

Chapter 89: My Chosen Life

Kylorian

When I stepped into headquarters, I was almost immediately ambushed by Larkspur, one of my subordinates. I lifted a finger in her face before she could speak.

“You know how this goes,” I said. “A quarter mark. Whatever it is can wait for a quarter mark while I get situated in my office.”

With a heavy sigh and an eyeroll, Larkspur backed off, letting me pass her. I hurried to my tiny, corner office because despite what I’d told my subordinate, I knew if one of them came at me with that level of urgency, they usually meant to convey something dire. I needed to get through my initial routine as quickly as possible so I could hear the news.

Once in my office, I pulled a key from a pocket to unlock the tiny chest on the rickety table behind my desk. Both surfaces were littered with quills, inkpots, food crumbs, and roughly crafted paper, but I ignored it, all to retrieve the chest’s contents.

The pistol was heavy in my hands as I carefully loaded it. Shortly after Doldimar had vanished from Auden, Raimie and Spymaster Oswin had interviewed and employed several blacksmiths to produce a plethora of these weapons, to be given to soldiers in Auden’s army. Owning one was strictly regulated to those soldiers, but soon after I’d become the Minister of Public Safety, the king had given me one as well.

I *hated* having it on my person, not trusting myself with something so destructive, but I couldn’t deny how much it helped with my job.

Still, I only carried it while working, leaving it locked in my office the rest of the time. The only exceptions to that personal rule were at events that posed a greater than normal risk to the king. For example, I planned to wear it in a concealed holster at the upcoming Anniversary Ball, when several dignitaries from somewhat hostile kingdoms would be in attendance.

Shoving the pistol into its secured harness on my belt, right beside my sword, I took a couple of deep breaths, shoving my personal problems to the side. While I was working, I was Auden’s faithful servant, a position I thoroughly enjoyed, and I wouldn’t let anything get in the way of that.

All right. *Now*, I could start the day.

Larkspur was waiting to pounce outside of my office. Practically vibrating with anticipation, she waited until I'd closed and locked my office door before speaking.

"There was a murder this morning," she said as soon as I looked at her. "So far, it looks like a mugging gone wrong, but we haven't verified that yet."

A murder? That was unusual. Elisk might be the largest city in Auden, but violence—of the life-ending variety, at least—was fairly limited here. It seemed most of the populace was still fairly sick of seeing, enacting, or otherwise experiencing someone's death, when it came before their time.

Which wasn't to say that murder never happened. I wasn't sure any sizeable population of humanity could go for long without it, terrible as that was, but it was rare enough to surprise me.

Still.

"Why are you bringing this to me?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "It sounds like standard investigative work, and you all tend to only bring me in on the cases that could lead to civil unrest."

Even if I was a Minister and all of Elisk's peacekeeping forces eventually reported to me, I usually let my subordinates run the day-to-day operations of my office, waiting for them to let me know where my brand of influence was needed. Unless they brought something up with me, I stuck with grunt work, like patrols, or served in any short-staffed positions.

"The death occurred in the neighborhood closest to the western gate," Larkspur solemnly told me.

Slamming my eyes closed, I made a face.

"Shit," I whispered.

That was one of the most recently opened sections of the city, ready for habitation now that Doldimar's former influence had been cleansed from it. When Raimie had taken over Elisk, the city had been full of bodies—victims for the Kiraak—poisoned wells, and genuinely unsafe living conditions. Clearing them out had been a steady but long slog.

But of more importance to the present moment, the more recently opened neighborhoods were where most of Auden's recent influx of Eselan immigrants tended to settle.

Opening my eyes, I met Larkspur's gray gaze.

"Is that why you're in the office instead of on patrol?" I asked.

Larkspur was one of the handful of Eselan subordinates I'd recruited, but she was the only one scheduled to work today.

Ducking her chin, Larkspur broke eye contact.

"My partner thought it might be best," she murmured.

I nodded.

“I understand,” I said, “and so long as you agree with him, you’re welcome to stay here for as long as you like.”

As soon as she’d acknowledged my words, I continued, “Mind telling me where I’m headed?”

Larkspur gave me directions, and I left the office. As I walked down city streets, I took the pulse of the crowd around me. Most people seemed calm or excited, but in a happy way. I didn’t sense much tension or fear, which relieved me.

A happy populace, living in a safe environment that also met their needs, led to less violence between its members. That, in turn, led to less work for me, not that I minded working, but I did enjoy seeing less crime among the people I cared for.

As king, Raimie had done an excellent job with fostering this environment. I was honestly impressed that he’d gotten so far in such a short amount of time. Sure, he’d had a head start before taking the throne: all those years we’d spent contesting the throne between us.

But still.

