

Chapter 57: Horror Left Behind

Ryvolim, Eledis

Ryvolim

Raimie had been right about our pacing. Soon, we turned a corner, and the palace claimed the group's focus.

Now, that building. *That* was an impressive piece of engineering. Made entirely of obsidian glass, one would think it unstable, ready to crumble at the slightest movement of the earth, but every surface had been coated with a clear, resin-like material, one that strengthened the underlying obsidian's typical fragility. Even though it had been constructed in a fashion common to this cycle with buttresses and corbels aplenty, the palace's black material made it look alien in this city of gray stone and white plaster. Its five spires, greedily reaching for the sky, didn't help with its sense of otherness. If these humans only knew who'd originally built their architectural masterpiece...

Raimie didn't pause on seeing this wondrous sight, so wrapped in his dogged pursuit of Daevetch that it passed beneath his notice. As he marched through the short wall that surrounded the palace, the group was forced into a trot to keep up with him.

"He's headed for the gardens," Eledis said beside me. "At least that's what my research tells me."

"He won't find gardens there anymore," Thumb said with a manic cackle.

The spy was right, which didn't surprise me in the least. Doldimar hated beauty. It was a blatant reminder of everything he'd lost, and he destroyed it when possible, much as he had here.

At one time, the palace gardens had rested atop the hill that Elisk was built upon. Its renowned flower beds and hedges had culminated in a wall of windows, one that extended over a cliff edge and into open air.

Those gardens had been blasted away. Trees, flowers, grass, dirt; all had been scoured from the earth until only stone remained. In their place was a pit, an ugly monument dedicated to the glory of violence and death. A semi-circular chunk had been bitten out of the hillside, and benches were carved into its walls, save for a pair of portcullises on either side. Trap doors littered the path to the pit, entrances to the cages that contained the condemned participants of the fight.

All standard for an arena, except for the fact that it was sheared in two with one half exposed to a drop down the cliffside. It was a rather efficient means of body disposal in a place where they were so quickly generated. I'd hate to see the mess rotting at the hill's base.

A second oddity distinguished this arena from countless others I'd visited before. From this distance, a giant blob appeared to rise from the arena's floor, but as we approached, I recognized it as the source of the Daevetch knot. The oddity was too amorphous to be Kiraak and too large to be a single mass of dark energy. Protrusions were rising from its surface, and were those...?

With a dry mouth, I said, "We're close enough, don't you think?"

"What?"

Flipping to face me, Raimie grinned as he walked backward.

"Afraid of a little Daevetch?" he said.

"No, I just..."

I sighed. I couldn't shield my friend from this.

"At least leave the soldiers here," I said. "They couldn't help in a battle between primeancers."

And we shouldn't subject them to this.

"Not a bad idea," Raimie said. "Have them form a perimeter, would you, Oswin?"

"Yes, sir," the spymaster said with a salute.

"I hope you're not thinking of leaving us behind, like you are with them," the female member of the Hand said.

"If you've decided to follow me, I can't exactly stop you, can I?" Raimie said, rolling his eyes.

But then, he frowned, scanning the people behind us.

"Did anyone see where Eledis went?" he asked.

Shrugs and negatives rose all around, which deepened the furrows between Raimie's eyebrows, and oh, how I wanted to let his grandfather distract him, but much as I hated it, we couldn't avoid what was waiting for us in the pit. Even if we sidetracked him now, my friend would encounter this scene at some point today.

"Eledis can't run into much trouble by himself," I said. "He's quite capable of defending himself. We should keep moving."

And get this over with.

“Fine by me!” Raimie chirped.

When he faced forward again, however, his pace slowed down.

“What is *that*?”

Gods, the horror in that question!

The Hand and I had successfully distracted the kid, getting us to the arena’s edge, but our efforts had resulted in an exceptionally clear view of the mound when he turned. Heedless of danger, Raimie raced down the stands, leaping from seat to seat in his haste to reach the bottom.

I followed him much more slowly, reluctant to take a closer look. I forced myself to gaze upon Doldimar’s work, though, because in some small way, I was responsible for every atrocity that my enemy (friend) wreaked upon the world. My experiment had brought this curse down upon us, and the torment of living as Daevetch’s Champion was what eventually drove Arivor mad every cycle.

The smell hit me first. When we’d entered the palace grounds, I’d noticed a faint unpleasantness, but without the arena’s walls to contain it, the stench of decay smacked me in the face like a lover spurned.

Comprehension came next. I’d known the lump would hold bodies, but until this point, my mind had refused to believe what had been done to them, despite how many times this had happened before. To my eye, the mound looked like a perfectly-shaped, red and white cube, an abstract sculpture on the arena’s floor. Dark tendrils flickered across its surface—Daevetch—and I pieced together that a white sphere, floating in one corner, had teeth in it, shifting the picture in my head.

