

Chapter 79: Da'kul

Rhylix

But still, I've found no release, only a continuation of life.

After three and a half days traveling through the Cerrin Forest, the Kiraak below me had finally succumbed to his paranoia. He was muttering under his breath, jerking his head as he scanned the trees, and I sighed, tapping the branch that I was perched on.

He was right to be paranoid, of course. Infected with Corruption as he was, he could feel me hovering, in a vague sense. The Ele that was ever near me wouldn't be as potent to him as it would be for an Overseer or an Enforcer, but over the time I'd spent tracking him, that nagging sense would still have prickled his skin.

Halting, the Kiraak threw his arms to either side.

"I know you're here, Eselan," he shouted. "You should go home. Follow me all you want, but it won't do you any good. Come back with me, and you'll be captured. Tortured to death. So, walk away while you still can."

Rolling my eyes, I waited for him to decide what he'd do next. For far too long, he continued scanning the forest for signs of me, which only made me shake my head.

They never looked up. It only made sense, given that Auden hadn't seen Esela or Ele primeancers in centuries, and the Daevetch primeancers that Doldimar raised weren't usually ones for finesse. There were exceptions, of course, but not enough for the average citizen to consider looking for their quarry in the tree above them.

Even if this Kiraak did look up, though, he wouldn't see me, not when I had my Ele source wrapped around myself. After doing this for three days, it had started wearing on me, but exhausting myself in this small way was better than chancing the Kiraak spotting me. After spending so much time tracking him through the forest, killing him would be bothersome.

Growling, the Kiraak turned and ran, and I rose into a crouch. Racing over my current branch, I leapt to a new one, gripping it with toes that I'd shifted to resemble a monkey's.

And so continued the pattern that my days had recently followed. The Kiraak took a zigzagging path, trying to lose me, and if I'd been on the ground, this might have worked. As it was, it was just another annoyance in this chase.

After another hour of this, the trees started thinning ahead of me, and I made a face. Unless our destination lay there, this pursuit was about to become a lot more interesting.

In gradual leaps, I made my way to the forest floor, rolling when I hit it, and at that noise, the Kiraak reversed course to investigate. Sweeping the area around me, he growled to himself, even stopping in front of me for a time. I watched him consider his next steps, all while fighting a bucking stomach at the black vines beneath his skin.

Poor man. He'd once been a human, and that humanity had been stripped away from him. No one chose to become Kiraak. No one.

Daevetch, however, was pulsing just beneath his skin and that energy...

It was my antithesis in many ways.

So, no matter how much I might pity this creature, I also badly wanted to strike him down.

Snarling, the Kiraak stormed toward the clearing ahead, and I silently followed.

When the trees could no longer conceal what they'd hidden, I stopped short. Before me, the ground sloped into a foothill of the nearby mountains, and at the top of this, a fort sat with a tower rising high above it.

Da'kul, the seat of power for this region's Enforcer. Considering the direction that my Kiraak had been heading in, I'd expected we might run across this place, had even knew it was probably our final destination, but staying with someone who'd lead me to his masters had seemed better than continuing alone.

So, no. None of this surprised me.

The army massed outside the fort, however, did. Given what he was, I'd known Teron would be preparing for a battle, especially after his targets had left Ada'ir, but he was further along with that than I'd thought he'd be. Based on the shockingly organized sprawl of tents that I could see, Teron had gathered around nine thousand people here.

"That's not good."

As Creation stopped beside me, I glanced at them, wondering when they'd shown up.

"You think?" I said. "I need to go in there. Will you stop me?"

Creation stared at me for long enough that I was sure they'd overrule my decision, so when they shook their head, it was so unexpected that I took a step away, certain the other shoe was about to

drop. With their face souring, they jerked their head toward the enemy.

“You’ll lose your guide,” they said.

Well. That...

Creation was usually much more cautious than this. What could have changed?

I couldn’t ponder it now, not when my Kiraak was pulling too far ahead of me. As quickly as possible, I hurried after him, catching up before he got lost in the camp.

As we walked through it, I couldn’t get over how disciplined everything was. Typically, when so many creatures beholden to Daevetch gathered, chaos reigned, but in this group, no one caused a fight. No one publicly participated in intimate behavior, although noises indicated it was being indulged in behind tent’s cloth, and although dice and cards were in use, the games were relatively civil.

Well. Civil for Kiraak.

All in all, striding through this place reminded me of my recent days on the road, if filthier and much, *much* more nauseating. Gods, so much Corruption was around me!

The Kiraak had been struck by the same gut-churning sensation. As I moved passed each one, they perked up, glancing around with narrowed eyes, but once I’d moved out of their vicinity, they returned to what they’d been doing. Hopefully, I wouldn’t have to sit still for long.

