

# 2

## The Girl

Freedom wasn't supposed to feel like this.

Standing over Hadrion's grave, I wondered what my little brother would think of the mess that I'd become, and his much-loved voice echoed in my head.

*"Shouldn't have ended things with Raimie, silly. I know you love him. You certainly blabbered enough about it to me. Who cares if his marriage to Ada'ir's queen would serve Auden best? Do what's best for YOU."*

"Like you have room to talk," I whispered.

When Kylorian had returned with Hadrion's body... Alouin, the sight of it.

*Pale skin turning green from rot. Neck split unnaturally wide to reveal the tissue beneath. The wound's jagged edges.*

As my lungs became a bellows for air, I slapped a hand over my mouth, biting my palm, and only unclenched my teeth on tasting blood. I wouldn't cry today, not when I'd shed so many tears in recent weeks.

"Why'd you do it, Had-had?" I said. "Did you think Raimie couldn't protect you? He could have! I know- I think-"

If he couldn't have, the remnants of Raimie might be laying here instead of Hadrion. Was that what I wanted? To trade the one I loved for my brother? It might be better than seeing him married to another woman.

I tasted blood again, and a sharp pain in my cheek made me release it from my teeth. Alouin, how could I think that?

"Ren, you ready?"

No.

"Coming, Ky!"

My older brother was waiting for me far distant from the grave, hugging his elbows.

Something was wrong with him. It had been that way *for a while*, but things had gotten worse since his trip to Nephiron: his way of grieving, I knew. He'd been jumpy and snappish, unlike his typical diplomatic self. Worse, he'd returned gaunt and hollow-eyed. Haunted. I was worried that he'd stopped eating properly, as he on and off had throughout our childhood.

To top it all off, he'd been avoiding both me and the rest of our family for weeks, which I didn't understand. Kylorian had always called upon the families of those who'd been lost in service to Tiro, but now, he was deviating from that pattern with those closest to him. I'd thought he'd want to spend as much time possible with us, especially given how often he was typically out in greater Auden. When he'd come to ask if I'd join him on his new planned trip, it had been the first time we'd talked since he'd come home.

As I approached him, I looked up and down his frame, noting the pack at his feet, the sturdy shoes, and the cloak around his neck. Did he mean to leave straight from here? I might have something to say about that.

"Shall we see Eliade and Dury before heading out?" I sweetly asked.

As always, Kylorian's eyes tightened when I mentioned our father's name. I could understand that, given the many times he'd talked about the lectures Tanwadur had given him and the thunderous shouting that I could sometimes hear ringing throughout our home.

Still, I was especially anxious to have those two say goodbye. My father had been *tense* throughout Kylorian's surprise trip to Nephiron, and I'd noticed that things were usually easier between the two whenever Tanwadur was more relaxed. I tried to make that happen as often as possible.

"We spoke earlier," Kylorian said, as if to spite me. "So, unless you have something you need to say to them?"

There. A way to get him home, at least for a little while.

"I do, actually."

I started down the path toward Tiro, soon glancing over my shoulder. Kylorian hadn't taken a single step.

"Coming?" I asked in a sing-song voice.

My brother's lips twitched with his fingers stretching, but he soon followed me out of the graveyard, and I smiled. He *would* see every member of our family before we left, even if I had to force it.

"Little bird!" Eliade said as we came through the front door. "And Ky! I didn't know you'd returned from your trip. How'd it go?"

He hadn't even told her he was back?

“It was...”

Kylorian broke off, looking anywhere but at Eliade.

“Productive Uneventful.”

Both Eliade and I stared at Kylorian until he sighed.

“I met my contact in Nephiron. Things didn’t work out so well between us, so I left. Found myself in a spot of trouble. Fortunately, my contact had a change of heart before I got in too deep. They came after me, and we worked things out.”

That was vague, for him at least. Kylorian usually regaled us with stories about his time on the road after he’d come home. What had happened to him while he was away to change that habit?

“I’m glad to hear you fixed things with your contact,” Eliade cautiously said before smiling. “Why don’t you two come to the dining room? I was making lunch when you arrived.”

As she gestured behind her, Kylorian shook his head.

“Actually, we’re in a bit of a hurry-”

“Nonsense! You always have time for my cooking, or so you always say,” Eliade said. “Right, Ky?”

Wincing, Kylorian said, “Yes, but-”

“Great! We should get going, then,” Eliade said. “Your father’s already at the table. Let’s join him, shall we?”

Kylorian’s frown deepened as he followed our mother, but still, I smiled at his meek shuffle. Eliade had been the only one, ever, to cow my brother like this, and I’d always found it entertaining to watch: the quintessential housewife conquering one of Tiro’s best warriors.

