

Chapter 62: And Her

Raimie

I strode down the now familiar, eerie halls of the palace toward Eledis' quarters, and true to his word, Oswin nonchalantly trailed me at a distance, disappearing among the slow-moving flow of people when we reached a more populated floor. Unfortunately, this gave me time to consider what I was doing.

I'd agreed to become the king of Auden. Holy shit. How had that happened?

When I'd accepted my role years ago, before the chaotic months of battle and death, I'd kept hidden at the back of my mind the certainty that someone would eventually come along to take the throne from me. That belief had never been fulfilled, despite my hopes with Kylorian. Even now, I kept expecting someone to step forward, announcing a greater claim to the throne, but no such disturbance disrupted my path. Instead, every step closer to Eledis became another shovelful of dirt, burying me beneath a prestigious position that I'd never wanted.

You should be happy, I said. I know the idea of ruling a people has always appealed to you.

With his arms folded behind his back, Nylion shrugged.

"It should be interesting," he said. "I am more concerned about what happened earlier this morning. What was that, Raimie?"

Us merging for the first time in years? I said. No, that's not true. We did it after Hadrion died...

We both fell silent, fighting off the melancholy that still afflicted us when the teenager's name came up.

"I meant what happened before that," Nylion eventually said. "You... kissed me. I thought you... Why did you do it? And why right then, after I decided that our relationship is more important than revenge?"

Smirking, I diverged from a straight path until I bumped into Nylion.

I told you. I've been wanting to do that since Vale, I said. I don't know, Nyl. I have... feelings for you, maybe more than what comes from us being US. I don't know what they are, but I need to find out. I didn't get a chance to do that with... Ren, and I don't want to miss an opportunity like that again.

Stopping short, I ignored people's protests as they scrambled to keep from running into me.

If you're willing, I'd like to explore this, I said. *I want to know if I can return the affection that you've expressed for me, strange as that will be for who we are.*

With wide eyes, Nylion stared at me, unmoving. It was almost as if someone had frozen him into stone until he reached to hover a hand along my jaw.

"Gods, I want to kiss you," he said. "Maybe if we were not in such a public place."

The pads of his fingertips pressed into my skin with an electric pulse jolting from the contact, and I barely kept from gasping.

"Thank you, heart of my heart," Nylion said. "You have freed me, fought to remember me, and now, you give me hope. I do not know how I can repay you but—"

You DON'T, I interrupted. *Damnit, Nyl. You owe me nothing.*

Nylion dragged his fingers along my face until one of them was left resting on my lower lip.

"And that is one reason why I love you," he whispered.

Someone took hold of my elbow, dragging me into a side passage, and I cast an annoyed look at Oswin.

"I know. You were in the middle of some big epiphany," he said, "but it didn't seem like a good idea to have it in the *middle of the palace staff*. Besides, I found something you should see while you were distracted."

Huffing, I glanced at Nylion, who smiled and shook his head. Apparently, nothing further was needed there. Still, I wasn't happy that our conversation had simply... ended. I could feel something flitting around the edge of my consciousness before Oswin had pulled me away, some memory or realization.

Whatever it had been, it was gone now. I followed Oswin until we slipped out of an exterior door, setting foot in the gardens.

'Gardens' wasn't necessarily the best word for the piece of paradise found around the palace, though. Since the victorious (awful) day of Elisk's liberation, Rhylix's jungle had been partially tamed with its grass and low-hanging branches trimmed, but besides that, this miniature example of a forest had been untouched.

Oftentimes, Eliskians would visit the gardens to commune with nature or to enjoy the hush that the tall trees provided, blocking out city noise as they did. As a rule, I avoided this place—too many bad memories—but today, I was grateful Oswin had brought me here.

Within the forest's fringe, a woman was lying on a blanket with her eyes closed and her black hair strewn above her head. As usual, she prompted a mix of desire and comfort in me, but this time, a deep, roaring anger was buzzing there as well. I hadn't seen Ren since the night I'd returned to Tiro from the Birthing Grounds.

"Thank you," I said.

I didn't question how Oswin had known that Ren would be here, only counting myself lucky to have him on my side.

