

Chapter 63: First Outside Interaction

Raimie

As Ren's words absorbed into my shocked-to-stillness brain, I could swear time crawled around me. Overhead, the trees' branches bobbed in slow motion while leaves fell at a snail's crawl.

Did she just...?

I couldn't finish the thought.

"I... think so."

Nylion had sounded as dumbstruck as me. Was this not what he'd expected would happen after I'd shared our story?

When I could control my tongue, I asked, "You don't think I'm crazy?"

Gods, how those words made me cringe, but on hearing them, Ren laughed. She *laughed*.

"Oh, Raimie," she gasped. "I've thought you were crazy since you decided to face Teron in battle instead of running from him, all those years ago. Now, I have proof that I was right. Guess what?"

Oh, I did *not* want to respond to that.

"...What?"

Leaning closer to me, Ren mischievously grinned.

"I don't care," she whispers.

She... didn't...

Laughing, Ren straightened, wiping her eyes.

"Alouin, you people from Ada'ir don't understand, and you never will," she said. "For centuries, the Audish people have lived with insanity on a daily basis, although that's lessened considerably since

Doldimar disappeared. Even still, you say there's another person in your head? You know what, Raimie? It doesn't matter. What does is your actions. How you, even with this 'Nyl' in your head, *live your life*. That is all that matters. So, again I ask. Can I meet him?"

"Uh..."

Oh, Alouin above, I was going to cry. I *couldn't* cry, so I looked toward Nylion, unsure what to do.

"Why not?" Nylion said with a thick voice.

"...sure," I said.

As always when Nylion took control, the entire world jolted, and once more, I was stuck inside our body, watching through our eyes. The experience would have been utterly terrifying if I didn't trust my other half.

How do you want me to act with her? Nylion asked with the question resounding in our head.

This was why my trust existed. Nylion would never intentionally cause a disruption in my life, even though he was the one trapped inside most of the time.

"Do as you wish, Nyl," I said. "I doubt you can damage what might have existed between Ren and me, more than it already is at least."

For some reason, my answer panicked Nylion. Shifting, he awkwardly sat up.

"Hello," he nervously said.

He extended a hand, and sitting up, Ren followed his example, although she didn't touch her hand to his.

"Hello!" she said.

What is she-?

"They don't shake hands in Auden, remember?" I said. "Ren's trying to greet you in a way that'll make you feel comfortable, but she doesn't understand this custom of Ada'ir's. Don't worry. I did the same thing to Hadrion when we first met."

Ah. So-?

"Lower the hand and wait to see what she says next," I said.

This was... strange, being the one giving advice. Still, Nylion followed my suggestion, even if his unease blared from his silence.

"You're Nylion?" Ren asked, peering into our eyes.

“You may call me Nyl,” my other half said.

“Nice to meet you, Nyl,” Ren said with a smile. “Oh! I meant to ask Raimie. Is that Nyl as in-?”

“Nothing,” Nylion said. “The nickname is a private joke between us since that is what I am, nothing more than a voice in our head.”

“Nyl!” I gasped. “How can you say that?”

Ren, on the other hand, merely burst into laughter on hearing that.

When our arms hugged our chest, she said, “Sorry. I just find the idea that you’re ‘nothing’, as you put it, a little funny, considering you’re speaking with me right now. You seem pretty real to me.”

Shifting, Nylion hugged our arms tighter around himself.

“Forgive my lack of social graces, Ren,” he said, no doubt trying to change the subject. “I am afraid I do not receive many chances for pleasant conversation, besides those I share with Raimie.”

Hell, no wonder he was so nervous. I’d never considered what being trapped in our head might be like for him. Did Nylion get lonely in here? How horrid must those nine years by himself have been, absent our bond!

Why do you think I so badly hunger for vengeance? Nylion said to me.

To Ren, he said, “I hope you can excuse any social gaffs I may have made.”

“You’ve done nothing of the sort,” Ren said. “In fact, you’ve been quite pleasant.”

She smiled at us, which had us gushing warmth at each other through our bond.

Clearing our throat, Nylion said, “Then, forgive me once more, but I must ask you a discomfiting question.”

He shifted our eyes downward.

“I hope you do not mind.”

“Fire away,” Ren said, folding her hands in her lap.

Nylion took a deep breath.

“You said that you have been traveling with Kylorian since we last saw you. Raimie did not grasp the implications of this, given how elated he is to speak with you, but I certainly understood,” Nylion said. “Do you intend to support your brother in his bid for the throne? You have led Tiro’s scouts since Kylorian’s outside activities have claimed his time, especially during Doldimar’s reign. You have more than curried the city’s favor, such that where your final decision goes, Tiro’s is likely to follow.”

