

Chapter 64: Immature Boys

Eledis

Most people assume that the person who holds the most power in a realm is the one who wears the crown. I laugh at those assumptions. A nation's monarch may decide on policy, but who carries out their decisions? The monarch may be the director of our puppet show, to be sure, but we few, the advisors and ministers? We hold the strings.

-Pierdriel, Minister of Finance, Ada'ir

Once again, I contemplated the problem of Raimie.

Two years had passed since Nylion had presented himself to me for the first time in years, and I still hadn't come up with a plan to eliminate the threat or at least, not one that would end with me alive afterward. Raimie was too well protected. He had his Hand, five highly trained spies who stuck to him like flies to fruit, and his Eselan friend, Rhylix, who was a powerful primeancer as well as a spectacular swordsman.

Sure, that Eselan was away more often than not now, ranging across Auden's fringes in pursuit of his singular obsession with finding the missing Dark Lord, but he frequently returned to Elisk, and when he did, it was always at the most unexpected of times and places. Sometimes, he came through the city in a blaze of light, but others, we'd have no idea he was there until he wearily trudged into a meeting.

Of course, I also had to consider the matter of Raimie's primeancy. In the last two years, the kid had exponentially grown in strength. Towns destroyed by Harvest had been restored by his hand, and without batting an eye, he walked through the shadows from one end of the kingdom to the other in an instant.

At first, I'd thought that I could use Raimie's flagrant use of primeancy against him. In Auden, wielders of Ele and Daevetch were regarded with far more mistrust and hatred than in the rest of the world because of Doldimar's oppression, and I'd hoped the vast throng of commoners would turn against Raimie when they'd seen what he could do. The kid and his friends might be able to render many threats harmless, but they'd have a hard time with staying in one piece when under a mob's care.

That plan had died with a whimper when Raimie's first visible act as a claimant to the Audish throne had been destroying the pits, the second highest source of terror for the common man.

They loved him for it, and he'd built on that adulation by insisting that he address the most challenging of public works himself. With his service, the hearts and minds of the Audish populace had firmly yielded to Raimie's control.

And so, I was left to rely on Gistrick, the Zrelnach commander who claimed he could fix our problem via some mysteriously awful solution. As time had gone on, he'd gotten increasingly aggravated, especially when it came to his comrades' inquiries into his plans. He insisted on keeping those plans secret, which I found suspicious as hell, but given my lack of options at the moment, I'd decided to leave it be, happy to have even a vague hope of withstanding the threat of Nylion. That hope, however, didn't stop me from scheming by myself, when I could.

Huffing irritably, I returned to my work. I was currently struggling through a report about the state of Auden's coffers. It was dismal reading at best. I didn't know what had driven Doldimar, but keeping the realm afloat had certainly not been his goal.

Thank Alouin for Kaedesa and the alliance with Ada'ir! Never mind that I despised the price she'd demanded for the cooperation between our kingdoms. Auden needed Ada'ir's coin if it had any hope of surviving. Infrastructure needed to be rebuilt, trade reestablished, and most importantly, the people needed to be fed while farmers returned to their craft. We'd already made progress in those areas, but a long slog still awaited us.

Yawning, I rubbed my eyes. I hadn't slept well last night. Nightmares had haunted my dreams, ones where a hostile stranger wearing Raimie's face had attacked me with a bloody knife. Nylion hadn't shown his face since that fateful meeting when we'd marched on Elisk, but I knew the aberration was always there, lurking under the surface of Raimie's forced smile.

When the door creaked open, I jumped in my seat, perfectly aware that I'd almost fallen asleep despite the massive amount of paperwork I needed to finish today.

Glancing up, I tiredly said, "What do you want, Kylorian?"

Standing there, clutching at his tunic's hem and refusing to look at me, the boy looked so much like my brother, and I had to remind myself that he wasn't. He was a potential threat.

"I..." he said, swallowing hard. "I need advice."

Which took me by surprise. After a slow blink, I wordlessly gestured to the chair on the other side of my desk.

After he'd gotten settled, Kylorian said, "I realize how ironic it is that I'm coming to you for this, given... everything. But I've been burning a lot of bridges lately, and my father... I can't go to him with this. He's already made his opinions known."

As he made a face, I winced. I'd come to know exactly how hard the leader of Tiro was on his oldest, adoptive son, so I also knew exactly how true Kylorian's statement was.

"I know you're not the closest with Raimie," the kid continued, "but in this case, that might be a good thing. I need a neutral party, or at least, one who's as neutral as possible. So."

Still refusing to look at me, he waved my way, and resting my elbows on my desk, I folded my hands in front of my face. Could this be the angle I'd needed to tackle the Nylion problem?

"What's the issue?" I asked.

Sighing, Kylorian finally met my gaze.

"It's Raimie," he said.

Of course it was.

"What about him?" I said. "If you want advice, you'll need to give me more information."

"Right, right."

Slumping, Kylorian fiddled with his fingers, nervously picking at his nails.

Alouin, he was so much like my brother. Ugh... this was going to be difficult, wasn't it?