"You're welcome," Oswin said. "Happy birthday."

Damnit. That was today, wasn't it?

Wait.

As every muscle in my body clenched, I stiffly faced the spy. A teasing grin was covering Oswin's face, and on seeing it, I curled my fingers into fists.

"We've talked about this," I said. "Birthdays aren't special for me. They're just another day."

"I know," Oswin said, "but this gift was too good. I had to give it to you."

"You say that every year!" I growled.

"Maybe I want to see how long it takes before you lose your temper and punch me."

"Don't tempt me," I said.

"Isn't that the whole point, sir?"

Closing my eyes, I breathed in deeply, repeatedly clenching and opening my hands.

"Stay here," I said.

When the spy obeyed me, I was mildly surprised. Oswin liked to pick and choose which orders he'd follow, and I'd thought for sure that being anywhere near Ren without backup would be one of those times.

"You just want him with you for support," Nylion said.

So what if I do? I said. *Gods, I think I might pass out.*

"You can do this."

As I approached Ren, she pulled herself upright, warily watching my every move. I stopped outside the perimeter of her blanket's spread, scrambling for something to say. It had been almost two years. How did I break a silence that had stretched for so long?

“Ren,” I said with a nod.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. What was wrong with me?

“Raimie,” Ren said. “What was that about?”

She gestured toward Oswin, who was scanning the perimeter like a good, little bodyguard should. Snarky *asshole*.

“Oh,” I said.

Shit. How should I explain that conversation?

“It was nothing,” I continued. “He was wishing me a happy birthday.”

“It’s your birthday?” Ren said with her face brightening.

There. A miniscule glimpse of her bubbly side poked through the rest, letting a tiny piece of me relax.

“Apparently,” I said.

“Why do you sound so sour about it?” Ren asked.

“I...”

Biting my lip, I looked away from her and toward Nylion. My other half was watching everything with amusement, and gods, if I didn’t want to stick my tongue out at him right now.

“Tell her the truth, heart of my heart,” Nylion said. “In all things, only speak the truth with her.”

He was right, gods damnit.

“I don’t like birthdays, is all,” I said. “May I sit?”

I pointed at a spot on the blanket beside her.

Spreading an arm, Ren said, “Be my guest.”

While Nylion folded to the ground, I settled in beside him, trying not to overanalyze that first interaction’s awkwardness. Why was this so hard?

“It’s been a while,” Ren said.

“Yes, it has. A couple of years or so, I believe.”

Like I hadn’t been counting every day spent away from her. Gods, what a sappy fool.

“How have you been?” I asked.

“Oh, you know. I’ve been ok. Mostly following Kylorian around Auden. You have good timing! We returned from a trip to Sotchal a couple of hours ago. Ky’s off getting us somewhere to sleep, but then, he mentioned going into the city,” Ren said. “But yes, I’ve been with him for the last two years, making sure he doesn’t get himself killed, like Hadrion.”

At the mention of her younger brother, her voice tightened, and I pulled my knees to my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “If I had only...”

I trailed off, unable to continue, and turning to me, Ren cocked her head.

“Why do you do that?” she asked. “Take the blame for tragedies that aren’t your fault, I mean.”

What could I say? That I must take partial blame for Hadrion’s death? If I confessed such remorse, Ren would want to know why I was at fault, and I’d have to lie to her, which Nylion had said not to do. Considering its contents involved secrets that she could never learn, though, the truth was forbidden to her. No one could know about Nylion.

The last time we’d shared his presence with those closest to us, they’d banished him from my life. So, it was better to brush the subject away, even if doing so was sure to scare away her skittish willingness to speak with me.

“You should tell her,” Nylion said.

Sitting cross-legged in the grass, he rolled his eyes at my incredulous look.

“You told Rhylix about me against my wishes, and none of my fears about your choice have come to pass. In fact, he has been... kind about me,” he said, frowning as if that statement was still hard to believe. “Perhaps we can trust Ren as well. I believe she is ready to learn about me, and gods know I do not want her fleeing from us again. So, tell her. She should have the truth. What is the worst that can happen? She rejects us again?”

