

# Chapter 52: A Decision for Myself

## Kylorian

Unfortunately, turning to their own grief was a luxury only Eliade and Ren could afford right now. After hugging them both, murmuring reassuring words as they shuddered or remained dry-eyed, I left Tiro's graveyard in a rush. On storming into the city, I made straight for my parent's home, barely remembering to open its door gently instead of slamming my way through it as I'd like. My mother lived here too, after all.

I didn't bother with knocking on Tanwadur's door. Striding through it, I advanced on him, which gave him enough time to look up from his desk in surprise.

"Ky! I was hoping you'd come here-"

Slamming my soiled hand in front of him, I pointed at it.

"Look at this, Dury."

And when he only stared at me with tightened eyebrows, I fucking roared.

*"Look at it!"*

Reluctantly, he turned his gaze downward, and I stabbed my floating finger toward my hand once more.

"These are Hadrion's ashes, dad. *Your son's ashes!*" I shouted. "Why weren't you there to honor him? Did his life mean so little to you?"

Sighing, Tanwadur said, "You're being dramatic, Kylorian. Of course Hadrion meant something to me! Of course he did. Now, would you please calm down and sit?"

Calm... down? He wanted me to *calm down*?

"I had to take your place in the Ceremony!" I shouted. "I had to do something awful for you *again* because you- you-"

Heat had clogged up my throat so badly that all the words I wanted to say got caught in my chest instead. As I struggled with this blockage, Tanwadur calmly looked up at me and said one word.

“Good.”

The icy tone in that word reminded me about who I was talking to. It reminded me that Tanwadur had yet to greet me after coming home to find his son dead.

Heat was still beating against the door to my mind, but still, I swallowed. Straightened. Took a step back. Watched him for what he'd do next.

Tanwadur merely returned to what he'd been doing before I barged in on him. I listened to the steady scratch of his quill across a page, along with his quiet breathing, until I couldn't resist the question poised on my tongue any longer.

“How is any of this ‘good’?” I said, barely keeping my voice from a growl.

“Because now, maybe you've learned your lesson,” Tanwadur said without looking up. “After you gave me your opinion on the problem in our midst, I told you that you shouldn't believe a word he said, and yet, you still sided with him on his half-mad dash to the Birthing Grounds. You trusted him with your brother's life, and because of that, Hadrion's dead. I've let you suffer the full consequences of those choices, hoping you'd understand how important it is to listen to me, although I suppose you'll have to tell me if that's finally happened.”

He... blamed *me* for Hadrion's death? I... I...

Dully, I said, “I've always known that listening to you was the wisest course of action.”

“Mm,” Tanwadur hummed.

He tapped his quill's tip on the paper for a moment before looking up at me.

“I understand why all of this has happened. For years, I've been waiting for you to rebel against my directives, as every boy does when he grows up. It's unfortunate that you chose these difficult times to test yourself against me, but in the end, we will deal with our losses. The important thing is that you now know how disastrous choosing your own path can be. You know you should follow the one I've laid down for you instead.”

For a moment, I simply blinked at him before realizing he expected a reply from me.

The only one I could manage was, “Yes, sir.”

Leaning back in his chair, Tanwadur speculatively eyed me for what felt like forever before shaking his head.

“Then again, perhaps this is my fault too, at least in part,” he said. “It's been a while since I've shown you what it's like to stay in my good graces. Do you need a reminder of what that feels like,

Kylorian?"

My mind and body locked up. I knew I couldn't show this to him, though, so I made my clumsy tongue move inside my frozen mouth.

"No. Thank you, sir."

When Tanwadur stood up, I felt myself going fully numb, felt my body tingling in a far distant place. I watched from the back of my head as he came closer.

"Are you sure?" he asked, peering into my eyes.

Scrambling to move something, even as far away as I was, I used metaphorical pins to contort my lips into a smile.

"I'm sure," came out of my mouth. "Thank you, sir."

Tanwadur's face softened, and he pulled me into a hug. Each pound of his hand on my back brought me more fully into control of my body, and once it felt like it might be mine again, I hesitantly returned his embrace.

"It's going to be ok, son," he whispered in my ear. "We'll work through this together."

He released me, strolling back to his desk, and I just breathed.

"I'm already working on a plan to handle Raimie, on the off chance he doesn't get killed on this newest endeavor of his. While I was visiting Da'kul, the commander he'd placed there, Gistrick, went running off on his own, well before news of the idiot's newest strategy reached the fort. It seems the commander has his doubts about his leader. Maybe we can cultivate those doubts until he becomes our ally," Tanwadur said as he sat, "although given his decision to attack Elisk, of all places, it seems unlikely we'll see Raimie's face again. If we do, though, I want to be ready to take our revenge for Hadrion out on him."

...Revenge? Did that mean he blamed *Raimie* for what had happened? I didn't... didn't...

"In the meantime, I need you to take care of Eliade and your sister," Tanwadur continued. "I'll let you know when we're ready for the next step."

When he glanced at me, I nodded, which seemed to satisfy him. With a half-smile, he waved at me.

"Now, go wash that filth off of your hands," he said. "It's time to move on."

"Yes, sir," I said.

