

Chapter 33: Frozen Grief

Part Two

Kylorian

I kept going until I reached a dense line of familiar trees. This was what finally stopped me, slowly. Reluctantly.

Climbing to the ground, I unhitched both horses from the cart, slapping one on the rump to get her galloping through the grass. May she find a freedom that we Audish would never have.

For the second horse, I secured her before trudging to the back of the cart. I carefully pulled my burden into my arms, never looking at it, and returned to the horse so I could secure this bundle across her back, behind the saddle. When I climbed in front of it, the creak of the saddle's leather was loud in the unnatural silence, found even on the edge of the-

Cerrin Forest is always beautiful at this time of day. The midafternoon sun trickles through the leaves of its wide canopy, turning the air beneath it golden, and everything here smells so CLEAN. No smoke from a neighbor's fire. No stale ale drifting off of someone I pass on the street. Just air and damp wood all around me and the faint tinge of some flower that I can't see.

How I wish I could stay here forever, living in this quiet corner of the world.

Today, I'm out here for a reason. Hadrion ran off again last night, sneaking away in the dark, and I have to find him before Tanwadur or Eliade find out. Ren's helping me, starting her search on the other side of Tiro, so hopefully, we can get this done on time.

I understand why the kid keeps doing this. In some ways, I'm even envious of him for having the courage to try it, but for him specifically, running away isn't helpful or healthy. Hadrion has nothing to fear from us, the people who want to give him a home, but considering how much his previous home threatened his life on a daily basis, it makes sense that he'd want to get away from it as often as possible.

I find him quickly, thank Alouin, but who I find him with? That has me unsheathing my sword, already working through ways to get the kid away from the Kiraak at his side. I have to do that before said monster can hurt my little brother worse than he's already been harmed.

It comes as a great surprise, then, when Hadrion jumps in front of the Kiraak with his arms spread wide.

“Don’t, Ky!” he says. “They weren’t hurting me, just asking for help. I want to give it to them.”

Help... a Kiraak?

“Hadrion, get out of the way,” I say, barely keeping annoyance out of my voice. “With everything you’ve experienced, you have to know that Kiraak are an abomination-”

“But they’re not!” Hadrion says.

When I narrow my eyes at him, he lowers his arms with his hands curling into fists and- and STOMPS THE GROUND, like a little kid. He IS a little kid, but... still.

“They’re not monsters!” he says. “They are as human as you or me, but unlike us, they must fight against something evil for their whole lives, something they never asked to bear. Plus, this one’s newly turned, Ky! They still have a LOT of time before Corruption makes them mean. Trust me. Like you said, I have experience with this.”

Damn, he’s not going to let this go. There’s too much passion in him, and I... I have to return him to Tiro as quickly as possible.

Lowering my sword, I spread my other arm toward my brother.

“Fine. I’ll leave them alone,” I say, “but you have to come home with me. Right now.”

Hadrion crosses his arms, narrowing his eyes at me.

“You have to promise,” he says. “Promise that you won’t hurt this Kiraak and that I can come back to help them if I want to.”

Seriously? He wants to help one of the enemy?

But then, what’s the harm in that? It’s only one Kiraak, and it hasn’t discovered Tiro’s existence. Plus, if I’m lucky, one of my scouts will come across it and kill it for me. That way, I can keep my promise and still do my job.

“I promise,” I say

Before Hadrion can get too excited, I lift a finger.

“But! You have to bring me with you whenever you come out here. Ok? Let me keep an eye on you for my own peace of mind.”

With a beaming grin, Hadrion says, “Ok!”

He turns around to reassure the Kiraak behind him, letting me get my first good look at it. Hadrion was right. The spread of Corruption across this one's body has barely begun, only peeking out from a couple of infestations across its skin.

And its arm is broken. Presumably, that's what it needs help with, which is good. It means the Kiraak won't have a reason to stick around for long.

I keep an eye on it while Hadrion hurries to me, only looking away once we're far from it, and as soon as I've gotten the kid distracted by something else, I go right back to that spot.

When the Kiraak sees me coming, it chuckles under its breath.

"So, you'll break your promise after all, huh?" it says.

I don't want to speak to this creature, soon to become an instrument of suffering and death, but unfortunately, Hadrion has made that unenviable task unavoidable for me.

"No, I won't do that," I say. "The kid you spoke to? He barely trusts me and my family. I won't break that trust over something as meaningless as you."

The Kiraak flinches, looking away, and I take a moment to determine how much of a threat it might be if it attacks. It certainly looks muscular enough, but at the same time, its body is smaller than average. I'm not sure what to do with that information, as it could be either good or bad for me.

"Why are you here?" I eventually ask. "Did Enforcer Teron send you out to find rebels, like he usually does?"

Glancing back toward me, the Kiraak snorts.

"No," it says. "I hardly expect you to believe me about this, but I'm still unbound. Got away from the transport that was taking me to the Enforcer I was assigned to."

It's right. I don't believe that for a single second, but in the end, I suppose that doesn't matter. Shrugging, I throw a bundled bag its way.

"Some supplies. They should get you through to tomorrow, at least," I say. "You can stick around for as long as it takes you to heal up because that's what I promised my brother, but rest assured. As soon as that period's over, I expect you to leave this place. Find your refuge somewhere else."

Nodding, the Kiraak slowly crouches to gather the bag to it.

"I expected as much as soon as you ran across me and Hadrion talking," it says. "Don't you worry. I don't want to be anywhere near people who want me dead."

