

Chapter 42: It's True

Raimie

In the room's threshold, Ren braced one hand against the doorframe while the other kept it from swinging closed.

The sight of her nipped my fury at my father in the bud with even Nylion going cold. Had she sprinted all this way to greet me after learning I was home? She must have missed me.

"Tell Kylorian to stop with the lies," she gasped. "He claims that Hadrion fell in battle. The bastard insisted it was your fault."

My smile slipped when I realized why Nylion had gone cold at the sight of her.

"Why don't you come inside?" my father said. "Sit down. Please."

While she hesitantly did as he'd suggested, he escaped through the open door behind her, and although normally, my father's flight would have had me chasing after him, currently all I wanted to do was switch places with him, creating distance between myself and Ren. Obsessed with the wrongs committed against me, I'd forgotten what was waiting for me on my return to Tiro. I'd forgotten the grief and guilt that had been spawned by the death of an innocent, teenage boy.

How could I forget?

Flopping onto one of the room's beds, Ren said, "Why did you fake it this time? As far as I know, Hadrion isn't in any danger, not like Rhy was. Everyone he's ever met loves him. So, did one of the Kiraak at the Birthing Grounds take a shine to him as well?"

Oh, how those teasing words hurt, making my heart break for her.

"Ren... it's not a lie," I made myself say.

Gods, why was saying this worse than what I'd done with my father? I didn't want to tell her, wanted to let her live in blissful ignorance for a little while longer but...

"We cannot," Nylion breathed.

Coming to me, he cupped my elbow, lowering his forehead to my shoulder.

"Tell her," he said.

“What do you mean it’s not a lie?” Ren asked.

As she’d spoken, her teasing smile had started slipping and hell. This was going to kill me.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Kylorian is... telling the truth. In the Birthing Grounds, an Enforcer snuck up on me and Hadrion while I was distracted. She took your brother hostage, and rather than allowing me to take his place, he... well, he died. I’m so sorry.”

For the longest time, Ren said nothing. Her face spoke for her, washing of color as it was.

“Get out,” she eventually said in a faint voice.

And I blinked. I’d expected a host of reactions from her: weeping, beating her fists on me, screaming. This wasn’t one of them.

“Are you...?”

But I wasn’t sure how to finish that question.

“Out! Before I do something I regret.”

Gods, her voice had been trembling with ferocity, and look at the tears in her eyes! Faced with the force of her cold fury, I retreated, and when the door snicked closed behind me, I collapsed on it.

Would she ever forgive me, or was I destined to endure her displeasure until the end of my days? Could I bear it if she blamed me? Why did the thought of that happening with her hurt worse than if it had been coming from someone like Ryvolim? He was my friend too. Why-?

Behind me, Nylion said, “She will eventually forgive you, heart of my heart. Vengefulness is not in her nature.”

Unlike with us, apparently. Although I didn’t know if I’d classify anything that had happened with my father as ‘revenge’.

When I glanced up at Nylion, he was hugging himself, which surprised me. He hadn’t been around much when I’d spent time with Ren, so why did he look almost as distressed by her reaction as I was? Was he merely feeling my emotions right now?

“What will I do if she looks at me with nothing but hate, Nyl?” I said. “I can’t... I can’t do that again.”

I wasn’t sure when this situation had happened before, but I couldn’t face seeing such a thing here.

Before Nylion could respond, heavy footfalls spun me around, and I nervously watched as Kylorian stormed toward me.

“Is Ren in there?” he said, jerking his head toward the door at my back.

Unable to say a word, I nodded. Kylorian had asked me to give him space, and yet, here I was, in his face less than a week after I'd last seen him. Gods, I was the *worst* friend.

"Did you tell her I wasn't lying about... Hadrion?" he snapped.

Swallowing hard, I said, "Yes. Of course. I will never lie to her, not even to save myself from pain."

Wordlessly, Kylorian examined me before nodding.

"I want to see her," he said.

Coming forward, he reached around me for the knob at my back, but I grabbed his wrist before he could touch it, wincing all the while.

"That's not a good idea," I said. "She wants to be alone."

Glaring at me, Kylorian said, "Is *that* what she said? Or does she not want to be around you?"