As we stepped into the dining room, Tanwadur, already at his seat, glanced up at us. There was a brief flash of... something—I wasn’t sure what—in his eye, but it was gone almost as soon as it had appeared. Getting to his feet, Tanwadur spread his arms wide

“Ky!” he cried. “You’re home!”

While he came forward, presumably to hug my brother, I punched Kylorian in the shoulder.

“You said you’d spoken with them!”

From the corner of his mouth, Kylorian said. “I may have fibbed a bit.”

“A bit?!”

With his attention fully on our father, Kylorian accepted his embrace, *obviously* ignoring me.

“How are you, Dury?” he asked.

My father’s thick arms squeezed, too tight, it would seem. Kylorian sharply inhaled, stiffening, but he quickly got ahold of himself.

“Better now that both of you are here,” Tanwadur said, “Come! Sit!”

As soon as he released my brother, the two of us joined him at the table. Eliade, who’d taken a detour on the way here, bustled inside. She held plates piled high with vegetable pies, bread, and roasted meat, and after placing each platter on the table, she sat down as well.

“Wait your turn, Hadri-” she absently began.

Her choked sob stopped what had once been a daily admonishment, and as it echoed in the room, everyone avoided looking at a conspicuously empty chair.

After a moment, Eliade whispered, “I’m sorry.”

I leapt from my seat, rushing to hold my mother. As I rocked her from side to side, she started crying.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I said.

The two men with us had, predictably, withdrawn, facing their pain with their typical clenched jaws and tightened fists.

Meanwhile, Eliade hid her face in her hands, shuddering, while I released her. This left me as the one to draw our meal back into something we’d find more comfortable.

Again, I bit the inside of my cheek. Didn’t they know I was hurting too? Why did I have to be the strong one?

*“Take my role, big sis,” Hadrion whispered to me. “Be the beacon of cheerfulness and hope that this family badly needs.”*

So, I forced myself to smile as I said.

“Alouin, this food looks amazing, mom! I didn’t know potatoes were in season yet!”

Eliade laughed into her hands.

“Maybe if you spent more time in the fields instead of traipsing through the forest all day, you would have known.”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Aren’t you the one who’s always telling me little birds fly where they will? I’d be too twitchy for farm work.”

“That’s true,” Tanwadur grumbled. “Don’t you go stealing her for your fields now, Eliade. The Terror of Da’kul couldn’t have earned her title if she’d kept to the role you intended for her.”

Eliade slapped the table, revealing a tear-streaked face.

“I never could stand against the two of you when you were united in purpose.”

After a moment more of glaring, she relented, waving at the table.

“Dig in. I know you want to.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice,” I said under my breath.

I joined Tanwadur and Eliade in serving my plate, Only Kylorian refrained from the free-for-all.

“Are you feeling all right, Ky?” I asked.

I could tell, just by looking at him, that he needed to put some foot into his body, one way or the other, and it concerned me that he didn’t look interested in a meal that he’d typically jump right into. Our mother’s cooking was one of the only forms of sustenance he tended to let himself enjoy.

Making a face, Kylorian said, “I’m fine. Just not hungry. Anxious to be on the road.”

Sure...

Taking aim, I meant to flick a pea at Kylorian as an opening salvo, one where I might eventually get him to relent, but before I could try, Tanwadur interrupted me.

“Kylorian of the line of kings!” he said. “Are you refusing to try your mother’s cooking?”

At that gruff question, my brother flinched, and I winced inside. Alouin love my father but sometimes, he could be entirely too harsh with Kylorian, completely unlike how he’d always been with me and... Hadrion.

“I wouldn’t dare,” Kylorian said.

Hesitantly, he filled his own plate. I studiously ignored him and our father as we all ate, starting the meal as many before this one once had.

Eventually, though, Tanwadur broke the quiet in a displeased grumble.

“What’s got you in such a rush?”

At his tone, I choked on the bite of vegetable pie that I’d been chewing. Any pleasant snips of conversation we’d been indulging in vanished, gone as if they had never been.

As always, Kylorian looked nonchalant about the change in our father’s mood, although I knew looks could be deceiving with him. He scooped up a bite as he said.

“Surely you’ve heard that Raimie’s recently taken Elisk without a single loss. Even I’ve heard the rumor, and I’ve been on the road for a while.”

Tanwadur started scowling.

“More like Doldimar gifted it to him,” Tanwadur spat.

Which made me flinch. I’d endured a lot of lectures during my time spent courting Raimie, so I hated that my brother had brought up the subject now.

“Well, yes. You and I know that’s what happened,” Kylorian continued, poking the air in our father’s direction with his knife, “but to the general populace, it doesn’t look that way. So, in the battle for their hearts and minds, Raimie holds the advantage right now. Since he’s acting like he’ll keep to our agreement, I mean to step forward in the populace’s mind as an alternative ruler. Hopefully, this will begin swinging things my way.”