Someone had smashed who knew how many people into paste, binding the resulting mess into a neat Daevetch package.

Raimie had turned to stone in front of the cube, staring sans a single blink at the sand in front of it, and I approached him with caution. Once I was within arm’s length, I laid a hand on my friend’s shoulder, which made his fingers twitch.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

It was a silly question; I knew. How could anyone be ok after seeing... *this*? Still, I’d asked it, a subtle reminder that decent people still existed in the world.

What had been holding Raimie’s attention lost its attraction, and he marched toward one of the portcullises. Before chasing him—gods, he’d need a friend nearby for a while—I took his place and tightened my lips.

Written across the sand was a message, meant for my friend.

‘A second gift, dabbler of both sides. More to come.’

“He won’t find survivors,” someone said behind me. “Judging from the size of that... *thing*, the pens will be empty. At least Thumb and I got some of them out before... We should have done more.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” I told the other man.

I might also be talking to myself.

“Doldimar’s actions are his own.”

“I know but-”

“But you’re a good man, Pointer,” I said, “and you can’t help feeling guilty, even if you did nothing wrong.”

Pointer was quiet, and after a moment, retreating footsteps told me that I was alone in front of the cube.

Where was the horror, the rage, or even the sorrow that I should feel at this slaughter? All that this massacre prompted in me was quiet resignation. Had I finally seen enough senseless death? Was this the final straw needed to break my-?

Doldimar’s presence firmly asserted itself somewhere nearby, and whirling, I looked up, up, up...

There, on the palace’s top floor and behind the window wall. A striking Eselan with blonde and blue hair, clothed from neck to toe in black leather.

Lifting a ruined hand, Arivor jerked it in a wave, and I instinctually copied him. Gods, why did he always get the good looks?

As my friend (enemy’s) mouth twisted into a sneering smile, he gestured and... oh, fuck. No, no, no!

I spun toward the cube as the Daevetch holding it together joyfully raced back to its master, and without the energy needed to support it, the mess behind that artificial wall fell apart. It smashed into me and-

A river, an ocean, a TIDAL WAVE of blood all around and my family’s corpses in the mix and oh, gods, I’ll never escape and I’ll drown, I’ll drown, I’ll drown and a muffled voice calling a foreign name and Alouin, what did Raimie say to call him if he lost it and-

“ERADREN!”

I stared at my knees, tearing at my hair. A high-pitched whine filled the bubble that I’d formed between my chest, head, and thighs, but as soon as I noticed it, it stopped. What had happened? Why was I huddled in a-?

Leaping to my feet, I lobbed an Ele bolt at the palace’s top floor.

"You *son of a bitch!*" I shouted.

Of course, Doldimar wasn't there to receive my attack. He'd probably shade melded away as soon as he'd observed the results of his handiwork.

"That's the *last* time I tell you any secrets between cycles," I growled to myself.

"You done?" Oswin barked behind me. "Because we need help here!"

When I faced him, my breath caught. I hadn't been the only one caught in a wash of blood and bone. Oswin was painted red from his feet to just above his panicked eyes, and in an exact match of his bodyguard, Raimie was...

For a moment, I stupidly blinked, uncomprehending of what my friend was doing, before jolting into awareness. Having laid a latticework of pulsing shadows over the arena's tiered seats, Raimie was systematically smashing them into rubble. With stone tumbling free, dust had thickened in the air, and while I watched, a loosened portion of the stands nearly crushed Little beneath it. Only the spy's quick reflexes saved him.

"I've got it from here!" I shouted over the rumble. "Get your people out while you can!"

"Don't need to tell me twice."

Oswin's subsequent shout to his subordinates barely carried over the noise, but the four other Hand members heard it. All five spies raced up the stands, hurrying to reach the top before the steps were disintegrated.

Advancing on my friend, I shouted, "Raimie? What are you doing?"

A wild grin danced over my friend's lips but gods, the fury in those eyes...

"I'm showing Doldimar what I think of his *gift*," he growled.

At his wave, the second half of the stands crumbled into dust and debris.

Hell. I needed to bring my friend down from this rage-filled high and quickly at that.

"Great. You've trapped us in here," I said, trying to sound lighthearted. "Now what?"

"Now, we give these people a proper burial."

Sprinting away from me, Raimie leapt in bursts of light from boulder to boulder, steadily advancing up the destroyed seats, and I was forced to follow, although I ceased my use of primeancy when the pit's lip loomed above me. By the time I climbed over the edge, Raimie had knelt with his palms flat on the ground, sending a first Ele pulse into the hill.

When I turned back to the pit, I heard a laugh pass through my lips, but I was too busy watching what Raimie was doing to care about it. The stone and sand that had composed the pit's floor had started flowing like water, and like a stream during a flash flood, the earth splashed upward, eagerly climbing for the hole's surface.

Gods, Raimie would be magically spent for *days* after this. Sure enough, when I checked on him, he was shaking like a leaf, and all color had drained from his face.

