

“Brother By Blood”  
January 2023  
Kelly McGlade

Kori knew it was Griffin in the doorway of his study by the clink of the brass buckles on his armor. If he ever took it off, maybe he'd learn to be subtler - but, then again, Griff was nothing if not straightforward. Something Kori had never been able to fault him for their whole lives.

“What,” Kori asked, not looking up from the scroll under his quill.

Silence.

His quill scratched to a stop. He threw a halfhearted look over his shoulder. “What, Griff.”

Silence.

Kori rolled his eyes to the back of his head. “Griffin, *what*,” he snapped, putting a hand on the back of his chair to turn around fully with a scowl.

Griff's bulk cut an imposing figure in any doorway, but Kori's - built specifically to accommodate his short elven stature - just made it more of a humiliation every time he dropped by. His royal armor gleamed bright and pristine as always, gold against the ebony of his bare muscled arms. The golden stud under his bottom lip winked as he smirked to himself.

“Sol wants to see us,” was all he said before giving the marble doorframe a pat and ducking back into the hallway.

Kori rolled his eyes again but pushed back from his desk anyway, pulling the long waves of his bleached-white hair through his fingers with a sigh. It probably would do him some good to get away from his desk after the hours he'd pulled the past month.

He threw on a belt over his ceremonial robes and grabbed his faithful mage's staff on his way out the door.

King Solomon e-Farid held his inner council meetings in the airy central chamber of the royal quarters. Potted palm fronds floated in the air breezing in through the balconies and open doorways. The young king had chaises and embroidered seats for all members arranged around the glass tea set on the broad, low table in the middle of the mosaic floor. He already had a chalice of wine in hand when Kori arrived.

“Little early for the booze, don’t you think, Sol?” said Kori, pulling up a carved chair.

The general at the king’s left - Kori’s wife Priya, bedecked in her own robes of state - just waved a bejeweled hand. “Don’t try,” she said. “I already lost that battle. You’re lucky you’re the last one in.”

“Shame. Well, I’m sure you did your best.” Kori planted a kiss on her cheek.

At the head of the circle, Solomon flashed a grin. “If my two top advisors are done harassing their poor fealty-sworn ruler,” he said, “I’d like to call this council meeting to order.”

Kori threw one knee over the other and leaned an elbow on his armrest, almost brushing shoulders with his wife. Their group was a small one - six companions, a spouse or two in the mix, all of them the highest ranking members of Solomon’s royal court. The six companions who, almost a decade ago, had won the bloody civil war that put the rightful heir on the throne. Kori had fallen in love with Priya on that battlefield as teenagers. All of them had fought and fallen side by side.

Viah’s absence in their circle didn’t gut him like it used to, but it still left Kori with a lingering feeling of discontent in the presence of everyone else.

But the most important thing was that Griff was still with them. He sat with his own wife Morge, who he’d met and married once the war was behind them. She was a lieutenant in her own right, but she wasn’t a regular at inner council meetings like these. Kori pushed aside his mild curiosity once Solomon began to speak.

“First,” said the king, “I’m pleased to announce that our finicky elven neighbors to the south have finally agreed to reopen the ore trade. Special thanks to our brilliant Kori for spearheading that diplomatic effort.”

Affirmations went up around the circle and Priya rubbed his shoulder proudly. Kori spread his hands. “And you all told me to stop working myself so hard,” he preened.

“You were so sleep deprived you told me there was a ghost hanging onto my shoulder,” Griff deadpanned.

“I told you not to speak a word of that.”

He shrugged.

“*Secondly*,” Solomon interjected while Kori glowered across the circle, “We have another tidbit of news, this one vastly more exciting for this council in particular-”

“Hey!” said Kori.

“-but I don’t think I’m the right person to... deliver it, shall we say.” Solomon lifted his wine chalice at Griff and Morge.

All at once, something clanged off-kilter deep in Kori’s chest. Something in the couple’s eyes, their secret smiles.

“Morge my dear, would you care to take it away?”

Morge squeezed her husband’s hand, and the rare, true smile on Griff’s face beamed down on her like a soft ray of sunlight. “It’s the beginning of a new age for the kingdom you all fought so hard to save,” she said. “Griff and I... we’re having a baby!”

