

Chapter 30: Broken Relationship

Raimie

Securing the Birthing Grounds and returning humanity to the Kiraak had become welcome distractions for me. Every slow, tenuous drag of Corruption from someone else's body, every task that required my input, was delaying the time when I'd need to deal with Kylorian and the knot of grief and guilt beating against my mind.

The current Kiraak I was working on let loose a howl, and I flinched. I must have missed a site where Corruption had been biting into his body.

As he slumped into unconsciousness, I sucked in a breath.

"Shit!"

When I lobbed the Daevetch ball I'd collected at the wall opposite me, the strength behind the strike blew a hole in it, surprising the soldiers scurrying by outside.

Behind me, Oswin said, "Perhaps you should rest, sir. You've been at this for a while."

With my hands on my hips, I hung my head.

"How long?" I asked.

I'd lost track of time in my flight from the pain waiting for me.

"Almost an entire day," Oswin said.

Glancing back at him, I said, "Really?"

It hadn't felt that long. I'd have guessed only a few hours had come and gone.

But when he nodded, I knew he'd told me the truth and returned my view to a collapsed man.

"Remind me, Oswin," I said. "How many Kiraak are waiting for my help?"

“You’ve worked through a good chunk of them already, sir. Several hundred are left but…”

Trailing off, Oswin sighed.

“Forgive me for the presumption, Your Majesty, but you’re only one man. You’re starting to make mistakes. If you keep going at this rate, you’ll hurt one of the people you’re trying to save. You—you need sleep.”

Growling, I crossed my arms. What did Oswin know? I could keep going. So many tasks were waiting for my attention. I couldn’t afford to rest-

The man in front of me groaned himself half-awake, dazedly trying to stand before his legs gave out once more.

Wincing, I said, “Ok. I see your point. Unfortunately, I still have one more thing to take care of before I can sleep.”

There was a beat of silence and then.

“As you say, sir,” Oswin grumbled.

Yeah. He wasn’t happy with me.

In the single day since the battle for this place had ended, the Birthing Grounds had undergone a change. Granted, I’d never seen the place before the fight had begun, but I knew from Little’s report that under Doldimar’s control, its Enforcer had imposed little order on those garrisoned here.

Now, a sense of purpose drove almost everyone I passed. I didn’t know each of these people’s assignments, but I’d guess they were working toward goals similar to those we’d striven for after capturing Da’kul: clearing the caves of enemies, assessing our newly captured supplies, raising defenses, and preparing for a counter-attack.

Besides those basic goals, I’d tasked several platoons of soldiers with guarding the Kiraak that I had yet to visit. None of those formerly hostile monsters had tried to leave the barracks we’d herded them into, but no one wanted to leave so many near deathless, former enemies unguarded.

Then came those robbed of their sense of purpose. I found the occasional person aimlessly ambling through streams of soldiers, forcing the more aware people around them into dodging. I recognized many of those lost souls, although they looked strange without black marks obscuring their features.

Almost as soon as the battle had been over, I’d given the order that those recently reverted humans could have full access to the Birthing Grounds. Once they’d recovered, they were welcome to come and go as they pleased, and if they wanted, they could even leave, venturing into the wild reaches of Doldimar’s domain. The soldiers under my command would still keep a close eye on them, but unless they attacked, I was giving them the freedom they’d been long denied.

The problem was that most of these people didn't know what to do with it. They'd been wandering in a daze, refusing to speak, and at times, they'd hostilely reject anyone who tried to help them. Given that, my people had learned to leave them be. Their despondency was another issue I'd need to tackle once I could think straight.

As we approached a building I'd been avoiding for hours, Rhyli- no, Ryvolim watched me coming. He was leaning against an out-of-the-way barrack with his posture tight and his arms clenched around his chest.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Let's wake him up," I sighed.

Leaving Oswin to guard the door, I followed Ryvolim inside.

After I'd gotten ahold of myself earlier, we'd dumped Kylorian in the comfiest pile of rags that we could find in this place. A much fluffier mattress had been available on the second floor of the house at the center of the Birthing Grounds, but after I'd finished with the Kiraak in that awful place, I hadn't wanted to spend another moment in it

This barrack's interior had been left in a near pitch-black, so I drew on Ele to combat the darkness. The rush of peace and order that always followed that energy draw helped with calming down my jumbled thoughts, letting remnants of my sanity creep back like a wounded animal.

In the last day, I'd used so much Daevetch, *so much*, and the temptation to take another sip of it was dragging at my focus even more intensely than when I'd first descended into this pit. Right now, the Ele trapped in my hands could barely hold that ferocious need at bay.

When shadows fled from my summoned light, it revealed two, slack forms, slumped on the dirt floor. Kylorian's chest was moving in an even rhythm. His peaceful slumber was undisturbed by his brother's body, lying beside him.

We'd wrapped Hadrion in spare cloth. Gods, his youthful face, robbed of life, and the jagged gash across his throat had been too much to bear.

