

# Chapter 51: Saying Goodbye

## Kylorian

Raimie and his army had left Tiro a day or so ago, almost as soon as his people had returned from the Birthing Grounds, and I was still struggling with figuring out how I felt about that. In many ways, I was questioning what I knew about him.

I'd thought he was smarter than this. Who rushed off to take a kingdom's capital when the rest of the place was still firmly under its oppressor's sway?

But then, maybe he wasn't truly on his way to assault Elisk. Maybe he'd used that as an excuse to get out of Tiro before anything untoward could happen to him or his people. His timing had certainly been impeccable, departing from the city mere hours before Tanwadur had arrived back home.

At the least, I knew I was jealous of Raimie for dodging that man's wrath. I was also grateful to him for leaving when he had, though, because without a target for him to direct his anger at, my father had retreated into his study for the last day, which had been both a blessing and a curse. It meant I didn't have to discover what his initial reaction to our circumstances would be, but it also meant that Eliade had been left alone to deal with her grief, and I... I'd been so busy with... other things that I'd had little time to help her.

And there was that. The *other things*.

Over the last few days, I'd been dealing with a sense of metaphorical whiplash on top of everything else, all caused by Ren. When I'd first barged in on her after she'd run away from me and the news I'd brought home, the sheer overload of seeing her *cuddling* with another man, coming so soon after I'd had my own confrontation with said man, had brought my 'inner Dury' out in full force. It was something I greatly regretted, if only for how it had affected Ren.

But then, mere hours after that... *incident*, Ren had come bursting in on me, in the first quiet moment I'd found since returning home, only to tell me that she and Raimie were finished. She'd been inconsolable ever since.

I understood why Raimie had broken things off with her. Marrying Queen Kaedesa was a wise move, gaining him more economical and military power than I could possibly hope to counter. If I'd known she was in the country, I might have tried proposing a similar scenario to her. If that weren't enough, I didn't even blame him for choosing Kaedesa over Ren. The move made so much sense that I'd have been confounded if he hadn't gone for it.

Still. Seeing Ren, the girl I'd loved since childhood, crying her eyes out over him had been... difficult, and I'd been struggling with figuring out where to place the anger it had caused. What did I do with it when I couldn't blame anyone for what had happened?

It didn't help that I hadn't been angry like this in a good, long while. Any time the emotion had come up in the past, I'd easily pushed it away, burying it deep down, but this anger wouldn't let me do that. Every time I thought I'd mastered it, it came back up, and because of that, I'd been taking a lot of breaks in my home to calm down, in between everything else that had required my attention recently.

That was where I was now, pacing up a storm, but I knew I couldn't keep at this for much longer. I was supposed to meet my family at Tiro's graveyard soon, which was just...

Hell, I didn't want to do that.

But I had to. So after a few more passes across the room, I turned to the door in a forced jerk and marched outside.

Tiro's graveyard wasn't found inside the city. Given how small our hideaway was, there was barely enough room for the living here, much less the dead.

Even still, the dead must be honored and remembered. It was the least we few surviving Audish could do for those that our Dark Lord's reign had deemed unworthy.

Hence, why Tiro had a single weak point in its defenses, most especially in the many ways we remained hidden.

At the join where the city-concealing lattice and mountain shelf met, there was a small opening in the vines and leaves covering it. A concealed trail led from this point to a spot near the top of the mountains, far enough away that it didn't reveal Tiro's locations while remaining within walking distance. Here was where we honored our dead.

Eliade and Ren were waiting for me there, but I saw no sign of Tanwadur. After glancing across the barren rock around us, I approached the women with an eyebrow raised.

"Where is he?"

As Eliade choked back a sob, Ren hugged herself, looking off toward the far distant Narrow Sea.

"Not coming," she said. "He wouldn't answer me when I knocked on his door this morning."

...Not... coming? To his own son's funeral?

"That asshole," I said under my breath.

Wiping her eyes, Eliade said, "Your father's grieving, Ky. He does it in his own way. I'm sure he'll come out here when he's ready."

That was debatable. Still, I wrapped my arms around Eliade, squeezing her.

“I know.”

On pulling away from her, I winced.

“I guess it’s down to me to lead this thing, then, huh?”

Ducking her head, Eliade fiddled with her tunic, staring at her hands all the while.

“You don’t have to, Ky,” she whispered. “I... I can-”

“No.”

I reached forward to nudge my mother’s chin up.

“We agreed on this earlier,” I said. “After you clearly stated how much leading this would destroy you, Dury said he’d take the task on to spare you, and I promised that I’d serve in his stead, if need be.”

“But-!”

Squeezing her shoulder, I said, “I can do this, mom. Please, let me.”

Eliade fiercely bit her lip before nodding.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

I ignored her unasked for and frankly, unwanted gratitude. When I glanced at Ren, she huffed out a sigh before leading the way to where one of her scouts had left everything we’d need for this process.

They’d picked a good spot. It wasn’t too far from the other graves but was distant enough to grant visitors privacy, and a lone tree, clinging to the nearby mountainside, provided some shade for us.

