

Chapter 27: The Battle of the Birthing Grounds, Part Two

Raimie

Focusing in this place was *impossible*. With every step I took, I struggled to break free of Daevetch's enticing touch, and each time, I barely kept myself from falling into a hole I'd never escape from. That dark energy had been so heavily utilized here that its remnants whispered temptation to me, promising power and an easy victory, both in this place and elsewhere. It would be *so easy* to draw from Daevetch, destroy the Kiraak and Conscripted, and never let that power go.

Maybe I should take just a little, enough to quiet this damn *screaming need* for it...

At my side, Hadrion asked, "Are we lost?"

With a jerk, I pulled myself out of my head, glancing around. How the hell had I forgotten about the teenager and my goal in the Birthing Grounds for so long? Damn. We could have circled this entire pit by now, and I wouldn't know it.

"Hang on," I said.

Squinting at the sun's position in the sky and the trebuchets peeking over the cliffs' summit, I quietly cursed. Hadrion was right. I couldn't figure out where we were based on my present landmarks, something that hadn't happened to me in forever.

And it was mostly due the effect Daevetch was having on me right now.

Dim, can I dull what I'm feeling? I asked. *It's distracting. Could get me killed.*

With a hesitant frown, Dim said, "I honestly don't know. Most of my humans have enjoyed places like this. I've never had one who's wanted to block out the feelings they find here."

Gods, they looked positively vibrant with their nondescript visage practically *glowing*. Bright, on the other hand, had wilted with a sickly aura hanging over them. It was somewhat reminiscent of the time after they'd been destroyed, and seeing it, I had to stop myself from asking how they were. They'd always gotten snippy with me when I'd done that in the past.

Almost croaking, they said, "Have you tried accessing my whole?"

And I wanted to smack myself for my stupidity.

"Duh," I said under my breath.

But then, I drew light into my body, making my skin glow the slightest bit, and Daevetch's lure faded, although not by much. Even if it was only a minute reduction, though, it was better than nothing.

Behind me, Oswin said, "Sir, is something the matter? You're acting... strangely, and I don't know if you've noticed it yet, but the Kiraak have started leaving their barracks."

Of course they had. Without the threat of plummeting boulders hanging over their heads, those assigned to defend the Birthing Grounds *should* be hurrying to do their jobs.

Swearing up a storm, I dragged Hadrion into a patch of concealing shadows, where Oswin had already retreated.

"Are we lost?" the spy whispered to me.

I nodded, watching the Kiraak sprint past our hiding spot with pinched eyes.

"I'm having trouble focusing," I said. "Daevetch is spread so godsdamn thickly here. It keeps demanding my attention."

"Hm. Is that going to be a problem?" Oswin asked.

I gave him my best incredulous look.

"It already has, hasn't it?" I said. "I think I can control it now, but... you should probably take the lead. For now."

Rearing back, Oswin hissed, "What makes you think I know where to go?"

With my eyes narrowed, I glared at him.

"You're the spymaster of my Hand, for Alouin's sake!" I growled. "Isn't doing impossible stuff, like finding whatever random place I need to be, part of your-?"

"Huh. Is that Little?"

Seemingly unaware of my conversation with Oswin, Hadrion pointed at a clump of Conscripted soldiers, who were pushing their way against the Kiraak's flow, and yes, the short man prodding them along did look familiar.

"Oswin, can you-?" I'd started.

But the spy was already moving to intercept. Hooking his elbow around Little's neck, he ruffled his youngest subordinate's hair, and after a few unheard words, the two led their group of Conscripted soldiers to where Hadrion and I were hiding.

There wasn't enough space here for everyone Little had corralled toward us, forcing most of them to form an awkward barrier at the mouth of an improvised alley, so I supposed I should thank Alouin for the Kiraak's all-consuming obsession with violence. Otherwise, they might break free of their rush to battle, all to investigate this anomaly in their midst.

Glancing over a mass of unfamiliar faces, I said, "Who are these people, Little?"

I doubted the spy would have brought a bunch of enemies straight to me, but still, I couldn't help my wariness of them.

"They're defectors from Doldimar's army, sir," Little said, "and they'd like to prove their new loyalty by providing you with an escort to the center of the Birthing Grounds."

Before I could decide whether I should trust people who could change their allegiance so quickly, one of said people pushed his way through the others.

"This is your king, Private?" he said.

With a crooked smile, Little said, "Captain! I present to you Raimie, rightful claimant to the Audish throne by birth and foretelling."

For a moment, the captain only glanced between me and the spy, chewing on his lip.

Then, he hesitantly asked, "Are you aware that he's glowing?"

That made Little scoff, although I wasn't sure why he was doing that. Maybe he was hoping to stave off questions about my primeancy, but... I wouldn't have that. Not anymore. I wasn't ashamed of my magic, and I wouldn't let other people make me feel that way. Damn them if they tried. I'd handle any threat to my life that came with this, if it meant I could stay openly true to a part of who I was.

