

# Chapter 15: Sibling Solace

## Kylorian

The route to the meeting point with my siblings was hidden and somewhat frustrating to traverse. It hadn't always been that way, but as we'd grown up, what had once fit our child-sized bodies had become restrictive instead. While squishing my way through a final crevasse, I had to hold the basket overhead, hoping that it didn't get stuck as the crevasse's ceiling got lower. When it finally released both me and the basket, I let out the breath I'd been holding, shaking my head. Soon enough, I wouldn't be able to get back here.

As soon as I'd caught my breath, I glanced over this cave, hidden behind the back wall of Tiro's protecting mountain. Ren and I had found this place when we'd still had the time to explore our home. Before Tanwadur had revealed his plans for me, forcing Ren to take over everything I'd handled to that point. After Hadrion had come along, we'd spent a few weeks coaxing him out of his trauma-induced state by dragging him here with us, a technique that I'd once used with Ren. He'd spoken his first words to us here, asking about this city's Kiraak in the quietest of whispers.

Today, he was much changed from that closed-off boy, bouncing to his feet as soon as he saw me. With an excited yip, he snatched the basket out of my hands, quickly scrounging through it before making a face.

"Two sweet rolls and some milk?! Is Eliade *trying* to starve me?" he said.

"You should be grateful that she had something for us in the first place, Had-had," I said, "but don't worry. I snuck something out here too."

Reaching into a pocket, I pulled free a handful of strawberries that I'd grabbed while on the way here. They were underripe, showing green along the top of their bodies, but Hadrion still pounced on them like they were the best thing he'd seen all day, which only made me laugh. I remembered what I'd been like at his age. Sometimes, it had seemed like my hunger would never be satisfied.

"Remember to leave some for Ren," I said before Hadrion could finish off the treat.

Wrinkling his nose, Hadrion stuck his tongue out before reluctantly putting two of the strawberries into the basket.

"Whatever you say, *lover boy*," he said.

As I choked up, a flash of heat washed across my chest and arms.

"It's not... like *that*," I said. "Alouin, Hadrion. It's not-"

Because yes, I had feelings for Ren. Always had, from the moment Tanwadur had brought her home, but those feelings weren't what most people would think of when it came to true love. I wanted to be around Ren all the time, wanted to cuddle and hug and very rarely, kiss her. Her happiness brought me a joy that I'd never felt before, but I *didn't* want anything more than this, and that wasn't because she'd been designated my sister, if not by blood.

I'd never thought of Ren like that. She was my closest friend. My confidant, more so than Hadrion because Hadrion couldn't know most of what I told Ren. To me, she was *not* my sister. So, that wasn't the reason why the thought of anything *more* with her made me sick to my stomach. No. I had other reasons for never wanting to go near sex with her or anyone else.

Besides, Ren thought of me as her brother, and that made anything I might want between us impossible. Like I'd said, I only wanted her to be happy, so if I was to be only a brother to her, then that was what I'd be.

Laughing uproariously at the look on my face, Hadrion leaned against a wall before slumping onto the ground. He was still snickering as he pulled the basket into his lap, there to stay until Ren eventually joined us. He'd be the zealous guardian of our food, a baby bear that would maul anyone who tried to lay a finger on it without his permission.

"Sorry, Ky. I can't help teasing you about that," he said. "If you didn't want me doing that, you shouldn't have told me how you felt about her so many years ago."

Growling, I kicked at the air next to his shin, which he jerked away from.

"Yeah, maybe I shouldn't have," I said under my breath.

But I sank to the floor nearby, thunking my head against stone once I was settled. After a moment of comfortable silence, Hadrion cleared his throat.

"So. Was he awful to you?" he asked in a falsely cheerful voice.

Which made me want to cringe.

"Had-had, he's never *awful*," I said. "Sometimes, he just has a temper."

Hadrion seemingly pierced through that lie in an instant.

"Mmhmm," he doubtfully hummed. "And how are you feeling, now that you've met with him?"

Hell, Hadrion and his obsession with *feelings*. After weeks of dealing with people who'd rather pretend that such things never existed, it was always jarring to come back to him and his constant poking at them.

"I'm fine," I said, continuing at his incredulous look. "Well and truly fine! I promise. Dury didn't have much to say about my journey. He seemed a little too focused on this newcomer, Raimie, to do anything besides acknowledge that I was back."

Wincing, Hadrion said, "Oh, Dury brought him up, did he? How many vindictive lies did he spew this time?"

So, Tanwadur *didn't* like the newcomer, huh? I'd thought that might be the case, but it was nice to have confirmation of how I should act about this subject when around him.

"None, actually," I said. "Dury only told me what Raimie has been doing since arriving here."

"Interesting. Wonder what he's trying to pull with that?" Hadrion said with a frown. "You know that Raimie and Ren are... friends, right?"

He looked at me so cautiously that I wondered what else he might be holding back.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Ren introduced him to me back at..."

And I remembered everything that had happened when I'd come home. Curling over on myself, I hid my face in my hands.

"Oh, hell. *Hadrion*. The things I said to Ren!"

Scooting closer, Hadrion patted me on the back, leaving his hand there once he was done.

"What happened?" he said. "Come on, big bro! Spill the goods. I can't wait to hear this week's gossip."

As usual, Hadrion's utter *ridiculousness* pulled me free of my hands.

"Something I deeply regret already," I said.

But then, I told him the story, wincing at his reactions the whole time, and once I was done, Hadrion tapped on his lip before pointing at me.

