

Chapter 44: Gaining Him Means Losing Her

Raimie

Pins and needles were running rampant over my leg, but still, I wouldn't shift Ren off of me. I didn't want to disturb her rest, of course, but I also sincerely liked having her body pressed against mine.

Everything about her was soft—her skin, her hair, her lips—and she smelled amazing. She had an understated beauty, something that sometimes took my breath away. It wasn't the same as Kaedesa with her curves and confidence, which frankly, intimidated me sometimes. No, Ren's lean frame and long legs had always appealed to me.

I could kiss her awake, hold her tight, and show her that something good still existed in her grief-stricken world, but... now didn't seem like the best time for that.

"I do not think she would mind at this point," Nylion said.

Nestled against her, he looked drowsy, perfectly at ease for once, which I found a little strange. I was glad to see it, but why was he acting this way around her when he'd never relaxed around anyone besides me before?

She might not mind, but I would, I said.

Nylion lazily drifted his blue eyes, the only part of his face that wasn't smashed beyond recognizability, to me.

"You would?" he said before his confusion cleared. "Ah. Yes, you would. I can feel it, which is strange because you were just admiring her body."

Glaring at him, I said, *Can you blame me?*

As Nylion traced what he could see of Ren, he hummed.

"No. No, I cannot," he said.

And *gods*, that bounce of need between us, back and forth, one to the other. It was... distracting.

Laughing under his breath, Nylion said, "And you still think that Ren is merely a friend? Even with *that?*"

What else am I supposed to call her? I said with a frown. *I mean... yes. I feel MORE for her than I do for Ryvolim or Oswin or Dath, but I don't know what the distinction is. Maybe... love? Hadrion... asked me about that a while ago.*

Slamming my eyes closed, I pushed back a sharp sting of grief, rising from within. I must have shifted in the process because with a sharply drawn breath, Ren moved her head on my leg.

Blinking, she sleepily smiled at me for a single, blissful moment before realization hit her, and she jerked upright, almost clipping my chin with her forehead. Nervously giggling, she swiped at her face and hair.

"Can't believe I fell asleep on you," she said. "I must look like a mess."

Exchanging a glance with Nylion, I said, "You're a vision of beauty."

Maybe I didn't know what to call this strange thing I had with Ren. Maybe it was love. In the end, I didn't think it needed a label. It was nice and good, and I'd simply... go with it. Move along in this relationship in whatever way felt right.

Frowning at me, Ren shifted off of my lap, and somehow, I kept from making a face at that loss of contact. I couldn't, however, protest what she'd done, not in the face of why we were here.

"What now?" I asked.

What more did she need from me right now? I'd do anything to help.

Wiping her eyes, Ren said, "You must be busy. I've taken up enough of your time, I know, but... I can't deal with what's waiting beyond that door yet. Will you sit with me for a little while? Maybe you could tell me a story. As a distraction, obviously."

Flushing, she glanced away.

Stay with her? Tell her stories?

"I'd love to," I said with a smile.

I couldn't blame her for wanting to stay here. Who wanted to plan a sibling's burial?

So, I told her a horror story that mama had once whispered to me on the darkest of nights, trying to make me scream. What had failed to scare me in the past worked its magic on Ren, and while she playfully slapped at me, I rubbed at my ringing ears, laughing.

At her insistence, I switched to fairy tales, and as I engulfed us in make-believe worlds of magic and duels and evil vanquished by good, time passed us by. I took great pride in sharing one of my

favorite stories about the Eselan Preserver, one that she joined in on halfway through the telling. Apparently, tales of the world's legendary savior weren't centered solely in Ada'ir.

I still couldn't quite believe that they were stories about my friend.

After one especially grisly story, Ren said, "Your home kingdom must be peaceful indeed if wars are held in such high regard there."

"Ada'ir is nothing like Auden," I said, "but it's had its fair share of trouble."

I told her about rebellions against Ada'ir's queen and pirate attacks on coastal cities. At some point, the narrative shifted to details about my life, and with nostalgia, I talked about the winter when my family and I had nearly starved to death because of our poor planning, which sent her into a fit of laughter.

Of course, now I knew that that winter had been our first freezing season away from Daira's comforts, but I didn't tell her about that. In fact, I avoided anything that had come before my ninth birthday. Those recently recovered memories—so many of them and more pouring into my head every day—were too raw and fresh to share with someone else, even someone like Ren.

"She would not understand," Nylion said. "Not yet."

More like she'd think I'd lost my mind for forgetting so much about my life, I said, *but point taken.*

With a soft smile, Nylion said, "You would be surprised how easily love can color someone's vision, heart of my heart, and I believe this is how Ren feels about you. I doubt she would think you are crazy."