Taking a deep breath, the kid said, "I've been an asshole to him. For a while now, actually. But just recently, I did something that put my behavior toward him into sharp perspective. *Alouin*, it was bad."

Shifting forward, he rested his head in his hands, and while he thought, I gave him silence. Much as I'd like to intrude on this, warping this kid's feelings about Raimie until they would suit my purpose, he wasn't done talking. It was best not to interrupt until then.

"So you know, I'm not an idiot," Kylorian said from where he was hanging his head. "I know Raimie's won our contest for the throne."

Huffing, he sat back up with an eye roll.

"Honestly, though? Realizing that has been terrifying but also... a relief," he continued. "The idea that I'd be king someday has been shoved in my face for my whole life, something that was determined for me long ago, and now that I know it won't happen, I've had time to think about what I want from my life. It's been... strange but freeing. It's also increased the pressure from Dury ten-fold, but... that's not the issue I want to talk about right now."

"I guess... I don't know how to feel about Raimie. I know he's a good man. He's shown me that so many times before, even with what happened to Hadrion. I've long since moved past that issue between us, but I'm not sure what to make of his behavior toward Ren."

"He didn't have to clean up the mess he left behind after breaking things off with her. When I heard the two of them were courting, I was willing to step aside, so to speak, because she seemed happy, and happiness is all I want for her. We lived such horrible lives under Doldimar's reign. I didn't want

to cause her more problems by making her see... me.”

Ah. He was in love with the girl. That explained a lot. His overprotectiveness of Ren at the last two Anniversary Balls. The rumors I’d heard about how hard he’d worked to keep her at his side. I’d always thought it was a bit much for an adoptive brother, but if he was also in love...

“When Raimie left for Elisk two years ago, Ren wasn’t the same,” Kylorian said. “I’d never seen her cry before then, not even with someone who badly hurt her in the past.

“So, in essence, my problem is as follows. Personally, I like Raimie. I want to be his friend and help him when he eventually becomes king, in whatever way he’ll have me. If I follow that instinct, I’ll need to apologize to him. Make things right. And I’m not sure how to do that.

“I’m also concerned about what might happen between him and Ren. If I follow that instinct, I’ll need to do some things that will cause problems, in order to support her the best way I can. And I’m not sure which of those options I should choose.”

And there it was: the perfect way to sabotage my grandson. It would pain me to take it, but obviously, I would do my best to turn this kid against Raimie. Any ally who could stand with me against the threat of Nylion was worth cultivating.

Before I could, though, an unseen person said, “You are such an idiot, Ky.”

With a pop, Raimie appeared from thin air, and I was so grateful that I’d kept my mouth shut for as long as I had. What would he have done if he’d overheard what I’d been about to say?

When Kylorian turned to the other boy with his mouth gaping, Raimie made a face, waving a hand.

“I know, I know. I shouldn’t have been eavesdropping, and I’m sorry about that,” he said, “but it was the only way for me to figure out what was going on with you since you’ve apparently decided it was better to talk about our issues with someone else.”

Slowly closing his mouth, Kylorian winced.

“Fair enough.”

With a heavy sigh, Raimie shook his head before circling in front of the other boy and crouching there.

Looking up at him, Raimie whispered, “You really love her, don’t you?”

Silently, Kylorian nodded, which had Raimie making a face.

“Gods, I’m sorry,” he said, “but you’re wrong about what happened between me and her, Ky. She... left me.”

Stiffening, Kylorian said, “What?”

“You heard me,” Raimie said. “After I told her about Kaedesa’s proposal, Ren told me that our relationship needed to end for the good of Auden. To meet that goal, she wanted me to marry Kaedesa, which I didn’t and still don’t want to do.”

Oh, Alouin. I needed to keep a straight face. I couldn’t let laughter out.

After staring in silence for a moment, Kylorian said, “You’re telling the truth, aren’t you?”

When Raimie nodded, Kylorian slapped a hand to his face.

“Fuuuuuuck,” he hissed out. “I’ve made such a fool of myself, I’m so sorry.”

Patting his knee, Raimie said, “That’s ok. All I wanted to hear was an apology for earlier. Given everything else you’ve said, I think we’re good.”

But I was still caught on the ridiculousness of what had happened. Unable to contain it any longer, I dissolved into laughter, which only made the youngsters glare at me, but honestly, what had they expected? They were telling one of the oldest stories ever written: a misunderstanding between two boys because of a girl. Really. It was pathetic.

“Please, forgive me,” I gasped, waving a hand at them. “I merely find it amusing that you two have been arguing over Ren when you should be thinking about who will stand in front of me at the investiture one month from now.”

Alouin, their blank stares were delightful, if understandable. I hadn’t told anyone about my plans for the ceremony yet.

Rising to his full height, Raimie cocked his head.

“I thought that’s what we were already doing,” he said. “Kylorian has admitted to something we’ve all known for a few months now, although it took me a while to accept it. So, the concern you mentioned isn’t truly a concern at all, is it, Eledis?”

Ooooh... that smile. Someday, I was going to wipe it off of that kid’s face.

Turning to Kylorian, Raimie said, “And I’d love it if you decided to help me. I’m certainly going to need it. Perhaps we can discuss how that would work before the investiture ceremony.”