Good. That's settled, then.

I spin on my heel, meaning to head home, before pausing. If I'll be interacting with this Kiraak while it heals, I should figure out what to call it.

"What's your name?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder.

The Kiraak stops digging through the bag to look up at me with scrunched eyebrows.

"Ivelais," it slowly says.

Good enough for me. Without another word, I leave it there.

I wondered what Ivelais would think of what had happened. Would they grieve for a dead friend? Would they even care? The last time I'd seen them, the Corruption under their skin *had* spread, but it hadn't gone far. They might have enough of their conscience to remember their emotional connections. Maybe I should find them to see how they'd react to the news, if I had time.

Softly laughing, I shook my head. Like that was ever going to happen.

At my side, a flash of cloth resolved into one of Tiro's scouts, landing from a drop out of a tree.

"Kylorian?" they said.

I didn't reply, besides nodding. I didn't have the energy for social interactions, not with the one I'd have to endure in the next hour hovering over my head.

The scout didn't seem to need more than an acknowledgment, though. Like the shadow they were supposed to be, they quickly vanished into the underbrush around us, and I was returned to thoughts of an unexpected ally and perhaps informing them that *my brother is dead*.

Again, the hurricane in my mind, still whirling as strong as ever, hurled that thought out into the void of my subconscious.

It had taken me a while, but I'd figured out why this problem in my head wasn't concerning me as much as it should. I'd experienced it in the past, shortly before Tanwadur had brought me to Tiro, and I'd seen it in-

The new boy is staying in my room until we figure out what to do with him, and I'd be fine with this—ecstatic for the distraction he brings, actually—if it weren't for how corpse-like he's been. For the last half mark, I've been stuck in my room, trying to get through the book Tanwadur wants me to read, but I keep getting distracted. Instead of doing what I've been told, I've mostly ended up watching the new kid as he stares through our room's window at the sky outside.

I don't know what to do about it. After Tanwadur and I brought him home, Eliade asked me to look after him, and I don't want to disappoint her. But how am I supposed to look after someone like him? He hasn't spoken a word since Tanwadur and I found him, barely eats the food we give him, and won't focus for long enough to do even the simplest of tasks.

He... he reminds me of me. Me when I first got here. Ren wasn't as bad as this when she first came home but me? From what others have said, I gather that I was as nonresponsive as this kid for almost two months.

What drew me out of that catatonic state?

Snapping the book closed, I throw my legs over the side of my bed.

"Hey, kid! Get your shoes on for me, yeah?" I say. "We're going for a walk."

I make sure to plop said shoes beside the kid, and slowly, he looks at them before doing as I asked as mechanically as possible. Soon enough, though, I'm leading him outside and down Tiro's streets.

After he falls behind a few times, I gently take his hand, making sure he stays with me, and that contact draws a first spark from him. He sharply glances at me before fixing his eyes on where I'm holding him, and that doesn't change for the entire walk to where Tiro's scouts meet every day.

Inside, I catch Ren's eye, where she's glancing over the scouts' stored weapons.

"I need you," I say. "Got a minute?"

She opens her mouth, probably to complain about how busy she is, before spying the kid behind me. That softens her features almost immediately, and she sighs.

"Yeah, let's get out of here."

Together, she and I lead the kid through a busy marketplace, across the fields in the city's center, and down a few abandoned alleys until we reach the entrance to our hidey-hole. Once inside, I flop to the ground, like always, but Ren spins on the kid, spreading her arms.

"Welcome," she dramatically whispers, "to the best spot in Tiro."

The kid's frozen, probably because of Ren's sudden movement, and sighing, I tug on her leggings.

"Sit down," I scold. "You need to make some room so our little brother can get comfortable."

While the kid rapidly blinks at me, Ren spins on me with her hands clasped.

"Dury said it was ok?" she asks.

Rolling my eyes, I gesture for her to sit the hell down, only answering her once she has.

"I don't give a fuck what Dury wants or thinks, not about this," I say. "The kid needs a family, and I say it should be us. So there."

Ren looks skeptical, something I can't consider, so I turn my attention back to the kid.

"You got a name?" I ask.

The kid flicks his eyes between me and Ren, shuffling between his feet. I force myself not to smile at this improvement.

Leaning over to me, Ren whispers, "Ky... I don't think he does."

The sorrow in her voice is only echoed in me, but I choose to grin at the kid instead of showing that.

"Oh, that's all right," I say. "You and I can give him a name. What do you think?"

The kid doesn't reply, looking down at his feet instead, and after an awkward moment, Ren hums.

"How about... Hadrion?" she says. "And the two of us can call him Had-had. You know? Like that old song! 'Oh... if I only had, had a brother, we could upset our mother, getting in all sorts of trouble, toogeeeeetheeeder!'"

I snort at her, frankly, horrible singing, watching with no small amount of wonder as the kid's lips curve into the smallest of grins.

"Hadrion it is!" I say. "Well? You coming in or what?"

Cautiously, the kid shuffles to a spot as far away from me and Ren as he can get. Throughout our time there, he watches the two of us talk, never moving besides the occasional twitch, but I expected that. It'll take time to win his trust and with it, his voice.

And maybe, once we have it, he'll speak.

Blinking, I found myself standing in the clearing outside of Tiro's stone doors with the horse's reins in my hand. I didn't remember dismounting, too lost in the past and present mixing together, but it was ok. I was here now. I was... home.

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