

Chapter 55: A Sane Day

Doldimar

Waking to the horror of my life, screaming alongside my mind with my throat a blazing inferno and-

Do as you're told, Arivor, and I'll make your bad dreams and memories go away again.

Give in, and I become HIM, but I can't take it anymore, I can't take it, can't take, can't-

...Ok

-57th Cycle. One year, nine months, and eighteen days since domination of host's mind

Tap, tap, tap, tap. The sound bounced around me, taking up all of my thoughts.

Which made it difficult to focus on the inane worries of the man in front of me.

"-simple enough to overwhelm their defenses, Your Greatness. As far as we're aware, they have a single, rogue Daevetch primeancer at their disposal. While he was enough to wrest the Birthing Grounds from our control, he alone can't stand against the Enforcers' full might."

The black-eyed man seemed finished, which would be *wonderful*, but swallowing hard, he made himself continue.

"It would be especially easy to retake the pit if you joined us, Your Greatness."

Tap, tap, tap.

Where *was* that annoying sound coming from?

Looking down toward it—*oh*—I forced myself to stop jiggling my foot.

"Why would we want to retake the Birthing Grounds?" I asked, refocusing on...

What was this one's name again?

When the weakling's mouth fell open, I considered blasting a Daevetch bolt through that gaping hole and out the back of his skull. I could already envision the gorgeous blood splatter it would make on the far wall...

Off to the side, Corruption shook its head, and I made a face. The Enforcer must have thought my look of displeasure had been directed at him because he started babbling excuses at me. Sighing, I reached for the Daevetch bundle that was latched into thousands of points in the man's body.

"Hush," I said, squeezing at his Vice. "You've bored me for long enough today."

While the Enforcer worked his jaw against the will that was keeping it closed, his face gradually turned bright red, which was interesting. I hadn't seen that shade painted on someone in a while.

"I understand your concerns about how I've handled the rebel force that's recently arrived on our shores," I drawled, fiddling with the Enforcer's Vice, "but none of you know the full scope of what's coming for us.

"I do. In the past, I've fought E directly, like you want to do, and that method has never, never, *never* worked. I'm trying a subtler approach this time. The change in methodology may mean that *many* of you peons will die in the process of his defeat, but in the end, I will eliminate the threat, and those of you left standing can return to whatever it is you do when you're not serving me. Now..."

Coming up blank, I paused. Really, I should try to remember some of these weaklings' names.

"You. I want you to inform your fellow Enforcers that they're to do *nothing* without orders from me. If I find out that any of you have disobeyed me, then so help me. I will come down from my tower and eliminate you all. You're not terribly hard to replace. Are your orders clear?"

When I released my hold on the Enforcer's Vice, only the enormous strength of will that had risen him to his rank kept him from falling to the floor.

"Yes, Your Greatness," he stammered through a shuddering jaw.

"Good," I said. "Now, get out!"

After stumbling into the shadows, the Enforcer vanished, and I stretched with a yawn. With that little inconvenience over with, I had no more meeting left for today. Maybe I'd have time to visit...

No. Couldn't think about that now.

So instead: maybe I could do something for myself before the day was over.

"Was that heavy-handed enough?" Corruption sarcastically said.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "I know you've existed since the dawn of time, Corruption, but even with your long existence, you have no idea how mortals work, do you?"

On returning to the project behind me, I folded my hands behind my back, running my eyes over troop distribution throughout this pathetic kingdom.

"The Enforcers have access to vast power, so much of it that they feel invincible," I continued. "At times, they need me to slap them down, reminding them of who gave them their power and who could, in the blink of an eye, crush them like the bugs they are."

"You could just as easily have bribed that Enforcer with more land or access to the human population," Corruption said. "That might have kept him in line."

"Yes, but that solution would fix only one symptom, not the underlying problem," I said. "How like a Corruption splinter to jump straight to a bribe. Maybe if you were of aspect Manipulation or Coercion, you could understand, but you're not, are you? I suppose that in this, you'll simply have to trust your Champion. I *have* been doing this quite a while for you lot. Now, be quiet. I'm working on logistics for the next phase."

Behind me, Corruption quietly hissed before spitting.

"I hate your sane days."

Which only made me smile. Of course the splinter preferred times when the chaos of my mind consumed me. I was easier to handle when Corruption seemed like the only real and stable fixture in my life, but 'sane days', as the splinter had called them, were necessary if Daevetch wanted to have any chance at victory in my games with our dear protagonist, E. Thus, the force of nature's reluctant concession of them, so long as I fed it misery and death.