None of this was to say the Audish were perpetually at peace with one another. That wasn’t possible in any nation, much less one where most of its population had some form of battle fatigue. But to date, Auden’s recovery from Doldimar’s reign had gone exceptionally smoothly.

When I reached the crime scene, I greeted the people standing guard as professionally and calmly as possible. My subordinates looked nervous, flicking their eyes over every citizen who passed in front of the alley they were blocking. They let me through, and I slowly approached the body slumped against one of the alley’s walls, trying to prepare.

I never liked seeing bodies—who did?—but the dead Esela who’d been popping up over the last year had been among the worst of those I’d seen. The Audish hadn’t taken their arrival to our shore well, and that distaste had been shown through crimes like this one.

When I looked upon this body, however, I was relieved to see no obvious mutilation to it. They were slumped sideways at the base of the wall with their head bowed against their chest. If I hadn’t already known about the murder, I’d think they were sleeping off a drunken bender.

I supposed the shallow pool of blood around them helped to dispel the illusion too. The killing wound wasn’t obvious from this angle, but from the volume of that pool, it must have clipped a vital blood vessel.

I crouched in front of the body to take a closer look and immediately cringed. Someone had gouged this Eselan’s gray eyes out. I wasn’t sure yet if the perpetrator had done that due to extreme emotion or out of a vain hope to cover up what amounted to a crime committed out of hatred. The Eselan’s hair was a muted brown and black combination, something that might have let them pass as human without their gray eyes, so maybe their murderer had wanted to delay our discovery of

their race.

I could see no other obvious clues, so straightening, I returned to my subordinates at the alley's end.

"Any witnesses?" I asked.

They both gave me the side-eye before replying in the negative, not that I could blame them for that. The Audish people still distrusted anyone in a peacekeeping position, given that the last people who'd held that role had been mostly Kiraak, Overseers, or Conscripted. Much as they might love Raimie, idolize him even, they still had issues with trusting him and his decisions.

And so, the citizens of Elisk tended to avoid my subordinates whenever possible.

Sighing, I passed a hand over my face.

"Well, see if you can find anything else connected to the crime nearby," I said. "I'll work my charm on the locals. See if they'll give me anything. We'll meet back at headquarters by midday and go from there."

The two tried to salute, which I winced at and waved off. We weren't the military, and I had no desire to run us into anything like one.

I made my way up and down the streets that bordered the alley, speaking with residents and shop owners alike. Much like with Raimie, my efforts to help our people during our former contest had helped to ingratiate them to me. Still, that didn't mean many would be willing to help with my current investigation, which showed when I met up with my subordinates later.

Fortunately, they'd had better luck with their side of things, although I could barely take in their new information through the depth of my frustration with my fellow citizens. I was about ready to strangle the next one who gave me the runaround on what should have been a simple line of questioning.

Thank Alouin, I'd become well aware of this warning signal, coming from my own brain, over the years, and I knew just how to handle it before it turned into something... less than pleasant.

I spent the first half of the afternoon patrolling one of Elisk's more crime-ridden neighborhoods. Sometimes, if I was lucky, I'd come across a thief or similar ruffian who was resistant to arrest, and I could use the resulting struggle to quell any violent urges lurking in my mind. Today, that wasn't the case.

So, I headed toward my fallback.

Once I reached home, I wasn't sure what sort of greeting I should expect. Things had become tumultuous between me and Ivelais in the last sixteen months, even though the two of us were also closer than ever. But the reactions each of us had to our inner evils—our 'inner Durys', as Hadrion had once called them—had become more varied and extreme, especially on Ivelais' part.

Cautiously, I crept through the house with my hand always near a weapon's hilt. Ivelais and I hadn't fought with real weapons since I'd cast my father out of my life, but it paid to be prepared.

This home was much more cluttered than the one I'd kept in Tiro. Rather than a single table and chair, several soft surfaces littered both of the house's rooms. Charcoal drawings were hung on the walls with the ones more appropriate for mixed company in the front and the more disturbing images in the back. An unfinished drawing rested on the small desk in our bedroom, the one beneath the room's small window.

I couldn't find Ivelais anywhere, not that there were many places to look. My new home might be bigger than anything else I'd owned, but it wasn't anything like the palace or even the smaller family homes that lined Elisk's thoroughfares.

Where could Ivelais be? Maybe they'd snuck to a more secluded neighborhood, somewhere they wouldn't feel as trapped, or they could have hooded up to chance a market visit.

Frowning, I eased open our narrow back door into the garden path behind the building, guarded by tall walls. This was the biggest reason Ivelais had decided to live with me after I'd moved to Elisk. They'd craved time outdoors where they wouldn't have to constantly stay alert for the presence of unwanted onlookers.

For a moment, I stood in the doorway. My danger sense, highly tuned throughout childhood, had awakened, and I wasn't sure why. The garden patch looked as abandoned as the house, so why...?

