

Interlude 3.2: Caution

King of Auden

11th of Third, 3478

Forget my doubts. Forget my bravado. The enemy is indeed a primeancer, and Auden is doomed.

We joined him in combat on the Lyzencroft-Matvai border. I thought the battle would be simple. The soldiers had their orders to behead the enemy when possible, and we had the high ground. It should have been an easy victory.

Instead, it was a slaughter. By themselves, Doldimar's monstrous, deathless soldiers might have tipped the scales in the enemy's favor, but with the primeancers at his command, our defeat was inevitable.

They can instantaneously move from one side of the battlefield to the other, carving through plate-mailed men and horses like they're made of paper.

Doldimar wasn't even with his army. Instead, a pair of his lieutenants, Teron and Xiki, harried our forces, even as we retreated. The men looked to me to drive those two off, supposed Ele primeancer that I am, and I could do nothing.

We are doomed. Unless we can find a way to appease Doldimar, everyone in my wretched kingdom will die, and it will be my fault-

"Your Majesty, are you paying attention?"

Lifting my quill from the paper, I glanced at the faces expectantly gazing back at me.

"You're discussing the status of our reserves," I said.

"Since the conflict has morphed into a drawn-out war after the Battle of Eadochas Valley—"

I inwardly cringed. They'd already given that travesty a name?

"—calling on the reserves seems only right. Best to prepare for the worst, no?"

Which minister was making this suggestion? Since I'd taken the throne, their number had exponentially grown, to the point that I could no longer keep track of who controlled what around here.

"Why would there be more fighting?" I wearily asked, deciding to address the entire assembly rather than one minister alone.

"Doldimar's forces are already harassing our border towns, which is a perfect replica of what happened to Lyzencroft. If we don't nip it in the bud now, Auden will fall."

I knew this speaker: Nebailie, my brother. The one who'd stood with me in the Valley. Who'd argued against the retreat that I'd ordered.

"I plan to treat with Doldimar," I said. "We'll see if we can't find some room for a compromise before inciting further violence by drawing on the reserves."

The room went very quiet, save for some nervous shuffling.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty, but that's a terrible idea," Nebailie tensely said. "You've heard the stories about Daevetch primeancers. We'll find no common ground with beings like that."

"I'm aware of the stories," I said, trying to keep my voice calm, "but I'd like to try anyway. Prepare to call up the reserves. Do whatever you'd like to get ready for war, but if we can avoid more fighting, I want to take that chance."

"We should strike them while they're still flush with victory," Nebailie said. "Eadochas taught us how to fight Doldimar's abominations. Since our return, we've been drilling the troops in more efficient decapitation techniques."

"And what about the primeancers?" I snapped at my brother.

"What about them?" asked Minister... something or other. "You can eliminate them, can't you? Therefore, not a problem."

And herein lay the problem. Nebailie knew about it but refused to acknowledge it. I knew and tried to find an alternate solution.

The primeancers were a problem because here, at thirty-one years of age and almost two years into my reign, an Ele splinter had yet to appear to me.

"Of course I can."

I brashly smiled at the minister while my insides clenched at the lie.

"Then, why shouldn't we do as Commander Nebailie has suggested?"

Murmurs of agreement echoed this question, and hearing them, I realized that I could do nothing more in this meeting. I pushed away from the table.

"I've made my decision," I said. "Send a messenger to invite Doldimar to discuss terms, but don't think your advice has gone unheeded, brother. Prepare your soldiers to attack if these talks go poorly in any way."

"As you wish, Your Majesty," Nebailie said with a bow.

Uh-oh. I knew that tone. 'bailie would be coming to have A Talk later.

The others rose as one as I stalked out of the Ministers' Chamber with Emir at my heel. During the five-minute walk to my office, I couldn't help but fume at what had happened during the meeting, and once we were safely ensconced in privacy, Emir's head shimmered, settling back into its blonde-and-blue hair paired with gray eyes.

"He made a good point, you know," the Eselan said once the shape change was over. "An immediate attack would work in our favor. We could wipe them out before they can gather for a large assault."

"Both you and 'bailie know why I can't do that," I snapped.

"Yes. I still think we should fight, like your brother suggested," Emir said. "Why are you hesitating with this? You're usually quick to jump on a chance to get rid of your enemies. Are you afraid that during a battle, your men will die to a primeancer you should be able to neutralize, or is it more about the chance that someone will drag your secret into the light of day?"

Both. I didn't want soldiers to recklessly spend their lives for my lie, but I was also terrified of what would happen if I was discovered. I'd surely lose the throne and possibly my life as well, but I was prepared for that eventuality. What made me balk at simply telling everyone about my deficiency were the possible consequences for my family. What would an angry mob do to the wife and sons of a false king?

"I'm afraid for the men, of course," I said. "I know this move is overly cautious, but I'm only hoping to keep Auden out of an unnecessary war."

"Seems pretty necessary to me, given what we know," Emir said under his breath.

I pretended I hadn't heard him. War might or might not be coming, but this nation wouldn't run itself while that status was determined. A two-foot-high stack of paper was waiting for my perusal on my desk, another Matvai delegation had come to Elisk bearing grievances, and the supplicants who'd been waiting for me to hear them since my departure for Eadochas required my attention.

Oh! I should probably see the boys at some point today too, otherwise Illasaya wouldn't speak to me for days. She already complained that I didn't spend enough time with our children.

But first, I'd finish my work.

Revision #1

Created 7 September 2025 01:31:49 by FatalisticFable

Updated 7 September 2025 01:35:41 by FatalisticFable