

# Chapter 14: Homecoming

## Kylorian

I watched Ren's new 'friend' run after his companion with my head cocked and disquiet roiling in my gut. Before, the blonde-haired one had come running down the street, shouting *those two words*, and my mind had spliced another time and place over the real world. I'd watched a younger me strut across a lantern-lit cavern while people on all sides smiled or whispered those same words, and then, Dury and then, Dury and then, *Dury-*

"Hey, you ok?"

Puffing out a shaky breath, I glanced at Ren with a half-smile before remembering what I'd just done. As soon as I had, that smile turned into a wince.

"How can you ask *me* that right now?" I said. "Hell, Ren. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have brought up—"

Raising a hand, Ren nervously laughed.

"It's all right!" she said. "Let's forget it, yeah?"

And I was forced to agree with her. I knew how deep the wound of Josenik still ran in Ren, even years after he'd left her here with a *problem* to resolve, and more than that, I *knew* not to poke at another person's sensitive spots. That lesson had been drilled into me over the years.

Instead, I crossed my arms, ruefully smiling at Ren.

"So, you made a friend, huh?" I said. "The notorious Terror of Da'kul made a *friend*. How'd that happen?"

Flushing, Ren started sputtering, which only made me smile more, before she backhanded my chest *again*.

"I can make friends as well as the next person, asshole! I simply choose not to," she said with a huff. "Besides, you're one to talk."

"Fair enough."

While she laughed, I glanced over my surroundings once more, taking in a wondrous sight for perhaps the thousandth time. It didn't matter how many times I came home to this. It still managed

to take my breath away.

Even still, there was that: the fact that this was home. I wondered when I'd get to escape it again.

"So, how'd it go?" Ren said, bouncing in place. "Since Raimie was kind enough to excuse himself from the conversation, are you going to tell me now?"

Right. That.

Ren took one look at my face, and her excitement dropped into nothing.

"Oh," she softly said.

There was an awkward pause while I scrambled to figure out what to say, but then, Ren shook herself.

"Right. We'll do the thing tonight, then. I'll get Had-had. We'll meet you in the usual place once you're done, ok?" she said. "But you should go now. Get there before someone else can share the news."

Alouin, I *knew* that but...

But she was right, and I could not argue against the truth right now, no matter how often I'd had to do that in the past.

Still, I took the time to squeeze Ren's shoulder.

"It'll only be a light scolding, same as always. You know that," I said, "but yes. I'll see you there."

With a grin, Ren said, "All right. Good luck, Ky!"

Holding a hand over my head in farewell, I stayed fixed in place, watching Ren's back until she was out of sight, but then, I slumped. I vigorously rubbed my face, trying to psych myself up before I had to make an anxiety-fueled walk, but as usual, that didn't help me much. As I headed to Tiro's city square, I could feel *his* presence looming over me, getting closer with every step I took, and it took much more energy than it should to ignore that imaginary sensation.

One good thing was sure to come before I ended this journey, though, and sure enough, when I stepped into the house and was greeted by a higher-pitched voice, I felt my shoulders lowering from my ears. When Eliade came into the foyer, she clasped her hands in front of her face, releasing a happy hum, before spreading her arms wide.

"Welcome home, Ky," she said.

I hurried into her embrace, clutching her tight once there.

"Hi, mom," I breathed into her hair.

After a moment, Eliade thrust me away, running her eyes up and down my frame.

“You look thinner,” she said, flicking her eyes up at me in accusation. “Have you been skipping meals again?”

With a nervous laugh, I rubbed the back of my neck, ignoring *his* voice growling about ‘proper figure’ and ‘having an imposing presence’ in my head.

“Maybe?” I said.

Clicking her tongue, Eliade said, “This is what happens when you get sent away for nearly four months.”

Sighing, she shook her head before pulling me into another hug.

“We’ve missed you.”

“And I’ve missed you,” I said before trailing off, waiting for her to speak her part of this tradition.

“Just as much as you’ve missed my cooking?” she obligingly said.

Solemnly nodding, I said, “Just so.”

“All right, all right.”

Releasing me, Eliade rested her hands on her hips while jerking her head into a nod.

