

# 6

## The Girl

For the first time in months, I felt alive.

The bandits had taken Kylorian. I'd woken up alone and in shackles that had been pinned to the wall. In fact, my shoulders' screaming protests had dragged me from sleep in the first place, and as soon as my disorientation had dissipated, I'd joined in with their screaming, shouting for someone to release me or tell me where my brother was.

Someone must have gotten tired of my racket because not long ago, a man had come to free me from my shackles. He'd punched me before doing it, eliminating any chance for me to escape and then, had left me in my locked room.

I'd been sitting in this improvised prison cell for hours with worry gnawing at me. Where was Kylorian? Why had the Enforcer begun his 'hospitality' with my brother? What torments had he already endured?

And why, for the love of Alouin, had he submitted to the bastard in the first place? I kept playing the scene of our capture in my mind. From the moment the Enforcer had arrived, Kylorian's behavior had changed. Before, he'd been his normal, if a bit broodier, self.

Afterward, he'd gone complacent, yielding.

My big brother didn't take orders, especially not from an Enforcer. He gave them, *and* he was the most argumentative son of a bitch I knew... except for when he was with Tanwadur, but I couldn't see how our adoptive father was anything like one of the evil, son of a bitch Enforcers.

What could have so thoroughly changed my brother? I had my theories, each more terrifying than the last, but when they flung Kylorian into the cell with me, those theories were forgotten.

"Ky!" I shouted.

While I dropped to my knees beside my adoptive brother, the cell door slammed shut and was latched, but I hesitated before touching him.

They'd stripped him down to his smallclothes, and over every inch of exposed flesh, a mottled red color was spreading with only his head spared from the beating. Where could I lay a hand without hurting him?

Groaning, Kylorian rolled to his back.

"Help me up," he whispered.

Leaping to my feet, I hauled my brother to his own. He winced the whole way, but once he was upright, he stumbled to the door, beating his fist against it.

"I'm still standing, assholes," he shouted with a ragged voice. "I'm still--"

All at once, the fight left him, and he collapsed.

"Alouin, it doesn't matter," he said. "Eventually, they'll win. They always do."

"Don't say that, Ky," I said. "We'll escape. I'm the Terror of Da'kul. You've been hailed king for years. We can take a few bandits."

After I was done, Kylorian's shoulders shook for so long that when laughter eventually burst from him, it sent goosebumps racing over my skin.

"Don't infect me with your optimism," he said. "It will only make our ends more painful."

I reeled back. This defeatism... it wasn't my brother, and seeing it, banished theories and suspicions crept back into my mind.

"You're not the brother I know," I whispered. "My brother would fight, tooth and nail, until death dragged him under. He would never surrender, even to an Enforcer, but the man before me has defied those expectations. Which makes me wonder, who are you, Ky?"

I waited for a moment in a tense silence before voicing my worst fear.

"Did someone ensnare you in a Vice while you were on your recent trip? Are you a Kiraak now?"

Kylorian shot his head up with a snarl fixed upon his face.

"Do you see Corruption under my skin?" he snapped. "If an Enforcer had put me in a Vice on my travels, that horrible stuff would have spread across my body by now. You know this. You've seen newly born Kiraak and how short of a time it takes for black vines to cover them. And in my recent spat of fun with our Enforcer captor, my skin wasn't breached, or can you not see that? Also, *I've never met Doldimar*. You know? The only one who can *make* Alouin damned Kiraak!"

"I--"

Swallowing hard, I stopped, working to find my voice.

"I know, but I have no other explanation for the changes I see in you."

With heat in his voice, Kylorian said, "We've been growing distant for years, Ren. That's what happens when I have to follow Dury's crazy plans all across Auden and you get stuck at home.

Over time, people *do* change. Maybe you haven't noticed the changes in me because I've been gone so often recently."

Shaking my head, I started pacing in front of him.

"No," I whispered. "This isn't some gradual change, taking place over the years. This is something sudden, something that's happened since Hadrion died. Is that it? Did Had-had's passing make you realize how vulnerable we are?"

"Don't you speak to me about Hadrion! Not when you-"

Kylorian choked on the words that I knew he'd been wanting to scream since returning from the Birthing Grounds, and I was sick of it hanging over us. If we died here at the hands of a sadistic Enforcer, wasn't it best to clear the air between us?

I missed the brother I'd grown up with, teased and played with, and trained beside. Who along with Hadrion and Eliade, had been my source of support after Josenik left me with a mistake in my womb.