Kori sat unmoving. His mind was a white expanse of silence.

Around him, squeals and congratulations were going up. Priya and the others flocked to the couple. Hugging. Praising. Joyous. Solomon led a deep, hearty toast. A wineglass found its way into Kori’s hand, and he lifted it on reflex. Sipped it without tasting its bite. All the while, his vacant gaze fixed on Griff, somehow unable to stare anywhere else.

*A baby. Griff... the father of a kid.*

“To the next generation of heroes!” said Solomon. Cheers echoed his proclamation.

But Kori’s body moved of its own accord, masking his face while his mouth formed words to hide the white fog overwhelming his brain. “What about the rest of this meeting’s business?” he heard himself tease.

“There is no more business. This was just an opportunity to get the whole family in one room for once. Morge’s idea!”

“To the next generation!” said Priya, hooking her arm in Kori’s.

They drank. Kori moved like a shadow puppet, sticks directing his cup to his mouth, pulling his mouth upwards at the corners.

*Griff, a father.*

*The whole family in one room.*

Those two things should have made him happy. He should have been proud of his oldest friend, his brother in everything but blood. But no matter how many times he told himself that, it didn’t quell the frantic thunder of his heartbeat in his ears.

~

“You can start talking now.”

Kori looked up. It was just him and Priya in their bedchamber. His wife hung her general’s robes on the brass hook in her wardrobe, the muscles in her broad, brown back flickering as she picked out a tunic for sparring. Kori’s own robes were only halfway off his shoulders.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

“Ah, the deflection.” She tugged her tunic over her head. Pulled her curtain of black waves out from under it in a brilliant cascade and deftly tied them into a low tail. She spared him a glance over her shoulder. “I know you shut down during this morning’s meeting.”

*Damn her for that keen eye.* “Well,” he said, doffing his robe in a heap on the embroidered armchair, “I don’t know if we can really call it a meeting. Looked more like an excuse for Sol to throw a party.”

“For good reason.”

“Of course,” he said. The shuffle of fabric as Kori dressed for sparring was the only sound in the room for much too long of a moment.

The low curtained bedspread sighed as Priya alighted on its edge. “Something upset you,” she said. “Something about Morge and Griffin’s baby?”

“I’m not upset. I’m happy for them.”

“Tell me what’s wrong, Kori.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said. He tugged on his sandals with a little more force than needed. “Someone in the old group was bound to have a kid at some point. They seem excited about it, so that’s all that matters.”

She tipped her head to the side, eyes soft. “Are you jealous?”

“No.” He shook out his head. “No, Priya, we’ve talked about this. I’ve never wanted children, even if it were possible with you. That hasn’t changed. I’d be more than satisfied watching over the children of my friends.”

“Is it Griff, then?”

He exhaled sharply. “Look, I don’t know. Maybe it just caught me off guard this morning. That’s all. Are we going to train or what?”

Priya padded across the room and put her callused palms on his arms, standing close behind him, her lips brushing the long taper of his ear. Kori closed his eyes against her warmth, her company.

“You remember when we first met?” she murmured, slowly trailing her hands up and down his arms. “Those early days on the road, hopping from tavern to safehouse, just us and our friends.”

“Dogged by imperial soldiers every waking hour? How could I forget.”

“Well, we knew what we were getting into when we joined up with Sol. I remember,” she added, “a stubborn little elven boy whose favorite conflict resolution strategy was dragging one of us into the sparring ring whether we wanted it or not.”

Kori chuckled. “Dust Town diplomacy.”

“And your only flirting technique.”

“Hey,” he said. “I never had a reason to hone one before I ran into you! At least it worked, right?”

“Took you long enough.” She leaned her chin briefly on his shoulder as she grinned. “To think, now that same boy is running a whole government.”

“I’d like to think I’m more refined now.”

Priya hummed. Pulled away. “You’ve always been the first person I fall back on, you know - with my name change, with family issues, with political crises,” she said, softer this time. “Please don’t keep shutting yourself away, Kori. At least not from me.”

