

Chapter 66: Ivelais

Kylorian

In the city proper, people milled about on the streets, forcing me to duck and dodge between them. This didn't usually bother me. For the most part, I'd grown up in Tiro, one of the most crowded populations in Auden, but today, every individual who blocked my path added another spike of irritation to an already fatly packed weight. I'd started imaging bloody deaths for the few incredibly oblivious people among the crowd by the time I'd reached one of Elisk's abandoned neighborhoods. There, I could take a moment to catch my breath.

I was glad Elisk's streets were busy and bustling. I was glad that a sense of energy and hopefulness had been injected into its citizens. I was also teetering on a line that I'd had to balance for a while now, and anything that could make me fall off of it *wasn't welcome*.

The eerie quiet of the abandoned neighborhood I'd entered quickly dampened the sounds of trade and life found outside of it, and once those sounds had fallen away, a shiver rumbled down my spine. Ren said she thought the palace was haunted? I thought she was more likely to run across ghosts in one of these places.

Throughout the years of Elisk's revitalization, certain parts of the city had remained abandoned, no matter what sort of enticement Auden's government had placed in front of the newcomers.

While Doldimar had still been in power, the news of Harvests would spread across the nation, but this had mostly been at the Audish population's behest. Receiving news of which town had undergone that horrible ritual could inform one on whether family in distant parts of the land was still alive.

Because of this, almost everyone in Auden knew which of Elisk's districts had last undergone a Harvest, and said districts had become miniature ghost towns within the city's wall. Who wanted to live in the home of someone who'd likely been brutally murdered within the last five years? Most people would rather occupy a place whose former owners might have faded from memory.

This had been advantageous for me because it had provided a way to keep Ivelais hidden while in a place I regularly visited. For a while, we'd tried having them follow behind my traveling group or staying in the wilderness, but those hiding places had proved inconvenient for me and not at all acceptable for Ivelais themselves. Risking a possible haunting had seemed better to both of us, especially given how little either of us believed such superstitious nonsense.

I followed the signs they'd left to their latest accommodations until those stopped at a modest two-story building with a small courtyard in front of it. Hopping up the steps to its front door, I let myself inside, listening to the door close in the utter silence beyond.

"Ivelais?" I called into this.

I got nothing back, but I'd expected that. Most of the time, Ivelais liked to greet me in a *certain type of way*, and in anticipation of this, I drew my sword, loosely holding it at my side, before walking further into the house.

With candles and lanterns unlit, the house gave off even more of an eerie feel than the district outside, but right now, I thoroughly appreciated that. For reasons I didn't quite understand, Ivelais put a lot of work into making our reunions as memorable as possible, all to help us with the lingering, bullshit emotions we carried from our past mistakes.

Through a kitchen full of rotten food and broken plateware, past a pitch-black bedroom, out onto a narrow balcony, and right back inside. I didn't see a single trace of them, and after several minutes of searching the house, I wondered if I'd followed an old set of their signs to an abandoned hideout.

As I was making my way to the house's front door, a creak behind me gave me a split second to spin and raise my sword before a gleaming sharp edge slammed down onto it. The person behind this attack manically grinned at me with their mousy brown hair frazzled around their head.

"Kylorian," they said.

Returning their smile in a much more vicious manner, I growled, "Ivelais."

When I shoved them, they followed the force of that motion, gracefully skittering backward, and I was left off-balance for a heartbeat. I was surprised when Ivelais didn't take advantage of my unsteadiness, waiting for me to regain my balance instead, but it wasn't surprising enough to make me stop.

I swung at their chest, using that to hide when I drew a knife, and once it was in my hand, I stabbed for Ivelais' neck. They merely blocked and subsequently, swayed away from my attack.

That was fine, though. Following the momentum of my swing, I sidestepped around their bent-back body, ready to sweep my sword back the other way and into their stomach. Ivelais, however, spun out of my reach as I was moving, and before I could recover, they'd stepped forward enough to leave a nick on my arm. In the next breath, blood started welling from that opening, and for both an instant and the length of eternity, I stared at the evidence of my weakness before something inside snapped.

