

# Chapter 93: Let's Start This Thing

## Raimie

When the first of my summoned guests arrived, I was as ready as I'd ever be. Tugging on the hem of my new uniform, I scanned a recently drawn map of the surrounding area again, making sure I hadn't missed anything. I was grateful to have clothing that both fit my trimmed physique and wasn't falling apart, but because it wasn't worn in yet, my uniform's fabric was still stiff. I found myself picking at it or otherwise adjusting at the oddest of times.

"It'll be fine," Rhylix said behind me.

He was sitting on one of the crates in this tent, and glancing at him, I made a face.

"Maybe this conversation will go well, but the rest? I doubt it," I said. "Don't worry, though. I can hold it together for a little while longer. I've dealt with worse than a bunch of cranky elders before."

Snorting a laugh, Rhylix leaned back while pulling his legs under him.

"That's for sure."

We shared a smile as the tent flap, hidden behind other crates and barrels, lifted, and someone quietly cursed as he maneuvered his way into the cramped space I'd cleared. Glancing over me and Rhylix, Marcuset placed himself on the other side of my table with a nod, quickly followed by Eledis.

"What's all this about?" my grandfather snapped when he spotted me.

Turning to Rhylix, I said, "See? Cranky elders."

As my friend choked on a laugh, I smiled at the men who'd joined us.

"You'll find out soon enough," I said. "Let's wait until everyone's here before I explain, though, shall we? I'd rather not repeat myself."

Eledis started grumbling to himself, but he didn't have long to wait. Within a few minutes, Ren led Gistrick and my father into the tent, coming to a stop at my shoulder.

“Unless you object, I mean to switch places with Oswin. I’ll play sentry instead,” she said. “Much as I might wish otherwise, this is more his fight than mine. He should be in here, listening.”

She’d made a good point. Why hadn’t I thought of it?

“All right,” I said.

When she turned away with a nod, though, I grabbed her wrist, drawing her gaze back to me.

“Thank you, Ren,” I said. “For everything.”

For a breath, she wordlessly stared at me, but then, one corner of her mouth lifted in a grin.

“No need to thank me,” she said. “Like you said before, you’re the one who’s lost here. What sort of woman would I be if I let you drown?”

Reversing my hold on her, she squeezed my hand before leaving, and I stared after her, rubbing where she’d touched me. Why did it feel so pleasantly warm?

Someone cleared his throat, and with a small start, I turned to the gathered men, some of whom were watching me with interest.

“My apologies for the delay,” I said. “Ren was just telling me that she’d send Captain Oswin in here, and once he’s joined us, we can begin.”

Crossing his arms, Gistrick said, “Are you sure you want him here? He *is* a spy, after all.”

Someone must have gotten around to telling him that piece of information. I wondered if he’d raised this protest due to disgruntled feelings over the delay or the typical distrust that common soldiers had for spies.

“While he may be a spy, Oswin has also been appointed as my bodyguard,” I said. “Considering the proximity to me that this position requires of him, he’ll find out what I mean to tell you sooner rather than later. Why not include him?”

No need to mention that he’d already heard the news I meant to share. As if to emphasize my point, the spy effortlessly strolled through the maze of crates as I finished speaking.

“Find out what exactly?” he asked.

Somehow, I kept from laughing at his display of ignorance, gesturing to Rhylix instead.

“As many of you already know, Rhy left to scout the surrounding terrain after we arrived here,” I said. “He’s recently returned, and given the news he brought with him, I thought it best for us to gather so that he could share.”

And I stepped aside. Rhylix and I had agreed that he should repeat his initial report to these people, letting his in-person perspective add to the urgency of our situation. He, however, refused to come down from his crate, instead making himself more comfortable on top of it.

“First of all, a small matter of business,” he said. “Everyone here knows I hail from Auden now, yes?”

Everyone nodded, of course. That was one of the few secrets I’d pulled out of him long enough ago for it to have filtered to the rest.

“Good. Then, I expect no one to question how I know about these things.”

Hopping to the ground, Rhylix started rearranging things on the table.