*It’s not something I enjoy doing, if it’s any consolation.*

Kori touched her fingers and pulled away. “I’m sorry, Pri,” he murmured. “I just... I think I need to process it all. But you’ll be the first one I open back up to when I do, you know that, right?”

“Of course.” Priya pressed a kiss to the corner of his jawbone. Her lilac perfume lingered in the air where she’d just been.

He sent her a smile before picking up his staff. “I love you,” he said.

“Love you, too.” She grabbed her gleaming scimitar from their kingdom-toppling days and slung her shield across her back. “Just remember, family is family. We’ve been through hell and back with these friends of ours. This doesn’t change anything.”

“Sure,” Kori lied. He took his wife’s arm with another masked smile and headed for the fluted corridor outside their door. He knew she recognized that mask of his back on his face.

Blissfully, she said nothing more about it. The clash of their weapons, steel against sorcery, drove all thoughts from their minds.

~

It was well past midday once they stopped. Sweating under the pavilions ringing the wide, green lawn of the palace sparring yard, Kori didn’t notice him approach until that telltale armor clinked right by his ear. Ice lurched through his stomach like a frozen spear.

“Oh, hey, Griff,” said Priya, taking a swig of her waterskin.

“I could hear you from the great hall,” said the royal guard. The hilt of his greatsword glinted on his back.

“Really? Ah. Sorry about that.” Kori’s mask was back up before he even had time to think about it. He grinned lopsidedly up at him. “I’ve been refining that sonic concussion spell I told you about. Had no idea the bang would reach that far.”

“It packs a serious punch up close,” Priya warned him.

Griff hummed in appreciation and pulled up a chair. Kori swallowed a curse, then swallowed the surge of guilt at wanting his best friend to leave him alone. The latter stung a lot more going down.

“How’s it going, then?” Griff asked. “Working through that new spellbook, I mean.”

“Oh, pretty good. Nothing too difficult so far. Elf blood, natural aptitude for magic, you know.”

“Really? I’d have thought you were hitting walls like a student again, with the amount of time you’ve spent holed up in your tower since you got it.”

“Fuck off!” Kori laughed, smacking him with his staff. Griff blocked it with his gleaming gauntlet with ease.

Priya stuck her arms between them immediately. “Hey, hey, take it outside,” she said.

“We are outside,” Kori grinned.

“Leave it to Griff to bring out the fourteen year old in you,” she muttered with a skyward eye roll. “If you’re gonna pick a fight, do it in the yard. You know, the one place in the castle that’s *built* to handle combat?”

Kori raised his eyebrows at Griff. All pretense of anxiety was gone - Griff just had that effect on him. “Want to?”

“Done,” Griff clapped his hands on his knees and rose to his full, towering height. “Just like Dust Town.”

“Just like Dust Town,” said Kori. He hiked up his staff and vaulted over the pavilion balustrade, landing deftly on the lawn. Griff took off running along the perimeter for the nearest steps. Kori dashed to intercept him, a grin pulling at his mouth and heart.

*Dust Town indeed - except we’re ten times the fighters we were back then.*

He spun his staff above his head and thrust it out in front of him with both hands, whispering the spell under his breath. A wall of earth shot straight up into Griff’s path. The flash of armor - the guard grabbed the grassy lip just in time, using the wall’s momentum to fling himself over the top.

No one else read Kori’s moves in battle nearly as fast. They were completely synced as they always were, stretching back to those distant days of scrapping in the streets of their hometown. Kori met Griff’s greatsword with a shield of solid energy, which Griff met with a sweep of the leg, which Kori met with a whirling gust of air that propelled himself out of the way. Each hit of their heels on the earth landed like drumbeats. A practiced dance. A familiar routine, etched in Kori’s blood.

*I can’t lose this, too.*

He stumbled at that thought. Then the wind flew out of his lungs as he took the full brunt of Griff’s knee to the chest.

He flew, skidded on the grass. Griff was on him immediately, mouth open in shock. “I thought you were gonna block that, sorry about that.”

“No,” Kori wheezed. Griff offered his hand, and Kori grasped it to stand. “Don’t worry about it, Griff. My bad, I should have seen that coming.”