Now released, I could march into the street outside, hazily watching people pass on either side of me. A well up ahead drew me forward like a magnet, and when I reached it, I hauled up a bucket of water, unhooking it so I could take it to a nearby gutter. I plunged my hand into its icy confines,

scrubbing it until it was bright pink, and once it was clean, I emptied the bucket. I watched dirty water—*Hadrion!*—swirl along the gutter's incline until it mixed with the other filth and sludge further down the way.

This was what my brother had become, was it? Filth to be washed away? All because of m- Raimie?

When I blinked, that complicated, *confusing* man was standing in front of me, and I watched myself wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze and *squeeze* and SQUEEZE until life started leaking out of him. Then, I stepped back and made him *suffer* until-

I blinked again, and he was gone, leaving me barren and empty. I was faintly surprised at how violent I'd so quickly become. Had that imagining been truly mine, or had it been my 'inner Dury', coming out to play? Did I blame Raimie for my brother's death, or was that only my father, messing with my head, yet again?

It was concerning that I didn't know the answer to either of those questions.

I had to figure it out. When it came to this one, singular thing, I couldn't let Tanwadur influence me, not in any way. Raimie had been the first and only person I'd related to who wasn't connected to my father. I- I needed to know if he was my enemy or my friend.

And I couldn't figure that out while I was here.

With that fact known, my next steps were easy. I secured supplies from someone who'd survived a recent Harvest, one I'd led the rescue for. While checking on my people, I made sure that they knew they weren't to follow new orders until I returned. They were free to protect Tiro as they saw fit, but I didn't want them doing anything else, especially if the idea came from Tanwadur. And then, I headed for the closest stable to the city's stone doors.

I was saddling a horse, checking on her tackle as I did so, when Ren found me. Her appearance didn't surprise me as much as it probably should have. She and Hadrion had always had an uncanny ability to know when I was about to leave them.

I ignored her as she walked into the stable. She paused, crossing her arms to watch me for a moment. Once she was ready to speak, she walked forward, laying a hand on my arm.

"You're going?" she softly asked.

Without looking at her, I nodded.

"I have to get away for a while. Need to figure some things out *for myself*," I said. "I'm sorry about that, Ren. I know you're struggling right now, what with Hadrion and Raimie..."

Ren squeezed my arm until I looked at her.

"I'll be fine, given time," she said. "What about you? Will you be ok?"

"I... don't know," I said. "It's one reason why I have to go."

Releasing a sigh, Ren tugged me away from my task, wrapping me in her arms once I'd faced her. I struggled to accept the comfort she was offering me—I was supposed to take care of *her*—but gradually, I relaxed into her embrace, holding her for a while.

When she eventually pulled away, it *hurt*, but I didn't let that show, merely rubbing my arm. I only realized how awkward that must look when Ren let a faint smile show through the exhausted mask she'd been wearing lately.

As I turned back to my task, she said, "I'll look after Eliade and Dury while you're gone, so don't worry about them. You're always looking out for us, never thinking about yourself, so please. Take as much time as you need with this, Ky."

Pursing my lips, I tightened one last strap on the saddle with a jerk.

"Don't let Dury know that I've gone until he asks for me," I said, deliberately ignoring what Ren had said. "He might send people after me once he realizes what I've done, and I don't want to cause more trouble than I already have to with this."

One last act of rebellion. A choice I was making solely for myself. Something I desperately needed right now.

"All right," Ren said.

When I swung up into the saddle, she patted my thigh, staring up at me with the ghost of a smile.

"I'd tell you to be safe, but we both know you don't need that reminder," she said.

"I never do," I replied, forcing out a genuine smile.

Or as close to a genuine one as I could get right now, at least.

"See you soon, Ren."

She patted my thigh once more before stepping back, and I nudged the horse into a walk. I didn't think about where I was going or what I'd be doing until I was through Tiro's gate and far into the surrounding woods. Sure, the goal of this jaunt was to get my head on straight and figure out what I—and I alone—wanted to do about the conundrum that had landed in my lap this winter, but I didn't want to spend the time idly riding down roads and camping out at night. Much as I needed to be alone with my thoughts, I also *couldn't* be fully alone with them.

So, what task could occupy me while I was working on my personal goals?

I didn't find an answer to that question until I was out of the Cerrin Forest, near where I'd entered it not long ago. The memory that had once ushered me under the trees' canopy came back to mind as I greeted a clear sky, and I huffed out a laugh.

“Ivelais,” I said under my breath.

The only other secret I’d kept from Tanwadur. The act of rebellion he’d never found out about. It seemed fitting that I revisit that portion of my life while openly defying my father for the first time.

Besides, what had I been considering the last time I’d thought about Ivelais? How they’d react to the news of their friend’s death?

That was a good goal. I’d find Ivelais, tell them what had happened to Hadrion, and see how they responded. I’d find out if my brother had been right about the Kiraak, whether they were still somewhat human or not. Maybe that could help inform me on my decision about Raimie as well.

I’d have to head for Nephiron first. That had been Ivelais’ intended destination once the impending danger of discovery had forced them out of my life, and wouldn’t that be interesting? From what I’d heard, the port city was under another realm’s control right now.

What would that be like? Besides Tiro, I’d never been in a city that Doldimar didn’t rule.

“Something to look forward to,” I said.

With a destination in mind, I turned my horse’s head to the west and started that way.

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