

Sore Loser

*Set toward the end of Zidra and Kyrundar's
second year at Harcos Academy*

Zidra

The curfew at Harcos Academy was in place to prevent the sorts of tomfoolery that could run rampant when a couple hundred young adults were living together and to encourage the discipline required for a career in the military or as a rengir. Therefore, if I was out of bed past curfew for the purpose of dedicated study and extra practice, did it *really* even count as breaking curfew?

A bit of guilt suggested it did, but my wounded pride was louder.

Clutching my boots in one hand, I slowly turned the handle and eased my bedroom door open. Any loud noises would echo in the stone hallway, and our small bedrooms were placed close together. I'd only waited an hour past curfew. Any of the students in adjoining rooms could still be up studying, and I didn't have a strong desire to test my "I broke curfew in the name of hard work and discipline" argument out on the headmaster if one of my fellow students turned me in.

They weren't likely to tattle on me, really, as most of the students thought the curfew was aggravating or ignored it entirely, but I wasn't about to get my first "broke curfew" mark on my record because I was too loud. A quiet voice in my mind noted I was breaking my nearly two-year-long perfect curfew streak, even if my midnight training session wasn't discovered, but I ignored it.

I stepped into the silent hall and gently closed my door. The quiet click made me wince, but no other doors opened. Now I just had to make it out of the dormitory without being seen by a student, or—far worse—whichever instructor was on patrol tonight.

I shifted my eyes to their wyvern form to see better in the dark and crept past the long rows of doors. Cold from the barren stone floor seeped through my stockings. Although the weather had grown warmer and each day the sun stayed out a bit longer, spring hadn't truly arrived yet, and winter's chill still stalked the night.

A shiver went up my spine, making me miss my warm bed in my room, but I pressed on. This was my last chance to practice alone.

This week, Instructor Ryaldir had the second-year students running the obstacle course, and tomorrow was the final day. Unlike previous times we'd run the course, Ryaldir had extra rules. The run didn't count as complete if we fell to

the ground when we weren't meant to or didn't use an obstacle as designed, such as walking across the top of the bar with the trapeze rings. We had to complete the entire course in under seven minutes as measured by sandglasses to pass, but extra points were given for beating your own best time and to the students with the five fastest completions.

I'd made it in seven minutes my fourth try, I'd beat my own best time twice, and I was third in our group. In fact, according to the top score board, third in our entire class. That wasn't enough. I wanted to have the best time. I needed to, because I was desperate to wipe that teasing smirk off Kyrundar Ilifir's ridiculously pretty face.

He was doubtless being extra cocky about having the fastest runtime among the second-year students to compensate for his recent loss in our ongoing competition. I'd been awarded the highest score for our essays on identifying and cleansing realm tears, invisible sites where void taint was leaking from the void-between-worlds into the Laedreshian Empire. That score had put me at the top of our class...until the fire-blasted obstacle course.

I paused at the top of the narrow spiral stairwell, listening and breathing deeply through my nose. Neither my hearing nor my sense of smell indicated anyone else in the stairwell. Nearly halfway there. I rushed down the steps on my tiptoes, making as little sound as possible.

Of course, the problem was Kyrundar had unfair advantages when it came to the obstacle course. He had far longer arms and legs, which made several obstacles easier. I couldn't beat him at footraces, either, and there was nothing I could do about my lack of height. No amount of study, consulting with instructors, or practicing my fighting forms would give me longer legs.

But the obstacle course wasn't simply a race, and I had been getting faster, so maybe I had a chance. Now, alone and under cover of darkness, I could attempt something I'd been too self-conscious to try in front of the other students. I couldn't grow taller, but maybe I could find a way to level out Kyrundar's other advantage.

Ryaldir had decreed that the students could use their magic to navigate the course, so long as they actually still did all of the obstacles. After all, in any real situation involving obstacles, we'd be able to use our powers. I'd tried to point out that if I were faced with a bunch of obstacles outside the academy, I'd shift and fly over them. Ryaldir had said "assume for some reason you can't, just like Kyrundar can't simply fly on an ice disk over the course."