“I’ll go make a basket full of treats for you and your siblings,” she said. “It’ll be waiting for you in the kitchen once you’re done with your father.”

Suppressing a shudder at the mention of *him*, I said, “Sounds great! Thanks, mom.”

Eliade spun in place, waving my thanks away as she did.

“It’s nothing, Ky. Now, get up those stairs. Can’t keep Dury waiting, now can we?”

No. No, we couldn’t.

As I headed up the stairs, I tried not to trudge, straightening my posture until it was impeccable. Almost automatically, my face settled into a neutral expression, and all the while, I was praying that Tanwadur would be in a good mood today or that he’d at least keep quiet during our conversation. I hated watching Eliade turn into the confused, not-there person that she became when her husband was in one of his ‘moods’. It was such a stark contrast to her typical personality, and every time he forced her into it, it pained me.

At the door to Tanwadur’s study, I took a steadying breath. After receiving an acknowledgment of my knock, I confidently pushed it open.

“Good evening, Dury!” I made myself cheerfully say. “I’m back from greater Auden and bring greetings from our fellow resistances.”

Sitting behind his desk, Tanwadur glanced up at me over the rims of his spectacles before breaking into a smile.

“Ky! How good to see you,” he boomed.

And again, my memory was spliced apart. For the briefest of moments, a younger me ran to the welcoming arms of his adoptive father, taking deep pulls of the room’s scent as he was cuddled beyond reason. The ghostly image drew a faint smile to my lips. Those had been the good days.

My present-day father strode through the image, coming to embrace me, and I tried to match the enthusiasm of his back pounding.

“You’re looking good, my boy!” he said as he backed off. “The road must have been treating you *right*.”

“That it has,” I said, “but still, I’m glad to be home.”

“I’m sure you are,” Tanwadur said before gesturing to one of the chairs in front of his desk. “Come, come! Sit down. Let me get you a drink.”

‘That’s not necessary,’ stayed poised on my tongue for a half-second before I pushed it back down.

“Thank you, Dury,” I said instead.

I perched on my relegated chair in as relaxed of a manner as I could manage, waiting while Tanwadur messed with glasses and bottles on a bookcase’s shelf.

“So...” he said as he poured two drinks. “How has the rest of Auden been over this last, dreadful winter?”

Awe-inspiring, as usual. The people of Auden had always found love and joy and what safety they could, even in their constant struggle for survival, and that had been no less true over the last few months of excessive snow. As always, I’d found it beyond beautiful.

But that wasn’t what Tanwadur wanted to hear, and for the moment, I lived to please him.

So, I said, “Barely getting by, as you’d expect. My people and I did what we could to help those who needed it, and that seemed to have made an impact in some of the nearby villages.”

With a satisfied nod, Tanwadur murmured, “Good, good.”

He brought me my drink, and as he sat, I made myself take a sip. It was awful stuff, this poor man’s beer, but I forced it down anyway.

Once he'd gotten settled and taken a few gulps from his own drink, Tanwadur leaned forward, setting the glass in front of him.

"So?" he said in a near whisper. "How did it go with the others?"

And this? This was the part of our reunion that I'd been dreading since melting snow had forced my hand into returning home.

"About as well as you'd expect," I carefully said. "As usual, the other resistances balked at our offers of aid, so of course they were suspicious of your proposal for combining our efforts into one. Even with the proposal coming from me, most refused it, but fortunately, a few said they'd think about it over the coming spring. Perhaps we'll see some progress then."

I half-expected Tanwadur's face to go bright red on hearing this, but instead, he grimaced.

"Stubborn bastards," he said under his breath before leaning back in his chair.

For what seemed like forever, he stared off into space while tapping a finger on his desk, and all the while, I stayed still and silent, a waif-like ghost until he decided to address me again.

"Well, I can't blame you for your failure, inconvenient as it might be," Tanwadur eventually said, "but I should update you about why it might be a problem."

Taking up his drink again, he took another big sip before slamming it back down, which almost made me flinch.

"Have you heard anything from the west coast since you left?" he said.

"Very little at first and then, nothing at all once snowfall started," I said, "and for the last week, my people and I have done nothing but march and huddle in whatever shelter we could find."

"So, you haven't heard about the newcomers to our shore."