There was no helping it. I'd have to investigate the garden patch either way.

As soon as I stepped outside, a heavy weight landed on my back, and teeth clamped down *hard* on my earlobe, splitting skin. Gasping, I bit back any other noises my body wanted to make while backtracking into the house. Somehow, I managed to kick the door closed while flailing to get my attacker off of me.

I managed that rather important task right as a sharp edge grazed against my neck, right over the blood vessel that would see my dead if it had been broken. Tossing my attacker away, I drew my sword while noting the distinctive features across from me.

"What the *fuck*, Ivelais?" I hissed.

They didn't reply, merely leaping at me again with the knife they were holding extended. Swaying, I batted that blade aside, barely managing to regain my balance in time to spin around their careening body. They slammed into the back door, and I was right there after them, shoving them face first into its wooden surface.

"Is it really that bad today?" I gasped into their ear.

They manically laughed while throwing their head back into my face. I stumbled away from them, losing track of them for a split second. In that time, Ivelais got something behind my legs, and I collapsed onto our bed. With a delighted shriek, they jumped onto my lap, slapping their hands into

my shoulders. I couldn't maintain my balance. They bore down so hard with their hips and hands that I was afraid the force of it might tear through our bed's straw mattress.

Disoriented, I watched skin and hair blur until two soft surfaces whacked into my mouth. I tasted blood as Ivelais quite literally shoved their tongue through my lips.

Well. This wasn't *quite* what I'd been looking for when I'd come here, but... it would work just as well.

Releasing my grip on my sword, I flipped us away from it, wrapping my hands around Ivelais' throat. I maintained the kiss while applying pressure, almost enough to choke them out.

Things followed a fairly standard pattern for us after that. We spent a good quarter to half mark violently indulging in each others' bodies, long enough to satiate our inner monsters.

Or at least, mine was satisfied by the time we fell away from one another. It purred in satisfaction at the back of my mind.

I looked over Ivelais, noting the scratches and bite marks on their skin.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

Slamming their eyes closed, Ivelais made a face before turning away from me.

"Fine," they mumbled.

Oo. That wasn't good.

Gently, I scooted until I'd slotted my body against theirs. I draped an arm over their stomach, pressing my nose into the back of their neck.

"Ok," I breathed. "Let me know if you need anything else."

They were quiet for a long time while I merely waited. Sometimes, Ivelais would let me in on their inner turmoil, although this only came after they'd let the excess off in whatever way they must. Sometimes, they closed down even tighter than they usually were. I wasn't sure which way they'd swing today.

Eventually, they cleared their throat.

"Why haven't you told King Raimie about me yet?" they quietly said.

I tensed. With a huff, I rolled away, sitting up.

"I don't know," I said. "I keep meaning to but..."

Making a face, I reached for my tunic. I wasn't sure why Ivelais slipped from my thoughts whenever I was in my friend's presence, but it was causing issues between them and me. Ivelais

didn't necessarily expect me to present their problem to the king so that they might become human again, but they also weren't happy to still bear Corruption's marks, even this long after Raimie had finished cleansing the rest of the kingdom of known Kiraak.

Sighing, Ivelais rolled my way.

"I don't blame you for it, Ky," they said. "I'm just worried. You've had such a long time to bring it and your own problem up with him, but you never have. What do you think will happen if you continue to let our problems linger like this?"

That had me frowning. My own problem? I'd addressed the issue of Tanwadur and every influence he'd once held on me over a year ago. I wasn't sure what else Ivelais could mean.

I turned toward them, planting a kiss on their forehead.

"I know. I'll keep trying," I said. "Maybe I'll remember to bring it up tonight! I'm meeting Raimie and Ren for dinner. Those two apparently have important news to share, and I'm one of the lucky few who get advanced notice of that sort of thing."

Ivelais scowled at me for several heartbeats before sighing. Sitting up, they wrapped their arms around me, almost clinging.

"You can't keep avoiding this," they whispered, "not if you want to avoid any disasters *he* has planned."

Abruptly, I stood up. With how long I'd spent here, I wasn't sure how much time I had left to linger. It would take me quite some time to reach the tavern Ren and Raime had chosen as our meeting spot, given it was on the other side of the city. Had I been so wrapped up in quelling my inner monster that I'd made myself late?

"Like I said, I know," I absently said.

Glancing at Ivelais, I lifted one corner of my mouth.

"Wish me luck tonight?" I said. "You know I might need it with all that distracting alcohol surrounding me."

Ivelais watched me intently with their brow creased, which soon had me squirming.

Huffing out a breath, they said, "Good luck, Ky. I'll be here when you get home."

Nodding at them, I brightly smiled before heading toward the front door. Raimie and my sister hadn't wanted to have a family meal in a long time. I wondered what was so momentous and urgent that it required such an important gathering.