

# Chapter 75: Confession

## Kylorian

As I waited outside the room where Raimie had been taking his meetings for the last two days, I fought to keep my foot from tapping or doing anything else that might show how agitated I was. I wasn't scheduled to see him today—

Or scheduled the way he did it, at least, with messengers sent out to retrieve people as needed. It had become pretty clear to me that Raimie didn't know how to do the logistics part of running a government yet, and I looked forward to helping with that.

—but I absolutely needed to speak with him. I'd put this conversation off as long as I could, hoping to let him heal up as much as possible, but- but he was here, and I needed help.

Raimie was a bit busy at the moment, though. From what I could faintly overhear through the closed door between us, I gathered that Ren had had similar thoughts to me today. She and Raimie were speaking in that room with her tone turning confused and intrigued and comforting in equal measures, and I was stuck here listening to it.

What was Raimie saying in there that had drawn so many different tones from her? Were they discussing his engagement to Queen Kaedesa? Was he telling her what had really happened in Qena, what had been the subject of rumors in Elisk since he'd come home? Or was he breaking her heart, yet again?

As soon as that thought had crossed my mind, I rejected it with a snort. I'd come to know Raimie well in the years since he'd first appeared in Auden. If that man did decide to reject Ren, he'd do it in the least harmful way possible. He'd have agonized over each word in the speech he'd meant to give her, to the point that it would have Ren agreeing with what he'd said, no matter that she'd already mentioned she'd do that anyway. Sure, his rejection would hurt her, as it must, but it wouldn't have any lasting effects in the long run.

I didn't know when I'd gained this much faith in Raimie. Perhaps it had been over the long months of our contest, where I'd constantly heard about his good works across the kingdom. People had always talked about how he'd never asked a thing in return for his service, save for the room and board he'd needed while accomplishing his tasks. Perhaps it was because with my concession to him finally here, I could let myself have this faith in him. Either way, one thing was for certain. Raimie had gained my loyalty, or as much of it as I was capable of giving him.

On the other side of the door, an Eselan in Ada'ir's uniform was standing straight-backed with his eyes pinned on the wall opposite. The sight of him had surprised me when I'd first arrived. Even several years into our alliance with them, the people of Ada'ir rarely came to Auden's shores, except for their queen and her small retinue of guards. I wondered why one of them was standing guard outside of Raimie's room instead of with his queen.

When the door opened and Ren came through it, I straightened from where I'd been leaning against the wall, and almost immediately, she narrowed her eyes at me.

"Ky. Were you *eavesdropping* on us?" she said.

With my mouth dropped open, I was left at a loss for words, but fortunately, Raimie filled the silence with uncontrolled chortling.

"That would be fair turnabout, considering how *I* eavesdropped on *him* before I last left Elisk," he said, "but I doubt Ky would do anything like that, Ren. He probably had the same idea as you. Or at least, I assume you're here to talk?"

"Yes, that's what I'm here for," I said, pinning my eyes on Ren.

She ducked her head, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, before heaving a sigh.

"Sorry, Ky," she said. "I..."

"It's ok," I said. "I understand where you were coming from, given... things."

Slowly releasing a breath, Ren jerked her head in a nod before practically racing down the hall. We hadn't talked much in the month Raimie had been away. It made sense that she was still wary of me.

After a tense moment, Raimie called out, "Are you coming in or not?"

Right. I took a deep breath before stepping into the room.

And immediately halting.

"Alouin above, what happened to you?"

Raimie was sunken into the room's bed, probably from exhaustion, and his pallor was as gray as the sheets covering him. When he grinned, it made me wince; it looked so different from his typical enthusiastically pleased expression.

"A pebble and a storm, if you can believe it," he said. "Please, come in. I promise it's not as bad as it looks."

"If you say so."

I slowly came forward to perch on the chair already at his bedside.

"If you need to rest, I can come back later," I tentatively said.

But Raimie made a face and shook his head.