So, I snapped, "When what, Ky? When I love the man you blame for Hadrion's death? Why do you blame *him*? I've heard the tale of the Birthing Grounds from multiple sources. I know how Hadrion died, and from what I've heard, Raimie can't be blamed for what happened. In fact, he did everything he could to save Hadrion, including offering to take our brother's place as the Enforcer's captive. Before the Birthing Grounds, you two seemed to have found some common ground. You looked like you might have become friends! So, tell me, Ky. What possible reason could you have for this sudden dislike? Why-?"

"*Alouin, Ren!* How can you be so oblivious?"

As Kylorian's shout rang in our cell, I barely had enough time to suddenly *know* that I didn't want to hear what he was going to say next, but I was helpless to do anything but that.

"It's like you push away everything that you don't want to see, both the relatively tame and the absolutely horrible shit going on all around you," Kylorian said. "I tell you *so much*, but you refuse to read between the lines, to see what I've been both hiding from you and silently screaming for you to notice. You've never seen what *he's* done to me for all these years but-"

A cough cut him off. I stared as he squeezed his eyes closed before continuing in a whisper.

"No. Let's not talk about that. Let's talk... let's talk about Raimie."

Opening his eyes, Kylorian directly met mine.

"You're wrong, ok?" he said. "It took me a while to realize it, but Raimie is a good man, and if nothing else, I admire him. I certainly don't hate him or blame him for Hadrion, like you've suggested. I don't like how he ended things between the two of you, especially when I..."

He clenched and unclenched his hands, all while I cocked my head. How Raimie had ended things with us? He hadn't-

Huffing out a sigh, Kylorian crossed his arms, standing so abruptly that I took a step back with my focus still fixed on him. He took hold of my shoulders, barely stopping himself from shaking me.

"I swear, Ren. I've done what I can to show you how I feel, even repressed it when that was what you needed, but *damnit*, how can you not fucking see it, even now?"

I rocked away from him. The fierce look on my brother's face scared me. I'd never seen him like this, and I wasn't sure if I liked it. I wanted to say the words that would calm him down, that would make this scorching heat between us die, but my traitor mouth refused to oblige me.

"See what?" I whispered.

Kylorian wordlessly shook his head before hiding his face in his hands.

"I-"

The cell door creaked open, making me and Kylorian tense as a bandit stepped inside. He gestured at me with a drawn knife.

"Your turn," he said.

Lurching forward, Kylorian stumbled between the bandit and me.

"That wasn't the deal."

Chuckling, the bandit said, "You think an Enforcer would keep any promises he made with you?"

Of course not. The only Enforcer known to do such a miraculous thing had been Teron, and even he'd been erratic on which promises he kept.

"I won't let you take her," Kylorian hissed.

With an eyebrow raised, the bandit looked him up and down.

"I doubt you could stop me," he said. "Sit down before I have to hurt you."

I tugged on my brother's shoulder, shaking off the intensity of our previous conversation.

"It's all right, Ky. I'll be fine."

Whirling toward me, Kylorian shouted in my face.

"It is not 'all right'. I-"

Crossing the space between them, the bandit smashed his knife's pommel into the back of Kylorian's head, my brother dropped to the ground, and I retreated from the two, hissing.

"You want me to hurt you too?" the bandit asked.

Standing there, unarmed and with my brother lying at an enemy's feet, the seconds slowed to a crawl with the pound of my blood filling my ears. *This* was living. Balancing on the razor's edge, toeing the line between mortal peril and manageable danger. The choices made in these moments not only determined someone's survival but also defined who they were.

This moment carried one, real question: could I take the bandit? If I attacked and won, I could call myself courageous. If I didn't, deciding to wait for a better opportunity instead, I could call myself wise.

Impulsivity had only hurt me in the past. Better to bide my time.

Crouching, I checked Kylorian's pulse before striding for the door.

When the bandit hesitated to follow me, I said, "Why aren't we leaving yet? Let's not keep our host waiting."

I left before he could recover. He'd catch up soon enough.

Play the game. I'd never participated in one so deadly before, but I knew how to do it. No rules, only me, an Enforcer, and my own cleverness. A game where one misstep would see me dead.

As the bandit trotted to get ahead of me, I hummed to myself. Rushing forward to test my mettle against one of Doldimar's Enforcers, I'd never felt more alive.

It didn't matter that the bastard would likely beat me black and blue in this first round. I could handle that. The opening salvo wouldn't matter in the long run because eventually, I'd find a chink in the armor of those holding me captive, and when I did, I'd worm my way out of here.

Either that, or I'd take Hadrion's route, denying the Enforcer his pleasure. However this turned out, I'd win.

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