With a sharp breath, I pulled away, releasing Kylorian. After all, that thought had crossed my mind.

In the end, though, I didn't think it was likely. Ren liked to show the world a brave face. She didn't let many people near her when she was feeling vulnerable, and while she'd let the few of us she trusted help her at times, Hadrion's death was a personal grief that she wouldn't want to share with anyone. Even with two times practice, mourning a sibling wouldn't be any less painful. The initial outpouring of emotion that was sure to be happening behind this door was for Ren and Ren alone.

That was what I thought, at least.

So, when Kylorian tried for the door again, perhaps taking my silence as assent, I stepped in between him and his goal.

"She said she wanted to be alone," I repeated. "I think we should respect her wishes. When she's ready to talk, I can come find you."

Stiffening, Kylorian flexed his hands a few times before slumping.

"You're right. Of course you're right. She'll come out when she's good and ready," he said. "I just... don't know what to do with myself until then."

Could I...? I didn't know if this was a good idea but-

"If you like, I could buy us drinks at Sigemond's," I said. "We could wait for her there."

"No," Kylorian almost immediately replied. "I... appreciate the offer, Raimie. Truly. But I *can't*. Still can't. I'm sorry."

Biting my lip, I hugged myself to contain my pain.

“Don’t apologize. I understand. *I’m* sorry that I... had to be around you so soon. After,” I said. “I’ll do my best to stay away while I’m in Tiro.”

“That might be for the best,” Kylorian said.

He turned to leave, but much as I should let him go, I still had a question for him, one that was burning a hole in my pocket.

“Why did you tell Ren that his death was my fault?” I said. “I thought- I thought you didn’t blame me for it.”

Kylorian stopped short, never turning toward me.

“I didn’t tell her anything like that,” he said. “All I did was tell her what happened, as much as I was able to at least. If she interpreted that to mean this was your fault, then that’s her beliefs speaking, not mine.”

Like a dagger, those words plunged straight into my heart, and I folded around the wound. I didn’t see Kylorian’s departure, overcome with what he’d said. Did Ren blame me?

“We cannot know the answer to that question until we ask her,” Nylion said. “Do not believe a single man’s word, especially about something like this. Only Ren can know what is going on inside her head.”

Right. Of course.

Able to breathe again, I straightened, but I wasn’t sure what I should do next. I badly wanted to open the door behind me and *help Ren*, but like I’d told Kylorian, I’d respect her wishes. If she needed space, then I’d give her space.

Besides, a ridiculous amount of work was crowding my plate, ready to provide a welcome distraction from... everything. I could catch up with my father and *finish our conversation*, or I could see what Eledis had come up with regarding plans for liberating Elisk, or I could find Tanwadur and apologize for Hadrion’s death... But that would probably end with a near-to-death beating and exile from Tiro.

Hell. When next we met, I’d be lucky if Hadrion’s father decided exile was enough of a punishment for me.

So, what else should I handle right now?

“Finish the conversation with your father,” Nylion said, biting off the words. “The rest can wait. We need to resolve what that man did to us.”

All right. I could do that. Before I could get started with it, though, something stopped me short.

“Raimie?”

The door might have muffled Ren's quiet voice, but still, the sound of it kept me firmly stuck in place.

"Yes?" I hesitantly said, hoping she'd say something more.

Please, let her say a single word more to me.

"You can come in."

I was through the door before I'd registered opening it. By some miracle, Ren had managed to keep her tears at bay to this point, but when she met my eyes, they spilled over. Tiny hiccups and gasps shook her frame, and crossing the distance to her, I drew her into a hug. Stiffening, she weakly pushed against me, but I wasn't letting her go. Now that she'd let me in, I was never letting go.

"My baby brother," she sobbed.

Pounding a fist on my back, she cried those words over and over again until her legs stopped supporting her, and I had to lower us onto a bed. With Nylion pressing up against her other side, I arranged her in my lap. I let Ren soak my clothes with her tears while my spirit fractured alongside hers, and as I ran my fingers through her hair, she gradually calmed down before drifting into dreams, despite the sun's height in the sky.

And I refused to move.

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