I wasn't sure how much good it would do to wake Kylorian up next to the source of his grief, but I'd left the task of tending to the brothers to Ryvolim. Knowing how experienced he was with this sort of thing, he must have had an excellent reason for placing them together.

Without further delay, Ryvolim sucked a light strand from Kylorian's form, and after a moment, he stirred. Ryvolim and I gave him time to wake up with our hands resting on our hilts, ready to throw light or gloom at the slightest provocation.

Rising from the ground, Kylorian yawned.

"Hello, you two!" he brightly said. "Have we started the assault? I had the most terrible nightmare last night. We let Hadrion join us and..."

As I'd been listening to Kylorian talk, I'd tried to keep horror off of my face, but I must have failed miserably because the other man quickly broke off, holding stock still.

After a heartbreaking moment, he said, "It wasn't a dream, was it?"

I shook my head, unable to form words. I didn't know how that could be possible with such a giant lump in my throat. As Kylorian turned to look at the bundle beside him, I could almost hear the groan of straining metal coming from his neck, but when he reached out to touch that cloth, his hand only hovered, trembling. Slumping, he dropped said hand in his lap.

"What will you do with me now?" he asked with a dead voice. "I tried to kill you. You're fully within your rights to punish me for that. Is that why I'm here, away from prying eyes?"

Gods, what sort of person did he think-?

But no. I couldn't blame him for thinking that might be possible, even with how well we'd once thought we knew one another.

"You're here on the off-chance that you make another attempt on my life," I said, "but if you don't do that, I'm planning to send you home with Hadrion."

Sharply glancing at me, Kylorian said, "You'd let me go, even with everything that's between us now? I know you're not to blame for my brother's death. My head is perfectly aware of that, but my heart isn't listening, and I... don't know what to do about that. Before this, I would have said you were one of the best men I'd ever met but now..."

Pausing, he shook his head.

"Wouldn't it be foolish to leave a potential enemy like me alive?"

If only Kylorian knew how much I'd been thinking about that. Even still, I shrugged.

"I'll deal with that complication if I must," I said, "but I don't think we'll be enemies, Kylorian. No matter how you end up feeling about me, we once agreed that Auden's citizens should choose who rules them. If anything could, that will keep things amicable between us. I refuse to believe the Audish people would want a murderer on the throne, and you love them too much to disappoint them."

Kylorian laughed, but there was an edge as sharp as a knife to it.

"You don't know the Audish people very well yet, Raimie," he said, "but at the least, you're right about me. May I go?"

This felt like a bad idea, something I'd come to regret, but still, I stiffly nodded. When Kylorian reached my side, he stopped, wincing as he rested a hand on my shoulder.

"We should give it time," he said. "Just... don't let me see you for a few weeks, yeah? Let me grieve, and we'll see where we stand then. All right?"

That damn lump was still lodged in my throat, but I forced myself to say.

"Ok."

With his hand slipping off of me, Kylorian absently stared into space.

"Alouin, I have to go tell Ren that another of her brothers has died," he said, as if to himself.

"That'll be fun."

But then, he left me and Ryvolim in the Ele illuminated barrack, and I buried my face in my hands. I hadn't... hadn't wanted to think about Ren yet.

"That didn't go as horribly as I thought it would," Ryvolim said.

"We're lucky," I said through my hands. "Ky has always been generous with me and I..."

No. Couldn't think about that either. Not yet. But I would soon.

"What about you?" I asked. "How are you handling... everything?"

I vaguely waved while Ryvolim crossed his arms.

"Better than Kylorian, that's for sure," he said. "I only failed in my mission to eliminate the Enforcers. I let the woman who killed Hadrion escape my clutches, and Kylorian never had a chance to--"

My friend started coughing, abruptly cutting himself off, and I winced, getting the message loud and clear. This had become a sore spot for him. I wouldn't pry into it further.

Sighing, Ryvolim said, "Don't do that, Raimie. I wasn't trying to push you away. If you need to talk, we--"

"No, thank you," I rushed to say. "I don't think that would be wise. I... no, thank you."

Ryvolim nodded, but that seemed like the only way he could respond to what I'd said. We were just too raw right now.

"If that's so, I plan to find a private corner where I can release this shape change," my friend said. "Can you keep out of trouble for one day? I'll be unavailable until tomorrow evening at the latest, and I don't want you running off somewhere dangerous without me to help."

"My plans for the evening involve finding somewhere to crash for the night," I said. "Hopefully, trouble can find someone else to torment while I'm sleeping."

That made Ryvolim chuckle, although he cut it off by clearing his throat.

“What about the body?” he asked.

“I thought that was obvious,” I said. “Oswin will see that it’s returned to Tiro with Kylorian. Isn’t that right?”

From outside, Oswin’s voice drifted to us.

“As you say, sir. I’ll see that they receive the swiftest form of transportation we have available.”

“Well, then. I hope you rest well,” Ryvolim said.

He moved forward as if he wanted to give me a comforting gesture, but after pausing for a moment, he shook his head and left, abandoning me with a corpse.

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