

# Chapter 78: The Investiture

## Raimie

These damn robes were extraordinarily heavy. After Ring finished smoothing out an unseen crease in their length, she stepped back, wrinkling her nose.

“Are you sure you won’t let me add some color to your cheeks?” she asked.

She'd entered my room a few minutes ago, taken one look at me, and started fidgeting with my clothes and hair, which had made me only a little uncomfortable.

“Let’s see how I look without it first,” I stiffly said.

Ring retrieved a full-length mirror that she’d found gods knew where, rolling it to a stop in front of me, and I examined her work in progress. One look and I understood why people had been treating me like someone who was about to keel over for the last few days.

“We look awful,” Nylion said. “You should have rested a day more in Qena before making the journey here.”

*I was eager to get us home,* I said.

Grinning, Nylion came up behind me, resting his chin on my shoulder and circling his arms around my waist. It was a disturbing image, what with me completely drained of color and Nylion a grotesque mixture of black, blue, and green. Only our ice blue eyes provided any redeeming qualities to our otherwise matching faces.

“More like you wanted to return to Ren and the conundrum that she has left us with,” Nylion said.

Tilting his head, he kissed my cheek while I glared at him.

“A little color might be called for,” I said. “Not too much, though. It can’t look unnatural.”

“I don’t *do* unnatural,” Ring huffed, pushing the mirror away. “Sit.”

I was more than happy to comply. Holding my weight on my leg, even for a short time, had dragged on my already flagging supply of energy.

While Ring bent to her work, Nylion stood behind her, making an alarming range of noises from impressed to disgruntled, but before I could get too annoyed with him, Rhylix slipped into the room.

“Wow, look at you,” my friend said. “I can almost believe that I didn’t patch you up two weeks ago.”

“Are you here to scold me again?” I sourly asked.

He’d been doing that a lot since we’d gotten back, and I didn’t want to hear it again.

“No, you’re too stubborn to listen to my advice, so why should I give it?” Rhylix said with a smile. “I’m here to offer my congratulations.”

“What for?” I asked. “I don’t want this.”

Which only made Rhylix smile.

“I’m well aware,” he said, “but that’s why you deserve the congratulations. If you were eager right now, I might be worried for Auden.”

“*Would you two stop talking?*” Ring snapped. “Fixing this wrecked masterpiece will be difficult enough without my canvas moving.”

I promptly closed my mouth, holding it still despite both Rhylix and Nylion’s many attempts to make me laugh.

“That’s the best I can manage,” Ring eventually sighed. “Hopefully, it’ll do.”

Rhylix moved forward to take a closer look.

“Oh, it’ll do,” he says. “He doesn’t look like he’ll drop dead at the faintest breath of wind now, which is a marked improvement. Considering the before, I’d say your work is nothing short of miraculous, Ring.”

She blushed a deep, cherry red, mumbling her thanks.

“Will you be there to watch your ‘masterpiece’ revealed?” I asked.

I... could use all the support I could get today.

“I won’t be observing people’s reactions to my work, if that’s what you’re asking, sir. I’ll be looking for trouble, the same as the rest of the Hand,” Ring said. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get ready.”

After she’d left, I sank back into my chair with Nylion sitting on my knee, waiting for the signal that the ceremony was about to begin. Butterflies fluttered in my belly, and I jittered my good leg. To keep my mind off of what was waiting for me, I inspected my friend.

Today, Rhylix claimed the most animated state that I'd seen from him in the last two weeks, which meant Ele must be firmly under his control. Contained energy was making my friend look positively vibrant, which was a nice change from the depleted state that he'd been stumbling in since Qena.

The average person probably wouldn't notice this change, but I did. I wasn't sure if that was because my friend always let his guard down around me or if I'd grown to know him well enough to read such a tiny distinction.

In the last two years, Rhylix had ranged between exhilarated and exhausted, depending on how much energy Ele provided him on any given day. When my friend seemed to be staggering through a fog, I raged at Ele—Bright had probably gotten sick of that—but on days like today, I positively cheered to see Rhylix returned to the man I'd first met.

Although, honestly, Rhylix looked much more striking today than he had four years ago. He'd neatly pulled his hair into a tail and shaved, dispelling the scruffy air that had accompanied him since Doldimar's disappearance. In addition, he'd discarded his ratty cloak, tattered by years of travel and combat, and replaced his normally disheveled clothes with a modest tunic and trouser combination. A smart, waist-length jacket went over that, and knee-high boots finished the ensemble.