“Why didn’t you?”

*‘Cause I remembered you were as vital a part of me as any one of my organs.*

“Distracted,” he shook his head with that mask-smile and hefted his staff. “Another go?”

Griff grabbed his arm before he could escape.

"You don't get distracted," he said, looking him dead in the eye.

The lurch of panic was back. Kori tried to playfully tug his arm away, but Griff held him firm - gentle, but firm. "First time for everything?" he tried.

"Uh-uh. The truth."

Kori worried the inside of his cheek, scanning his best friend's face for mercy and finding none. At length, he shrugged. "Just... this morning, I guess. You and Morge, having a baby!" he said. "Wild, am I right? It's a lot to consider."

At the mention of his wife, Griff's demeanor softened just a bit at the edges. *He never used to do that when we were kids. Nothing got him to cave.* "I'm not the pregnant one," he said, finally letting Kori go. "You don't have to hold back with me."

"I didn't," said Kori, but his mask was cracking fast. "I told you. Distracted."

"Distracted thinking about my future kid?"

"I... yeah," he shrugged. "Doesn't it distract you, too? Thinking about being a father all of a sudden?"

Griff frowned. "Well, it's... not sudden for me, no. Morge and I have been talking about this for years, if I'm going to be honest."

*I didn't know that. You didn't tell me that.*

Kori swallowed. "Aren't you... I don't know, just a little bit worried?" he asked. "You and me, we never knew a father figure of our own. How do you know what to do?"

*Two orphans on the streets of a forgotten town. Blown in from separate communities like everything else that collected in the alleys and peddler's avenues, clinging to each other for survival.*

"I don't," said Griff. "Not really. But it doesn't worry me. I just want to give my kid the kind of life we never got, I guess, and I'll figure it out as I go."

"But how will you *know*?" A rawness was creeping into Kori's voice, spurred by the fear that he was watching his argument run through his fingers and disappear into the dirt.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"



“You’re trying to build a family. A blood family, but you’ve never *had* one of those before. Since before either of us can remember, the only person you ever trusted like kin was me, and mine was you, always you. Even after we joined up with Sol! Ally after ally we picked up, but we were still a unit.”

“Kori,” said Griff.

“We held off the *bridge invasion* together. Just the two of us, my magic and your sword against a whole host of knights under that tyrant king’s command. It would have failed if it were anyone else. Sol and the others would have died if those reinforcements got through. We won because we were *together*.”

“We’re still together, aren’t we?”

“You tell me,” said Kori. His voice broke and he wanted to kick himself for it. For the pressure building in his throat. He tossed out a limp hand. “Face it, Griff, this group of ours isn’t what it used to be.”

Griff straightened. “I *have* faced it,” he said, a new emotion hiding behind the sturdy set of his jaw. “I think I’ve faced it more than you have, actually.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on. Tell me your head hasn’t been stuck in your tower so long that it’s only taken you until now to see the cracks.”

“Of course I’ve seen them,” he snapped. “Look at Sol. Every chance he gets nowadays, he’s got a bottle in his hands. Oh, he doesn’t let it get in the way of running the country, but it’s like he doesn’t have anything else to fill his leisure time with anymore. Not to mention, the whole Viah situation.”

“And you?” Griff set his teeth, eyebrows leaping high. “You think you haven’t changed just as much?”

Kori went to retort, but his best friend cut him off. “You’re a *husk* of the Kori I knew during those revolution years,” he said, and the words hit Kori like a slap to the face. “Every free moment Sol devotes to his drink, you devote to your work. Your magic studies. Your diplomatic snarls that ought to take thirty minutes at a council table to iron out, yet you tackle them all single handedly.”

Kori stepped back a fraction. “It’s my job,” he said, but the argument felt as weak as he sounded. “Balancing the paperwork of an entire kingdom-”

“Doesn’t have to be all on your shoulders! This is what I’m saying, Kori. We took down a tyrant regime together, yes, but you don’t seem interested in doing anything as a team anymore.”