All well and good for him to say, but Kyrundar could still use his ice powers to create handholds and footholds, catch himself if he fell, or to help him slide down or under certain obstacles. The two forest elves in our group could grow vines

and ledges out of the wood structures. They were over-reliant on that, though, and their growing magic didn't work as fast as Kyrundar's ice. Focusing on strength and speed had helped me beat their times, although they also had another chance tomorrow to do better.

The humans in our group—a firemage, a couple metalmages, and a couple non-magicals—didn't have any advantages, either. At least I was faster than them, mostly thanks to my shifter strength and speed. Honestly, they had more reason to complain about the unfairness of the obstacle course rules, but Beck, one of the ungifted humans, had just shrugged and said he was used to it. The gryphoni, wolvus, and two pantheras had similar runtimes to mine, as they also had to run the course in their human-like di'ora to actually do the obstacles.

Shaking those thoughts aside, I paused in the shadows at the edge of the training field. I'd have to cross the wide expanse to reach the distant obstacle course. The half moon shone in a cloudless sky, casting muted light on the packed dirt, stubborn clusters of grass, and racks of training weapons. The north windows of the dormitory looked down on the training field. I had the highest chance of getting caught while crossing it.

But the dormitory windows were all dark, and no one was out patrolling the field.

Now or never.

I sprinted across the field, then darted into the shadow of the first structure, a fifteen-foot wall with a scattering of rock-like handholds. Once I was certain I hadn't been spotted, I moved to the start line.

If Kyrundar could use his magic, maybe I could, too. My dragon fire heated my veins. A partial shift, getting some aspects of my di'yar but not completely shifting, was the hardest feat for any shifter to master. Once the magic that powered our shift was unleashed, it could be difficult to hold in check. It had taken me years to be able to hold a stable partial shift and years more to do so effortlessly.

Curving black horns sprouted from my head and my fangs grew even longer. Not particularly useful, but I'd never managed to partially shift without them. I felt scales erupt from my skin in random clusters over my body, particularly over my hands. My fingernails thickened and grew into sharp claws. The claws were what I hoped would help me. That and having more dragon fire surging through me, lending me extra strength and speed.

I took a deep breath and rushed forward.

I ran the course seven times before I felt confident in doing so in a partial shift. The claws helped with some obstacles, but made others, like swinging across the line of trapeze rings, trickier. The horns slightly affected my sense of

balance, and I had to account for their added height—I did not miss the irony. A couple times as I used my power to lend extra strength to a jump or pull-up, I almost triggered a full shift. Thank Iskyr I hadn't humiliated myself by trying this for the first time with witnesses.

At last, exhausted but hopeful, I slunk back to my room and collapsed into bed, where I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

I was going to show Kyrundar Ilifir who was the best future rengir.

Kyrundar

As I packed away my stylus and wax tablets—which, as usual, had far fewer notes scratched into the wax than Zidra’s did, but really, when would rengiri need to know this much about large group battle tactics?—I wondered if I could skip today’s final obstacle course run. I had the best score in the class, and I doubted anyone would beat it today. I’d beaten my own best time twice, so I hardly needed any additional points. Maybe I could go into town and try the new bakery that had just opened...

In front of me, Zidra slung her bag on her shoulder, but instead of walking toward the door at the front of the classroom, she turned to me. “See you at the obstacle course.” A small smile pulled at her lips, as if she was trying and failing to keep her face expressionless.

“I don’t know, I was thinking of skipping. I don’t have to be there.”

She gaped at me. Probably affronted that I would even *consider* missing a class, even one that wasn’t required because I’d passed it already. “You can’t!”

I raised my eyebrows, my interest piqued by her indignant insistence. “Oh?” I lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug and

fought a smirk. "It's not as if anyone is going to beat my best time today."

