

# Chapter 17: Resolving Things

## Raimie

Muttering a greeting, Kylorian joined me and Hadrion with a glass already in hand, and sipping at it, he regarded me with a measuring look over its rim.

Setting the glass down, he said, "I've done my research on you since we met, Raimie. It seems you were right. Ren has become a decent judge of character. I should never have thought otherwise."

...Done his research? Gods, what had he learned?

"I'm glad to hear that," I said.

But I couldn't keep caution out of my voice, which Kylorian must have heard. Laughing, he leaned back with a smile, taking another sip of his drink.

"Relax! I'm not going to bite you," he said. "And why would I? From what I've heard, you're the reason that things on the coast have been so quiet over the winter. Defeating an army of Kiraak? Taking down Teron, one of Doldimar's oldest Enforcers and his most ruthless? Claiming his fortress for your own? I'd never think those accomplishments could be attributed to one man. Clearly, you know what you're doing."

I'd argue that point but...

"Thank you. It's been a long journey," I said, "but I have to correct you on one point. The things you've mentioned? I alone didn't accomplish them. The work and sacrifice needed for each of them should be attributed to the people who've entrusted their lives to me."

My big family. The ones I needed to keep safe. The ones I was doing all of this for.

"And that right there is one reason I'm not completely terrified of you," Kylorian said. "If I hadn't heard other stories about your generous character from my own people, I'd think you were invading our land with ill intent. Judging from your martial successes alone, most here would compare you to an Overseer or an Enforcer, only looking to expand your territory, but instead, what I hear from my people is that you may be an annoyance at times, but you're also a welcome one. Given my people's nature, that's a high compliment indeed."

At our side, Hadrion snorted.

"It really is," he said under his breath.

Which I knew. In Tiro, I'd found a more reticent and sullen people than I'd ever met before. Even still, they were likeable in their own way. There was something to be said for a group that had somehow forged safety and happiness from a place where most would struggle to survive.

"Given everything I've learned about you, I-"

Kylorian paused for a moment, staring off into space, before making a face.

"Look. I know I'm a bit rough around the edges," he said. "I'm quick to judge people, have a short temper at times, and am incredibly insecure about... a lot of things, actually. And I'm not too proud to admit those failings to you because- because..."

Sighing, he shook his head.

"Well, because you're obviously here to change things, which I admire. And I'd like to help you with that, where I can. So, I'm hoping that by admitting my flaws, it'll help you give me grace when I mess up. Like I did when I came home, trying to shame my sister into silence. That was incredibly wrong of me. I've already apologized to her, but I had to bring it up with you too. Let you know that I'm not always like that."

As Kylorian fell silent, I cocked my head.

"I'm... confused," I said. "Both you and Hadrion have spoken about our meeting as if anything you've done would make me hate you. Sure, I didn't like hearing Ren talked about like that, but that was only one thing that happened, *and* you were clearly stressed when saying it. I don't judge people when they're at their worst. At the least, I should get to know all of them before doing something like that. Which is what I thought tonight was supposed to be about. Or was I wrong about that?"

Hadrion and Kylorian exchanged a glance.

"Told you," the younger brother said.

Which only made the older one roll his eyes.

Facing me, he said, "I'm glad to hear that. Thank you for keeping an open mind. I haven't met many people who can do that for long. Now. I believe we're here to drink. So, what all are we having? And so help me. If you say anything other than water, Had-had, we will have words."

Hadrion only grinned at the stern look his brother had shot at him.

"I know better than to drink anything else right now, Ky," he said.

Of course. The suspiciously clear liquid was *water*. No wonder Hadrion had seemed awkward about joining me and Kylorian for a drink.

“And you?” the older brother asked.

Wincing, I said, “I have a brandy here, but then, that’s the only form of alcohol I can tolerate, and even it tastes awful. If you have any suggestions for something I might actually enjoy, I’d be thankful.”

“Brandy, huh?” Kylorian said with a smile. “You’re a man after my own heart, then! I’m sure I can help you find something more to your taste. Just give me a moment.”

He was gone for only a few minutes, and when he returned, he slid a mug of something deeply brown but not foamy my way. Warily, I sniffed at it before taking a small sip.

With my eyes shooting wide open, I said, “Oh, that’s good.”

Or at least, it wasn’t mouth-curdling, mind-numbingly terrible, but that was a vast improvement over everything else I’d had.

Chuckling, Kylorian said, “I thought you might like it.”