I was roaring and banging down on Ivelais' weapons, *thirsting* to break through their defenses. I needed to see my enemy destroyed, needed to see their blood sprayed across the walls and floor, needed to revel in the feel of flesh-soon-to-go-cold. It was a red-hot, glorious enticement or maybe excitement, running through my veins, through my mind, and *gods*, it felt good, it felt *good*, it felt

so damn good!

I was lost in it, screaming and crying and watching from a vast distance as the strength running through my arms overcame the weakness in my enemy's. Their sword slipped out of their fingers, and my body drove theirs into a wall. I pressed my forearm down on their throat, watching the black vines beneath it bulge, and drew back to punch a knife through their open mouth.

"Kylorian," they calmly said. "Do you really want to kill me?"

That brought me up short, introducing a slight pause in the rush pounding through my body, and within that moment of clarity, I hovered, knowing something was wrong. Unsure what it was. What was I missing here?

"Kylorian, listen to me," my enemy repeated. "Do you *really* want to kill me?"

That was the problem. I knew this enemy. It was Ivelais, and they... they were staring at me, waiting for me to decide if I was going to *end their life*.

Stumbling away from them, I coughed out, "Fuck."

Then, I turned away, rubbing my face.

After a tense pause, Ivelais said, "I gather you've been stressed lately, then."

When I nodded, they hummed before stepping forward to rub my back.

"Well, you stopped before anything irreversible could happen," they said. "I'll take that."

Growling into my hands, I said, "It's such bullshit that you're saying something like that. *I* made the mistake. *d* nearly killed you. That's not something you should have to experience and then say, 'No harm, no foul'."

Sighing, Ivelais rubbed my back in two more circles before dropping their hand.

"Sure, you 'made the mistake', but we both know something else was driving you," they said. "Asshole people made us this way. The best we can do is muddle through every ugly behavior that they engrained in us, trying to change the pattern when those bad habits raise their head, and have grace for each other when we fail. Besides, *I* was the one who attacked *you*, if you'll recall."

I released an explosive breath as I flung my hands down to my side.

"Stop trying to make me feel better. It only makes it worse," I said. "Let's just... check in, like we always do. Ok?"

Shrugging, Ivelais said, "Sure."

They turned toward a hallway leading deeper into the house, and I followed them, trying to determine where we were going by examining our surroundings over their shorter stature. When Ivelais eventually led me into a gathering room of some sort, they lit a candelabra on a low-to-the-ground table, and I took a seat in an armchair, running my eyes over their body as I did.

The black vines creeping over the join of their arms and shoulders hadn't advanced much since I'd last seen them, but the ones that flowed up their neck had almost reached their chin now, which was problematic. If those awful things must advance beyond where they'd originally been placed, why couldn't they have done that in a less visible manner?

"So," Ivelais said, "how did things in Sotchal-?"

"Raimie's going to be king," I blurted out, unable to wait until they'd finished speaking. "I couldn't keep pretending that I had a chance, so I backed out. He'll be the one on the throne."

Pausing in taking their seat, Ivelais glanced up as if assessing me before pursing their lips.

"That could cause problems for you," they said.

With a groan, I hunched forward until my head was hanging between my knees.

"I know," I said, drawing out the word as if continuing to speak it might stave off anything else Ivelais might say.

It didn't, of course.

After a beat of silence, they said, "That explains why you were so gung-ho in our tiff today. Usually, you actively *enjoy* a surprise attack from me when you get back."

From where I was still hanging, I nodded.

"They remind me that I'm not playing a game with you," I said. "You've never tried to manipulate me with words, always telling me exactly what bad thing will happen before it comes. An active fight instead of false hugs is definitely the best way to greet me."

"For now," Ivelais said under their breath.

I ignored them, making myself sit upright.

"One good thing to report, though," I said. "Raimie and I have made up, so he's offered me a place in his government. That should keep the pressure off from *him*."

Which was good. I still didn't know how to refuse anything that *he* might ask. Every time *he* brought me a demand, I was a little boy at his feet again, fervently hoping he wouldn't do to me what he'd once done to my childhood caretakers.