Zidra pulled herself taller, not that it made much difference with her short frame. "We'll just see about that, now won't we?" With her nose in the air, she spun around and stomped out of the room.

I smothered a laugh. Now I had to go. I'd only very lightly gloat when she didn't miraculously improve her time on the course to beat me. And if, on some off chance she *did*, I'd obviously have to rerun the course to keep my top spot. If I wanted to be the top student for the term, I needed to get the top marks in as many of our classes as possible. Thanks to that essay, Zidra was currently in the lead by one. The obstacle course would have us tied. With only a month left of term, if Zidra somehow managed to overtake my score in the obstacle course, I'd have little chance of being at the top of our class. Not the end of the empire, certainly, but Zidra had been top of class last term. We had a nice back-and-forth going, and I wasn't about to stand by and let her get the bragging rights of being top of class two terms in a row, even if our competition was just friendly rivalry.

A rivalry several instructors and other students said we were much too old for, but they also couldn't deny it worked. We *were* the best students in our class, possibly in the entire academy. If we kept this up, we could be the best students in

the history of Harcos, and after that—the best rengiri alive and maybe even the best ever. Which of us was *the* best remained to be seen.

With that in mind, obviously I had to watch Zidra attempt to beat my score on the obstacle course. Besides, now I was curious what new tactic she'd try. This should be entertaining at the very least.

Grinning to myself, I joined Zidra and the other students in our class and walked outside.

Instructor Ryaldir was waiting by the starting line along with a gryphoni first year student who would time the course runs using the seven one-minute sandglasses, with black lines painted on the glass for greater accuracy, lined up on a stool. Ryaldir was a light elf, as his red-blond hair, tall and slender build, long and loose tunic with slits up the sides, and the earrings covering his long, pointed ears all attested. I had no idea how old he was. He'd once mentioned he'd been a rengir for nearly four hundred years, but there were currently elves anywhere from age sixty to four hundred enrolled in the academy.

All I knew was Ryaldir was old enough to be grumpy. He watched us approach his arms crossed and an inscrutable expression. One eyebrow lifted ever so slightly when his gaze fell on me.

“Morning, Kyrundar. Are you going to attempt to beat your time again, or just here to cheer on your classmates?”

I shrugged and snuck a sidelong glance at Zidra. “Here to keep an eye on the competition.”

Ryaldir heaved a sigh and glanced heavenward. “Zidra.” She stepped forward, her eyes alight, but the instructor shook his head. “To prevent distracting your classmates with your tiresome rivalry with Kyrundar, you’ll go last. Kyrundar, should he wish to run again, will go after you.”

Her shoulders fell a smidge, but her expression reverted to the stony stoicism she wore whenever she didn’t want anyone to guess at her emotions. I drifted over to her side as a nonmagical human classmate stepped up to the starting line.

“So what’s your strategy, Zee?” I whispered. “I know you didn’t find a way to cheat.”

“I would never!”

I swallowed a laugh. “I said I know.” I winked, and she rolled her eyes. “So? What are you going to do different? You can’t shift and burn the whole course down.”

She turned to me and affected a syrupy sweet expression unlike any I’d ever seen on her. “You’ll just have to wait and see, Icicles.” She tossed her thick curls over her shoulder and sauntered away.

I watched her go, my mind empty of teasing retorts and my face warm. Was I seriously so worried she was going to beat me that I was speechless?

Refusing to let her get into my head, which would doubtless affect my performance if—*if*—I had to run the course again, I shook off the odd feeling. I created an ice disk directly on the dirt and sat on it. With my powers, I could keep the ice from melting and from chilling me, and this way, I could sit and comfortably watch the other students without getting covered in dirt. Of course, if I did run the course, I'd get dirty, anyway, but I wasn't going to need to.

Zidra busied herself with stretches. Maybe I should stretch, too... No, that would make me look worried that I might lose. What was making her so sure she could beat me, anyway?