Nodding, Tanwadur scooped peas and potatoes into his mouth, and despite the sensitive subject matter, I breathed a sigh of relief. My father had relaxed, which was good for all parties involved.

“How?” he asked around his mouthful.

“Raimie has his strengths, much as you might hate to admit it,” Kylorian said. “I have mine. While he runs around charming people with his good nature, I’ll play politics. It was what I was gathering Ren to do before our stop here.”

Tanwadur grew distant as he thought through my brother’s plan.

“You mean to speak with town mayors,” he said, “gaining their promises of support in exchange for whatever they might demand from you.”

“Sounds about right,” Kylorian said.

“And why do you need our little bird for this?” Tanwadur asked.

Every eye turned to me, which started a flush creeping up my neck. After Kylorian had explained his plans for the next week, during one of the rare spells he’d talked to me recently, I’d asked if I could join him on his trip. I’d only told Kylorian that I needed an excuse to leave Tiro, but I suspected he knew the real reason I’d asked to come with him. After all, he’d walked in on me and Raimie before I’d...

Anyway, I was sure he knew, as I was sure our parents did too, but I’d be damned if I’d admit that reason aloud.

Without any prompting on my part, Kylorian stepped forward to rescue me, as usual.

“Ren should see something of Auden besides our little piece of it, and she should do it now, while Doldimar’s gone,” he said. “Who knows when he’ll return with his Kiraak and his games? Let’s take

advantage of our freedom while we have it.”

“Hear, hear!” Tanwadur cried, slamming his tankard on the tabletop.

While he and Kylorian devolved into a heated discussion about travel plans and what resources he should pledge to which towns, I picked at the remnants of my meal. My brother had come up with a nice lie for why he needed me to join him on this trip, but it was just that. A lie. I knew why I really needed to leave this place.

Touches of Raimie were rife throughout Tiro, and they were driving me mad. Why was it that a broken heart hurt almost as much as a lost sibling? Was I that shallow?

*“Not in the least, big sis,” Hadrion said. “I remember the things you said about him. How he made you feel, like a missing part of you coming home. I also remember the night you brought him to Tiro. As soon as I saw the two of you together, I knew that Ky had lost the battle for your heart. You and Raimie were made for each other, and while it hurts that I’m gone, never to be seen or spoken to again, the potential that you’ve lost with him hurts more. I know it does, Ren. You could never lie to me. It’s all right, though. I understand.”*

“You’re a voice in my head,” I whispered while ripping into my last few bites of meat.

“What was that, sweetie?” Eliade asked at my side.

I flinched, huddling on myself.

“Nothing, mom.”

Eliade watched me as I finished eating. When I set aside my utensils, she laid a hand over mine.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” she asked. “I was here when Josenik left-”

Gasping, I stole my hand back, which made Eliade look miserable. I had to give her something else to focus on.

“I was just wondering what freedom feels like,” I said. “Do you know?”

If anything, my mother’s face fell further.

“Oh, little bird. What makes you think I would?” she said. “When I was a child, Doldimar had held dominion for almost two hundred years. Besides the pretense of it that we have here, I’ve never been free, but maybe we can learn how that feels together.”

Hmm.

“I’d like that,” I said, meaning to continue the conversation.

Shoving away from the table, Kylorian stopped that from happening.

“Thank you for the meal, but we really should be going now,” he said.

With nothing else, he stalked out of the room, and those of us he'd left behind exchanged a glance. That had been abrupt, but then, Kylorian was sometimes like that, usually after he'd finished an intense conversation with our father.

Like the one he'd just had.

“Or maybe not,” Eliade sighed. “Safe journey, sweetie. Thank you for bringing Ky here before you left.”

“It was no trouble,” I said. “Despite how he might be acting right now, please know that both of us are looking forward to coming home.”

“Oh, we know,” Tanwadur said. “Now, hurry after him, Ren. He'll be halfway across Auden by the time you catch up.”

Despite the warning, I took my time saying goodbye. When I did leave, I sprinted after my brother, and on catching up, I swatted the back of his head.

“Your bathing has gotten as deplorable as your manners lately. Is that something you picked up from your contact in Nephiron?”

Without stopping, Kylorian shoved me with a smile on his face, and for a split second, I saw the brother that I'd grown up beside.

“What's that supposed to mean?” he asked, sulkily pouting.

“You missed a spot this morning,” I said. “I swear, it's like dirt loves you; it clings to you so!”

“Really? Where is it this time?”

Kylorian twirled with his arms spread wide.

“Right along your hairline,” I said with a smirk. “Guess I can't blame you for missing it. I almost didn't see it myself.”

At my words, Kylorian slowed down, lifting a hand to his neck. A river of emotions flowed over his face, too fast for me to read them, but when they'd passed, my familiar brother was gone again, replaced by what he'd become since the battle for the Birthing Grounds.

“Huh,” he grunted.

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