As for me, a clear head was certainly preferable to the alternative, but my greatest pleasure on these most wondrous of days came from watching Corruption sulk.

I really hated that little shithead, in case it hadn't been obvious.

When my next interruption came along, I felt it approaching long before it reached my chambers. As it came closer, I flung the doors open with a touch of Daevetch. Beckoning the two weaklings on the other side toward me, I never stopped staring at the spread of pins in front of my face.

"Forgive me, Your Greatness," a Kiraak said, bowing low. "This one insisted on speaking with you personally. They killed several of my squad in a quite... distinctive way before we decided to disturb you."

When I cast a cold glance over my shoulder, my stomach flip-flopped, and I turned, allowing a little showmanship to peek through my natural inclinations. Of the two people behind me, the Kiraak seemed suitably awed and cowed, but I couldn't read the stranger she'd been escorting. The figure was fully draped in cloth: white strips that even concealed their face.

“Dark Lord,” a venomous voice spat from within that cocoon.

Male, then. At least I had a probable gender.

Flicking my fingers at the Kiraak, I said, “Thank you, worm. You may go.”

“But Your Greatness! The danger-”

A cough cut off her protest. Damn but the Vice had been an exceptionally useful tool today.

Forcing the woman’s legs to carry her out of the room, I slammed its doors closed. I appreciated that the weaklings were compelled to protect me, but in this case, when I could clearly protect myself, the directive could become... *trying*.

“Now then,” I said. “What are you?”

Stepping into the shadows, I let them embrace me, tugging me along until I reached my destination, and only then did I climb back into firelight. I stepped into my chambers behind the stranger, and it took him at least a couple of seconds to register my change in position. Not a primeancer, then, but the stranger did have good reflexes.

“The disgust in your voice tells me you’re not a fan,” I said. “Assassin, then? No one’s tried to kill me in ages.”

Spinning in place, the stranger took a step back, but if my intimidation tactic had worked on him, I couldn’t tell, all due to that all-encompassing mask. Fascinating.

“Doesn’t matter what or who I am,” the stranger said, “only what I can do for you.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

When I once more stepped into the stranger’s comfort zone, he didn’t retreat, drawing himself upright instead.

“A rebel group has recently been plaguing you, more than the typical ones do at least. Correct?” he asked. “I can get you inside information about their plans.”

Oh... yes.

“I knew it!” I said, excitedly clapping. “You have E’s stench *all over you*. How is he?”

“I- I don’t know an... E.”

Even if I couldn’t see the frown surely contorting the stranger’s face, I could hear the confusion in his voice.

“Right. He’ll have taken a new name,” I said. “That other friend of his—the tormented, little spy—mentioned a... Rhylix, was it?”

I cocked my head.

“The kid also said this Rhylix was dead, which is an interesting tactic, but I guess it doesn’t matter. If I learn more about the rebels, I’m sure I could figure out E’s new identity.”

Not that I’d need this stranger’s help to infiltrate the rag-tag group. Still.

“None of that matters right now. What concerns me is *you*.”

In the blink of an eye, I’d drawn Lighteater from its scabbard. As it flashed in the light, a line of red leaked from a new cut on the stranger’s arm, and shooting a black needle into the break in his skin, I sent it to the base of the mush in his head.

My attack was over in a mere two seconds, but nonetheless, the stranger unsheathed his sword, retreating to give himself more room.

“Oh, stop,” I said. “I’m not going to *hurt* you.”

Yet.

“I was only getting a Daevetch slip into your head.”

If anything, my reassurance further stiffened the stranger, and I waved at him to calm down. Why did people always freak out when I did this sort of thing?

“I’ll take it back once we’re finished here,” I said. “I find that having Corruption in a person’s system makes them more... honest.”

The stranger snorted as he stiffly sheathed his blade.

“That’s rich, coming from you,” he said.

“Yes, well. Truth has its place,” I said, smiling at Corruption’s bristled shoulders. “So, who are you? And what on earth are you wearing?”

“This?”

The stranger pointed at his head.

“It’s an affectation from the place where I’ve been staying. A rather handy disguise, yes?”

Hmm. Did that mean the man wasn’t from Auden? Was he part of the invading force, then?

“I’m assuming that means you won’t tell me your name,” I said.

Even if the stranger refused to answer me verbally, the tilt of his head screamed his incredulity for him.

“How do I know you’ll provide me with useful information if you won’t even give me your name?” I said.

This was getting frustrating. I liked a good mystery and all—who didn’t?—but not when solving it would keep me from distinctly more important things on one of my few sane days.

“I can prove my value in other ways,” the stranger said. “Like this: the rebel’s leader is a man named Raimie, a descendant of the lost Audish royal line, all of which I’m sure you already know.”