“Yes, as usual, you are the connoisseur of all things brandy, Ky,” Hadrion said.

After we took a moment to enjoy our drinks, I cleared my throat.

“So, I was wondering about the mission you mentioned a few days ago,” I said. “I understand if you can’t talk about it, what with your security concerns, but I’ve been hearing all about your exploits over the last few months, and I have to say. I’ve been impressed. I’d love to hear about this one too.”

Making a face, Kylorian uncomfortably shifted in place.

“I can certainly share if you want to hear about it, but you probably won’t find this mission impressive,” he said. “It failed pretty horribly.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it anyway?” I said. “Maybe there’s some way I can help.”

Grimacing, Kylorian said, “I doubt it.”

He paused, and with an earnest look in place, Hadrion nudged his brother, making him sigh.

“I was out in Auden, trying to consolidate the other resistances,” he said. “Tiro isn’t the only place that fights against the Dark Lord. Tanwadur and I were hoping that if we worked together, we could put up a greater defense against him, but the others weren’t as amenable to that idea as we’d thought.”

He looked away.

"They... know certain things... about me, all part of Dury's plan, and that's made talking with the other resistances difficult."

Certain things...? No. Hang on.

Leaning back in my seat, I crossed my arms with a hum on my lips.

"Do you think these other resistances would be more receptive to you and Tiro, if they knew you'd wiped out the Kiraak in this region of Auden?" I asked.

Kylorian went very, very still.

"But... that's your accomplishment," he said. "You... you'd be willing to give us the credit for *your* victory?"

Shrugging, I said, "Why wouldn't I? It would put Tiro in a more advantageous position, yes? And we'll need all the help we can get if we're going to defeat Doldimar. I certainly don't need the glory of a victorious battle. In fact, I'd rather if it were used to strengthen the free people of Auden. Because that's the point, right? Freeing Auden. Making this country less of a horror show for its people. Yes?"

Seemingly shocked into silence, Kylorian stared at me for an uncomfortable length of time. I'd started squirming in place before he found his voice again.

"Damn," he softly said. "You're making all of this *so much* harder for me."

Wait. What?

Pulling my hands under the table, I reached for Ele and Daevetch, hoping all the while that I wouldn't have to use them. Not only did I not want to hurt Kylorian or Hadrion, but Bright and Dim had been rather... absent since we'd taken Da'kul. I could feel my sources on the fringe of my awareness, but still, I had yet to see my splinters, which was worrying me a little. For now, I'd been chalking their disappearance up to the fact that I'd closed another tear while they'd been nearby. They'd vanished for quite a time after the last time I'd done that.

Maybe Kylorian saw how much I'd gone on the defensive because he lifted his hands in reassurance.

"I'm sorry. That must have sounded ominous," he said. "It's only..."

Sighing, he looked away.

"My father told me about who you are, Raimie. A descendant of the Audish kings," he said, "and that's yet another issue that could cause complications in this relationship."

As he wavered between me and him, Kylorian peered at me out of the corner of his eye, and slowly, I released my hold on Ele and Daevetch, bringing my hands into view again.

"Why would my ancestry be a problem for you?" I said. "From how you've been treating me, I'd guess that you don't despise me for my family's past."

As I grimaced, Kylorian jerked his head toward me with his mouth in an O.

"Not at all!" he said. "I- I couldn't! I..."

Slamming his eyes closed, he took a deep breath before nudging Hadrion.

"I'll get us refills," he said. "Could you... explain things to him? Please?"

Hadrion gently patted his brother's arm.

"Sure thing, Ky," he said.

"Thanks."

Awkwardly, Kylorian heaved himself off of the bench before wandering in an almost dejected manner toward the bar. Oo... what had I stepped into?

When I raised my eyebrows at Hadrion, he made a face.

"So, my family's a little weird, and that's not just because all of us kids are adopted," he said. "Ren's our father's darling, right? He dotes on her whenever she's around. I get the overprotective parents routine because I'm the youngest and because... I come from somewhere not very nice."

He paused for a moment, swallowing hard.

"But Ky..." he soon continued, "Ky has a unique relationship with our father. Ever since Dury first found him, he's been training my brother to be... well. To be a king, in essence. That's been Ky's whole life, from the time he was young, and it's made things difficult for him, in a lot of ways."

Frowning, I said, "Why would Tanwadur do that? Does Kylorian have some claim to the throne? I didn't think anyone from my family stayed in Auden after Doldimar's conquest."

