

# Chapter 34: Frozen Grief

## Part Three

### Kylorian

Leading the horse closer to the center of the clearing, I dropped her reins and thanked Alouin that she stayed still as I untied the bundle from behind her saddle. Once it was in my arms, I went to where sunlight was caressing the ground nearby and gently lowered... my brother into the grass.

Hesitantly, I pulled at the rope holding a blanket in place around him, flicking its corner to the side once it was free. I wrinkled my nose at the stink that hit me in the face from this, but I didn't smell it in full, merely reaching for the other corner with a shaking hand. Once I'd pulled it free, I made myself look upon what had once been a dear friend and a loved sibling. In many ways, the hopeful light of mine and Ren's world.

*When something SLAMS into me from the side, I purposefully topple, like I was taught, and pull a knife free on standing. I can't see much of what or who attacked me. The moonlight's weak behind the clouds in the sky, but I'll find the enemy and I'll stick a knife in its...*

*For a moment, I can only blink at the scene I left behind. Tanwadur's running to me with a bow in hand, cursing all the while. Our campfire, several dozen paces away, is still merrily crackling with our dinner simmering over it.*

*And there's a small, filthy thing on the ground between us, snarling up at me with THE palest of faces.*

*Without a thought, I drop my knife, holding a hand up for Tanwadur to stay where he is. Fortunately, he follows my suggestion, for once, leaving me free to gradually approach this... this child.*

*This child who's draped in several oversized pieces of the shitty armor that the Conscripted wear. Specifically, the Conscripted stationed in the Birthing Grounds.*

*It makes sense. Tanwadur and I passed that horrible place earlier today, taking the long way around it to avoid its patrols.*

*It also doesn't make sense. Children don't make it to the Birthing Grounds. They just... don't, and I'll leave that there, refusing to think about what happens to them instead. That plus this kid isn't*

*large or well-fed enough to have attacked, let alone defeated, the Conscripted soldiers needed to put this outfit together. His cheeks are so gaunt that in the low light, I can see shadows where they should be!*

*This could be an opportunity.*

*This is a child, one who needs help.*

*Both thoughts tug at my attention as I lower myself toward the ground, trying to catch the kid's eyes.*

*"Hey, are you hungry?" I say. "That's why you jumped me, right? You wanted our food."*

*This changes nothing in the child. He continues to hiss at me, and I flick my eyes to Tanwadur.*

*When he scowls at me, I whisper, "Please. He's just a kid. We're supposed to be helping here, right?"*

*Sighing, Tanwadur throws his head back, shaking it, but he moves toward our fire, soon bringing me a portion of our food. While he stays standing at my back, I extend it to the child, and this makes him go still. Expression drops off of his face until he's cocking his head to the side, almost as if he doesn't know what to do with an offer of kindness, but within a few seconds, he crawls forward to snatch the food out of my hand. While he gnaws at it, I nod.*

*"You're welcome at our campfire," I say, "but you don't have to join us, if you don't want to. It's up to you."*

*I don't know if he's heard me, but still, I stand and slowly make a circle around the kid until I'm beside the fire. Given his state, it's best to let the kid have a choice, when it comes to this. He should decide whether he wants to accept someone's help or not, not have it thrust upon him.*

*I'm not sure what I'll do if he refuses to join us. Letting a little kid like him wander around alone in these dangerous lands—especially if he's from the Birthing grounds, as I suspect—is a terrible idea.*

*Fortunately, I don't have to worry about that for long. The kid slowly pads into view, stopping at the edge of our fire's light, before dropping to the ground. He doesn't move, merely staring into the flames, and I let him be. Tanwadur and I can figure out what to do with him in the morning.*

The CRACK of Tiro's stone doors drew me back to the here and now, to the green tinge on my brother's-

Lunging to the side, I pressed a hand over my mouth, barely keeping myself from throwing up, and all the while, I heard someone coming closer.

"Ky? You're back early. What's going-?"

Oh, no. It was Eliade.

I jerked upright in time to see my mother stop, see her eyes widen, see her fling her hands over her mouth and release a piercing scream into them. Hearing its muffled sound, I squeezed my eyes shut, wanting to disappear.

Running feet preceded the thump of a body to the ground, and my mother raggedly breathed for a split second before:

“Hadrion? My baby boy? What-? Hadrion?”

She kept babbling to herself, and I made myself open my eyes and move toward my mother, wrapping my arms above where she was reaching for the body in front of us. After letting her cry for a while, I gently pulled her toward me.

“Where’s Dury?” I asked.

I needed to know this, needed to know why he hadn’t come out here with Eliade. He’d always, ever done that with his wife in the past, so why hadn’t he done it now? Why hadn’t I heard him screaming at me yet?

Shaking in my hold, Eliade said, “He’s... your father... he should be at Da’kul by now. He went there, looking for...”

She trailed off with tears filling her eyes, pulling back toward the body, and I dragged her into an embrace instead, holding her head to my shoulder. As she cried, I thanked my lucky stars that Tanwadur wasn’t here now, much as it would make a reunion with him so much harder in the future. I used consideration of that eventuality to keep myself stuck in my mind’s depths, far enough from the world that I wouldn’t feel my mother’s tears on my skin or hear her hitching sobs.

I wasn’t so deep that I missed Ren calling for us. Within a blink and a thought, I was on my feet, racing to her. I met her halfway to us, grabbing her shoulders to keep her in place.

Scowling at me, she tried to keep going, probably wanting to comfort our mother, but I didn’t let her take a single step more.

“Ky! Let me-” she said before clicking her tongue. “What’s going on?”

Oh, *fuck*. I hadn’t... What did I...? How did I...?

Tightening my grip on Ren, I sighed, lowering my head so I didn’t have to see her face.

“There was an accident at the Birthing Grounds,” I numbly said. “During the battle, Raimie was watching over Hadrion, but something... he couldn’t...”

I couldn’t make myself tell the whole story. Steeling myself, I glanced up at Ren, holding her gaze.

“Ren. Our brother is dead.”

But this time, those words stuck. Perhaps it was because I'd spoken them out loud. Perhaps it was because I'd seen his empty face. Perhaps it was because of the sobs at my back and the look of shock in front of me, but those words wormed through every defense I'd unconsciously raised over the last week, settling into my heart.

And I wanted to scream. I wanted to *KILL SOMETHING*. I wanted to do anything but let my tears out because if I started crying, I didn't know if I'd stop.

"You... you're lying."

Blinking, I focused on Ren, and on seeing the look on her face, I released her. How was I supposed to keep touching her when she was looking at me like *that*?

"I'm... not," I said. "I wish I was, Ren, but I'm-"

Whirling in place, she flat-out sprinted away from me, passing into Tiro within a minute. I was left staring because... what the hell? What was I supposed to do now?

"Mom..." I breathed.

I had to go after her, but I had to stay, but I had to go after her!

"She- needs- you- Ky," Eliade gasped between her sobs.

And I was freed. I ran into the city, intent on finding Ren and helping her however I could.

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