“I... would like that,” Kylorian said before softly smiling. “You’re going to be a great king, Raimie.”

Grimacing, Raimie said, “I don’t know about that.”

But then, he turned back to me.

“So, it’ll be me in that awful position one month from now,” he said. “May I leave planning the ceremony with you, Eledis? I have somewhere else I need to be, and I probably won’t be back until right before your imposed deadline.”

Wait, what? If that was true, did that mean Raimie had known what I'd been planning? I didn't see how he could have made his schedule align with mine if he hadn't known.

But that would mean he'd outmaneuvered me. Again.

Damn. I really should be proud of him. I wished I could be.

"And where, exactly, will you be going?" I coldly asked.

Smiling, Raimie said, "Qena, the eccentric town near the Wastelands? We received a request for aid while in negotiations with the Matvai. A tear close to the town has been acting strangely, and they asked me to fix it. Not sure where they could have heard about Allanovian and Da'kul, but apparently, someone's been spreading rumors about those tears."

Pausing, he frowned.

"I forgot to mention that to Ren earlier. The conversation we planned to have might have to wait for a little while, but... perhaps that's for the best."

Ren...? No. Wait. Raimie wanted to go. He'd leave the capital, so soon before a major event, to deal with something as minor as *this*?

"Raimie. You have matters of state to attend to here," I said.

"But you're so good at dealing with those, Eledis!" Raimie said with a twinkle in his eyes. "I assumed that managing Auden was what you wanted. Where would the realm be without the guiding hand of its Chief Minister, after all?"

As I sat there, taking in what the kid had unloaded on me, he turned to Kylorian.

"I'll see you in one month's time?"

Smiling, Kylorian said, "It will be my pleasure."

Striding to the door, Raimie pulled it open and disappeared, and for a moment, both Kylorian and I stared at its wooden surface until the kid's whistling, heard through it, faded.

"Alouin, he trusts people too much," Kylorian whispered, almost to himself. "One day, that'll get him killed."

With a pained look on his face, he got up, bowing to me.

"Thank you for your help, Eledis," he said. "It seems all I needed was for another person to listen to my troubles."

"I'm... happy to have been of service," I said, still a little stunned.

Chief Minister? Did Raimie know what he'd given me? Hell, with this position, I might finally have everything I'd been needing, for so long now.

As Kylorian left my office, he brushed past Kaedesa, murmuring an apology, and still standing in the doorway, she stared after him for a good, long while, thank Alouin. It gave me time to get my head back on straight.

"What was that about?" Kaedesa said, pointing after Kylorian.

Raising my hands to either side of me, I shrugged.

"The urgency and obliviousness of youth?" I said.

"The young are always in such a hurry, aren't they?" Kaedesa said, almost contemplatively. "While those who are nearing the end have mellowed. You'd think it would be the opposite."

Chuckling, I waved her inside, noting the guard from Ada'ir at her side.

"What can I do for you, Your Majesty?" I asked.

As she strolled inside, Kaedesa curiously examined my sparse office. The guard—Raimie's friend, Dath; I believe his name was—remained in the corridor outside.

"Is it true that the investiture has a date?" she asked.

Hell, how many people had known about this before I'd spoken a word about it?

"Indeed it is!" I said, hoping to disguise my flushed state with enthusiasm. "It's in one month's time, on the 10th of Fifth. Why do you ask?"

Trailing a hand over my desk's surface, Kaedesa said, "I'm simply verifying that Raimie told me the truth earlier."

"Raimie is many things, but a liar, he is not."

And I nervously laughed with my heart pounding in my ears. In the months after Doldimar's disappearance, I'd gotten used to Kaedesa's unexpected visits. In the beginning stages of reestablishing order, she'd been enormously helpful.

After a last, extended stay with us, though, she'd needed to return to Ada'ir to make sure her power-hungry nobles hadn't taken advantage of her absence. During that time, I'd missed her more fiercely than I cared to admit, and now, she was back, a few short feet from me.

"You know, Eledis, you're not as disquieting as I remember," Kaedesa said.

Leaning over, she snatched a piece of parchment off of my desk with her hair tumbling over her shoulders.

“Thank you. I think,” I said with a dry mouth.

“Perhaps working with you won’t be as difficult as I’d imagined it would be,” she said, scanning her confiscated document.

“Working with me?” I said.

“Yes. If I heard Raimie correctly, you’ll be Chief Minister soon,” Kaedesa said, “and I’ll be the queen of Auden. Given that, I’d imagine that you and I will have many interactions together.”

As my betrayer of a heart froze in my chest, ice washed down my spine.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” I woodenly said.

Kaedesa flicked her eyes up to me, and that was enough to jolt my heart into an even rhythm once more, even if it didn’t beat quite as rapidly as before.

“I don’t know,” she whispered with her face scrunched. “Something about you... it’s like I’ve known you for my whole life.”

Roughly shaking her head, Kaedesa cleared her throat.

“Thank you for confirming Raimie’s claim,” she said.

She left, abandoning me to my study, deep within a black palace’s confines. My only companion here was my battered and befuddled heart.

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