"Yes, that's true. No *legitimate* members of your family stayed," Hadrion said, "but the last king had a brother. One that people liked to pretend didn't exist. That brother stayed behind when the rest of your family left. Centuries ago, he was the one who first established Auden's many resistances, or he did so before the Dark Lord captured him."

"And that brother had children, then?" I guessed. "Kylorian's one of his descendants?"

Nodding, Hadrion said, "That's it in a nutshell."

But he immediately fell silent, carefully watching me.

I didn't know why he was doing that. In fact-

"This is great!" I said. "I've always thought it was silly that the average citizen doesn't get a choice in who leads them. Why would you leave it up to chance like we do? But this way, the people of Auden can decide which of us takes the throne! It would have to come after we defeat Doldimar, of course, but that could be a good thing too. Give us time to decide how we should do it and-"

*Heart of my heart, you are missing another important bit.*

Rapidly blinking, I forced myself not to visibly react to Nylion's intrusion into my stream of thoughts. While Hadrion stared at me with confusion, I turned my attention to my other half.

*What do you mean?* I said.

An internal sigh was followed by: *If Kylorian is truly descended from an estranged member of the Audish royal family, that means he is your cousin, if distantly. He is family.*

*Oh.*

I... hadn't considered that. Why did that idea feel so...?

I wasn't sure how it felt.

*Maybe that is why we recognized him, though,* Nylion hurried to say.

*Potentially.*

But then, I had to return my attention to the world outside of my head. Kylorian wearily plopped onto the bench beside his brother, pushing a drink toward me, and I accepted it with a grin.

"So, given that you're family, Hadrion and I were discussing how we might establish some method of letting the people decide who will become king, once this mess is finally cleaned up," I said.

"Any thoughts about that?"

Kylorian paused with his mug halfway lifted to his mouth. Licking his lips, he set it back down with his brow furrowed.

"Letting... the people choose?" he said. "You'd... you'd be willing to do that? Just... relinquish the throne?"

Snorting a laugh, I said, "Oh gods, yes. Don't get me wrong. I'm not denying that I must play a kingly role for my own people right now. They've made it abundantly clear that I'm not getting a choice about that. But king of Auden? Honestly, I'd rather not. Plus, like I was saying, everyone should get to choose who leads them, no matter who they are."

Tipping my glass and head toward Kylorian, I took a sip of my drink, relishing the slightly less than awful taste of the brandy he'd chosen for me.

“So... you’re suggesting that we compete for the crown,” Kylorian slowly said. “That’s...”

“I think it’s a great idea!” Hadrion interrupted. “It’d keep Dury happy but also—I don’t know—leave it up to chance, sorta. Maybe you could focus on something other than preparing to be king for once.”

“Huh.”

Once again, Kylorian seemed dumbstruck, but after a few heartbeats, he sharply nodded.

Extending his hand to me, he said, “I look forward to it, then. Let the Audish decide who will best lead them.”

So, they did shake hands here? Was it only done when making agreements instead of greetings?

Whatever.

Taking Kylorian’s hand, I firmly shook it. Once I’d released him, we both slumped into our seats, and Kylorian burst into laughter.

“You were right, Had-had,” he said. “I do like him.”

“Told you,” Hadrion said.

With a smirk, I said, “I’m glad to hear that, but let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves. We still have a big, bad Dark Lord to push out of power before we can ever get to the succession question, right?”

“Fair enough.”

Sighing, Kylorian slung his arm to rest on the bench, behind his brother.

“I look forward to helping you with that,” he said, “but it can wait until tomorrow, yes? For now, let’s simply drink and enjoy one another’s company.”

“I can heartily agree to that,” I said, lifting my mug in the air toward my companions.

“Same,” Hadrion said.

He got halfway out of his seat to clunk his drink against mine, which subsequently spilled water all over the table. As he went red-faced, apologizing all the while, Kylorian and I good-naturedly ribbed him while hurrying to get things dry.

*Perhaps... perhaps the older brother is not so bad, Nylion whispered inside. Whatever I saw in him the other day, it is not present now, and... it would be nice to have someone kind in the family for once.*

I hardly paid attention to what he'd said, too busy teasing Hadrion for his spill. I might have far too much on my plate right now—*how the hell should I choose where to attack next?*—but Kylorian had made a good point. For now, I could let myself have this. I could take the time to relax with people I'd come to like. I could... be a friend. Not a king. Not a commander of armed forces. Not a primeancer. Not a chosen one of mysterious foretelling.

Just a friend.

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