"So, your 'inner Dury' came out to play," he said. "Wonder why it went after the Josenik incident? You know that's her biggest issue."

Squeezing my eyes closed, I turned away, but I was only there for a moment before Hadrion was pulling me back.

"Hey, hey, I'm not criticizing! Alouin knows I have my own inner Dury ruining my day sometimes. I was just curious about the chosen subject," he said. "Besides, you said Ren wanted you to let it go, right? So, let it go. For once, she's the injured party in your constant battle of poking each other's soft spots."

“It’s not like we do that intentionally, or at least, I don’t,” I petulantly said.

Raising his hands, Hadrion said, “Fair enough.”

He backed up, glancing off to the side as he thought.

“Wonder what that made Raimie think of you,” he said. “He’s pretty nice, so hopefully, he won’t care but still. I was hoping you two would get along. You need more kind people in your life, Ky.”

Fucking *hell*. Reaching over, I lightly shoved Hadrion.

“Would you stop trying to be the older brother in this relationship?” I said. “I don’t need anyone taking care of me.”

“Who’s taking care of whom now?”

Shooting upright, I twisted toward the entrance of our cave in time to watch Ren make her entrance. To the unenamored eye, she probably looked clumsy while wiggling through the entrance’s crack, but I couldn’t help smiling at her.

She was Ren, the fierce protector of Tiro and the leader of its many scouts. She was the closest person to me, the one who knew the full story of how I’d come to this city or... almost all of it. She was the one who’d talked me through rough moments after our father’s caustic lectures, although she didn’t know about those lectures’ intensity.

Ren knew that Tanwadur was tough on me—I’d be surprised if anyone in Tiro *didn’t* know that—but she had no idea of how tough he could be. I’d only told Hadrion about that, and that had only happened because he received similar treatment.

Twirling to a seat beside Hadrion, Ren snatched the basket out of his lap. On grabbing a sweet roll from it, she stuffed half of it into her mouth before either of us boys could protest it, and that, of course, had Hadrion pouncing on her.

I watched the two play fighting with a smile, enjoying every moment of them being solely *themselves*. Usually, Hadrion could get away with presenting himself to the world without masks, ignored as he sometimes was, but Ren and I? Not so much.

When Ren eventually gave up, handing over the rest of her sweet roll to her brother, Hadrion plopped to the ground before pausing. Wordlessly, he offered it to me, but I shook my head.

“I’m good. You two should finish the rest off.”

Shrugging, Hadrion started in on his hard-won bounty while Ren pulled the second roll out of the basket more slowly. In the end, though, she didn’t protest what she might see as ‘my sacrifice’, and I got to lean against the wall without having to argue with them. What a rare change of pace.

“So, how are you fixing things with Raimie, if you did mess things up with him?” Hadrion asked without preamble. “Given who he is, you’ll have to be at least a little friendly with him.”

Ren coughed up the bite she’d taken.

“You know about...?”

She fell silent when I glanced at her.

“Yes, Dury shared,” I said. “I’m planning on meeting with him for a drink in a few days, Had-had. Hopefully, we can work things through then.”

Hopefully. I was aware I hadn’t made a good first impression on the man who might be king, but all I could do to fix that was apologize and try to resolve things. It was all I’d ever been able to do when I lost my temper. Resuscitating my ‘inner Dury’, as Hadrion sometimes put it.

“Here’s hoping,” Ren said. “He’s... he’s a good man, Ky. I know you may doubt me when I say that-”

“I don’t,” I said, interrupting her. “Really, Ren, I don’t. You have good intuition about people. I’m just an ass sometimes. You know that.”

“Mm,” Ren said with her eyes fixed on her lap.

Damn. My comment truly had messed with her. So much for letting it go.

Before I could reassure her again, Hadrion cleared his throat.

“*Anyway*,” he said. “I think you’ve got a good plan. Give Raimie some time to cool off, if he’s mad for whatever reason, and then, get him drunk before talking to him. Should work *wonders*.”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “I’m not going to get him *drunk*. I’m going to *talk* to him, and that’s usually easier to do over something like drinks.”

Hadrion fluttered his hands as he dipped into as deep of a bow as his sitting position would allow him.

“As Tiro’s great negotiator says,” he solemnly intoned.

With a tongue click, I crossed my arms.

“Can we please move on? I don’t want to focus on this right now.”

“I’ll bet,” Ren said. “So, how was your meeting with-?”

“Fine!” Hadrion and I both said.

Pausing, Ren glanced between us before shrugging.

“All right,” she said. “What are we talking about, then? Or will we be sitting around, awkwardly silent for the rest of the evening?”

Snorting, Hadrion said, “As if.”

And I smiled at him. Always ready to bounce from serious to light-hearted, this one.

“Why don’t you two tell me what you’ve been up to while I’ve been gone?” I said.

Halfway through a bite, Ren grunted while nodding.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” she said around her mouthful. “Had-had has *quite a few* stories to tell, don’t you?”

“I’ll have you know that-”

For a moment, I stopped listening. Much as I always wanted to run away from this place, much as I’d rather be *anywhere* else, I had to admit that one good thing was always waiting for me here: them. I loved them both, no matter how different that love might be for each individually.

So, I sat back and listened as they told their stories, and when Hadrion started nodding off, I pulled him sideways so his head was in my lap. He quickly fell asleep while Ren leaned on me, and before I knew it, she was snoring too. Just like every other time we’d done this together.

For a while, I sat there and listened to them breathing. For a while, I let them soothe me.

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