"The glowing would be because of the Ele energy I'm holding," I said. "Will that be a problem for you... captain, is it? Do you have a name to go with your rank?"

With a chuckle, the captain raised an eyebrow.

"Nah, no names here," he said, "and I honestly don't know if we have a problem yet. Right now, I'd say no... but that could change. I hardly know you and what you mean to do with... that."

He waved at my glowing skin, but I didn't blame him for his hesitancy. The captain seemed like a man who hedged his bets, and I could respect that.

“Fair enough,” I said. “As long as you’re aware that I don’t trust you either, we should get along famously.”

Throwing his hands over his head, Oswin growled, “Fantastic! We’re all nice and aware of our general unease of one another. Can we move toward our objective now, or is the plan to stand around, posturing, until the Kiraak kill us?”

Little lifted a hand to his lips.

“Goodness, spymaster. For someone who’s lost his way, you sure are eager to insult the people who’ve come to save you.”

Closing his eyes, Oswin hissed out a breath before fixing his eyes on Little.

“There were mitigating circumstances for us,” he said, “which I don’t have to explain to *you*, Little.”

Shrugging, Little said, “Whatever you say, spymaster. Just come with me.”

Fucking *whistling a godsdamn tune*, the younger spy practically waltzed out of the shadows, and as he moved, the Conscripted defectors surrounded the three out-of-place men in their midst, which I was grateful for. Any amount of cover was good right now.

Several paces ahead, the captain sidled up next to Little.

“You never said your king was a primeancer, Private,” he said under his breath.

“Eh. It didn’t seem relevant when we talked. I was more worried about returning to Tiro,” Little said before glancing at the other man. “Why? Does it matter?”

“Well... the only primeancers I’ve known have been crazy bastards,” the captain grumbled. “Granted, I’ve never met someone who uses Ele but...”

Chuckling, Little said, “Trust me. Raimie’s nothing like the asshole Enforcers you’ve been around, and he doesn’t command Ele alone. He can use both Ele *and* Daevetch.”

Hearing that, the captain tripped over himself, nearly face planting.

“*Both?*” he hissed.

And I couldn’t hold myself back anymore.

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Yes. By the way, I can hear you two. Just so you know.”

Glancing at me, the captain clicked his teeth together while Little shoved his hands in his pockets, returning to the whistle he’d taken up earlier. Gods, much as I might like it, that kid’s flippancy and carefree attitude were going to get him killed some day.

When a fence up ahead broke the monotony of slapped-together barracks on either side, I started paying attention to my surroundings again. Beyond this barrier, an average looking house occupied the yard within, and despite Little's much-advanced warning about this, its normalcy took me by surprise. I'd expected that a place dedicated to transforming humans into Kiraak would look more imposing or sinister.

As Little had also said, lumps were littered across the yard, piles of flesh and clothing. After making quick work of the gate's lock—I'd been practicing with my lockpicking since Da'kul—I flung it wide, which had those lumps fighting to reach their feet, and soon enough, a handful of people jostled their way past me in their bid for freedom.

"Wait! Please," I shouted after them. "We're here to help you, but you should stay put for a little while longer, just until the battle's over."

Most of those left in the yard settled back into the grass, but several people had already been lost in a panicked need to escape. Oswin stopped me from pursuing them.

"You warned them.," he said. "Let them make the choice about whether to heed your warning or not."

Slumping, I nodded before turning to the Conscripted defectors.

"Little, you and your friends can stay here," I said. "Watch for Kiraak, although I doubt they'll be a problem for much longer. Once Ryvolim has eliminated the Enforcers, they should go docile, and after that's happened, I want you to join the rest of our army in herding them into their barracks. I'll get to them as quickly as I can."

Tossing a loose salute my way, Little said, "Sure thing, sir."

He spun in place, barking orders at his group of deserters, and I chuckled at the sight of those weathered people flinching away from that kid's affected gruffness.

"Can you keep watch on them, Oswin?" I asked under my breath. "I don't trust these 'deserters'. Not yet."

"I think that would be wise indeed, sir," Oswin said.

Smirking, I said, "What? No quips about forcing the bodyguard to leave his charge's side this time?"

Oswin looked completely serious as he said.

"If I can't keep a threat out of that house, then I either don't deserve to be your bodyguard or the threat is more than I alone can handle."

"It was a..."

Sighing, I rubbed my eyes.

“All right, fine. Hadrion? Let’s see what this house of horrors holds for us.”

Forging through a loose crowd of emaciated people, I kept my chin tucked to my chest. I couldn’t see their pain, not when I couldn’t help them. I’d be able to soon! But not yet.

There was a span of empty space between the last of these people and the house, one that Hadrion and I quickly passed through, and uneasily reaching for the front door, I led the teenager inside. As soon as we’d crossed the threshold, though, I stiffened, and distantly, I heard Hadrion gagging behind me, just as faintly as I noticed Bright going perfectly white in the face while even Dim paused.

Someone had made changes since Little’s first visit to this place. A reportedly peaceful foyer was gone, replacing its furniture and decorations with stacked bodies.

