

# Chapter 21: Meeting's Conclusion

## Eledis

When Tanwadur jerked his eyes to me, I realized that not only had the protest I'd meant to keep in my head been audible but I'd also risen to my feet. Eyes were boring into me, and I bowed beneath the weight of them.

At least my actions had stopped Tanwadur from doing something he'd regret.

"Apologies," I said, sinking into my chair.

But no one was paying me any mind now.

"You're drunk, Dury," Kylorian whispered with his posture ramrod straight. "I didn't plan to say anything while we were here, but your behavior is getting out of hand. Sit down and stay quiet so you don't further embarrass us."

Tanwadur blanched, but instead of returning to his seat, he left the room in a daze. The door swung shut behind him, and the room's occupants politely averted their gazes from Kylorian with their shoulders rising toward their ears.

"Thank you for your help, Eledis," the teenager eventually said, "but I don't need your protection."

Immediately, I said, "Of course. I apologize for presuming."

Not that I could blame myself for what I'd done. The past hadn't come to haunt me in years. It seemed I'd gotten out of practice with ignoring it.

Nodding acceptance of my apology, Kylorian turned to Raimie.

"My offer stands," he said. "Would you like my help?"

"Rhy?" Raimie said. "What do you think?"

Running his eyes over the teenager, Ryvolim said, "I don't see what harm he could do. Welcome aboard, Ky!"

Smiling, the teenager dipped his head to Ryvolim.

“Thank you. I look forward to lending you my sword.”

And the issue of Kylorian was put to bed.

“I think that’s everything,” Raimie said before turning to Ryvolim. “Wait. Have I forgotten anything?”

“Not that I can think of,” the other man said, “But they might have questions for you. Find out, maybe?”

Which only made me frown. Such familiarity shouldn’t exist between two people who’d only known each other for a few days, and the way they’d acted around one another was reminiscent of a relationship I’d thought concluded. This man couldn’t be...

No! Rhylix had always been reserved, almost haughty, whereas this Ryvolim was energetic and down to earth. Their personalities couldn’t be more opposite.

On top of that, the difference in their appearances was startling. I knew the Esla could shape change, but not only was I sure that Rhylix wouldn't have taken on a human form but such a shape change would require intense effort and force of will, or that was what I’d been told. No Eselan could hold it for more than a day straight.

And there were the testimonies. If I asked them, at least a dozen people would swear on what they considered sacred that they’d seen Rhylix’s corpse in Da’kul. My creeping suspicion had no basis in fact, no matter how uncannily similar Raimie and Ryvolim’s interactions might seem to that friendship.

Once more, I listened in on the conversation. Not many questions must have come up because the meeting seemed to be wrapping up.

“...anyone objects, I’ll put the plan into motion,” Raimie was saying.

At that, all eyes turned to me, and I snorted. Why did they rely on me to oppose the kid? It was irritating, especially because in this case, I rather liked Raimie’s scheme.

Now that we had a foothold in Auden, we’d want to destroy Doldimar’s military and economic infrastructure. Yes, preserving parts of it would also be a priority, but I couldn’t see our people using Kiraak at any point in the future.

Even if Raimie had been willing to use his magic to place ordinary people under his thumb, I would fiercely oppose it. We’d need the common man’s support in the coming months and years, and one surefire way to destroy that goodwill would be to use something as unnatural as Kiraak to accomplish our goals. Even with it discounted as rumor, Raimie already teetered on that line with his primeancy. There was no need to add more uncertainty to what surrounded him.

So, I asked, "When do we march?"

"We?" Raimie said with his face crinkling. "Eledis, you'll stay in Tiro. Didn't you hear me say that?"

...What?

"I can fight as well as you, grandson!" I snapped.

How *dare* he-?

"I know," Raimie said with a nod, "but you're much better at logistics and long-term plans. Look at the army you raised within Queen Kaedesa's ranks while waiting for me to appear! I need you to coordinate with Tanwadur and Gistrick. I'm hoping the three of you will have several step-by-step plans for how to attack Auden's capital, Elisk, when I return."

Huh. The kid had improved on his ability to use his people in a way that maximized resources, and he'd made my omission from the coming battle seem like a compliment. How surprising.

Anyway, it wasn't as if I'd wanted to participate in this battle. I'd fight when necessary, but I'd much rather leave that distasteful activity to soldiers who'd volunteered to die, seeing no need to risk my own life. I couldn't, however, show any of my relief.

"Fine," I said with a grimace.

"Oswin, make sure any further messages from the Hand go to my grandfather," Raimie said.

Making a face, Oswin said, "Sir..."

"I'll read them too! When I get back," Raimie said, rolling his eyes. "Happy?"

Oswin clamped down on a smile.

"Actually, sir, I meant to ask if I'm joining you on your fool quest this time," he said.

"Oh," Raimie said before wrinkling his brow. "Why wouldn't you? Unless you need to be here for some reason, I wanted you with me. Is that ok?"

"It is, Your Majesty," Oswin said with his lips curling.

Ugh. Middle always showed Raimie such disrespect. I should have come to expect it from the spymaster by now, but somehow, that man's familiarity with Raimie always found a way to surprise me at the most unexpected of times.

"Good. If so, that's everything, people!" Raimie said. "We'll move out as soon as preparations are complete."

After smiling at everyone, he and Oswin swept out of the room with Kylorian and Ryvolim following them, which left Aramar and Marcuset alone with me. For quite a few awkward minutes, no one

said anything, even if the useless one kept shooting significant glances at both me and Marcuset.