I wasn't sure how to feel about how much effort he'd put into his appearance, just because of what we were doing today.

After rapping on the door, a soldier poked her head inside.

"Nearly ready for you, sir," she said.

Which meant, 'get moving if you plan on shuffling into position on time'.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll be there soon."

Grunting with effort, I rose from my chair, and without a word, Rhylix was beside me, supporting my arm.

"Thank you," I whispered.

We slowly headed toward the hall of worship with Rhylix taking the brunt of my weight and Nylion worriedly hovering beside us.

My body was a mess of broken pieces, even two weeks and a half after Qena. Not counting my leg, I had a cracked breastbone and several bruised ribs to deal with. The leg itself always ached, a throb of pain that never quite went away, but the worst of my ailments was the exhaustion.

I'd lost far too much blood with that nicked artery, so much that without Ele's help, I'd have become a cold corpse before I'd left Qena's tear. As it was, Ele had assisted with my cling to life, but as with anything magical, it had come with a price. I'd survived, but a long recovery was still ahead of me, not only because of the very real blood loss I'd endured but also because of the

interest that Ele had demanded for its use, the price of which extended beyond total exsanguination.

Waving for a break, I leaned both palms against a wall. I fought to stop the uncontrolled wheezing rattling my lungs, vaguely aware of Nylion running a hand through my hair.

“Would you like me to take this from you?” Rhylix softly said. “Ele might allow it today.”

Sharply glancing at my friend, I directed my focus to Bright in truth, standing beside the Eselan.

“He’s overestimating his strength,” the Ele splinter said.

That was about what I’d thought.

“I can handle it, Rhy, but thank you,” I said. “Besides, you said I’ll be fully recovered in, what was it? Another month?”

“Give or take a few weeks,” Rhylix said.

“Well. After we’re done with this ceremony, I don’t plan on doing anything else as physically demanding until I’m healed,” I said. “Town mayors can bring their problems to me, for once.”

“I don’t think you realize how much work your first month as king will pile on you...” Rhylix started.

“I said I’ll deal with it,” I snapped, interrupting him.

Panting, I rested my forehead on my arm for a minute before pushing away from the wall.

“Let’s keep going.”

After what felt like an eternity, the hall of worship appeared ahead of us, and I tugged my arm away from Rhylix, reverting to sole dependence on my crutch for support. The reason for my sudden insistence on self-reliance was leaning against the doors ahead with his arms crossed.

“Kylorian,” I said, nodding to the other man.

“Raimie,” Ren’s adoptive older brother said.

If Rhylix had made a delightful transformation for today’s proceedings, Kylorian’s was stunning, even subtle as it was. Ren’s big brother had always been a handsome man, but in military dress, he exuded appeal. Every crisp fold, every gleaming button, and even the shine on his boots multiplied his legitimacy.

“Are you sure you don’t want to trade places?” I asked with a chuckle.

“I am absolutely positive,” Kylorian said, smiling. “Don’t envy you in the slightest.”

We both laughed at that while Rhylix uncomfortably shifted beside us. I knew he wasn't happy with Kylorian, considering everything I'd shared with my friend about him and Ren, but I'd insisted that since Kylorian hadn't insulted *him*, Rhylix should let Ren and I handle it how we wanted. So far, he'd respected that wish.

"My friend, I need to get into position," he said. "Can you handle... this by yourself?"

"Sure!" I chirped. "Ky and I will have a short chat, and then, we'll join you."

"And as always, I will watch over him," Nylion said.

He didn't seem to care if Rhylix had actually heard him, more needing to say the words. Besides, he knew the Eselan would eventually hear what he had to say. Over the last two weeks, he and Rhylix had been holding a halting and much interrupted conversation.

Unfortunately, because we'd been surrounded by a bunch of supremely overprotective soldiers at the time, Nylion hadn't been able to come out and speak for himself, so I'd had to translate things, not that I'd minded. I was hoping that sometime soon, the two of them could actually meet, in person, but I wasn't sure when that would happen. Life had been incredibly busy of late.

Lightly resting a hand on my back, Rhylix said, "Good luck."

He cracked the door open, leaving me alone with the man who'd been my rival. Who was somehow still my friend. How glad was I for that?