They were piled along the wall with some stacks reaching up to my height and others, several rows deep. Each of these people bore a mortal wound. Some of them were so horrific that I couldn’t bear to look at them, but still, I heard them all breathing, a sound that loudly echoed in this tiny room.

In the center of it, a man was waiting in a chair, hugging his guts in his lap.

“You are Raimie?” he gasped.

In a fog, I said, “I... am.”

Struggling for air, the man unsteadily nodded.

“We have a message for you from our Dark Lord,” he said when he could. “Will you hear it?”

Oh, gods. Oh gods, oh gods, oh-

“Do I have a choice in the matter?” I asked.

The man in the chair chuckled, setting his insides quivering.

“You’re perceptive. I’ll give you that.”

And he took a breath, alongside every other person in the room.

“Raimie from the ancient line of Audish kings,” a host of voices intoned, clearly echoing a memorized speech, “welcome to Auden. Please, accept this gift. I hope you’ll enjoy the task I’ve entrusted to you.

“These are the people that you failed to dispatch during your battle against that incompetent fool, Teron. I thought you might like to finish what you started.

“Consider this the first of many such gifts. Maybe in time, you’ll understand what I’ve done for you here. I hope that eventually, you’ll learn how useless Ele is, abandoning both it and E in favor of joining my side of the War.

“With some measure of respect, I, Doldimar, the Dark Lord of Auden, greet you.”

They fell silent, and I couldn’t think through the cotton clogging my head. Doldimar had left these Kiraak, these *people*, in misery, simply to deliver a message? Why the *hell* would he think I’d appreciate that?

And damn. Doldimar knew about my abilities, my *name*, and... AND he thought there was a chance in hell that I’d join him. Alouin. I’d laugh if I weren’t so... numb.

“What does he expect you to do here?” Hadrion whispered into the quiet.

I couldn’t stop my throat from working because *I didn’t want to answer him*. I didn’t want to undertake the task that Doldimar had forced me into, but if I didn’t do it... if I didn’t...

Hefting Silverblade, I hoarsely told the kid, “I’m to deliver Mercy.”

Starting with the man in the chair, I moved around the room’s boundaries. At first, Hadrion merely watched me work with turmoil written across his features, but he helped me with the task soon enough.

Many of the Kiraak here thanked us before we separated their heads from their shoulders. Tears of relief streaked across some of their dirty faces, and by the time we were finished, blood had been caked onto our skin. My uniform, the one Oswin had given me what seemed like forever ago, was ruined, and I itched to tear it off of my body. Unfortunately, decorum wouldn’t allow that, so the soaked fabric remained pasted to my flesh, making my every body part crawl.

“I didn’t think the first Kiraak I killed would be helpless and begging for death.”

As Hadrion’s whisper filled the room, it sounded deafening, now that no labored breathing could compete with it, and cringing, I closed my eyes.

“This is war,” I said. “It’s not glorious. It’s people, thrown into battles. Often times, it’s for a cause they’ll never understand, but still, they’re forced to fight for survival. It’s despicable acts like this, designed to test your enemy’s resolve and instill doubt in them. Are you sure you’re ready to participate in it?”

I could hear Hadrion’s swallow, even from halfway across the room.

With his voice trembling, he said, “I already have, haven’t I?”

“Fair enough.”

When I took a breath, hoping to clear my head, I only smelled blood and death, and it almost had my roiling guts leaking acid from between the fingers I'd pressed to my mouth, but I couldn't let that happen around Hadrion. Turning to him, I clasped his shoulders, ducking so I could meet his eyes.

"If it helps, death was the kindest gift we could have given these people," I said. "If I'd made them human again, not only would they have endured terrible pain during the process, but they'd have died anyway, once it was done."

When Hadrion recoiled, hugging himself, I bit my lip. What had I done to this kid? Having listened to his story about his past, I'd known what the Birthing Grounds meant to him, and still, I'd dragged him into this place once more. I'd thought I'd be helping the kid face his past, something he clearly wanted to do, but this? This was one more nightmare that would plague him.

I'd made a terrible mistake with this. Hadrion was too young to have appreciated the weight of what he'd been asking for...

The teenager straightened with something like resolve in his eyes.

"I know you're right," he said. "That doesn't mean I should stop wishing for a better solution to problems like this."

Or maybe Hadrion was more grown-up than I gave him credit for. Sheathing Silverblade, I winced at the thought of how much blood I'd need to scour from it later today.

"Do you need a minute?" I asked. "If you want, we could go upstairs for a bit. Little said that part of the house was relatively peaceful."

Shaking his head, Hadrion sat cross-legged in the middle of the corpses.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to pay my respects to these lost people," he said. "You go on, though. You're needed, so... I'll catch up."

This made me hesitate—I was supposed to watch the kid, after all—but leaving him here wouldn't put him in danger. A wealth of allies had surrounded this house, and if anything could get through them, then we were all probably dead.

So, I gave the teenager his space.

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