At last, it was Zidra's turn. I stood to watch and dispersed my ice disk into snowflakes.

Ryaldir sighed again. "Ready, Zidra?"

"Almost." Zidra closed her eyes, and when she opened them, they were red, slitted like a cat's, and glowing slightly. Horns pushed out of her scalp as scales blossomed along her jaw, cheekbones, hairline, and the back of her hands. Her fingers blackened and grew sharp claws. She grinned, flashing intimidating fangs as she stepped up to the start line.

"Ready."

My heart thudded and my jaw went slack. She could hold a partial shift? *While* doing a physical task that demanded a lot of effort and focus? From what I'd heard, that was challenging—many shifters never managed it.

Well, there was a reason Zidra Eilmaris was the only student at Harcos Academy qualified to be my equal and my competition.

Ryaldir seemed to have been equally stunned, because there was a long pause before he cleared his throat and started the countdown. "Three... Two... One... Go!"

The gryphoni student flipped the first sandglass at the same moment as Zidra ran forward. She ignored the rock-like handholds on the climbing wall, instead sinking her claws into the wood wherever was convenient. She was over the wall in moments, and instead of climbing down the other side, she slid down it, using her claws for balance and leaving long scratches down the back of the wall. I frowned at several similar lines of fine scratches in the wood—she had tried this before. When?

But she was already onto the next obstacle, jumping over the series of elevated logs. Somehow, I could have sworn she had greater clearance this time than she ever had before, as if her jumps had more power to them...

Her dragon fire. She was using her magic, strengthened by her partial shift, to lend her more strength and speed.

The other shifters in our class cheered her on.

I was torn between joining them and sulking as she slid under the “fallen pillar” obstacle and catapulted to her feet. She was doing too well.

Zidra tore across the swinging trapeze rings, her quick-footed stability on the balance beam was as breezy as any elf, and she leaped down the line of spaced-out tall tree stumps without hesitation. Every obstacle she navigated with breathtaking dexterity while sunlight reflected on her horns and the scales on her face.

She jumped from the final rope swing and tucked and rolled, leaping back to her feet at the finish line to ring the bell.

We all looked toward him and the student assisting Ryaldir. The gryphoni lad straightened from his crouch behind the sandglasses. “Five and nearly four-fifths of a sandglass.”

The tension in my chest spilled out in a relieved puff of air. “A good effort, but—”

“What?” Zidra shouted. She jogged over. “Let me try again—”

“No.” Ryaldir shook his head, although his expression was sympathetic. “Today was one last chance to attempt the course. I’m not making exceptions. You improved your runtime and are second place in this group. You’re tied for

second place in the entire class of second year students with Arrenu. That is an excellent achievement worth being proud of.”

Arrenu was a lanky light elf a couple years older than me, but we were rarely on the same class schedule, so I didn’t know him well. Still, for a short shifter to tie with an elf in an obstacle course race was impressive.

“But...” Zidra’s jaw tightened, and a faint whisp of smoke escaped her nose. Her wide eyes glanced from the course to Ryaldir to me. I almost felt bad—almost. The glow faded from her eyes. “Yes, Instructor Ryaldir. Thank you.”

The other students dispersed, and Ryaldir and the gryphoni first-year gathered up the sandglasses and stool and left with them. Zidra continued staring at the obstacle course. Her wyvern traits receded and left her looking like an ordinary young woman, even though she was anything but ordinary.

Abruptly, she spun around and glared at me. She jabbed her forefinger in my direction. “Fine, you win this one, Ilifir, but top student will still be mine.”

I grinned and swaggered over. “Don’t be so sure, Zee. We’re tied. I’m definitely taking top student this term. Especially if we have to do any more footraces or obstacle courses.” I winked and flicked snowflakes into her hair.

She brushed the flakes out of her curls, her face scrunching up in an adorable frown. “And if we have assignments that your ice crystals, your ridiculously long legs, and your pretty-elf charm can’t help you with, you’ll eat those words.”