...Newcomers? Had another batch of smugglers made their way across the Narrow Sea? Over the last few decades, that hadn't happened much. In fact, I could only remember one instance of them making the crossing. Enforcer Teron had made sure they hadn't had as much success with getting back.

Slowly, I said, "I have not."

The entire time, I watched Tanwadur's face, looking for even the slightest hint about how he was feeling. Most of the time, things like this—the unexpected and potentially inconvenient—put him in a bad mood, and when that happened, I had to make a bigger effort at making him happy.

This time, he was giving me nothing. I couldn't tell *what the hell* he was thinking, and given that, I made sure I hadn't started squirming in my seat. I didn't want to hear a repeat of 'the many ways you must comport yourself' or something similar right now.

“A couple of weeks after you left, a veritable army made landing in a nearby cove,” Tanwadur said, watching me as he spoke. “They were led by a man named Raimie.”

Wait.

Despite how problematic it could be, I couldn't stop myself from interrupting.

“Raimie? That's... I *just met* a man with the same name not a quarter mark ago! Ren brought him with her to greet me.”

At that, Tanwadur's face darkened, and I quickly shut my mouth.

“I keep telling that girl she shouldn't associate with that...”

Clenching his teeth, he fell silent for a moment before shaking his head.

“But that's not important right now,” he said. “Tell me. What did you think of him?”

Oh... shit. He was asking for *my* opinion?

“I'm not sure. We didn't spend much time together,” I said. “He only stuck around long enough to share his name before leaving.”

“Hmm.”

Fuck. Had that been the wrong answer?

After a supremely uncomfortable moment, Tanwadur shifted in his chair, which reminded me to relax. I couldn't show any tension right now.

“In that case, I'll give you some relevant information about the man so you can make your own judgment the next time you meet him,” my father said. “In the two and a half months he's been here, Raimie has accrued several significant accomplishments to his name. Soon after arriving, he and his people stood against an army that Enforcer Teron had gathered to wipe them out. Not only did Raimie surmount this threat to his life, but soon after the battle was over, he killed the Enforcer. I had to confirm that fact several times on hearing it, but after seeing the bastard's body for myself, I could no longer deny it. Most recently, he's returned from successfully capturing Da'kul, helped in part by his defeat of its former master, of course. Still, that doesn't lessen what he's done, and he should be congratulated for his victory.”

Stunned, I worked through everything Tanwadur had said, fighting against a sinking stomach the whole time. Of course, I was... I was *overjoyed* to hear this news. Cerrin Forest and the southern half of Auden's west coast wouldn't have an Enforcer terrorizing them until another one was appointed. All those who lived out from under Tiro's protection would go without the threat of Harvest until then too. Who wouldn't find this news incredible?

On a personal level, though, I heard about the things that this man, Raimie, had done, and I shrank inside when comparing them to my own deeds. He'd done things that I'd only dreamed of trying, but I wasn't jealous of this fact. More, I wasn't sure how that would make Tanwadur react, and if he decided that I could have done all of these impossible—it bore repeating: *impossible*—things, then I could be in for hell.

Fortunately, he looked as calm as he had before announcing any of this, so I worked through my shock to give him the response he was so clearly waiting for.

"That all sounds good, something we could use to our own advantage," I slowly said. "So, what's the problem? There obviously is one."

Nodding, Tanwadur simply said, "When on the other side of the Narrow Sea, Raimie found Shadowsteal."

And I couldn't help the cough that I released. *Found Shadowsteal?*

"He's one of the exiled royals?!" I somehow said.

With another nod, Tanwadur steepled his fingers in front of his face, and I scrambled for a response, *any* response, that would return the weight of the conversation to him.

Raimie was part of the exiled royal family, meaning.... meaning...

Alouin, I couldn't even think that impossible, terrible, *glorious* thought.

"That could be a problem," I managed after a moment.

Or it could be the best thing that had ever happened to me. Time would tell which it was.

"Yes. It could be," Tanwadur said. "You'll need to be careful over the next few days, Kylorian. While Tiro most definitely doesn't support this new contender for the throne, they also haven't moved to throw him out of the city, as I anticipated they might. Not only that, but your brother and sister have already fallen under his sway. You'll need to make sure the same doesn't happen to you."