Well, that made me beyond uncomfortable.

Snorting, I said, *Like you've had any experience with love.*

But Nylion met my eyes, completely serious, as he said.

"I have. With you."

My thoughts screeched to a stop, and as my body stiffened against her, Ren frowned at me.

Wha... what do you mean? I said.

Shaking his head, Nylion said, "It is not finished, then. That is fine. Stop focusing on me, Raimie, when Ren is right here. With you."

I couldn't close my gaping mouth, though. I couldn't tear my eyes off of Nylion, who was absently tapping his fingers on his knees, as I wondered what he could have meant. If this thing I had with Ren was love, then... did that mean Nylion felt the same way about me?

That couldn't be right, could it? We were the same, each one half of a whole. Could one love oneself in the same way I felt about Ren? The idea felt... strange. I didn't know what to do with it.

"Raimie?" Ren said.

Shaking my whole body, I said. "Sorry. Sorry! Where were we?"

Still a little addled, I continued with my stories, but soon enough, I was drawn back into a verbal dance with Ren. Over the course of my stories, she shifted her body's weight against me, closing her eyes, but quiet murmurs of surprise and appreciation let me know she was still listening.

I cautiously wrapped an arm around her, and when she snuggled deeper into my chest, I happily hummed, resting my chin on her head. The position made talking difficult—the back of her head was pushing into my neck—but I enjoyed the brush of her hair against it too much to move.

We'd folded ourselves into a warm cocoon of safety and contentment, a barrier against the hardships looming over our heads, and I never wanted to leave it.

It cracked when someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," Ren called.

The door opened with a thud, and frowning, I blinked at Kylorian. Compared to the sense of peace that Ren and I had been floating in for the last hour, he looked devastated. Stains were streaked down his clothes, and a puffy, soon-to-be-bruise rested on the crest of his cheekbone. His eyes looked wild, and I could smell the alcohol soaking him from the opposite side of the room.

Gods, I didn't like seeing him like this. He *must* be hurting, which pained me in turn.

"You!" he shouted, pointing at me. "You were supposed to find me when Ren was ready for company, you..."

Swaying in place, he searched for the word he wanted.

"Liar! You big fucking liar!"

He seemed mildly pleased with himself for having remembered what he'd needed to say.

With a gasp, Ren said, "Language, Ky! Hell. How much have you had to drink?"

"None of your business," Kylorian growled, wobbling. "You should be with mom and dad, helping with Hadrion. Instead, you're here. Alone. With *him*."

That had me bristling, but before I could say anything, Ren squeezed my thigh until sparks of pain shot up it.

"I'll head upstairs soon," she said. "Will you join us until then, or would you rather sleep off what you've drunk first?"

As he tried to figure out whether Ren's question had been hiding an insult in it, Kylorian screwed his face up, and after a beat, Ren waved him away.

"You'll do what you must, as usual," she said. "Is there anything else I should know before you *leave*?"

Kylorian must have missed the warning in Ren's voice because he remained fixed in place, thinking, before snapping his fingers.

"There's a woman outside who insists on speaking with your *lover*," he said.

That last word saw Ren shrinking on herself, and glancing at her, I rubbed her shoulder. Why would she take issue with Kylorian calling me her 'lover'? I did... love her. I thought. So, why was that one word a problem?

"Quite a temper on that one," Kylorian continued. "She almost sicced her goons on me when I didn't let her into the house."

And that description distinctly reminded me of someone I knew.

"Gods damnit," I said. "Did she have green eyes and brown hair, like a chestnut?"

"Yup," Kylorian said.

Groaning, I smacked my head against the wall, which made Kylorian laugh for some reason.

"All right, Ky," Ren growled. "You can get out now."

Once he was gone, we heard his laughter through the door and down the corridor beyond, but as soon as he was out of earshot, Ren rounded on me.

"Who is this woman Ky's talking about?" she asked.

Oh Alouin, why had she so quickly zeroed in on the source of my discomfort? And how did I explain this without upsetting Ren?

Maybe I should stick with the simplest answer.

"The queen of Ada'ir," I said, barely keeping from wincing.

This only made Ren more curious.

"And what does a *queen* want with you?" she said.

Chewing on my lip, I considered lying to her, but... that seemed like a bad practice when with those that one... loved. Plus, I'd always been the *worst* liar.

"She wants to expand her power base," I said. "When I fled her realm, I commandeered a few of her assets, which has put me in her debt. She wants me to repay that debt in an unusual manner."

"I'm sorry. Why does stealing from a person you're fleeing from put you in her debt?" Ren snapped.

Um... wasn't the answer to that question obvious?

When I thought about it, though, I actually... didn't have an answer to Ren's question, but before I could truly think about it, she shook her head.