"You ready for this?" I said with a grin.

"As I'll ever be," Kylorian said. "I'm not looking forward to seeing Dury's face in there."

Yes. There was that.

"We talked about this," I said. "I'm happy to help with him as much as you like, even more than I already have, but..."

"I know. It has to be my decision," Kylorian quickly said.

He looked away with a strange mix of pain and something else written across his face. Was that... shame? He had nothing to be ashamed of when it came to cutting contact with his adoptive father.

But then, Kylorian brightened.

"And I *am* looking forward to what my life will be like without *his* dreams for me overshadowing everything I do."

I could imagine.

"I'm glad you'll have that opportunity."

The long-winded speech filtering to us through the crack in the door started winding down, and I gestured toward it.

“Shall we, my soon to be Minister of Public Safety?” I said.

“It would be my pleasure.”

While Kylorian worked on flinging the hall of worship’s heavy doors open, I leaned my crutch against their frame, there for me as soon as this was over. On transferring even a modicum of weight to my bad leg, I almost toppled, which had Nylion reaching to steady me, but after a sip of Ele, the sparks of pain in my vision dulled. The pain transformed into a bone-deep soreness, a discomfort I could manage.

Following Kylorian, I began my march to the apse. With an expression of tranquility affixed to my face, I forced my lips into a serene smile to complete the illusion.

That smile became more genuine as I walked down the aisle. To either side sat town mayors and throngs of ordinary citizens, maids from the palace and average Eliskians allowed to attend the ceremony at my insistence. I knew my Hand was mingling with them, but they were blending in so well that I couldn’t pick them out of the crowd.

Toward the front, military commanders and foreign dignitaries had claimed their seats, and among them, several familiar faces stood out. Gistrick was frowning at me, infecting the guests in his immediate vicinity with his displeasure, but Uncle... Commander Marcuset practically beamed with pride at me. The Matvai's Vasnavai had shown up as well, despite her refusing to answer our invitation earlier this month.

I spied Ren’s black hair near her adoptive father, and my spirit lifted, even if she was resolutely facing away from me. Almost immediately after recognizing her, however, I noted Auntie Kaedesa in the same seat on the opposite side of the aisle with her Minister of Finance, Pierdriel beside her, and my delight wavered. Fortunately, Dath was sitting a little behind them both, furiously waving at me, and that almost had me laughing out loud.

For the briefest of moments, I wished my father was here with everyone else. No matter that I’d never wanted it, this ceremony was one of the most significant events in my life, and having no parents here to watch it tugged on my heart a little. Then, Nylion raced ahead to get into position, and I remembered why my father was no longer a part of my life.

Putting him out of my mind, I focused on my destination. Eledis was waiting at the head of the aisle, restlessly fidgeting. When our eyes met, he smiled, but I could see the strain behind his pleasant expression.

Oswin stood to the left and slightly behind Eledis, one of the two visible members of my honor guard, and if there was one thing I was certain of about with this ceremony, it was that the spymaster deserved that spot. How long had he been trailing me, never expecting to be remembered in full, before the spell that had constrained my mind had broken and our friendship could truly resume from its long pause? How often had the spy served as my shield? If anyone

could stand for me today, it was Oswin.

Meanwhile, Kylorian had positioned himself beside and behind my old friend. His spot in the honor guard had been both a personal and professional concession on my part. I wasn't sure if we were close enough for me to want him up there, but I *did* know that our previous rivalry had given the appearance of an unstable government to the Audish populace. Now, we were showing them that we two members of the Audish royal family were united in purpose and resolve, and *that* was important.

The final member of my honor guard wiped away any uncertainties I might have about Kylorian's position. Nylion was hovering with the other two, invisible but supportive in every way. As I approached, my other half beamed at me before pulling an incredibly hilarious face, which forced me to focus on maintaining my composure instead of laughing.

I'd wanted Rhylix up there as well, but he'd begged off, asking for another job. I understood stage shyness—the only reason I wasn't trembling from that right now was because of my shrieking leg—so I'd easily rescinded the request. As long as he was somewhere nearby, I didn't care what role Rhylix played in this ceremony.

I stopped short of the single stair that led onto the apse. Ceasing with his fidgeting, Eledis spread his arms.