So, *that* was what had claimed so much of her time when we'd been courting. The long conversations with cloth-swaddled soldiers and her excursions into the forest made perfect sense now. How had I missed it?

You were preoccupied with leading your own band of soldiers, Nylion said. Think nothing of it. Picking up on things like this is one reason I am here.

After a moment of quiet filled with much shifting in place, Ren said, "I have no intention of supporting my brother."

She grimaced at the admission.

"He's always been the most even-keeled of us siblings, but recently, he's developed a temper. He knows that he's lost the contest for the throne, and that knowledge seems to have tipped him over the edge, not that I can blame him. Given how our father has been acting lately..."

Trailing off, Ren shook her head.

"Anyway, any sense of mercy he once had has vanished. For example, on our journey to Elisk, a man tried to steal our horses from us while we were sleeping. When we caught the thief, the poor man tried to plead his case, saying he needed the money from the horses' sale to feed his family, but Kylorian didn't care. He cut the man down, and we moved on."

She bit her lip.

"He can't be king. Something broke in him when Hadrion died, Raimie, and I don't know what I can do to fix it."

Oh, no.

"Nyl, she didn't mean it!" I cried.

"My name is Nylion."

Our mouth might have formed those words, but the voice that had emerged was distinctly my other half's: raw, brutal, and so very, very crushed.

Ren smacked her hand to her lips.

"I am so sorry," she breathed. "I didn't mean anything by it. I swear!"

But Nylion turned away.

Can we switch back, please? he asked.

"I don't know if that's a good-"

Ren grabbed our hand, and at that, Nylion's wish to retreat wavered, replaced by something else, something much stronger. Before I could comprehend what was happening, we were huddled, far from the blanket and against a tree's trunk, shaking like a leaf.

Nyl? Are you ok? She was trying to comfort you, I said. Why-?

"Do not touch me!" Nylion shouted.

Our bond, so recently opened, shuttered closed with a clang, and with it came a vast gulf of separation. Returning to what I'd been between the ages of nine to eighteen jarred me into a listless float, a haze that clouded my thoughts but refused to blessedly cut them off.

How had I lived so empty for so long? How did *anyone* do that?

"What's going on? Please, I thought we were... Why won't you let me in?" I cried. "Please, please, Nyl! I can't be alone again."

What had cut me off loosened ever so barely, and I wept at the return of even this bare minimum of contact. Gods, I couldn't do it again. Never. Never, never.

Leaves crunched, and clothes rustled as Ren settled somewhere nearby. She did as Nylion had asked, however, and kept her hands to herself.

"Both of you do that, you know. When we were together, I had to catch Raimie in unguarded moments if I wanted a genuine reaction from him instead of terror," she said, crunching closer. "I'm going to rub your neck now, Nyl. That always calmed Raimie down."

Warm flesh connected with ours, and while Nylion continued trembling at first, he gradually relaxed while her fingers massaged our skin.

"Who hurt you?" Ren whispered after a time, barely audible.

Still, Nylion caught the question, and with a cough, he stood up.

"No one," he said, clearing our throat, "unless you count weapons masters who went too far with their lessons or tutors who exchanged raps on the knuckle for incorrect answers."

Frowning, Ren said, "No, whatever it was had to be something more to cause as much damage as I've seen in you two."

"There is nothing else!" Nylion growled.

Storming off, he reached the edge of the blanket before stopping, rubbing our face.

"Thank you for answering my questions," he said. "I apologize for making it more awkward than it should have been."

“No, no!” Ren said.

She raced to Nylion, stopping short of taking our hand.

“I’m sorry to have made you uncomfortable and to have forgotten who’s currently in this body,” she said. “Truly, Nylion. I am utterly and completely sorry. Please, forgive my mistake, if you can.”

Glancing at her, Nylion sucked in a breath on seeing tears running over her cheeks, and without thinking, he started wiping them away.

“It is fine. I am ok,” he said. “Please, just... stop this. Do not cry on my behalf. You made a minor mistake with me, if that. It is not worthy of your tears.”

Taking a step back, Ren gently took our wrist, stopping Nylion from touching her.

“Alouin, you’re *just* like him, aren’t you?” she whispered.

Shrugging, Nylion smiled.

“In some regards,” he said. “He is usually more forgiving than me, although my tendency to respond with anger seems to be suspended when it comes to you.”

Coughing, Ren shoved a fist in front of her mouth, but that didn’t hide the flush that was rising in her cheeks.

“Oh, good job, Nyl,” I said. “That was well done.”