"Let's set that aside," she said. "How does she expect you to repay her?"

Shit.

Coughing, I mumbled my response under my breath.

"What was that?" Ren asked.

And as I'd always done when I was in trouble, I looked to Nylion for help.

With a soft smile, my other half said, "How is hiding it from her going to help?"

But... I didn't *want* to tell her. If I did... if I-

"Raimie!" Ren snapped.

"Marriage, gods damnit!" I shouted. "She wants to marry me."

I ran my hands through my hair, tugging on its strands.

"She's offered the support of her kingdom's military and economic wealth in exchange for a place at my side as the queen of Auden."

With no strength left, I let my hands flop into my lap, inspecting them as if they were the most fascinating items in the world. I didn't want to know what Ren was thinking, didn't want to hear it, but when she eventually broke the silence, she sounded calmer than I'd thought she'd be.

"How would that work?" she asked. "Would she keep Ada'ir's throne when she took her place as queen here?"

"Yes. It's not unprecedented in history," I said. "The Southern Kingdoms trade hands via bride so often that the political landscape in the south can change over the course of months rather than decades."

On hearing what I'd said, I grimaced. My early lessons from politics and history tutors were ringing clear as a bell, now that my mind didn't need to fabricate a tale about where the information had come from.

"What do you think of this offer?" Ren asked, this time dangerously calm.

"I hate it!" I said. "I-"

Laying a hand on my chest, Ren forced me to meet her eyes.

"Raimie, what do you *honestly* think?" she said.

Why? Why was she doing this to me?

"Personally, I'd reject this proposal outright. I'm not sure how it would affect you or our relationship with one another, but I *know* it would, and... I like what we have here."

I grabbed Ren's hand before looking away.

"As for what's best for Auden, I'd be crazy not to accept. We could use the influx of soldiers and supplies, and despite what Kaedesa might think, she wouldn't be the only one expanding her realm's influence. Auden would have a say in what happens across the sea."

There was a small pause, leaving me fighting to control my breathing, while Nylion crawled around Ren to the other side of me. He laid a hand on my cheek.

"Whatever she says, we will be ok," he said. "Eventually."

Why had he said that? Why-?

"Then, you must accept."

For a moment, I couldn't breathe, couldn't accept what had come out of Ren's mouth. She hadn't said that. She *hadn't*.

"Ren. What are you-?" I started.

"Hush, now," she said.

She smoothed a hand across my face, where Nylion's had been resting, to turn me toward her, and I flinched at the look on her face.

"You are a king, my love. In all things, you must conduct yourself in a manner that betters Auden," she quietly said. "Your wants. Your desires. They have no relevance anymore. To this point, you've been allowed to do as you please because your successes have dazzled the populace, but eventually, your freedom to do this will shrink. It will start now, I suppose."

All of which made me want to scream.

“The Audish people haven’t even accepted me as their king! Kylorian and I mean to let them choose between us,” I said. “So, let’s not make any hasty decisions until...”

I trailed off at Ren’s smile, bittersweet and withering as it was.

“Tiro already lauds you, much as it might seem otherwise, and once they get to know you, the cities that Doldimar holds under his thumb will quickly forgive your relation to the king of old, much like we have,” she said. “My brother doesn’t stand a chance against your claim to the throne.”

“How can you tell me to- to *accept* this?” I said.

The conclusion our conversation was leading to? I’d started to see how inevitable it was, and *hell* if it wasn’t making me reckless with my words. I needed to scream them at her, making her see, but I kept my voice level. Somehow.

“You and I, we have something real here. You make me feel safe in a way that no one else has ever come close to doing. It’s almost like... you’ve become my best ally, the only person who’s more-than-a-friend to me, and I *need* that right now,” I said. “If I marry *her*, it will be gone forever.”

Straddling me, Ren ground her elbows into my collarbones to hold me firmly in place, and my resulting wave of nausea and terror broke off any further protestations I’d have made.

“You see me differently than other people do, my love,” she said. “You appreciate me despite my shortcomings, those that the Audish populace will never accept in a queen. They’ll never let a half-Eselan sit on the throne.

“I love you, Raimie.”

And through this declaration, Ren’s longing poured from her like a tidal wave.

“But I love the idea of an Auden that’s free from Doldimar more.”

She leaned in, but no passion fueled this kiss. Desperation made her clench my hair and neck, but her lips were light on mine. When she pulled away, I scrambled to chase her, but she pushed me back down.

“Our relationship was finished the moment your queen made her offer.”

Sliding off of me, Ren stalked to the door, and when I tried to follow, she glared over her shoulder.

“Don’t make this harder than it needs to be,” she said.

And she was gone.