

Chapter 26: The Battle of the Birthing Grounds, Part One

Ryvolim

Near where the Daevetch bolt had cracked a cave wall, Kylorian had already straightened from his stumble with his weapon raised.

"Where did that come from?" he said.

"From one of them, I suspect," I said, pointing.

Three men and two women had occupied the cavern we were standing in front of. I wasn't sure which of them had thrown the bolt, not with all five of them lounging as if without a care. Two were playing dice in one of the cavern's corner while another of them watched, one was flipping through a book at a lone table, and the last of them was casually tossing a knife over his face from where he was lying on a cot. Two of the men had nothing but squirming vines beneath their skin while the other three showed no signs of Corruption, only the black eyes that marked every Enforcer.

Our enemy, found.

At the table, one of the women casually flipped a page in her book.

"One of you take care of them already," she sighed.

As if on strings, the two men who'd been playing dice shot to their feet, unsheathing their weapons, but none of the other people in the room moved. Did they think two Overseers would be enough to stop us?

"What do you think, Kylorian?" I said. "Can you distract those two?"

"I was expecting to fight regular Kiraak, but... I can handle a pair of Overseers for a little while," Kylorian said. "Not sure if I can *kill* them, but I can certainly distract."

"I'll kill the Enforcers quickly, then," I said.

"Are you *quite* finished?" one of the Overseers drawled. "I'm so hungry to see your blood. I can't stand it!"

Recoiling, Kylorian said, "That's... *disgusting*."

But then, he attacked. I followed him into battle, but as I approached the pair of Overseers, I also flicked Ele at the man on the cot, Adrinusk most likely. He flinched away from the bolt before tumbling to the ground.

"Malkenthias, that one's mine," he growled.

Which had the Overseer who'd been swinging for my head stop halfway through that arc, forcing him into a stumble. Taking advantage of the opening, I slashed at his thigh. It was the best I could do, given how three primeancers had already begun rushing me, but hopefully, it would slow the Overseer down enough to give Kylorian a chance.

Any worries I might have had for my companion were wiped away in the onslaught of the Enforcers' fury. As I should have expected, they didn't coordinate their attacks with one another, bearing down on me with all of their strength instead.

When I used Ele to duck their strikes and therefore watch them make frantic readjustments, amusement tugged on my mouth. They obviously weren't used to encountering a challenge, which was perfect. This should actually be *fun*, for once.

For a while, we simply played with each other, or that was how it seemed to me. I was trying to kill them, of course. Raimie's plan required these Enforcers dead as quickly as possible for it to work, but it took me a while to find an opening in which to strike, and during that time, I let myself enjoy the fight.

At some point, Kylorian *finally* turned his back on me, and I swept an obvious wave of white light at my opponents, one that bowled them over. Before they could regain their feet, I rushed forward to behead one of the women.

As I was finishing with that, a flash of movement caught my eye, and I twisted, but not before cold steel pierced through my shoulder, which was a problem. The sword I'd been holding clattered to the ground, and snarling, the man who'd stabbed me brought his blade around in what should have been a killing blow. Backpedaling, I barely avoided that scythe of death. I used my dagger to block his next few, bone-shuddering strikes, each of which numbed my hand, and all the while, my injured arm dangled at my side, useless.

While caught in this blur of desperate movement, I noted the last living woman sprinting out of the cave before the fight for survival dragged my focus back to it. I'd have to go after her soon but first...

Considering how heavily his sword was raining down on me—like a hammer on a nail—Adrinusk must be getting frustrated, and my good arm had started tingling with pins and needles. Still, I clung to my dagger, aware of how quickly I'd die without it.

I wasn't sure why this was happening, but what had kept me in perfect health for millennia was taking its sweet time with healing my injured shoulder today. Almost, I shouted at Creation to tell

Restoration that it should *hurry the hell up*. I couldn't take another death, not so soon after the last one and certainly not now. I'd opened my mouth to beg the splinter for help when light flashed around me.

Thank the gods.

Catching Adrinorsk's next blow on my dagger's cross guard, I punched him in the face, reveling at his surprised jerk backward. Stumbling, he clutched at his nose with shock freezing him solid, but that was fine. It gave me time to retrieve my sword.

