

Red Snow

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Summary

In the middle of winter, Kelas Parmak's makeshift hut collapsed. There was really only one place he could go for shelter.

Or, more accurately, there was really only one place he wanted to be.

Winter on Cardassia Prime had always been dangerously cold; after the Fire, it became deadly. The snow stayed white only for five minutes after it fell. Then the ever-permanent dust settled atop the banks and turned them red. In a previous life, before the war, Cardassia's citizens from the service-class to the elite had spent the cold months inside their sun-rooms, but now, those old architectural feats were gone. The survivors lived, like Elim Garak, in ramshackle huts and stone garden sheds, structures that even the untrained could construct.

Dr. Parmak was one of those untrained. In the summer, when he built his shelter near the makeshift medical center, he'd been concerned with only two things: keeping the dust out and leaving enough ventilation that he wasn't trapped inside with the suffocating heat. Stability had been a concern, of course, but not one he was equipped to deal with by himself. If there were any carpenters in the emergency medical units he staffed, he didn't know it; if there was anyone who could help him shore up his foundation, he didn't think to check. There were injured Cardassians to tend to and corpses to bury, and winter was far away.

But time moves on.

At the end of winter's first month, during the fifteenth heavy snow, Parmak's roof collapsed.

Garak woke to the sound of snow thumping against the door. It must be falling from the sloped eaves in giant clumps, he thought, still half asleep. But in that state between waking and dreaming, his mind transformed it into something else. An earthquake. A cave-in. A massive impact, stone walls crumbling, oxygen pushed from his lungs—

He woke, chest tight, and realized it wasn't snow thumping against his door at all. It was a closed fist. A pattern and strength he recognized.

"Kelas?" Garak called, his legs tangling with the blankets. His shed was small; it only took two steps to cross from his bed to the door. When he pulled it open, Kelas Parmak all but fell inside, snowflakes clinging to his shoulders and glittering in his hair.

"Kelas!" Garak grasped him by the shoulders and ushered him inside. The shed was by no means well-heated, but by comparison to the blustery wind outside, it must have been a sauna. Parmak literally gasped from the shock of it, his glasses fogging up. He clutched at Garak's arm for balance and shook the snowflakes from his hair.

"My house," he said. "It—" Catching himself, he shot Garak a furtive glance and edited his words. "The heating unit's out."

"It collapsed!" Garak surmised at once, his chest tightening.

"No!" Parmak wilted. "Breathe, Elim. Yes, it collapsed."

"I'm breathing." Garak sat heavily on the edge of his bed. "Perhaps a touch too quickly, but I assure you—"

Parmak modeled slow, deep breaths. On a wheeze, fingers clenched in his trousers, Garak managed to say,

"You could've been killed, you know." Garak pushed out a breath and gestured with finicky grace toward his kitchenette, which was

tucked into the same room he slept in. Which was also the parlor. “A cup of tea, Kelas?”

Kelas’ lips curled into a one-cornered smile. He took a tentative step forward and placed his palm on Elim’s sleep-mussed hair, neither tousling it nor combing it. Just touching it.

“There’s blood on your forehead,” Elim murmured, scanning his face. He stood, his fingertips just barely brushing Kelas’ brow. He edged past Kelas in the low light and ripped through a parcel of medical wipes, the type that every med-unit received, since water was so scarce. Elim pressed the damp slip of paper against Kelas’ forehead, half-covering his sharp eyes.

“Give it a moment,” Elim said quietly. “Let the blood loosen a little. It’s half-dry.”

Kelas made a rumbling noise deep in his throat. He didn’t reach for the wipe. He let Elim hold it, the heat of his palm warming Kelas’ snow-chilled skin.

“I thought I might sleep here,” Kelas said when the blood had loosened up a little. “In the corner.”

Elim glanced at the corner in question. In the autumn, when the rains came, Kelas had occasionally built a nest there. Blankets and pillows only, and mostly, he did it to keep an eye on Elim, to make sure that nothing drastic happened during the night. In the months since then, Elim had cluttered the corner up with a kitchen table and two mismatched chairs, and now, he helped Kelas scoot them out of the way. It made the shed appear smaller. He had spent months artfully arranging his possessions to create the illusion of space, and now—

“If you’d like,” Elim said. He rubbed gently at the wound on Kelas’ forehead and inspected it to make sure it didn’t need stitches. “Bundle up,” he said. He pocketed the wipe and tossed his extra blankets to Kelas.

“Thank you.”

In the dim light, moonlight reflecting off banks of crimson snow, Elim could see Kelas’ silhouette against the wall, the dancing shadows of the blankets as he arranged a space to sleep. Elim lowered himself down on the bed. Eyes closed, breathing slow and steady, he pictured himself in a wide arboretum, where the trees were so healthy that every breath brought sharp, clear oxygen to his lungs. There were no walls. No threat of collapse. Nothing but empty space, wide-open air. But a cold breeze filtered through the imaginary space. It crept beneath Elim’s clothes and kissed his skin, flushing his scales a pale blue.

The cold was real. There was no avoiding it. It pushed through the cracks in Elim’s stone walls. And if he was chilled in bed, piled with blankets, than Kelas’ position on the floor must be untenable.

“Kelas,” said Elim into the darkness, “let’s switch.”

Kelas gave a sleepy snort.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Elim sat up. He stared into the shadows, letting his serious, unblinking gaze cut through the night. All the weight of a proper Obsidian Order stare, the type that had once broken Kelas in less than five hours, pressed down upon the shadows and prickled against Kelas’ skull.

“Don’t be dramatic, Elim,” said Kelas.

“Nonetheless.”

“I can’t make you sleep on the floor. Your health…”

A spike of outrage went through Elim, but of course, there wasn’t much he could say to that. He dealt with it the same way he always had, by leaning hard into his training – menace, cunning, an implicit threat of harm. With a sigh, Kelas slumped back into his nest.

“Don’t do that,” he said. “It’s late, Elim.”

“And you have very little protection from the cold,” Elim said.

“You’ll have no protection, either,” Kelas said.

“Then—” Elim cut himself off, alarmed by what he’d almost said, and glanced away.

“Then…?” said Kelas.

Silence. Elim stared at his own crumpled pillow. He counted his breaths, measured them out. He flicked his blankets out.

“Oh, do get in,” he said with an exasperated sigh.

“Elim. I know—”

Once, when Kelas first slept over, Elim had apologized, had explained he couldn’t sleep with someone else in bed with him. Crowding him. Even having Kelas in the same room was difficult. His training for the Order wouldn’t let him sleep if there was someone there; you never knew when you might be attacked. But with Kelas, for some reason, it had rarely been an issue. So although this was pushing it, Elim gestured for Kelas to climb in bed.

Kelas took the side closest to the wall. He settled down, his feet still cold as ice. Elim gathered the extra blankets and let them fall over Kelas’ inert form. He lay down next to him, close to the edge of the bed, the open air. He had a good view of the window from here: the monuments outside, the banks of snow.

He closed his eyes. He felt the brush of warmth as Kelas touched his arm. He breathed out, long and slow, and listened for a clutch inside his lungs, the first sign of a panic attack. It didn't come.

He slept the whole night through.

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