It was? Nylion said. *Wait. What was well done?*

While I laughed in our head, Ren tightened her posture, drifting her eyes over our head.

“Like I said, I’m sorry to have made you uncomfortable,” she said. “I’d hoped to meet you a little more... amenably, although that doesn’t seem to be an issue now...”

Trailing off, she ran her eyes over Nylion, making him shift in place.

“Anyway,” she continued, “you could have asked about my loyalties at a better time, but I could have...”

As she fell silent, her gaze unfocused.

“Wait. When you asked me about whether I’ll support Kylorian, did you also say that Raimie was looking forward to talking with me?” she asked. “Why would he want to speak with me after what I did to him?”

This turn in the conversation confused me until I felt gleeful anticipation bouncing across my bond with Nylion.

"Nyl, don't you dare!" I shouted.

"I did," Nylion said, ignoring me. "He is still in love with you, you know. He pines like a love-stricken fool, even now. It is a little embarrassing, actually."

Gods, he'd actually told her. Nylion had broken my trust to...

"You bastard," I growled. "How could you?"

Turning to the side, Nylion said, "You were never going to tell her about it, too intent on honoring her wishes to notice that doing so meant we would never find happiness with another person. Gods know you have tried."

"I could eventually find it with Kaedesa," I said.

"With Auntie? I doubt it," Nylion said, wrinkling our nose. "Even with our past, we may appreciate her body, to be sure. What person inclined toward women would not? But we have no real attraction to her. She is like... an Aunt, much like the nickname she holds."

"Then, I'll learn to deal with it!" I shouted.

"Excuse me, boys. Can I cut in?" Ren asked in a low voice. "I'd like Raimie, if you don't mind, Nyl."

Facing her, Nylion grinned.

"Not at all," he said.

When the world snapped, leaving me in control, that smile dropped. Hell, how was I going to reel this conversation back under control?

"Sorry about him," I said, rubbing my neck. "He can get a bit carried away sometimes."

"I do not get *carried away*," Nylion said, mouthing the words with distaste. "I was simply getting sick of how much you try to deny someone who is obviously meant for us. I thought I would help you along."

Well, look where that got us!

"Yes, Raimie. Look," Nylion said with a huff.

When I summoned the courage to glance at Ren, she had her eyes hooded, hiding her intent. Once she noticed my attention on her, she crooked a finger at me.

"Come here."

Gulping, I sidled as close to her as I dared. How angry was she? She'd been the one to tell me that our relationship was over. I should have moved on, but my efforts on that front had been lackluster at best. Was she displeased to learn that I still missed her?

Raising her face, Ren looked at me expectantly.

Wait. Did she blame me for how I felt about her? It wasn't as if I could change it. I'd certainly tried.

With an exasperated sigh, she said, "You're supposed to kiss me now, silly man."

Oh.

Thanks, Nyl.

"You are quite welcome."

Cautiously, I cupped Ren's face, certain that she'd bat my hands away, and when she didn't, I leaned down to meet her.

Gods, that spark was still there! That spine-chilling, toe-curling, back-arching want or possibly need. I could never tell which of those it was, but as always, it ran through my body from head to toe, although its intensity seemed amplified by the years we'd spent apart. Years I'd spent missing her.

Ren must have felt it too. She slipped her hands under my tunic, and while I initially flinched at that sudden skin-on-skin contact, I was soon shivering at the feel of it. Too absorbed in our kiss, I didn't notice her unbuttoning my jacket, but I definitely felt it when she tugged it off of me.

For a split second, I panicked—

She can't see me, can't see THOSE scars!

—but then, I was meeting her lips again, sucking in all of her. I couldn't get enough. I found the edge of her tunic, breaking away long enough to tug it over her head—gods, she was beautiful—before diving in once more.

We sank onto the blanket, touching, feeling, roaming our hands everywhere. I wasn't sure why I was having such an intense and frankly, *strange* reaction to being reunited with her but... fuck it. That didn't matter right now, did it?

"Ren!"

That shout shattered the magic between us like a stone would when coming through a window. Ren and I broke apart, and it was funny. Instead of reaching for clothing, which we should have done, our initial reaction to this sudden interruption was to grab our weapons.

"What are you doing?"

Distantly, I noticed that Kylorian was advancing on us like a storm cloud, and still trapped in a haze, I was having a hard time with figuring out where he'd come from.

Raising an eyebrow, Ren said, “What I want? What’s the problem, Ky?”

She didn’t bother with putting her tunic back on, replacing her dagger on her belt instead.