"Today is one for the history books," he said in a booming voice, "for today, the rightful king of Auden takes his place on the throne. Gone are the days of oppression, the centuries where a shadow veiled this land. Today, we move forward into a new age, one of peace and prosperity."

At the reference to the foretelling, I rolled my eyes. Perhaps my grandfather was hoping to convince the people that today's proceedings would fulfill the damn thing, but I knew that wasn't what was happening. Somewhere beyond these walls, Doldimar still befouled the earth with his presence, and the foretelling wouldn't be completed until he was gone.

Some of those in the audience must have agreed with my silent conclusions because a round of polite coughs followed Eledis' speech, but he hadn't finished with his theatrics.

"Kneel," he said with a smirk.

We... hadn't talked about this. Eledis knew that right now, I could hardly walk, much less kneel, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to get up once I was on my knees, not without help at least. What was he trying to pull?

Still, it wasn't like I could protest, considering the circumstances, so instead of thinking about the process, I concentrated on each step.

Place my bad knee to the ground first so it bore less weight when the other-

AGHH!

Wobbling, I nearly blacked-out before my good knee joined the bad on the stone floor. I took a deep breath, waiting for the pain to fade, before baring my teeth at Eledis in challenge, and he nodded his approval. Was that all this was? A test of strength?

But what else could Eledis have gained from it?

Beginning with the vows, he said, “Do you swear to serve Auden’s children, from the most common of serfs to the highest of nobles?”

Modifying the old vows to reflect modern times had been Eledis’ idea. While Doldimar had been in power, the worship of Alouin had struggled. Few had favored the idea of a benevolent god when their lives had been living hell, and so, Eledis had thought it best to drop any mention of him from what I would swear.

After my last encounter with Alouin, I’d heartily endorsed that change, having no desire to swear my service to a possibly unstable being. Plus, removing Alouin from the first vow was sure to please the Matvai’s leader. There was no need to remind her of the religion that had suppressed her own people’s beliefs for generations.

So, it was with a clear conscience that I said, “I so swear.”

“Do you swear to protect Auden from enemies within and without, using all available resources up to and including your own life?” Eledis continued.

This one was easy.

“I so swear,” I said with a grin.

As Eledis spat the words of the last vow, his face twisted.

“Do you swear to foster an environment of equality and understanding, always considering the view from both sides of an argument?”

This one had come at my insistence. Humanity insisted that life was made up of black and white—Ele and Daevetch—and its various people contended that those who weren’t on their side of the line were the definition of evil. Very few of us stopped to consider the maybe the world was made up of mostly grays.

Take primeancy for example. Most people considered Ele to be good, but what happened when one wrapped that primal force so tightly around oneself that only rigidity and inflexibility remain? Once trapped within a prison absent adaptability or change, only a slow death could await such a captive.

Conversely, Daevetch was named evil, but sometimes, aspects of it were required for life to advance. What came after the Destruction of a forest fire? An explosion of plant life, sprouting from the ashes. What accompanied the Horror of personal tragedy? In most cases, personal growth.

Maybe it was because I wielded power from both sides of the Eternal War, but I was tired of being one of the few people who could see the benefits of both. I'd make it my life's work to found a new type of kingdom, one where everyone belonged and it didn't matter if one was Eselan or human, an Ele or Daevetch primeancer. Everyone would be welcome in Auden.

Perhaps, however, my people weren't ready for my vision because behind me, vicious coughing erupted. Ignoring it, I squarely met Eledis' eyes.

"I so swear," I said.

Through gritted teeth, Eledis said, "Rise."

Ok. Climbing to my feet didn't need to be as daunting as it seemed right now. If I objectively examined the problem, I was sure I could figure out a solution.

I glanced at my hands, one of which was hanging beside my glowing leg. Would using them be a display of weakness....?

Oh. Duh.

Shooting Ele from my knees, I rocked onto my heels, wheeling my hands to keep from toppling. When my feet flattened, however, I relaxed, viciously smirking at Eledis.

My feat must have flustered the old man because he skipped the explanation of Shadowsteal's significance in Auden, merely gesturing for it. Rhylix came forward with a cloth-covered bundle cradled in his arm, and as he approached, he winked at me, softly applauding beneath his burden.

Flipping cloth to the side, Eledis withdrew the sword that had started our long journey, impatiently offering it to me, and I licked my lips.

"Here goes," I murmured to myself.

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