

Chapter 32: Frozen Grief

Part One

Kylorian

My brother is dead.

For perhaps the millionth time, I cast that thought out into the chaotic swirl of my mind, and once again, it got rejected, tossed out before it had had the chance to settle. As it slipped away from me, I took another pull from the mug of brandy in front of me, gazing into the nothing of the tavern on all sides.

Really, I shouldn't have stopped for a drink on reaching Sanc. I should be returning to Tiro with all haste, given the cargo in my gifted wagon, but I just... couldn't keep going. I'd needed to stop, if only for a single drink, before forcing myself onward once more.

I hadn't shared the news of the Birthing Ground's capture with these people, no matter that they were the ones who most deserved to know. How could I do that when I couldn't fully accept the fact for myself? Every time I thought about it, I was transported back to *that room*, and I watched Hadrion drop to the ground and...

How I wished that anyone besides Raimie had been there with my brother. How I wished it had been Ryvolim, the one who'd let Hadrion's murderer get away in the first place. How I wished it had been Oswin or the other soldiers outside the house, the ones who'd let her inside.

Instead, it had been Raimie, the one I'd wanted to be a friend. The one I'd wanted to be *my* friend, someone I'd *chosen* instead of someone who'd been forced upon me. Someone I actually liked.

Hell, how I'd yearned for him to banish all the tumultuous feelings roiling through me in those first awful moments in that hellish room. How I'd longed for a comforting word or an explanation that could excuse the scene spread between him and me.

Instead, he'd gone cold, straightening into the most indignant, wrathful posture I'd ever seen. He'd *poured* righteous fury on me as he'd said.

"I am only responsible for protecting one person in this world, and it was not your brother."

And for the briefest of moments, I'd seen myself in him. The person I'd always longed to be, the one who spoke up when things went wrong and had the courage to defend his unworthy self, and seeing that, I, of course, had attacked him.

Now, I wasn't sure if we could ever be friends again because now, my brain and heart had irrevocably tied him to the self-hatred that I'd always been full to the brim with. If I was ever to reconcile with him, I'd have to either untangle those two ideas from one another or *somehow* reduce the poison that ate away at everything I did. Both tasks seemed impossible to me, and that *hurt*, although it didn't come close to the pain of *my brother is dead*.

As if to frustrate me, that thought again broke apart when it hit the bedlam in my mind, and wincing, I finished off the last of my drink. I'd already paid the two silver chit price for what I'd imbibed, which let me rise from my seat and depart without having to address the barkeep again. Thank Alouin.

After climbing into the wagon I'd left outside, I flicked the reins, guiding the horses onto a well-worn road. I hadn't gone far, still able to see Sanc on the horizon, before the past and present resumed their play alongside one another.

I knew I was keeping the horses on their guided trail, but I was also *watching Ren shuffle Hadrion along in front of her with her hands over his eyes. When they reach me, she lifts those hands, and after blinking several times, Hadrion's eyes go wide.*

"Is that... a sword?" he says, pointing at the bundle in my arms.

"Yup," I say. "All for you."

Leaning down to his ear, Ren murmurs, "Happy birthday, Had-had."

He gulps, clasping his hands in front of his mouth with his eyes going glassy, but I can't blame him for that. Tanwadur and Eliade have been ADAMENT that their youngest child never learn how to fight. Ren and I have always found that contradictory. Tiro is still in Auden, much as we like to pretend it isn't, and everyone in Auden should know how to use a weapon like this.

I watch my brother as he softly giggles. His eyes are still watery as he drops his hands to reveal a beaming smile.

"It's about damn time!" he says.

The sun hugged the tops of the trees ahead with the mountain pass that led to Tiro coming into view. I was drowsy-

"Sometimes, I wish I was a girl so I didn't have to listen to Dury's lectures."

Pausing in writing out my next persuasive 'speech' in a notebook, I glance up at where Hadrion has slumped against the door he just came through. He looks... tired, in a distinctly unique kind of way, and I feel hairs raising all over my arms.

"What do you mean?" I carefully say.

Shaking his head, Hadrion says, "I mean... Ren never has to listen to how MEAN our dad can get sometimes, you know? I know it's just his temper popping up but still. I wish... I wish..."