Staring at him, I said, *And you’re ok with this? Given what you said not ten minutes earlier and knowing how I feel about her, you’re ok with me opening up?*

Wouldn’t that cause problems with... whatever we were? I knew more about love and romance now than I had before. I knew most people in an intimate relationship got overly jealous if their partner showed interest in someone else. If I... loved Nylion and he loved me, wouldn’t that fact hold true here?

Clicking his tongue, Nylion said, “Hell, Raimie, I love her too. Remember what we are.”

An extension of one another. Two separate people who were also part of one.

If you’re sure...

With an annoyed huff, Nylion scooted closer to me, placing a hand on my knee, and the spark of that contact, the glow of his reassurance and prodding through our bond, filled me to the brim. It was almost enough to negate my fear.

And now, Ren seemed filled with her own anxiety. Damn, I shouldn't have hesitated for as long as I had.

"Hadrion's death was my fault," I said in a rush. "In the Birthing Grounds, Nyl got distracted by Daevetch's emotional carryover, and I couldn't take control from him in time. Maybe if I had, the Enforcer would never have trapped your brother."

Ren looked at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"I'm... confused," she said. "Who or what is Nyl?"

Flopping to my back, I let the calming movement of the branches in the wind distract me.

"Answering that question will require a long explanation," I said with a sigh, "and I don't know if you're ready for it."

Ren lay on her stomach beside me, supporting her head with elbow-propped hands.

"Try me," she said.

So... I did. Slowly. Hesitantly.

I told her about my childhood, the ever-present Nylion, and our brief years happily spent together. I described our bond, our oneness of mind, and how it had been everything. I explained how my other half had become my protector and the one who'd been there with advice when life had seemed impossible. I gave her bits and pieces of what we'd been evolving into before the worst day of our lives. I shared about the ceremony that our loved ones had performed on my birthday, the one that had both killed my mother and torn us apart.

The long process of finding Nylion again. My joy at being made whole once more. My fury toward those who'd broken us apart in the first place.

I was hesitant to talk about recent developments, but Nylion pushed me into it, an outpouring of all my wants and fears and hopes.

The tale soon came to a close, and I focused on exactly how much I didn't care what she thought of it. Ren had been the one to stunt the growth of anything good flourishing between us, and therefore, her opinion didn't matter, but my insistence that I wasn't eagerly awaiting her reaction was definitely a lie I was telling myself to distract from how much I'd missed her.

Plenty of other women had crossed my path in the years since the time of us. Village girls who'd quite literally thrown themselves at me after I'd saved their home from bandits, town mayors who'd tried to curry favor with me in distinctly uncomfortable ways, the occasional palace maid who'd worked up the courage to slip into my study while I'd been sleeping. Despite my best

intentions, some of these surprise interactions had become something more meaningful, although they'd never lasted long. I was promised to another person, after all, and as I'd said, that tended to... stop things.

While I'd learned more about it, I still didn't *quite* understand how love, attraction, and sex intersected, even so many years after Hadrion had first tried to explain it to me, but over the last few years, my decidedly *strange* interactions with women had happened enough for me learn the pattern that other people took when all three of those subjects became involved. I'd learned how to participate, no matter how strange each of those paths had felt at the time.

Even still, I'd been telling myself that my betrothal to Kaedesa was the reason why since Ren, no woman had held my interest for more than a month, but the truth was, none of those relationships had felt right. All of them had lacked a spark, a sense of belonging, or the comfort of *home*. The problem was, I knew exactly who I wanted in my life, and because she could never be mine, I'd gone looking elsewhere.

Gods, that made me sound like a heartbroken, teenage girl, but it was what I'd done and how I'd felt. I couldn't deny it. Ren's opinion of me carried enormous weight.

Beside me, she'd scrunched her face up, and I couldn't tell what that meant. Was it a display of disbelief? Fear?

"You're telling me that another person is trapped inside the man I know as Raimie?" she said.

That seemed a bit oversimplified but...

"Yes."

With her eyes lighting up, Ren said, "Can I meet him?"

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