“That *is* good,” Ivelais said. “Maybe we can work on your resistance in the meantime. Stall as much as possible while we do that.”

With a tired nod, I said, “That’s what I was thinking, yes. How are things with you?”

When Ivelais winced, I held up my hand.

“That bad, huh? Well, you don’t have to go into detail unless you want to,” I said, pausing before asking a question I’d already asked a thousand times. “Are you sure you won’t go to Raimie with this? He’d take your Corruption away if you asked.”

Quickly, Ivelais jerked their face to the side, but not before I spotted it starting to sour.

“You *know* I can’t do that,” they snapped. “Any time I even think about it, my thoughts drift away from the idea, and when I do manage to stay on topic, I can’t make my body move. I get trapped in it, and that feels...”

They shuddered, and I reached over to squeeze their hand. That was one of many experiences that we’d both experienced at one point or another.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I know Enforcer Coleath was only able to complete the Vice on you because you came after me when Hadrion... after Hadrion. You’re in this situation because of me-”

“Don’t you dare,” Ivelais said.

Jerking back toward me, they cupped my cheek, making sure I was listening. It was what they’d always done when I’d tried to express my guilt over what had happened to them.

“I ran after you because *I* made a mistake with *you*,” they said, “and because of that, we’re both in a situation we’d rather never have taken on, but that’s why we work together, right? Because our mutual mistakes and our individual pasts make it possible for us to understand one another, better than most people could. I’m here to help you. You help me, as much as you can, and hey! At least I only have the one order to obey. You got me out before Enforcer Coleath could give me more.”

“Stay away from Raimie, yes. I know that’s part of what’s kept you Kiraak,” I said.

We sat in silence for a while before I hesitantly continued.

“I could always ask Raimie to come here in your stead. I know that might not be what you want but...”

With a wry smile, Ivelais glanced back at me.

“You’re welcome to try,” they said. “I’m curious if you’ll remember to do it before or after you have a conversation with him about your own problems.”

At that, I dropped their hand like it was made of acid.

“Yes, bringing *him* up will be difficult,” I said.

I still wasn't sure if I could do it. I'd meant to as soon as Ren and I had returned to the capital, but with how badly I'd messed up today, I wasn't sure if or when I'd be able to ask Raimie for the favor that I had planned. When would I have made up for my mistake enough to do that?

And with the investiture in a month, he was going to be busy, even if he'd left Eledis to manage the ceremony itself. I wasn't sure he realized how much would be asked from him, both before and after that awful thing was over.

Oh, hell. The investiture... That meant....

“Gods,” I whispered, mostly to myself. “*He'll* be coming to Elisk soon.”

Tanwadur. When was the last time I'd seen my father?

That snapped Ivelais' attention fully onto me.

“Oh, Kylorian,” they softly said. “I'm so sorry. That on top of everything else... it's going to be a difficult few weeks for you, isn't it?”

“Yes,” I said in a strangled voice.

But I couldn't let it phase me. I had to get through it because on the other side of the investiture, I'd have a time of peace and calm. If Raimie truly meant to offer me a place at his side, no matter how far away from him it might be, then I might have a chance to escape from *him* as well.

I could hold it together for a few weeks. I had to.

Still, I'd absolutely need help with it, so I faced Ivelais, meeting their eyes.

“Do you have any ideas for ways I can keep it together while that bastard's here?” I asked.

Ivelais' fierce smile made me shiver, even if it also spawned a grin of my own as well.

“Plenty, all born from experience,” they said. “Once you've started practicing these techniques, the next few weeks won't be able to touch you. You and I, Kylorian? We can make an unstoppable team when we put our minds together. So, let's do that.”

Hell, what reassurance they gave me! This relationship, born of secrecy and sealed by the damage we'd done to each other, shouldn't be as amiable or life-saving as it had been over the last few years, but that was what it had become. A bond that I could no longer do without.

The thought of how attached I'd become to Ivelais scared me at times. Not right now, though. Right now, I smirked right back at them.

“Yes, let's,” I said.

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