In a burst, he eventually asked, “Are you sure it’s a good idea to put Raimie in danger like this? Nylion only emerges when my son’s threatened, whether in actuality or to face a perceived threat.”

Oh, sure. Let’s *openly discuss* the one thing that the three of us *knew* we should never speak aloud. That seemed like a great idea.

Now that the Aramar had broached the subject, though, it seemed like Marcuset meant to continue with it, and I forced myself not to sigh or slap my face in frustration.

“And none of us will be around Raimie to contain him if that violent, little bugger comes out,” my friend said, almost affectionately. “Nylion always liked me best, so I can probably minimize any destruction he might unleash if he comes out while we’re marching, but during the battle, I won’t be close enough to help.”

Fine. If we were going to talk about this, then I supposed we should *talk about it*. Or at the least, it looked like I’d have to reassure these two that nothing was wrong yet again.

Shaking my head, I said, “We don’t have cause for concern yet. Some parts of the spell must be clinging to Raimie, otherwise, he’d have murdered us in our sleep by now. If at some point Nylion approaches one of us, we should restrict Raimie’s activities, but in the meantime, let’s take advantage of his unique abilities, yes?”

Because said unique abilities were currently the only thing granting us any measure of success in this hostile kingdom, much as I despised admitting to that.

Still, both Aramar and Marcuset looked unsure, and while I’d gotten used to that from the useless one, seeing it on my friend was disconcerting.

“You disagree?” I said.

“No, only...”

Sitting back in his chair, Marcuset sighed.

“Raimie’s a good kid, better than most who’ve come from your family line, and he’ll make a magnificent king someday. I know that idea makes you unhappy, Eledis, because you want the throne for yourself, but for once, you need to think about Auden’s people, not what you desire, my friend. If he’s allowed the chance, Raimie has the potential to become one of the greatest rulers Auden’s ever seen, but if the spell ever frees Nylion... it’s safe to say that unpredictability isn’t a desired quality in a leader. Forgive me if I’m wary of that chance.”

Marcuset’s confidence in the kid only hurt a little. My friend had always let passion rule his life, and since Raimie had displayed characteristics that Marcuset associated with nobility, he’d latched onto the kid as the next king. He didn’t understand that sometimes, nobility wasn’t enough when running a kingdom, and he probably never would.

Still, his naivety was manageable, so long as I was around to remind him of what real life was like. That situation was unlikely to change anytime soon.

For now, my friend needed reassurance that the Nylion situation was under control.

"I understand where you're coming from, but I promise you that there's no cause for concern yet," I said, "and if there ever is one, we'll deal with it. Together."

"Just try to remember that Raimie's family, Eledis," Aramar said on those words' heels.

Ever had he been eager to remind me of that sometimes *annoying as hell* fact.

"I will."

Not that this fact would change what we'd eventually need to do, but I'd never say that to the boy's Alouin damned *father*.

"Now, we have busy days ahead of us, yes?" I said, eager to move on from what should have been a taboo subject. "Shall we tackle them?"

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A week passed in a blur of activity. As the residents of Tiro and Da'kul prepared for their new siege machines' transport, a flurry of messages flew between the bases. Two days ago, Marcuset had led the army out of Tiro to meet the parade of trebuchets and catapults rolling out of the fort.

Conversely, Raimie and his saboteur team would be departing for the Birthing Grounds in the next few hours, meaning to arrive there before the bombardment began. I should probably see them off, but considering what Raimie had left me to struggle with, I couldn't be bothered to do that.

The kid had given me a unique challenge. He wanted Elisk captured in the next six months, a time long before Tiro's limited resources would fail and we'd be forced into raiding towns for food.

This unnecessary rush had a sneer pulling at my mouth. With it, Raimie showed such weakness!

The people in those villages were the subjects of the Audish king. Their food technically belonged to whoever had a legitimate claim to the throne, but Raimie insisted that we should let these peasants keep something that wasn't theirs.

No matter. I could figure out a way of ending this war in half a year. Ignore the enemy's overwhelming numbers. Ignore Elisk's impregnability when defenders were manning its wall. Once again, the old man would fix these problems *by himself*.

A knock interrupted my thought, and I nearly flung the piece of parchment I'd been reading at it.

"WHAT?" I shouted.

At the invitation, a messenger hesitantly stepped inside.

“I have a report for you, sir,” the man said. “It’s from Thumb. He’s-”

Alouin damnit, I *knew* who Thumb was, and that certainly wasn’t because a *certain imbecilic kid* had decided to introduce us.

“Give it here,” I said.

Impatiently snatching the proffered document from the messenger, I scanned it with my mouth going dry.

“Shit!” I whispered once I was done.

“What is it, sir?” the messenger said.

At that, I jerked my head up, narrowing my eyes at the man. What was he still doing here?

But in the end, his presence wasn’t truly important, besides the fact that he might help me now.

“I need to speak with Raimie. Right now,” I said. “Where is he?”

Cocking his head, the messenger said, “On his way to the Birthing Grounds, sir. He left a while ago. Is there a problem?”

I had no obligation to answer this man’s question. He was just a messenger, but despite how much I’d rather keep this information to myself, panic forced the words out of me.

“Oh, it’s nothing too serious,” I said. “I’ve received news that a fleet of warships has weighed anchor at a nearby port. They’re offloading troops, and Thumb believes their destination may be Tiro.”

Sucking in a gasp, the messenger breathed, “Hell...”

“Indeed,” I said with a nod. “If this is true, we’re screwed.”

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Revision #1

Created 7 September 2024 21:45:20 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable