

# Chapter 61: Admitting Defeat

## Kylorian

Sitting across from Besunthet, the mayor of Sotchal, I watched him talk and tap on his desk, all while knowing I wasn't going to get what I wanted out of this conversation.

"I'm sorry, young man. I really am," he said. "You've done many great things for my city and for Auden as a whole, but in the end, I don't think you're the best fit for Auden's throne. I think, perhaps, you already know this."

Damn him for seeing through my mask to my true thoughts. I already had one person who did that on a regular basis. I didn't need another one in my life.

Keeping my face locked in neutrality, I said, "I see."

*Damn* him for denying me! Damn him for not seeing how badly I *needed* this.

"If that's so, then I should move on," I continued. "Thank you for your time."

Standing from my chair, I bowed to Besunthet before turning to leave, but before I could make my escape, he stopped me short.

"Kylorian, wait," he said. "We've gotten to know each other well over the last two years of this ridiculous contest. Wouldn't you say so?"

After biting my lip to force away violent images of smacking the shit out of the man behind me, I turned on him with a smile.

"That sounds about right, yes," I said.

Nodding, Besunthet said, "Then, I hope you won't mind if I make an observation. Throughout the time you've spent trying to gain my people's approval, you've always seemed earnest and ready to help, but to me, it looks like you've been holding yourself back as well. As if you don't truly want what you're trying to gain. So, I have to wonder. If becoming Auden's king isn't what you want, then is there another reason you've been working so hard to achieve that goal?"

Those images of wanting to smack this man? They'd been upgraded to *much worse* imaginings, and I held back a wince as they popped into my mind. I didn't actually want to hurt this man, no matter how annoying he was currently being. He'd been kind to me over the last two years, and as a result, it was fair turnabout for me to answer his question. It didn't matter that he'd honed in on the one issue I absolutely did *not* want to discuss right now.

"I've always had a reason for everything I do," I told him, "but those reasons aren't something I'm willing to share, especially given your recent decision, Besunthet. I'm sorry."

Making a face, the other man nodded.

"That's entirely fair," he said. "In that case, all I can say is good luck, young man. Over the years, you've shown me and the people of Sotchal how honorable you are. I wish you joy and happiness in your future endeavors."

With a half bow to him, I said, "The same to you."

There was nothing more to say here, so I hurried out of the mayor's office, heading for where my people had camped outside of town. As I strode down the single, dusty street of Sotchal, its citizens called out or raised their hands in greeting, and I forced myself to return those gestures, no matter how much I'd rather storm through here and get out of town. Despite their mayor's decision, I'd like to maintain the relationships I'd established with these people. Alouin knew how badly I might need their friendly disposition in the future.

Ren was waiting for me several steps outside of town, leaning against her horse with her arms crossed, a frown on her face, and a stiff grass stalk—of all things—between her lips. Said stalk moved to the other side of her mouth when she saw me, although she continued chewing on it.

"Well?" she mumbled with raised eyebrows.

Passing her without a word, I shook my head, soon hearing her heave a sigh behind me. Nothing more came from her, though, and within a quarter mark, we were back with the handful of people who'd come with us on this sojourn. I knew most of them—men and women who'd accompanied me on missions before Doldimar had disappeared—and from most of them, I didn't receive more than a terse greeting. They knew better than to add more when I was like this. I'd always be grateful to them for noticing when my mood had turned this sour.

The others, however, were eager to know how my meeting with Besunthet had gone. Somehow, I managed to get them calmed down without answering their questions, and after grabbing dinner from the man assigned that chore this evening, I led Ren into the wilderness around camp.

After getting far enough that our voices wouldn't carry, I found a log to sit on, motioning for Ren to join me. She opted to sit on the ground rather than beside me, which was mildly irritating, but as I'd learned how to do over the last two years, I breathed that irritation out before it could cause *problems*.

We were several bites into our meal before Ren started the conversation with:

“So, it was a no, then?”

Tensing, I clicked my teeth around my wooden spoon, hard enough for its surface to splinter, and after *calmly* storing said spoon in a pocket, I lifted my bowl to sip from it.

After lowering it again, I said, “It was a no.”

Ren made a face, which had at least one corner of my mouth rising into a smile. Throughout this process, she’d insisted on remaining *solely* on my side. I knew where her heart and therefore, loyalty truly lay, but even still, she’d never shown me anything less than full support when coming out of meetings with town mayors or other such tasks.

“So...” she drawled, carefully watching my face, “what’s the plan now?”

Now, I *should* return to Tiro, making pit stops at the cities and towns between here and there, but the idea of doing that exhausted me, and I couldn’t bear to consider what might be waiting at the end of that trip.

So, I said, “I’m not sure yet, but I’ll have an idea for our next destination by the time we head out in the morning.”

Ducking her head, Ren nodded, focusing on her food for a while, but I knew she had something more to say. We’d been traveling together for the last two years, so I’d come to know her tells even better than I might have known them before.

Soon enough, she set her bowl aside. I pretended not to notice, continuing to eat while she gathered herself.

With a deep breath, Ren finally said, “Ky, why are you doing this?”

Slowing down with my slurping, I eyed Ren, wondering where she was going with this. For this whole trip, she hadn’t once asked me about why I believed I might deserve the throne, unlike almost everyone else we’d encountered. Her repertoire of questions had mostly involved ‘Where to next?’, ‘What do you need?’, and other ones similar to those two.

I could tell how serious she was with this question, though, so setting the bowl aside, I clasped my hands together while leaning on my knees.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

I wanted to make sure I knew exactly what she was asking about. Ren would always get an answer from me, no matter what she might ask, but unless she asked first, I didn’t plan to tell her much about what was going on with me. I hadn’t done that since a rebellious trip away from Tiro and the resulting meeting with a long-estranged friend.

Fortunately, Ren knew what I was doing. Most people would use a statement like mine to avoid the question, but I genuinely wasn’t doing that, only wanting to clarify.

With a look of concentration, Ren said, "I mean... this doesn't seem like your fight anymore, if it ever was in the first place. In fact, it's only upset you at every turn. You've even commented about how you believe that of the two of you, Raimie would make the better king, and yet, you're still participating in this contest of yours. So, if being the king isn't your goal, like it seems, why are you fighting for it?"

*Damn*, she'd gone straight for that one, hadn't she? It was just like the mayor from before.

Thank Alouin, my sick and beleaguered brain didn't conjure a twisted fantasy about her for me, unlike with Besunthet. Because of that, I could take the time to think about her question, figuring out how to best phrase my response. It must be spoken right, otherwise Ren might find out about *certain things*. Things I didn't want her to know. I didn't know if I could give her a true answer without at least referencing those things, though.

Before I could finish the process, Ren quietly added.

"It's not because you hate Raimie, is it?"

And I could only blink in response. Hate... Raimie? Did she think that was how I felt about the man? No wonder she seemed intent on learning why I'd tried so hard with this contest!

Slipping off the log, I knelt in front of Ren, taking her hands.

"Ren... I don't hate Raimie. I never have," I said. "He is a better and nobler man than most I've come across, and I greatly respect him for that. I promise. I'm not contesting the throne out of some need to spite him."

Lifting her eyes to mine, Ren raised an eyebrow, and I knew what she wanted to say before she spoke a word. Sighing, I glanced to the side.

"I know I was harsh on him *and you* the last time he came up," I said. "I was in a bad place when we were in Vale. Hadrion had died, and some unexpected things had happened on the trip I'd just come home from. So, I said and did a lot of things I didn't mean and that I still regret. And this is something I should have told you long before now. If I hadn't been so preoccupied, I might have. I'm sorry, Ren."

She merely rolled her eyes, refusing to accept my apology, as ever.

Cocking her head, Ren said, "Then, why...?"

I released her, sitting back on my ankles and rubbing my face.

"Because I *have* to take the throne, no matter how I feel about it," I said through my hands. "If I don't, I don't know what sort of awful things *he* might ask from me and I... I..."

I was terrified that I wouldn't say no when those demands eventually came.

Ren gently circled her fingers around my wrists, pulling my hands away from my face.

“Who’s he?” she softly asked.

I froze up. That was a question I should have expected her to ask, but I hadn’t and now....

Oh, Alouin, what should I say? How did I answer that truthfully without- without-?

Hell, I couldn’t even *think* about the answer to that question without- without-

With her frown deepening, Ren said, “Is it Dury? I know he’s gotten a lot more... harsh, we’ll call it, over the last two years.”

Oh, thank *fuck*, she’d said that, so I didn’t have to speak a word.

Mutely, I nodded, unable to meet her gaze, and she squeezed me.

“You know you can always tell him to back off, right?” she said. “It isn’t that hard.”

And I went dead, wanting *so badly* to laugh but also desperately needing to cry.

*She doesn’t know*, I reminded myself. *She can NEVER know.*

So, I smiled as best I could and said.

“Of course.”

I needed this conversation to be over now. I needed release this pressure inside, the pain in my head that had gotten more intense as the day had gone on. It was stabbing at me now, and I knew of only one safe way to relieve it, or the only one available to me right now.

If Ivelais were here...

But they weren’t. I’d have to make do until I could see them again.

Fortunately, the sudden need to see Ivelais had given me the perfect answer to Ren’s original question.

“Well, now that you’ve forced that out of me, maybe it’s time to do what I should have done months ago,” I said. “Tomorrow, we’ll head for Elisk, and when we arrive, I’ll talk with Raimie. I’ll resolve the differences between us, but then, I’ll concede defeat in this contest of ours. After the last few months, it’s clear that he’s won our people’s love and devotion, and I’m glad for that. They deserve a man like him on the throne.”

Not one like me, that was for sure.

Ren let out a slow breath, as if it was one she’d been holding for *a while*, and I wondered how long she’d been waiting for me to make this decision.

“I think that’ll be for the best,” she said.

In a rush, she lurched forward to hug me, and after struggling to keep from falling over, I returned her embrace. I let myself breathe her in, feel her body heat, enjoy this moment because I knew once we reached Elisk, I might not get something like this for a while. With the contest for the throne over, Ren wouldn’t be my ally anymore, and as a consequence, she’d be able to do something she’d wanted for the last two years.

Here was hoping Raimie wouldn’t reject her outright when she came to him, and if he did, I hoped he was gentler with her than he had been on first breaking things off between them. I didn’t like recalling what a mess Ren had been in the months after he’d left Tiro.

When she released me, Ren hesitantly smiled, tucking her hair behind her ears.

“I’m glad you’re finally doing something *you* want, Ky,” she said. “I’ve been worried about you for a while now.”

I jerked back, feeling my cheeks heating.

“Yes, well...”

But I didn’t know what else to say. Apparently, nothing more was needed, though, as Ren simply chuckled into her hand.

“All right. I’ll go find somewhere to sleep now,” she said. “What about you?”

I wouldn’t be sleeping for a *long* while yet, but she didn’t need to know that.

“I’ll join you soon enough,” I said. “First, I need to walk the perimeter and check on those keeping watch.”

Nodding, Ren grinned before leaping to her feet. She kissed her palm before pushing it into the top of my head.

“Ok. Good night, Ky!”

My own ‘good night’ followed her back toward the others, and for a little while, I sat there, watching them prepare for sleep. Once they looked settled, though, I got to my feet, heading out in search of something—*anything, really*—to track.

When I stumbled across some scat and a pawprint leading off to the west, I started that way, pushing the process of accomplishing this task to the side so I could think about everything that had happened today.

I’d given up on being Auden’s king. That thought alone sent a shiver over my body, and I had to shake out my hands to stop the shiver from reversing course.

Because I hadn't been lying to Ren. I was well and truly *petrified* about what might happen, now that I wouldn't have absolute control over this kingdom that I loved.

Not that I would have been able to stop anything horrible from happening to Auden, even with that control. Nobody could control nature or time or *the world* like that, but the illusion of it had been helping me with keeping my ever-present panic under the surface.

I'd have to talk about it with Ivelais when I next saw them. Hopefully, they'd have some ideas for how to cope with it, now that my current method of doing so wasn't viable anymore.

With my thoughts turned to Ivelais, I winced. That relationship had gotten complicated over the last two years.

When I'd first found them after the battle of the Birthing Grounds, they'd responded... callously to the news of Hadrion's death, which had sent me across the countryside in a rage. For a short while, I'd *loathed* Daevetch and the people attached to it, more than I normally did at least. I'd thought everyone associated with Daevetch were the scum of the earth, which had made resolving my conflicting thoughts about Raimie... *difficult* for that time.

Fortunately, Ivelais had caught up with me before long. I'd already done some damage to myself before then, but they'd gotten to me before anything utterly disastrous could occur.

Even still, I'd almost lost it on them when they'd showed up out of the blue. They, however, had gotten me calmed down before explaining why they'd reacted as they had to my news. We'd been in a weird range of close and distanced since then.

But Ivelais had become my confidante in many ways, much like Hadrion and Ren had once been. They had experience with the many aspects of my life that I couldn't get away from. The ones that I still tried to escape with every choice I made. Because of that, though, Ivelais had been *invaluable* when it came to keeping me functional. They'd kept me from racing into the ruins of Lyzencroft, never to be seen again.

In the last few months, Ivelais had settled in a remote corner of Elisk's uninhabited neighborhoods, which meant I'd have to keep my current problems under wraps until we reached the city. I could do that, though. I'd done it for far longer than the week it would take to make this journey before.

Thinking about the capital, though, brought up my worries about the coming confrontation with Raimie.

Could I confess everything I'd hidden from him, everything he'd need to understand if we were to be friends again? That I didn't blame him for Hadrion. That his involvement with my brother's death wasn't what had driven my sense of turmoil about him, no matter that it had started it. That I desperately needed his help if I was to escape the horror of my life.

How was I supposed to express all of that to him when I couldn't admit its many details to myself?

“You’re gonna be fine, boyo,” I whispered. “Just another few weeks of stress and it’ll all be over, one way or another.”

Which was incredibly true.

Slowly breathing out, I forced myself to relax, bringing my focus back to the hunt. I could do this. I’d get through this last bit of hell, and once it was over, maybe I could finally, *finally* live my life the way I’d always wanted to.

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