Nodding, I quickly moved into another form of distraction, now that the stranger’s hidden identity no longer entertained me. Distractedly, I considered how best to dissect this man before his dismemberment would have him singing the unique notes of death. I’d start with that concealed face.

“I’m sure you’re also aware that he’s a primeancer,” the stranger continued, “but did you know he can use both sides of that unnatural magic?”

Unnatural magic? Hello? Did this stranger realize he was speaking to someone who used that ‘unnatural magic’? Gods, what an idiot.

Wait...

“He controls Ele *and* Daevetch?” I said, barely restraining a squeak.

That would have been embarrassing, given the role I must play.

“How else could his army have taken the Birthing Grounds so easily?” the stranger asked. “He’s the one who snuck into the crater and built a staircase for his soldiers.”

That was an interesting bit of news. I’d assumed an Enforcer had broken free of my control before joining up with the rebels. Escaping like that wasn’t impossible, merely difficult, and I wasn’t sure which situation was more believable: that an Enforcer had gotten powerful enough to break the Vice I held on them or that our protagonist’s ally was a Daevetch primeancer.

“All right, then. Maybe I won’t kill you today,” I said, chuckling when the stranger flinched, “but you must tell me. Why would you serve me like this? You clearly loathe me, and I’d be surprised if you weren’t aligned with the rebels in some way.”

Taking a step forward, the stranger said, “I am. I want to see your kingdom fall, your work destroyed, and everything about you erased from the annals of time.”

Ouch. Harsh.

“I don’t, however, want to see one tyranny replaced with another—”

Those words had come out so muffled that I could picture the stranger’s teeth grinding together.

“—which is what will happen if Raimie’s the one to put you down. The dark energy he wields will eventually drive him mad, as it does for all of your kind, and once that’s done, another reign of terror will begin.”

For a solid five heartbeats, I waited for more words, but it seemed the stranger was finished.

“That’s it?” I asked. “You’d betray the man who’s given you the greatest chance to see me dead in centuries, simply because he’s a primeancer?”

What stupidity was this?

“How you must despise us.”

When the stranger stepped forward, I smiled, hoping he’d attack, but I was destined for disappointment.

“I have personal reasons for this as well,” he said. “I’ve hurt Raimie in ways he doesn’t know about yet. He needs to die before he figures that out and takes his revenge on me, but I can’t be the one to kill him. I need you for that.”

“And in exchange,” I said, “you can provide me with the intel I need to stay ahead of my enemy.”

For once. I hadn’t been looking forward to spying through the shadows again.

“It appears we have a deal.”

While I turned back to my project, I noted the stranger pulling away from me. Ha. He was probably surprised that I’d accepted his proposal. Idiots like him usually went into situations like this hoping that the ‘bad guy’ would kill or hurt them in some way. Attempting something like this was usually a means of appeasing whatever doubts they had about their leader as well, and they never meant to follow through with whatever they’d offered. Once caught in such a bargain, they tended to agonize over whether to fulfill their newly made promise or remain loyal to their leader.

I’d be interested to see whether this one fell into that category or not.

“H... how do I-?” the stranger shakily said.

“Stay in contact with me?” I said. “Go to requisitions. They’ll give you a case of flasks. I’ll summon one of them to me at the end of each month, and once those run out, I’ll have someone deliver more to a suitable location.”

Already finished with the conversation, I moved a blue pin from the map’s corner to the center.

“Oh. You’re an-?”

“Eselan, yes. Didn’t you notice the hair or the eyes? How has no one ever learned about that?” I said with a sigh. “Although, I suppose I don’t get out much. And who would suspect that an

Eselan would exterminate his own once he came into power?"

Stepping back, I glanced over my finished map with a critical eye. This troop distribution almost looked right. I'd need to shuffle a few more here and there but-

A cough reminded me that a stranger was in the room with me.

"You're still here?" I said. "Go away! Unless. Is there something else you meant to tell me earlier?"

"Just that..."

The stranger nervously shifted in place for a moment before blurting out.

"Raimie has given the order to march on Elisk. His army's four days out."

"Oh. Two days later than expected. I could use the extra time," I said. "Thank you, whoever you are! Keep in touch."

When I yanked at the Daevetch in the man's body, he gasped.

"Alouin *damnit*," he muttered before striding out of the room.

I monitored his departure from the palace with something akin to pity. He so obviously hated everything about the 'Dark Lord' and his reign, but before long, the miniature Corruption kernel I'd left in his head would inspire nothing but loyalty to me.

A traitor deserved nothing less.

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