too... *busy* to give our proposed contest more than the slightest of thoughts.

"Raimie, what's he talking about?" Oswin said.

I glanced at Kylorian, asking for his permission to share, and on receiving a nod, launched into an explanation with enthusiasm.

"Something I recently learned: Ky here is apparently my distant cousin," I said, "which means he has as much of a right to Auden's throne as I do. Before we got here, he and Tanwadur were using this fact to advance their resistance's cause, and after I learned about it, I proposed that instead of fighting over who would lead Auden once this war is behind us, we should let the Audish people make that decision for us."

Leaning back on my hands, I waited for Oswin's response to this idea with anticipation. I was rather proud of it, but instead of looking pleased, as I'd thought he might, the spy frowned.

"Raimie," he practically snapped, "you can't keep running away from your responsibilities--"

"I'm not!"

As my shout rang in the air around us, Hadrion shifted in place while Little looked anywhere but at me, but I couldn't help myself. After everything else that had happened today, Oswin's accusation had hurt worse than it normally would.

Taking a calming breath, I continued, "I have accepted the position of king when it comes to our people, and so long as they will have me, I will carry that role. If the Audish people decide that I am the best man to lead them into their future, then I will do my utmost to be a good and just king for them, but forgive me if I want to give freedom of choice to people who've long been without it, especially for something as important as who will lead them."

Oswin was angry with me. I could tell from his flared nostrils and the heat practically blazing from his eyes, but I didn't know how to fix it. I wasn't backing down from this idea. It was important to me in a way I couldn't fully describe.

So, much as it might pain me that Oswin disliked it, I would carry through with it regardless.

“Well. Personally, I think that’s a good idea, sir,” Little said, breaking the silence. “People should always have choice in as much of their lives as possible, yes? And this way, you’ll still need your Hand for a while too.”

Oh.... shit. Was that why Oswin was upset? Did he think I was trying to abandon him with this idea? Why would he think that?

“That’s right,” I said, “and even if I didn’t require a Hand anymore, I’d still absolutely need my *friends* at my side. All of them.”

Slowly, Oswin relaxed from his tensed state, fixing his stare on the fire instead of me, and after a pause, he jerked his head in a single nod.

Beside me, Dim chortled.

“Hell, you lot are fun,” they said under their breath.

And I ignored them, as I must.

“Does that mean me too? And- and what about Ky?”

Rapidly blinking, I focused on Hadrion, who was curled over on himself while leaning away from the group.

“Of course I’m talking about you too, Hadrion!” I said. “Of course! You’re one of the kindest people I’ve ever met. I’d be honored to call you friend. And as for Ky...”

Hesitantly, I glanced at the other man, who was chomping away at his dinner as if nothing dramatic had happened in the last ten minutes. Given the small bits I’d seen of his interactions with his father, his nonchalance in the face of arguments didn’t surprise me.

At the sound of his name, he paused with his chewing, looking at me warily.

“As for Ky, I’d like to be his friend,” I said, “but I also wouldn’t want to force that sort of thing on him too.”

Choking, Kylorian pounded on his chest for a minute before he could recover.

“Yeah, that... friendship’s fine by me,” he coughed.

Which only made me smile. Gods, how many people could I call friend now? Five people, if I included Dath, left on the other side of the sea? Hell. I’d never thought this sort of thing would be possible. When I was a child, the only relationship that had come close to friendship had been with Nylion. I’d never thought I’d have the social acumen or a desirable enough personality for other, real-life people to call me friend.

But here we were now.

“Great. Two more people for us to keep an eye on, then,” Little said, rolling his eyes. “All right. So, since this is apparently going to be a *thing*, tell us more about yourselves, please. Kylorian, you’re a distant relative of our oh-so-magnificent king, plus some sort of freedom fighter. That makes sense. What about you, Hadrion? What’s your story?”

Oh, that had been rude.

“Ignore him, Hadrion,” I said. “We don’t need-”

“I’m originally from the Birthing Grounds,” Hadrion said, interrupting me with aplomb.

And everyone went silent. That had been quite the fact to drop on us.

“Had-had, you don’t have to say anything...” Kylorian quietly said.

But Hadrion shook his head.