As I watch, he passes a hand over his face, allowing me the briefest of glimpses at the devastated look that he was trying to hide, and I'm on my feet. Quietly approaching him, I take hold of his shoulders, leaning down to his eye level.

"What did he do?" I say.

I refuse to break eye contact with my brother, even as he darts his gaze from side to side, trying to look away from me.

"He... gave one of those lectures he likes to spout off," he says. "You get them often enough, don't you?"

For a moment, I simply examine him, trying to determine if he's hiding anything, but I genuinely cannot tell at the moment. I'm not sure if that's because he's gotten good enough at keeping secrets, like me, or if my own emotions are clouding any signs I might be seeing from him.

"So, he didn't do anything else to you?" I cautiously ask.

When Hadrion frowns with nothing else in the expression, I internally sigh with relief, even as I relax and drop my hands.

"What are you talking about?" he says. "What else would he have done besides yell his head off, as usual?"

Forcing myself to make a face, I say, "I guess that's bad enough, huh?"

"You're telling me," Hadrion says with a snort before pushing off the door. "So, what have you been up to in...?"

Drifting-

Today marks the beginning of my first journey into greater Auden, and I am petrified beyond measure about stepping through the stone doors in front of me. Tanwadur says I'm old enough to start showing my face to the people I'll someday rule, if all goes according to plan. While I know he's right, I can't help my reluctance. I'm hesitant about picking up the pack at my feet, much less taking any steps to go... well. Anywhere, really.

Maybe I should stay here. Considering everything waiting for me, every atrocious story I've heard from survivors of Harvests, maybe I should dare to stoke HIS wrath. Maybe I should dare to chance the unspoken punishments that have set me on this hated path.

"Ky!"

Jumping in place, I spin toward that voice, unable to stop myself from cracking a smile on seeing Hadrion running toward me. When he reaches me, he doesn't hold back. He shoves my shoulder before grabbing me in the most engulfing hug I've had in a while.

"Were you planning on leaving without saying goodbye, asshole?" he says into my chest.

I don't know how to respond to that. Fortunately, I don't have to speak a single word because almost as soon as Hadrion's done with his rebuke, he springs his head upright, fixing me with a determined look in his green eyes.

"You go be good, Ky," he says. "Show Auden how good you are."

And I suck in a gasp. There's so much meaning behind that little phrase, more than anyone could ever know, and I struggle to keep back a snuffle while covering up the tears in my eye.

"I will, Had-had."

And I had been. I... had been...

Asleep-

I become aware of my surroundings halfway through a dream

it had to be a dream, couldn't be anything else, but my mind wasn't giving me more than a second to

see myself surrounded by enemies

no, that wasn't right. Go back. Try again

and see myself surrounded by friends. I love these people, even if I don't know-did know-don't know who they are.

One by one, they fall away. One to fever. One to a wound that should have been mine. One to the black vines under his skin and my blade when I learn about how he's hidden them from me.

The last of them stands with me and promises everything will be ok, but he takes my brother-my brother-MY BROTHER and when he returns, that brother isn't with him

I knew how this dream was going to end, but I couldn't reach it yet. Must go through the middle, must start from the beginni-

I'm surrounded by friends who fall to the ground, dead, and I watch them die-again-for the first time with said time slowing down around us, letting me see them breathe their last in agonizingly dripping-by seconds. My brother has gone with the last one alive, but when that friend returns, my brother is nowhere to be seen.

An Enforcer leerily smiles at me, making my heart jump in my chest, and I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe

woke for a moment to find myself slumped in the cart's seat with sweat slicked over my

she lifts my brother's body up by the head so I can see the slit carved in a gaping smile under his chin, the force of her grip tearing it open wider, and I charge her, meaning to take her head, but she's meaty mash beneath my feet, and Tanwadur-my father-the bastard who raised me is standing nearby with his arms crossed and a smug smile on his lips.

"That was well done, Ky," he says before those lips twist into something that punches terror through my limbs. "Let me reward you for your good work."

And I run for once, not frozen solid, not closing my eyes and waiting for it to be later in the day. I run and run and

I was still running, pushing the horses faster, hearing the cart jangling behind me. Alouin, I needed to slow it down before an axle broke or something worse happened. What if the package I was delivering fell out of the back...?

With a manic laugh, I didn't stop.

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