He locked eyes with me.

"Help. me," he said through gritted teeth.

After scanning our surroundings, I saw no unwanted observers nearby, so I joined Raimie on the ground. When I shot a questioning glance at Creation, they shrugged.

"No harm in trying," they said.

Fantastic.

Reaching inside for my source of peace, I found it buried even deeper beneath a growing load of horror, but once I did, I carefully cracked the seal on it. Ele burst forth in a flood, but when compared to what I'd unleashed during the beach battle months ago, it was a contained rush.

Focusing it on the wound in the hill's side, I bade Ele to restore, restore, restore! Earth quickly filled the hole behind me, and once it had finished with that task, I sent white light streaking across the hill in search of grass and flowers and shrubs and trees. Wherever Ele found a spark of growth, I breathed Life into them, and they sprouted. Grass spread with a mind of its own while seeds, acorns, and nuts vigorously budded. A carpet of plant life marched up and over the stone precipice.

As usual, reining Ele in took more focus than it should, becoming a struggle to squeeze a force of boundless presence into a tiny bottle, but I managed it without Ren's help this time. The seal snapped into place, and gasping, I opened my eyes.

I'd been transported into a forest's midst. Wild trees shaded us from the sun, grass rose to mid-shin on all sides, and flowers were peppered across the plants around me.

"Whoops," I said under my breath. "May have gone a bit too far."

"It's beautiful," Raimie said. "A wonderful way to honor the fallen."

My friend was heavily leaning on Oswin with his legs shaking.

Climbing to my own feet without help, I said, "You should never use magic like that, Raimie. It's really, *really* stupid."

"Good to know you care," Raimie said with a grin, "but you should worry more about yourself right now, yes?"

Should I? Yes, spending that much El at once had made me dizzy as hell, and I thought I might throw up if I stayed on my feet for much longer, but I was used to this. It had happened quite often before. So, what was Raimie worried about?

“Why’s that?” I said.

My friend pointed behind me to where a crowd of people, both civilians and soldiers, were standing. Gaping mouths and white eyes formed a discombobulated line from the palace’s wall to the forest’s fringe, and in some, I read fear while others displayed only awe, but all of them were firmly fixed on me. How... *wonderful*.

“Couldn’t have lasted much longer with so many big mouths knowing the secret,” I said with a sigh. “Goodbye, Ryvolim. Hello, Rhylix once more.”

Releasing the shape change, I faced my friend while the transformation worked its magic on my body.

“I’ll need a bed now,” I said.

And promptly collapsed. One member of the Hand—Little?—leaned over me.

“How can we help?” he asked.

I weakly laughed, and an energy drain hit me so hard that I blacked out.

Eledis

The room I’d entered echoed my footfalls back to me, but I hardly noticed that noise, too wrapped in echoes of the past to care about those from the present. From this palace, a family had provided stability and protection to a realm of various people for generation, but here, Doldimar had ripped their power and privilege away from them.

I’d found this bedroom after wandering for a while. At some point during that time, the palace had momentarily rumbled, and I’d briefly worried that despite what we’d anticipated, the fighting had begun, but the vibrations had quickly stopped, relieving that fear.

Walking down these cathedral-like halls had been like traversing through a long instance of déjà vu. The familiarity that I felt with this place was foreign, but I didn’t protest it.

I could hear the patter of feet and children’s giggles with adults’ outraged exclamations chasing that delightful noise. The low roar of conversation and the tinkle of champagne glasses had rung in a cavernous hall, adorned with tiled flooring, frescoes, and chandeliers. The throne room had carried the long-dead voices of criers, announcing visitors and issuing proclamation. The study with a wall of windows...

Well, that room had been too strong of a reminder of my father, a man who'd loved such views. In there, I'd heard only my brother's pained cries and the smack of leather on flesh.

Then, I'd stumbled across this bedroom, and I'd been home. Small, cozy, surprisingly illuminated by a lit fireplace, it was similar in style to every place I'd laid my head before this long journey had begun. The fixtures and furniture might be different but the feel of it...

I shivered. An armchair was even waiting by the fire, exactly where I'd always liked it positioned. I wandered to it in a daze, overwhelmed by a sense of well-being after so many years of peril and strife.

A slim, black-dyed book was perched on the armchair's seat, and seeing it, I stiffened. I rigidly switched places with that collection of bound pages, cracking it open once I'd gotten settled in the chair. Flipping through the journal, I absently scanned dates, followed by entries of various length, with a lump in my throat. When I reached the end, I paused. The story told in this book had ended poorly, but a few blank pages remained. Perhaps I could reverse the story, finishing it on a happier note.

I flipped to the final entry, intending to find some ink and a quill, but the words that followed the last line of text froze me in place.

Written in a meticulously neat hand, they read, "Enjoy it while it lasts, old man."

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