Soon enough, I followed my Kiraak to the other side of camp, and as we climbed the hill leading to the fort, I examined it. The wall was strong and tall with a single gate to breach it, and along its pinnacle, Kiraak patrolled in regular intervals. With arrow slits ringing its circumference, that wall was impressive in and of itself, and I had no doubt I’d find more forms of defense once I was behind it.

Two men, so heavily marked by Corruption’s vines that their skin could no longer be seen, stood guard at the gate. My Kiraak had bowed to them, probably explaining why he needed to enter the fort, and as I came into hearing range, one guard tossed his hand toward the gate.

“-forth and accept your punishment, worm,” he grumbled.

“Thank you, my better,” my Kiraak said.

Still bowed, he bobbed his body twice before rushing through the gate. I darted after him, relying on speed to get me through, but I didn’t stick around to see if the guards had detected my presence.

As expected, siege machines dotted the fort’s bailey, facing in all directions. Enough of them were here that, with the addition of the wall, thinking about the probable casualties required to take this place made me wince.

Several squat buildings sat at the tower's base, and it was to one of these that my Kiraak scurried. I slipped in after him, right before the door closed.

Inside, it was dark with only one lantern to light it. After a scan of the building's interior, I kept my focus on its occupants. Its décor called to mind too many painful events I'd rather forget.

A woman with beautifully delicate features was glaring at a portly man, shuffling in front of her desk, and even partially blocked by her hands, her eyes were so cold. Ignoring her newest guest, the woman stood, circling the desk to get in the man's face.

As she came into the light, I raised an eyebrow. When shadows had partially hidden her, I'd thought it was so, but even still, the faded color of the Corruption under her skin took me by surprise.

An Overseer? That type of Kiraak, the ones who had enough control to receive positions in Auden's shaky government, weren't usually found in random forts in the middle of nowhere.

With her hand shooting out, the woman grabbed the man's chin, forcing him to stop his shuffling.

Digging her fingers into his jaw, she calmly said, "You had one task, you insignificant peon. Bring me what I need to keep this army fed. My underlings may not need food to survive, but it keeps them strong and malleable. Given that, do you understand how much trouble your failure has caused me?"

The man was so firmly held that he could barely nod, and once he had, the woman hummed to herself while drawing a knife. As she rested it against his neck, he whimpered.

"My Enforcer will not be pleased," she said. "I should make you bleed for that."

When she tightened her hold, I winced. That man would have bruises, if he survived this.

He started pleading for his life, and rolling her eyes, the woman dropped her hold on him, slapping him hard enough that he stumbled away.

"You're lucky I'm in a good mood," she said before pointing at the door. "Go. Do *not* fail me again."

The man dipped into a quick bow before rushing for safety, leaving me and my Kiraak here. From what I could tell, he thought coming to his Overseer had probably been a mistake, not that I could blame him.

As she sheathed her knife, she mumbled under her breath, barely audible to my typically impeccable hearing.

"Why do they always think I'll kill them? Sure, I like my fun, same as the rest, but killing? It serves no purpose, and it's messy."

Making a face, she shook her head while I cocked mine. An Overseer, unconsumed by blood lust? That was unusual, although considering who her Enforcer was, perhaps it wasn't.

Even when I'd been a child, Teron had had a reputation for restraint. I wondered why that was.

"Oh, well," the Overseer said. "On to the next. You! What the fuck are you doing here, uninvited?"

With a deep bow, my Kiraak said, "Please, forgive me, Overseer Nessaira. I bring news from my scout of South Cerrin Forest, news that will be of great worth to you."

Rolling her eyes, Nessaira waved for him to get up.

"Yes, yes. What is it?" she said.

"While in the forest, I ran across a group of rebels, my better. From what I could see, they were Esela," the Kiraak said, "but more importantly, one used white light to move far more quickly than he should have."

Nessaira fell still.

"An Ele primeancer?" she said.

"That's what it looked like, my better."

The Kiraak looked so pleased with himself, but based on how Nessaira had shifted her posture, he shouldn't be. I had no doubt she was about to punish him for bringing her this news.

With a smile, Nessaira said, "This was well done. Go to the quartermaster. I'll let them know that you've earned a week's worth of food. Also, I'll ensure you're kept off of the front line for any upcoming battles."

...What?! This couldn't be right. It wasn't how someone like her usually responded to bad news. This *lucky asshole*.

Bowing again, the Kiraak said, "Thank you, my better."

He scurried out the door, and Nessaira waited for ten heartbeats before erupting into a screaming rage, throwing items across the room. There was the reaction I'd expected.

Once she'd calmed down, though, she stormed out of the building, heading for the tower. Taking its steps two at a time, she made keeping up with her difficult, but I managed, and once we'd reached the top, I got a break.

As expected, I found nothing but opulence here. A pair of comfortable chairs sat in front of a fireplace with an intricately patterned rug beneath them, and on the bed at my side, far too many pillows rested. Several candelabra lit the room, touching every place that sunbeams couldn't reach, and the glass in the room's windows filtered this into a deep yellow color. A claw-foot desk had

been shoved against the wall, and there, with his back to me, sat Teron.