When he got ahold of himself, Adrinorsk pressed his attack, barely giving me time to defend myself, but now that I was back at full health, his skill wouldn't be enough to save him. When he overstepped with a blow aimed at my stomach, I deflected it and buried my dagger in his eyes, one after the other. He dropped his weapon to claw at his face, screaming, and I quickly circled him to end his suffering.

No time to celebrate. I joined Kylorian in his fight.

To my happy surprise, the kid had performed adequately in the time it had taken to finish the Enforcers. With his tendons sliced clean through, the Overseer I'd started with was down for the count, unable to reach his feet anytime soon, but the second one was still in the fight, allowing Kylorian not a single opening. Watching this, I knew that even with the kid's impressive display of skill, the fight would soon be over if I weren't here to help.

I blocked a strike coming for Kylorian's head, yanking him behind me, and with his eyes widening, the second Overseer glanced around the cavern, taking in his fallen companions with tightening shoulders.

"What the hell?" Kylorian shouted. "I had that!"

Sure you did, kid.

"I need you to track down the Enforcer who fled," I said instead. "Maybe you could defeat this man, but I can finish the fight more quickly. So, go. I'll catch up."

"But!"

"Do it, Kylorian!"

The kid might mutter something crude under his breath, but he did as he'd been told. As he left, the Overseer tried to throw a knife after him, but I blocked that potential blow.

"Your fight's with me," I said.

Circling me, the Overseer said, "But why should I fight you? You've already defeated the others, and each of them was stronger than me. If we fight, I'm going to lose, without a doubt."

That was a good point, but what other resolution could come from this ? Corruption had infected the Overseer, and much as it pained me, that meant he had to die. Ele and consequently, *I* couldn't allow a Kiraak to survive, and Kiraak couldn't return to what they'd once been, or... I'd *thought* they couldn't, until recently.

Slowly, I said, "You could... not fight, but I'd find it strange if you did that. I've never known one of your kind to surrender."

Growling, the Overseer bared his teeth.

"That's only because surrender means death!" he snarled. "I've done unspeakable things to the Audish population. What could I expect besides death if I gave myself over into their hands?"

He wasn't wrong. The Audish people could be incredibly vengeful at times, but that wasn't always the case and- and-

I knew this Overseer hadn't had much of a choice about whatever evil things he'd done. I'd like to see how someone once under the control of a primal force handled a life spent free of it.

So, I said, "I have a friend, another primeancer. He can take Corruption away from you, making you human again. If they knew that Daevetch no longer controls you, those you've hurt in the past might be more inclined to forgive you. Maybe you could work toward reconciliation with them instead."

Pulling back, the Overseer stared at me with his muscles seemingly locked in place.

After a moment, he said, "If this is so, I'd like to be the first Kiraak you've known to surrender. To stop me from attacking you, though, you'll need to knock me out. You haven't killed Foln, my Enforcer, and her command to eliminate the Dark Lord's enemies is still firmly embedded within me."

"I figured as much," I said.

But I only took one step forward to do that before pausing.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Raimie tells me that the process of clearing Daevetch from the body can be rather unpleasant."

With a harsh laugh, the Overseer said, "It can't be any worse than what Doldimar did to make me a Kiraak."

I shrugged.

"Very well."

With that, I shot Ele into the Overseer's eyes before inducing sleep, and from the way he collapsed, it was a miracle that he didn't land on his sword. After checking that he hadn't been hurt, I turned

to the last person left alive in the room.

“What about you?” I asked.

“I don’t... know,” the crumpled Overseer panted. “I want to be free but...”

He gestured at his legs, which might never be repaired, and I understood. Was living with such a restriction worth it when your past would always be there to haunt you?

“If you’re not sure, then I’ll make the choice for you,” I said.

When the man nodded, I sent him into as deep of a sleep as his comrade. I was the champion of Ele, yes? So, no matter how much Creation might growl behind me, muttering things about ‘eliminating the enemy’, I’d still preserve the life that I’d found here.

After doubly reinforcing the Ele holding my prisoners in slumber, I raced after Kylorian. This place only had one Enforcer left, and once she was dead, it would be ours.

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