"No, thank you. I've had enough rest lately," he said. "And I'm glad you came. I'd have tried to find you myself if you hadn't shown up. I've been thinking about your offer to help with all of this."

He waved a hand overhead, as if to encompass the palace and everything that happened here.

"I have a few ideas for that and was hoping we could discuss them."

Considering that was half of why I'd sought him out today...

"I'd love to," I said.

Puffing up his cheeks, Raimie blew a breath out.

"Well, I guess my first question is how much do you want to be involved with... this," he said.

With a raised eyebrow, I said, "With setting up your new government?"

Raimie nodded.

"As much as you think I can help," I said. "With everything I've learned while growing up, I can bring a lot to the table, but... I know I could cause you issues too."

Cocking his head, Raimie said, "Issues?"

It was my turn to blow out a long breath.

"My... relationship with... my father," I said before waving it away. "We can talk more about it in a moment. Let's finish with this subject first, yes?"

"All right," Raimie slowly said. "Here's my idea, then: I'm planning on running Auden a bit like they do in Ada'ir, with Ministers and the like. At first, I'll appoint them, but once things are more settled throughout the realm, I'd like to have the people make those choices. That's a goal for the long-term, though."

I nodded along to show I was listening. It was good that he'd been thinking about these things.

Shifting uncomfortably, Raimie looked away, refusing to meet my eyes.

"I'd like it if you would become one of those Ministers," he said in a near mumble.

That... was a surprising ask. Did Raimie know how much power he might be handing me, a potential adversary, with a position like that?

When I failed to respond, Raimie rushed to fill the silence, shooting his gaze toward the ceiling.

“I was thinking you could handle everything safety-related in the capital. So, organizing and managing a peacekeeping force, figuring out how to regulate public resources like wells, and the like. It seemed to match up with some of your passions, or the ones I’ve noticed, at least. But what do I know? I may have learned a few things when it comes to governing over the last few years, but I’m still a nobody who grew up in the middle of-”

He fell silent, and I wondered what could have turned his face as stricken as mine sometimes had looked after one of Tanwadur’s lectures.

Hopefully, I could bring him out of it.

“That’s not a bad idea. I even have some experience with it from when I led Tiro’s spies back in the day,” I said. “Are you sure you want to have me in such a key position, though? What if I-?”

What? Fucked it up, like Tanwadur had always said I would without his guidance? I did *not* want to voice that insecurity to the man in front of me.

“I’m more than sure.”

The warmth in Raimie’s voice dragged me out of my head. He was giving me a crooked smile, one I hesitantly returned.

“Well, I’m grateful for your confidence in me,” I said, “and I’ll accept the position, if that’s where you think I can do the most good.”

*For Auden and for you.*

Turning solemn, Raimie said, “I do.”

Then, he broke into a spunky grin.

“Now, what are these supposed issues you think you could cause? Given everything I know about you, I’m having trouble thinking of any.”

Oh hell, how highly did he think of me? I had to get rid of any hero worship he might have toward me. Now.

“Like I said, it’s about my relationship with my father.”

Alouin, it already felt damn near impossible to meet Raimie’s gaze. There was no way I’d be able to maintain it throughout this part of our conversation.

“As the leader of Tiro, Dury has a lot of power and recognition, especially since Tiro became the final sort of resistance in those last few months before Doldimar vanished,” I said. “You may have noticed during our brief time working together that he has a claim on me. That hold has been

fading recently, and over the next few weeks, I mean to sever it completely. I'd like to tell you why he's always had that hold, which should explain why you might want to side with him during our coming disagreement."

I slid my eyes sideways to catch a glimpse of Raimie, jerking them back away once I had. He was watching me so intently! That much attention on me, especially his, made me shift in my seat.

He failed to say a word, so I blew out a long breath.

"It started when I was young," I said. "As a kid, I didn't live in Tiro with Eliade or Tanwadur. So far as Auden knew, I was the last semi-legitimate heir to the kingdom's throne, the descendant of Prince Nebailie. You know about him now, right?"