“For the most part, we have nothing to worry about right now,” he continued. “By a stroke of luck, we’ve landed in the middle of the Cerrin Forest, the only uninhabited portion of Auden’s west coast. At least, it’s uninhabited besides the occasional rebel or solitary survivor.”

And Tiro, of course, but considering the town was hidden on the eastern fringe of the forest, I couldn’t fault Rhylix’s omission of it.

“Unfortunately, we do have one, massive problem.”

Having placed a map of Auden so that it faced the others, Rhylix rested a finger on a point to the south of us, although still barely within the forest’s reach.

“A fort lies here, name of Da’kul,” he said. “The Enforcer of this region makes this place his home, and before you ask, all of you know who he is. You’ve each met him at least once.”

At that, the others stiffened while my father rested his hand on the ring around his waist.

Licking his lips, he said, “Teron?”

With a nod, Rhylix said, “And that’s not the worst of it. Because of our activities in Ada’ir, he’s been aware of our impending arrival for quite some time and has prepared accordingly. He’s gathered a significant force, one that he sent to meet us on the morning after I escaped the fort. Given that this was a little over a week ago and considering the average march time of such a large army, I’d say that it’s within three days of getting here.”

Finished, my friend made way for me, and as I approached the table, I leaned on it. Resting my fingers on the map’s edge, I did my best to ignore how badly my guts had coiled on themselves.

“This is what we know,” I said. “The enemy’s numbers are around nine thousand strong. Their ranks are made up of mostly Kiraak, which I’ll have Rhy explain in a moment, but so far as we know, they’re not bringing siege engines with them, just troops. We’ll have to send out scouts to verify this and check if they claim a cavalry division, but that’s for later. Given this, here is what I propose we-”

*“Nine thousand?”* Gistrick interrupted with a strangled voice. “How the hell are we to stand against that? Our numbers stand at...”

When he paused to consider, Oswin helpfully stepped into the silence.

“Five thousand, two hundred, and thirty-five,” he said. “That’s counting everyone with a passing ability to fight, though. The number of our competent soldiers is probably lower.”

Gistrick wildly gestured at Oswin as if the spy had proven a point.

“They outnumber us nearly two to one!” he said. “Alouin above, I hate to suggest it, but we should consider splitting up. We can regroup later.”

“And where, exactly, would we do that?” Eledis calmly rebutted. “Save for Rhylix, none of us know about this land. If we split up, we’re liable to end up indefinitely scattered in the wind instead.”

“So, what do you think we should do?” Gistrick snapped.

Shrugging, Eledis clasped his elbows.

“We run, yes, but as a cohesive unit,” he said. “That will gain us time-”

“Not enough of it, though. You know that, Eledis,” Marcuset interrupted. “Running will only tire the troops out.”

As Eledis glared at his friend, my father lifted a finger from his crossed arms.

“Probably not the best idea, but could we cross the Narrow Sea again?” he said. “We could garner support from the Southern Kingdoms before trying this once more.”

This idea had Eledis scoffing while Gistrick laid a hand on my father’s shoulder.

“My friend, you spent a lot of time in the Southern Kingdoms back in the day,” he said. “Do you really think that any of them will help us?”

“Not to mention how much time we’d waste by doing that!” Eledis said.

Bristling, my father started defending his point, and I wondered if I could bring this meeting back under my control. As I’d watched them arguing, I hadn’t been able to move, frozen in place first by their strong reactions and then, by uncertainty. How could I get them to listen?

When Oswin nudged me, I glanced at him, hoping he didn’t see how wild my eyes must look.

“You can do this,” he said. “Go on.”

He inclined his head toward the map, and I took a deep breath.

“I wasn’t finished,” I said.

But they paid me no heed, getting increasingly upset.

“Louder, sir,” Oswin said. “Like their opinions don’t matter.”

Because in this instance, those opinions weren’t supposed to matter. So, straightening, I squared my shoulders and bellowed.

“I’M NOT FINISHED!”

---

Revision #2

Created 28 August 2024 05:54:51 by FatalisticFable

Updated 8 September 2025 01:04:12 by FatalisticFable