“Then where *is* the team? Where’s the family now?” he exclaimed. “Sol promised us all a place where we’d belong once he became king. He *failed*. If the teamwork you’re talking about still existed, Viah wouldn’t have left.”

Griff stilled. Kori pushed his angle, even as it pierced him like a dozen arrows to remember. “We weren’t enough for her,” he said. “All our shed blood and tears weren’t enough and now she’s off who-knows-where chasing some new destiny of her own. Without us.” His nails dug little half-moons of pain into his fisted hands. “I dedicated *everything* for a future where we could all be happy together, and it still didn’t matter. We’re breaking apart and I... I can’t stop it.”

The royal guard stared at him for a long moment. When he reached out to hold Kori by the shoulders, Kori flinched. “So you stopped trying?” Griff asked, raw and quiet. “Do you even hear yourself, Kori? Never, not in all twenty-six years I’ve known you, have you been the first to give up on anything.”

“I can handle it,” he whispered. Closed his eyes so he couldn’t see his friend’s expression. “Sol’s drinking. Viah leaving. Even Priya - you know she doesn’t laugh the same as she once did. All of those changes, I can handle, and I *have*.” He took a shuddering breath and clasped his hands around Griff’s wrists. “But the one person I refuse to lose to this erosion of our fellowship is you, Griff.”

“I would never leave my little brother behind.”

“Even when your family grows beyond me?”

Griff tugged him in and hugged him tight to his armored chest. Kori’s arms were around his waist in an instant. A reflex as innate as their sparring.

“I know we never grew up with much of a family ourselves,” he murmured, “but if there’s one thing I’ve picked up in all these years since, it’s that no family can stay untouched by change forever. And it’s not blood that determines the strength of a bond.”

“That’s two things,” Kori almost laughed through his tear-swollen throat.

“Aw, shut up. You know what I mean.” Griff’s hand cupped the back of his head. “So it didn’t work out for Viah. That’s on her. But look at you and me, yeah? We might not be related in the slightest, but the way I see it, we’ve been through more than enough hell to make us blood kin anyway. And that’s not something easily cast aside.”

*A brotherhood forged in blood.*

Kori lifted his head as he pulled away. "You really believe that, don't you," he said. "What must it be like to live in your head? You make it sound so simple."

"That's 'cause it is. You think too much, Kori."

A single laugh escaped him unbidden. "I can't help it."

"I know you can't." Griff cracked a smirk. "That's why I gotta stick around to straighten you out. So don't worry about Morge and the kid, okay? I know plenty about dealing with this mess of a family... as long as you promise to work with *me*. I can't lose you, either."

Kori nodded. Rubbed the moisture out of his eyes with the heel of his palm. "Man. Kind of stupid to think such a cheery announcement could fuck me up so badly," he said. "You know I'm genuinely happy for you, right? You and Morge both."

"I know," said Griff. A thought seemed to strike him, and he reached out again - bashfully this time. "That reminds me. There's something else she and I have been talking about, regarding our child... and you, actually."

"Me?"

"Well, we know you and Priya aren't having kids of your own - her not having the parts, and all - and I know you've said you're fine with that, but we figured we'd throw the offer out anyway."

Kori crossed his arms, his staff tucked into his elbow. "Spit it out, now, I'm getting nervous."

"Morge and I," Griff said, rubbing the back of his neck, "were wondering if you'd like to pick a name. For our kid."

*A name?*

"Why me?" Kori asked, though looking at his oldest friend's face, he knew the answer before he even had to say it.

"It's like you said. You're the reason I'm still here at all, just like I'm yours. Morge and I will have other opportunities. If you won't get to name a child of your own," he shrugged, "you should be able to name a niece or nephew instead."

An emotion too vast for Kori's chest to contain threatened to fill him to bursting. His fingers grasped the front of his tunic. "Griff, I..." A thousand responses crowded his head.

*You think too much.*

He did. To hell with everything - Griffin was always right. Maybe if he started trusting in that again, trusting in his brother like he used to as a skinny orphan in Dust Town... they'd make it out of this battle, after all.

He had yet to fail him in that.

"Naming the first of the next generation," Kori mused, smiling to himself before looking Griff in the eye. "I'd be honored."