

# Chapter 16: Uncomfortable Conversations

## Raimie

It had been a while since I'd been able to sit back, relax, and read, purely for my own enjoyment. Something always got in the way, whether that was a life-threatening emergency or another tedious duty, but today, I'd somehow finished my appointed tasks well before the sun could go down. So, for the first time in forever, I had a trashy novel held over my face, greedily sucking down the tale of some stupid kid and his adventures through a strange land.

Very few of the books I'd read dealt with tales that were solely speculative in nature, as it wasn't a popular subject. In fact, most people I knew would consider this book a waste of paper and ink, but I'd found this one—a novel that had come straight from a tear—in Queen Kaedesa's library, back when I'd been her captive. While there, I *might* have stolen it, hoping it could get me through many a tedious hour spent locked in a room, and in the haste of leaving her capital, I *might* have also forgotten that it was mixed in with my other belongings.

Whoops.

As expected, the last three days had been busy. I hadn't had any time to check in with Ren or figure out drinks with Kylorian, too occupied instead with gathering the latest intel from my new spy network as well as reading over everything we'd learned at Da'kul.

It had been a lot of information, which was welcome. I definitely preferred it to the feeling of blindly flailing around in the dark, like I'd experienced at the fort, but that information had yet to settle in my mind. I wasn't sure what in it, if anything, was useful for my people's next steps, although there were a few minor tasks in the pile that might be helpful for the next few weeks.

And of course, I hadn't heard from my new Hand yet. Shortly before I'd departed Da'kul, leaving Gistrick and his Zrelnach to guard it, Oswin had sent his subordinates to what he'd called 'several strategically key positions' throughout Auden's west coast.

According to him, they shouldn't be gone for long. Missions like this typically took a Hand member a week to complete, tops, and if this was true, their reports would be showing up on my desk in a couple of days.

That would give me enough time to sort through what I already knew, and maybe with those reports in hand, I could figure out where we should strike next.

But until then, I didn't have much to do. Making sure my people were well taken care of certainly absorbed a good portion of my day, but besides that, I should be left to my own devices, leaving me with free time for the first time in...

I couldn't remember when I'd last had free time, actually. Perhaps before I'd found Shadowsteal.

That was a depressing thought.

"Knock, knock," someone said at the door.

Jerking upright, I slammed my trashy novel closed, hiding it under a pillow. Sure, I might not have been reading it for the last several minutes, too lost in my head again, but it had still been *there*, clearly visible, and I *really* didn't want people to know what sort of content I enjoyed when I was alone.

"Raimie? Are you busy? I can come back."

But I was already shaking my head.

"It's ok, Hadrion," I said. "Please, come in."

I gestured toward the only other seat in this room—a stool in the corner—but Hadrion smiled, almost apologetically.

"Actually, I'm here for my brother," he said. "Ky's a bit busy right now, but he should have some free time tonight. He asked me to see if you wanted to get that drink."

Cocking my head, I pointed at the kid.

"He sent *you*," I said. "That seems..."

Hmm. Was it demeaning, like I was thinking, or was I off-base?

Hadrion must have seen something on my face because his eyes went wide.

"Oh, no!" he said. "I offered to do it."

Flushing, he rubbed the back of his neck.

"Kylorian told me how you two first met," he continued. "So, I've maybe, kinda, sorta been watching for an opportunity to get the ball rolling on you two sharing a drink. I think you and Ky could be great friends, but he's always been a little *horrible* at certain social interactions. I didn't want your first meeting to leave a bad taste in your mouth."

...What?

"I don't know what Kylorian told you, but I don't think badly of your brother, Hadrion," I said. "I've only spent a few minutes with him. That's not enough time to form a complete opinion."

On hearing that, Hadrion slumped against the doorframe, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead.

"Oh, thank Alouin," he said. "I was so worried..."

But then, he smirked at me, drawing himself upright.

"Sorry. Dramatic, I know," he said. "Does that mean you're ok with the 'getting a drink' plan for tonight?"

"Oh."

I'd been looking forward to an evening of leisure but...

"Yes, a drink would be nice," I said. "Did Kylorian say where and when we should meet him?"

Wrinkling his brow, Hadrion said, "We?"

"Yes..." I drawled. "Your brother mentioned something about you and Ren joining us. Do you not want to come? Or are you not old enough-?"

"No, no, no! I'm plenty old enough for a drink," Hadrion said, shooting up a hand to stop me. "I just thought..."

Puffing out a sigh, he shook his head.

"It doesn't matter what I thought," he said. "I'm not sure *exactly* when Ky wants to meet, but if you like, we can head to his favorite bar now. I doubt he'll be long."

"All right."

After making sure my book was still hidden, I stood up.

"Lead the way," I said.

As we walked through Tiro, Hadrion kept up a steady stream of chatter beside me, occasionally calling greetings to the people we passed, and I listened with half an ear. He didn't seem to mind my lack of commentary, more content to have a friend nearby, and that was fine by me.

Soon enough, we moved toward a bar that I knew of, even if it was one I'd never visited before. Unlike Sigemond's tavern, this place's regulars were known to be more... sophisticated, I supposed was the best word for it. We'd find no loud music in this place, and its owner kept a more refined selection of alcohol on hand, or the most refined he could get, at least.

Before we went inside, Oswin, ever my faithful shadow, stopped us, making us wait a few heartbeats as he scouted the place, but for once, I didn't mind. Beside me, Hadrion giggled under his breath at the 'silly soldier', which I found hilarious for a number of reasons, and that was enough to make something that was normally annoying more enjoyable.