“No, I want to tell them,” he said. “They’re good and kind. I can trust them with my story. So.”

He scooted closer to the fire, holding his hands out to it with his gaze pinned on its flames, but I could understand that. If I were him, I wouldn’t want to see how we’d react either.

“My parents were Conscripted soldiers, stationed in the Birthing Grounds. I’m not sure why I was born because usually, pregnancies are terminated there, as soon as they’re detected, and yet, I was brought to full-term.

“In the same way, children don’t typically... survive in the Birthing Grounds. Kiraak take particular pleasure in hurting kids. Something to do with the joy that the Corruption in them takes from stealing a child’s innocence. I don’t know. All I do know is that children either die quickly around Kiraak or they get taken away to be used in ways I don’t even want to think about.

“But I was left alone, for the most part. I don’t remember much of those first few years, just snippets. Mom doing her level-best to keep me at arm’s reach. Other members of the squad playing games with me when they had the chance. Being hidden away whenever an Enforcer from another region came to visit. It wasn’t the *worst* childhood but...”

Falling silent, Hadrion chewed on his lip, and as I watched him collect his thoughts, I knew why he’d been so understanding with me earlier today. No wonder he’d intuitively grasped what Rhylix had been talking about!

“Something changed when I was six or so,” Hadrion soon continued. “I’m not sure what happened, but if I had to guess, I’d say my parents learned why Adrinusk had let them keep me. I think he had designs for me... but that’s beside the point. Whatever happened, my parents weren’t ok with me staying in the Birthing Grounds anymore. So, they got me out. And Dury... Dury...”

When Hadrion buried his face in his hands, Kylorian reached for him, squeezing his knee.

“We found him in the woods, near Avernik,” he said. “At the time, he didn’t look good, like he’d been by himself for a while, so... we took him in: me, mom, Ren, and Tanwadur. Of course we did. He was such a tiny thing...”

And now, that family protected him like he was the most fragile of beings. That made sense.

What they didn’t see, though, was how much that was harming Hadrion.

“That’s why you want to come with us, isn’t it?” I gently said. “You may also want to help because that’s the sort of person you are. But mostly, you want to go back. You want to face your demons.”

Snatching his face out of his hands, Hadrion somehow pulled a grin onto a tear-streaked face, but I’d expect nothing less from him. This kid was the most resilient and compassionate person I’d met in my life. He amazed me.

So, I turned to Kylorian.

“I’m sorry, Ky, but we can’t stop him from doing that,” I said. “He needs to be with us when we attack. I know that wasn’t the plan but-”

Shooting a hand up, Kylorian said, “No, no. You’re right. I can clearly see that, but I still need to keep him as safe as possible. So, how will we do that?”

“Well, obviously, he shouldn’t go anywhere *near* the Enforcers,” I said, watching Kylorian all the while, “which means he can’t go with you.”

Kylorian scrunched his face up. He clearly wanted to argue that point, but after a moment, he nodded.

“So, he goes with your half of the team,” he said, as if it were a question.

“Yes,” I said, “and when he does, he’ll be with three incredibly capable people: a dual primeancer and two spies from his Hand. If we can’t keep your brother safe, no one else can.”

As he breathed out, Kylorian slumped.

“All right,” he said. “All right.”

There was a pause, but then, Hadrion snapped.

“You were planning on *leaving me* somewhere, weren’t you?”

At the same time, Ryvolim said, “I feel like I’ve missed something.”

And I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

Waving at the bristling people around me, I said, "I'm sorry! Truly. It's just funny how often I get into situations like this. If I'm to be forced into fighting a bunch of angry Daevetch primeancers and their bloodthirsty horde, there's no one I'd rather do it with than all of you."

"If I had a pillow right now, I'd throw it at your head," Oswin said with a scowl. "You and your propensity for changing perfectly good plans!"

Still laughing, I gasped, "I know. I know! I'm the worst."

"Don't you *dare*," came from at least one of the people around me.

I couldn't tell which, but then, I supposed that detail didn't matter. Danger was coming for me, as usual, and as always, I'd go into it half-assed and barely prepared.

But they'd be with me. So, I'd be ok.

We'd be ok.

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