Raimie nodded.

"The half-brother of Auden's last king," he said, "and from what I understand, the founder of at least one resistance against Doldimar."

"That's right," I said. "The resistance I was born into, in fact. It... doesn't exist anymore."

Holding my body perfectly still, I fought off memories of the kind, indulgent people who'd first raised me. The good of their memory had been ruined by the next part of my tale for Raimie, and I couldn't afford to feel the grief of that blow, not when it would almost certainly have me losing control in front of a man I admired.

"When I was six, a visitor came to our hideaway from Tiro. Everyone knew about the hidden city by then, even if its location was still a mystery to all, but this was the first time anyone from outside of that city had heard from them," I continued. "I was so excited for his arrival. I'd met a few strangers before then, but this visitor was the first one my caretakers couldn't stop talking about. His arrival heralded a flurry of activity on a level I'd never experienced before."

"When I met him, he awed me; he seemed so much larger than life. Such a good fighter and so accomplished too! He told me stories of the outside world that made me hungry to see it for myself. I went to bed that first night both curious and delighted, ready for the continuation of experiences that was planned for the next day."

And that had been the last time I'd been so carefree and happy.

"We threw a feast for him on the second day of his visit, something to truly welcome him into our community. It was the first time we'd all been in one place for a long time, which... was a mistake."

Heaving a sigh, I blinked hard against the heat in my eyes.

"I don't remember much about the feast itself. I know it must have lasted a long time because I started chaffing to leave the table so I could do anything but sit there while the adults talked. I'd even have been happy to attend a lesson, which was my least favorite activity at the time. Still, all that's truly clear for me beyond that is the... noises my caretakers started making toward the end

of our meal. It was awful.”

They still rang in my ears as clear as day: coughing and choking and...

“They collapsed into their plated and didn’t get up.”

I fell silent. The room was *so quiet*, but I couldn’t change that state. It felt fragile, teetering on the edge of shattering. Just like me.

“He... poisoned your caretakers? Your family?” Raimie asked. “The visitor did this?”

Alouin, his voice had been so gentle. I didn’t know how to handle it. It was exactly the response I’d wanted from him, but it was also so *very* uncomfortable.

I hugged myself before jerking my head in a nod. It was taking everything I had to keep memories at bay.

*Vomit leaking from slack lips.*

*The man beside me rising halfway to his feet with his hand on his sword’s hilt before he toppled.*

People I’d loved.

“Was it Tanwadur?” Raimie asked again, as if nudging me to continue.

And I was beyond grateful that he’d been able to read between the lines of what I’d been telling him. I couldn’t, *couldn’t* have named my adoptive father as the perpetrator of such horror, and the fact that he’d done it for me had me loosening my grip on my chest.

“He told me he’d given me a lower dose of the same poison he’d given them. That he’d provide me with an antidote if I made a vow to come home with him. He wanted me to see Tiro for myself because he had great plans for me. Plans to free Auden. Plans that my caretakers hadn’t approved of. He asked me to hear him out so that I could understand why they’d had to die. And I did.”

I refused to say anything further. I wouldn’t detail all the ways that Tanwadur had warped and twisted and seduced me as a child, all the beautiful promises he’d never kept and the threats, punishments, and... *rewards* that had followed. Raimie didn’t need to know about any of that. He already knew more than most people in my life.

I took a deep breath, roughly shook my head, and dropped my hands to my sides.

“So, yes. That’s how I came to Tiro,” I said, “and it’s an example of why you might not want to make Dury your enemy. He’s... ruthless. When he wants to be. And good at pretending otherwise, like he does with Eliade and my siblings.”

I had reason to believe that his relationship with my mother had once been very similar to mine, from the violent start to the congenial balance whenever she ‘behaved’. But I knew for a fact that

Tanwadur had *never* treated my siblings so harshly. For him, their purpose was to serve collateral, keeping me in line. Always had been.

But now, it was once more Raimie's turn to speak, and I was absolutely petrified about what he might say.

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