I blinked. “Pretty?”

Zidra’s smile was as dangerous as her dragon fire. “Like a delicate porcelain teacup.” With that, she strode away.

I shrugged and laughed, then followed her toward the dining hall.

After lunch, we had sacred texts memorization class, then had the rest of the afternoon and evening free. Zidra disappeared, probably to the library or her own room to study. I went into town with a few of the other students and visited the shops on the high street and a couple taverns before returning barely before curfew.

When I entered my room, I frowned at the slight breeze. The window was open. It had definitely been closed when I left that morning. Maybe I hadn’t quite latched it and the wind had blown it open.

Great. With spring waking up the animals but the nights still cold, all kinds of insects, rodents, and reptiles had been sneaking into the buildings lately. Zidra and I had even spotted a snake slithering up a sunbathed wall like the

concave joints between the stones were its own little maze. I shuddered. I hated snakes. The way they slithered was creepy.

I latched the window, then, with the aid of a lantern, looked around the corners and crevices and ducked down to peer under my bed to make sure no critters had taken advantage of the open window. Satisfied, I removed my earrings so they wouldn't tangle in my hair and then changed into a thin pair of breeches to sleep.

I blew out the lantern and slipped into bed.

My foot brushed against something cool, hard, and slightly rough, yet that also had a bit of give. My heart pushed into my throat and every muscle in my body tensed.

The thing moved, an undulating motion beneath a surface almost like stone but...fleshier.

With a scream, I threw off my blanket and jumped out of bed. In the faint moonlight coming through my window, something long and narrow slithered across my mattress. A strangled yelp squeezed from my vocal cords.

The door crashed open, and a few students tumbled into my room, talking over each other as they asked what was wrong. One of them pointed toward my lantern, and a tongue of flame leaped from her fingertip to the wick, lighting the room. My face felt like it was on fire.

"What is it?"

“Snake.” My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat. “Er, snake in my bed. I didn’t realized until—”

“You were in bed with it?” one of the nonmagical humans finished, fighting a laugh. He slipped past me and plucked the snake off my mattress. My face contorted. “Don’t worry, I’ll put the little friend outside.”

“Little *enemy*, infiltrating my safe bed,” I muttered.

Several chuckles answered me, and I turned to see more students standing in the hall.

“Make sure your windows are firmly latched,” I advised. “Or you might be the ones screaming when something slithers over your foot in the dark.”

A few students shuddered or made faces.

“All right, back to bed, before the instructors catch us all.” I shoed them out and closed the door. Really, I just wanted them all to stop staring at me. At least a quick glance around had confirmed Zidra wasn’t among the gawkers. Although she would definitely hear about this tomorrow. The entire academy would probably know by midday.

Ah, well. At least “screaming at a snake in my bed” didn’t impact my chances at getting top student. After changing out my bed linens, I went to bed. I needed sleep if I was going to beat Zidra for top student.

Zidra

A muffled scream jolted me out of my light slumber. Dragon fire stirred in my chest, but I shoved it down. Grabbing the dagger that I kept within arm's reach of my bed, I lunged to my feet. The hallway echoed with doors banging open and voices, but there was no more screaming and no sounds of an attack.

Wait.

That scream had come from the direction of Kyrundar's room...

A ghost of a smile played on my lips as I eased the door open a crack and listened. I couldn't hear clearly amid the chatter at the far end of the hallway, but I caught *Kyr* and laughter and *snake*. I laughed quietly to myself and gently closed my door.

He shouldn't have told me he despised snakes if he was going to gloat about being the fastest on the obstacle course. A twinge of remorse as I imagined his shock and discomfort tempered my smug gratification. Even I wouldn't be happy to find a snake under my covers. But it was a harmless ribbon snake, and not even a big one, and Kyrundar had pulled his share of pranks over the last couple years.

Of course, my true revenge would come from securing the top student score this term. Still grinning, I went back to bed.