Damn. He'd survived getting shoved into the sea.

"Nessa, dear, I'm working," the bastard said. "I don't have time to play."

"That's not why I'm here," Nessaira said, "although when you do have the time, it would be fun."

Striding to the chairs, she spun one to face Teron, but he never looked up from what he was writing.

Speaking of which, I should take a peek at that. Restraining the Ele on me, I crept toward the desk.

"You've brought me something important, then?" Teron said. "But of course you have. You handle this region's tedium so well."

"Why, thank you, great one," Nessaira said, bowing in her chair.

Looking down on Teron's hair, I fought to keep my hands off my weapons. This man had not only hounded Raimie over the last few months, nearly killing him twice, but many, many years ago, he'd led the Harvest that had seen my parents dead.

The only reason he was still alive, so many months after our first meeting, was how badly my friend had needed me in the times we'd clashed, and unfortunately, I still couldn't take his head now. If the army outside attacked the people from Ada'ir, having its leader as a known quantity would be nice.

So, instead of cutting the bastard's throat, I leaned over his shoulder.

"One of the newly-turned just came to me. Interrupted my meeting with the mayor of Latchentak," Nessaira said.

"I assume you punished this person accordingly," Teron interrupted. "Our Lord Doldimar may allow the rank and file to run rampant near Elisk, but we can't afford that here on the fringes, where the rebels have maintained a foothold."

"I would have, great one, but the news he brought me was too important. Punishing a behavior that we should encourage didn't seem wise," Nessaira said. "In any case, he claims to have seen an Ele primeancer somewhere in South Cerrin Forest."

Teron's pen, scratching until now, stopped.

"I see why you've brought me this problem," he said.

And he started writing again. I wouldn't get anything from the scrawl, though. It was encoded, which given the constant power struggles among the Enforcers, only made sense.

Still, I stayed at Teron's shoulder since he apparently hadn't detected my presence.

"So, he survived. Of course he did. What am I thinking?" he said. "Does he mean to stay with his army now that his ally's dead? Nessa. Your thoughts?"

"It doesn't matter if he does or not," Nessaira said. "From our scouts' reports, we greatly outnumber them. We'll wipe them out."

Humming, Teron tilted his head from side to side.

"True, and while he's often tipped the odds in the enemy's favor, he alone can't change things this time," he said. "To be safe, we should send the army out at first light. Give the invaders little time to prepare."

Damn... With that order, I'd have a few days head start on the enemy, if I pushed myself. Would that be enough time for my allies?

"Given this, it might be best to chase our spy away, although it was kind of you to bring him to me. He can sow the seeds of fear and discord for us," Teron continued. "What do you think, Nessa?"

Oh... hell. Dropping my Ele bubble, I reached for a dagger, hoping to score a hit on the bastard who'd ruined my life here, but a sixth sense warned me to dodge sideways, right as a throwing knife sped through where my neck had been. While it embedded in the wall over Teron's head, Creation popped into being beside me.

"You need to go!" they shouted. "Now!"

They gestured, and I no longer controlled my body. My legs sent me toward a window, even as I craned my neck to glare at Teron, wishing I could hurt him. That asshole hadn't once looked up from the letter he'd been writing.

Then, I was crashing through glass with the wind soon whistling around me, giving me a potent reminder of the one fear I'd never conquered. Far more quickly than it should, the ground was rushing to smear me into paste, and with panic searing through my mind, I couldn't find a viable attraction point for Ele, which meant...

"Godsdamnit," I grumbled.

I struggled with it, but as the roofs of the buildings below pulled level with me, I shifted into a hawk. While I snatched my cloak from the air, the rest of my clothes flopped into the grass below, and flapping my wings, I barely avoided the same fate.

As I gained height, I dodged a few arrows, but soon, I was in the clear, banking back the way I'd come earlier today.

Soaring above the forest's canopy, an elusive sense of freedom fell over me, letting temptation in. Abandoning the cause would be so simple. I could keep flying, never look back, and have a simple

life.

What more did I need besides the hunt for prey, a home to roost in, and water to quench my thirst? I could be free, *free*, FREE like I hadn't been in forever. Just me and the quest for survival and friends to help with it.

My friends...

Ramie.

He needed me.

Making a sharp dive, I pulled up near the ground, releasing my shape change. I rolled along the forest floor, and stopping, I coughed into the leaves, shaking my head to clear it of a hawk's mindset. I'd almost gotten stuck in that form again, one of the reasons I hated Esela magic.

A breath later, the second reason, an energy drain, hit me hard. Barely keeping my eyes open, I crawled to my cloak, folding myself into it, and as I collapsed, Creation made another appearance.

"I'm sorry," they said.

I didn't have the energy to shout at them for overruling my decisions in the tower.

"Just keep watch," I said.

Then, consciousness fled from me.

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