I could only nod and murmur.

"Of course."

"Once you've had enough time to form your own opinion of the man, I'll expect to hear what you think," Tanwadur continued. "We can only move forward with our own plans once we know your honest appraisal of him. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, sir. Of course it does."

"Good. Other than that, nothing requires attention from either of us right now. I'm sure you'll enjoy taking a break in the city, yes? Perhaps you can spend some time with those girls who're always

following you around with moon-eyes.”

“Yes. Maybe.”

“Or you could spend it with your siblings.”

“...Yes.”

A loud thunk drew me back into my head, sharply glancing at where Tanwadur had dropped his hand on the desk.

“There you are,” he said. “Are you all right? I didn’t mean to shock you so badly with this news.”

“I’m... fine,” I said before shaking myself. “It’s simply something I never thought would happen. Forgive me for losing focus like that.”

“Given what I said, it was to be expected,” Tanwadur said. “Still, I will need my study back at some point, so unless you have something you want to share with me...?”

No. No, I did not. I never would unless I must.

Rising from my seat, I smiled at my father before downing my drink in one go. I forced down the cough that wanted to shoot out of my mouth, smoothing out a grimace as I set the glass opposite my father’s.

“I’ll let you know how things go with Raimie,” I said. “Thank you for sharing this information. It will be incredibly helpful for our efforts in the coming days.”

“Yes, of course,” Tanwadur said. “Now...?”

Raising an eyebrow, he shoed me away, and I mechanically chuckled as I left the room.

An heir to the throne. Hell, there was a *legitimate heir to the throne* in Auden.

I didn’t know what to do with that.

Leaning a hand against a wall, I forced myself to think about it and think about it and *think about it* until I’d gotten through the free fall that the last quarter mark had wreaked in me. Until I could realize, if only dimly, that there was nothing I could do about it right now. Until I’d gotten settled and somewhat comfortable with that idea.

But then, I was centered again. I could go to the kitchen, happy to have the chance to speak with Eliade again. Happy and- and *shocked* that the conversation in the study hadn’t included a raised voice or the biting criticism that would have turned me into a child once more.

In the kitchen, Eliade was bustling about, making sure everything was spick-and-span. When she saw me come in, her face broke into a beaming smile, and she hurried to a basket on the room’s

tiny table.

“I didn’t have much tonight, unfortunately. The refugees from Lindow have been cleaning me out over the last few weeks,” she said, “but there are sweet rolls in here and a jar of milk. You and your siblings might have to fight over who gets what.”

She handed me the basket, gently patting the blanket covering it, before returning to her chores.

“How did it go with your father?” she asked. “Was he pleased to see you?”

For once, I didn’t have to lie to her about this.

“He seemed well. Glad that I’m back,” I said. “I may be staying home for a while this time, which should make *you* happy.”

Grinning over her shoulder, Eliade said, “You know it does. I’ve never liked how often you leave, always trying to be the hero that Auden needs.”

That made me hiss in a breath, if only a little. No matter that it hadn’t been my idea to undertake the many humanitarian missions that I’d done over the last four years, I’d come to enjoy them. I loved Auden, perhaps more than Tanwadur might approve of, but in this, I didn’t care to conform to his will.

This kingdom was *beautiful*, and every time I was out there, whether fighting off Kiraak or delivering messages between towns or helping them bring in crops from meager fields, I was strongly reminded of this fact. The Audish people were brave and fierce and more loving toward one another than anyone would expect them to be, given all they suffered on a daily basis. Sure, they were also paranoid as hell and could become violent if pushed into said state, but beneath all of that, they maintained the innate *goodness* of humanity, and I wanted to see them grow and thrive, no matter how little good I could actually do for them.

In many ways, my ventures into greater Auden had been my saving grace over the last four years, much like my siblings and mother had been before then.

“Well?” Eliade said, drawing me out of my thoughts. “Don’t you and your siblings have your own tradition to complete?”

Ha! Tradition. I supposed we could call it that.

“We most certainly do!” I said as cheerily as I could. “Thank you for the food, mom. I’m sure we’ll enjoy it.”

“Have fun!” Eliade called, already distracted by her cleaning again.

I turned to leave.