As soon as we were given the all clear, Hadrion and I entered the bar, and I made a beeline for a table in the corner while Oswin found a spot just out of hearing range. Places like this, where it would get steadily busier as the night wore on, made me uncomfortable. While in them, I liked keeping to myself, staying in an unobserved corner throughout the evening.

After Hadrion and I had sat down, we were frozen into an awkward silence for far too long before the kid loudly groaned, sprawling across the table.

"Ok. I can't hold it in anymore," he said.

Pulling his hands under his chin, he looked up at me.

"Can I ask you a strange question?"

That... was an odd thing to say.

"Sure. Why not?"

I was probably digging myself into a hole here, but what could I say? Hadrion was a sweet kid. I doubted he'd ask me anything too disconcerting.

Taking a deep breath, he puffed out his cheeks before sitting back up.

"Are you and my sister... together?" he asked. "It's been driving me crazy for the last few weeks because you two *look* all lovey-dovey, gross with each other, but you also seem like you're trying to hide it."

...I didn't know what he was talking about. Was this what Nylion had been referencing earlier, after Ren had called the two of us friends?

*Nyl?* I asked, hoping he could help.

But for once in my conscious life, my other half was absent. As if he was asleep and I didn't know what to do with that idea.

Better to focus elsewhere.

Maybe if I clarified what Hadrion was asking about, it would help with answering him.

"What do you mean by 'together'?" I said.

For a moment, Hadrion blinked at me before cocking his head with a quizzical look in place.

"You know... together," he said.

Lifting his hands in front of his face, he interlaced his fingers, which didn't explain things.

"I mean... yes. Sometimes, we hold hands like that," I said. "Why would you want to know about that?"

Hadrion stared at me for an uncomfortably long time, but before that could become too intense, he leaned his elbows on the table.

"You really don't know what I'm talking about, do you?" he said.

Apparently, I was missing something obvious, so with one eye closed, I winced.

"Maybe?"

"How do you...?" Hadrion said. "You're, what? Eighteen?"

"Nineteen, actually."

Nodding, Hadrion said, "Yeah, ok. So, how do you...? But I guess if you did grow up in the wilderness, like Ren said... Even with that, though, your parents should have... Alouin."

Breaking off, he rubbed his face.

"How did I get stuck with explaining this?" he said. "I'm fifteen! I'm the *worst* person to tell you about this, especially since you're older than me."

Damn. I hadn't meant to make him feel uncomfortable.

"You don't have to explain anything to me," I said. "In fact, I have a friend who's been meaning to take on the task for a few months. I think. But he keeps getting... distracted."

"No, no. It's fine. I brought the topic up in the first place."

Slapping his hands to the table, Hadrion fixed me with a piercing look.

"Let's start with the basics. Do you know what attraction is?" he said. "Or... how about sex?"

If the kid's first question had made my insides go all tight and knotted, the second made my face flush with *far* too much scalding heat.

"Yes," I stiffly said. "I'm well aware of the many different forms of... *that*. And attraction is self-explanatory. Sort of. At the least, I know the dictionary definition for it."

"Ok..." Hadrion said with an odd look on his face. "Well, that's what I meant when I asked if you and Ren are 'together'. Are you attracted to her?"

Oh... all right. This was still a difficult question to answer, but at least I knew what Hadrion was talking about now.

"I like Ren well enough," I said. "She's nice to look at, but more importantly, she's kind. And she makes me feel safe. I don't... I don't know. When I'm with her, it feels different, like nothing I've ever felt before, but also vaguely familiar. I don't know how she feels about me, though."

Hadrion was still giving me an odd look.

"Real romantic, Raimie," he said before shaking his head. "Look. I'm asking if you love her, ok?"

...Love? What did that...?

"I... don't know. I haven't thought about it before," I said. "And love is related to romance, right? What does that have to do with... sex and attraction?"

Gods, this conversation was making me so queasy. Throwing my hands over my face, I took deep breaths, trying to keep my stomach under control.

"I'm sorry," I said into the resulting silence. "I don't mean to be difficult. It's only--"

Hadrion laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Hey, it's all right," he said. "Clearly, this is a difficult subject for you, and I didn't mean to stress you out. I was just curious, that's all! But I think we've satisfied my curiosity enough for today, don't you? Let's focus on something else."

Hesitantly, I peeked at the kid over my fingertips.

"You're sure?" I asked. "I didn't even answer your question, or at least, I didn't answer it correctly."

"You can't answer that question *incorrectly*, Raimie. It's a subjective--"

Making a face, Hadrion waved off the concern he must see on my face.

"Really. It's not a problem. If anything, *I'm* sorry for bringing it up!" he said. "Here. Let me get you a drink. Ky can forgive us for starting without him, I think. What'll you have?"

So... he wasn't angry that I'd messed up what should have been a simple conversation?

Huh.

"I'd like a brandy. Please," I said. "Thanks, Hadrion."

"No problem!"

Winking at me, Hadrion scooted off the bench before heading toward the bar, and I watched him go with my head cocked. That kid was always breaking my expectations, usually in a good way too.

Why should tonight be any different?

When he returned, Hadrion plonked my drink in front of me while lifting a glass of suspiciously clear liquid overhead.

“To all the times we humans have no clue what to do!” he said.

Laughing, I joined his drink in the air with my own.

“Cheers to that,” I said.

We lapsed into comfortable silence, watching the bar’s patrons as they arrived and left. Among them, I saw several people from the defeated group who’d arrived at Tiro three days ago, and unfortunately, that same heavy air was still hanging from them. Usually alone, they hunched over their drinks, slowly sipping from them.

All of which made me ache for them. Why couldn’t I see hurting people without feeling a compelling *need* to help them?

Fortunately, Kylorian soon arrived, taking my focus off of something I probably couldn’t fix.

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