Hadrion’s sword as well as a jar and a wrapped bundle waited for us there. While Eliade and Ren came to a stop a few paces away from this, I continued forward, picking up the sword once I could. I turned to them, laying the weapon across my palms so they could see it, and cleared my throat.

“We are here to honor Hadrion: a son, a brother, and one we loved. In his death, we speak to his essence, flinging our words into the void in the hopes that his essence may hear us.”

“Please, let him hear us,” Eliade and Ren intoned.

I couldn’t bear to look at them for long. Eliade’s body was already shaking like a leaf—and we hadn’t gotten to the hard part yet—while Ren looked empty. Her red-rimmed eyes stared through me while a puppeteer moved her body, and the sight of them in this grief-stricken state killed me. It reached into my heart and mind, and something like what they were experiencing pulsed back.

I wrenched my eyes above their heads before the sensation could overcome me.

“Hadrion wasn’t much of a warrior, and it’s safe to say that everyone knew this,” I continued. “Even still, he worked hard to learn what martial skills he had, never realizing how strong of a champion he was in the fight for our humanity. In the tongue of our ancestors, everyone he touched has always spoken of him as *unlida*—”

*‘Inspiring’-Yskella, the master of Tiro’s training yard.*

“—*valkonen*—”

*‘Valuable’-Sigemond, barkeep.*

“—*enenkiva vo salunan*—”

*‘Light in the dark’-Rhylix, a brother’s friend, now gone.*

“—...*unlavi*.”

*‘Hope’-Raimie, friend. Killer. The one who might save me from my fate.*

Woodenly, I lowered the sword to the ground between me and the girls, returning to the pile at my back for the jar. As I joined Eliade and Ren once more, I noted that my mother had started openly sobbing before pulling the jar’s lid off.

“Today, we name our brother and son in full. In the way of our ancestors, we name him.”

I stuck my fingers into the mix of ashes and water that the jar contained before getting on my knees. With the mixture I’d gathered, I painted three words near the sword, trying not to think about what the grime on my hands—a grey slightly darker than the stone beneath it—really was.

Above me, my mother whispered the three words I’d written—

“Hadrion val Compassion.”

—before bursting into tears again.

I hoped I’d chosen correctly. When it had come to fully naming my brother, I’d had to narrow everything he’d been into a single word, and the idea that I might gain this responsibility had been at the back of my mind, rolling over on itself, since I’d brought Hadrion home a week ago. Given my mother’s reaction and how Ren had slowly lowered herself to the ground with me, I thought they might agree with my decision.

At this point, I *should* get back up and retrieve the final piece of our ceremony. I *should* unwrap it and finish with this task, but... but I couldn’t move. I tried to send the energy radiating from my chest to my legs instead of my arms, but they refused to receive it, becoming so much dead meat beneath me.

I couldn't fail my brother in this, not after failing him so horribly at the end of his life. I *couldn't*, but with my body refusing to listen to me, I could only look at my mother, hoping she'd see the dilemma on my face.

When she met my gaze, Eliade's eyes softened, and with a fierce sniff, she drew herself upright, nodding once. She marched past me, leaving me to stare at the mess I'd made, but on retrieving the last piece of our ceremony, she joined me and Ren on the ground.

Gently, she laid a wrapped bundle into my limp hands, waiting until I forced my dirty fingers to close around it before letting go. Eliade said not a word, merely reaching up to brush my cheek before returning her attention to a sword and its owner's name, scrawled beneath it.

I was so grateful to her for this. For doing what I could not. For letting me finish a task I'd momentarily faltered in. For making not one comment about how I'd needed her help. It let me take a deep breath and unwrap a piece of tanned leather from around the only substantial pieces of my brother that remained.

Holding my breath, I handed three of the four out: a lock of hair—the easiest of the pieces—to my mother, a tooth to Ren, a fingerbone for me.

Picking up the jar once more, I drew a circle around a sword and a name, dividing it into thirds, before sprinkling the rest of the jars contents along the sword's scabbard. Ren and Eliade joined me in holding our pieces of a loved one over this scene.

"We carry you with us," I started.

Shakily, Eliade said, "You're with me always."

She folded her lock of hair into a knot before pinning it into her own mass of hair. Its blonde color was a stark contrast against her darker one.

"You're with me always," Ren said.

Bringing the tooth to her mouth, she kissed it before tucking it into a pocket at her waist.

Which brought things back to me.

No matter how much I didn't deserve to do so, I said, "You're with me always."

With a leather thong, I tied my brother's finger bone around the harness of my sword's scabbard. Then, I reached for Ren's hand, grabbing my mother's as soon as my sister had accepted it.

Once we were joined together, I said, "Hadrion val Compassion, you have made your mark on us all. You were loved, my brother. You were... loved. May that love guard you against our one, true enemy, the Morán. May that love protect you in the void beyond the real."

And that was it. The Rionunder Ceremony of the Dead, passed down from the time before Alouin had brought the Esela to our world, was complete. Now, we could turn to our own outpouring of

grief.

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