The question, however, hadn’t been directed at her. As I got to my feet, hoping to figure out what the hell had my friend so riled up, Kylorian shoved me, nearly tumbling me back to the ground.

“DON’T TOUCH HER!” he shouted, getting between me and Ren.

Shaking myself, I snatched up my clothes, hurriedly putting them on while struggling to pull myself out of my mental fog.

“Hey, Kylorian. So good to see you after such a long time,” I said. “What’s that? Sure, I’d love to get a drink with you! Right after you explain what’s going on.”

“Don’t act like the wounded party here,” Kylorian snarled. “I saw everything. You were assaulting her!”

And I froze. What....? I knew Kylorian had a quick temper. He’d as much as stated that soon after we’d met. Still, what he’d accused me of... that wasn’t something someone said out-of-the-blue. It was... I must have misheard him.

“He had better hope that we misheard,” Nylion growled.

“Ky!” Ren snapped. “Back off. This isn’t like before. *I* started it!”

I barreled over whatever else she might have to say.

“I would *never* do something like that,” I said through a tight smile. “Never, Ky! I can’t believe you’d think I was capable of something like... that. What the actual and bloody hell?”

For a moment, Kylorian paused, as if just now adjusting to his surroundings, and in that break, Ren stormed in front of him, slapping him silly.

Pointing back at me, she hissed, “*He* is not like Josenik. And *this*—”

She gestured between me and her.

“—is *not* like back then. I understand why you want to protect me like this, Ky, but hell! I know better now, and even if I didn’t, I’ve learned how to defend myself since then. If I ever need your help like that again, *I will ask for it.*”

Going pale, Kylorian took a step back.

“I’m... sorry,” he whispered. “I wasn’t... I thought I saw *him*...”

He pinched his nose.

“How do I keep messing this up?”

But then, he turned on his heel and walked away.

“Where’s he going? The nearest tavern?” I say.

Because with how visible his life had become over the last two years—much like mine—I’d say it was almost universally known how much Kylorian liked to drink nowadays.

“Perhaps,” Oswin called from outside of the clearing.

Which made both me and Ren jump. I’d forgotten about the spy and... why hadn’t he stepped in earlier?

“Kylorian doesn’t seem like the type to do this,” Oswin continued, “but he may decide to report what he thinks he’s seen to someone else, say... Eledis. Shame makes people do strange things at times.”

Falsely accusing me of a crime I hadn’t committed? That didn’t seem like the Kylorian I knew, much like Oswin had said, but on the off chance the spy was right...

“Oh, HELL no,” Nylion and I hissed, one silent. One not.

Finished with buttoning my jacket, I tugged on its hem before turning on Ren.

“I’m going to make sure your brother doesn’t do something stupid,” I said. “Want to help?”

Rolling her eyes, Ren said, “It’s what I’ve been doing for *months*. Do you see what I mean about keeping him from getting himself killed now? He’s been *really* out of control lately.”

“Yeah, I can see that. It... worries me.”

I knew a lot of Kylorian’s troubles were because of Hadrion’s death. I couldn’t blame myself for how he’d decided to handle that, but still, I wished I could have been there to help, in whatever way I could. Despite what he’d done here, I still... liked him, as a person. I still wanted us to be friends, even if I also wanted him to *apologize*.

“Ok. I’ll see if he went to Eledis,” I said. “Can you look for him in the city? We can reconvene later. I think we need to... talk. About a lot of things.”

Shyly smiling, Ren said, “And I think you’re right. I’ll start searching taverns. Meet you later this evening. Sound good?”

“It does. Until then.”

As I passed Oswin, I clapped his shoulder.

“Hope you can keep up,” I say through a grin.

A groan answered me, but still, I didn't let it dissuade me from my path. While I didn't need it for speed, I called on Ele, letting its peace wash over me. For a while now, I'd needed that peace whenever I was speaking with my grandfather, especially when they were stressful, and if I did find Kylorian in the old man's office, the coming conversation would fall into that category.

So, I shot down the palace's halls, evoking no responses from passersby. The Eliskians believed that I was the reason Doldimar had vanished, and so, they accepted my many oddities without a word, even the ones that would normally have them hating me. In fact, many of them called friendly greetings as I passed, something I still found... strange. I paid them no mind, singularly focused on making plans for the next hour.

Soon enough, I reached Eledis' office, but I didn't enter. I might need to speak with my grandfather, regardless of if Kylorian showed up here—the time had most certainly come for the second contender of the throne to bow out of our contest—but if possible, I'd like to keep said contender from even entering this room, or... perhaps I simply wanted to see what Kylorian would say if he did go inside.

Pulling my Ele source around my body, I settled in to wait.

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