

Chapter 19: A Spy's Report

Eledis

"Where do I begin?" Raimie asked, looking incredibly lost.

"How about with a target?" Kylorian said.

Raimie jumped upon the prompt with clearly apparent gratitude.

"Yes! Thank you," he said. "So, the next place we'll attack. It's going to be the Birthing Grounds—"

"Are you *insane*?" Tanwadur interrupted.

Already, his face was turning crimson, and I mentally groaned. Men like him made me feel... certain things. Unpleasant things. It made dealing with them incredibly difficult.

Apparently not finished, Tanwadur dropped a fist on the table.

"The Birthing Grounds is an impossible goal," he snapped. "You'd be sending your people to their deaths."

"Dury."

Calmly, Kylorian laid a hand on his father's arm.

"We should hear him out," he said. "By taking Da'kul, he's already accomplished a task that we thought impossible. There's no harm in listening to him."

Grumbling, Tanwadur leaned back in his seat, and with him taken care of, the room looked to Raimie for an explanation.

"Um..." he said, again tugging on his sleeve.

And seeing this, I discovered an enormous downside to Rhylix's death. Much as that Eselan might have deserved my hatred, Rhylix had always provided a boost to Raimie's confidence, and without that, the kid reverted to a shy, self-conscious boy unless someone provoked him.

Fortunately, I was quite good at doing that.

I'd opened my mouth to verbally poke the kid, hoping to get this show on the road, when a knock interrupted me. Although no one had issued an invitation to come inside, the door soon burst open, letting a short stranger through it.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Or am I early?"

The question had been directed at Raimie, who was staring at the stranger, bug-eyed. Given how much the rest of the room had done that, I couldn't blame the kid for his reaction.

"Early," he tightly said.

Raimie dragged the stranger to the side, holding an unintelligibly hissed conversation with him, and I raised an eyebrow at Marcuset. Shrugging, my friend didn't look concerned by this turn of events, but that didn't mean he shouldn't be. Marcuset had always been remarkably awful at understanding the political implications of... anything really, but fortunately, I had only one question in this case, something I wouldn't need Marcuset's help with.

Who was this stranger allied with?

"Apologies for the interruption," Raimie said. "This is Ryvolim. I'll introduce him more fully soon enough, but for now, suffice it to say that I asked him to join us, although it wasn't supposed to be quite so soon."

He'd said those last few words through gritted teeth, and Ryvolim beamed at the kid, seemingly oblivious to his frustration.

A new, mysterious stranger, huh? For this meeting's proceedings, I'd guess the man would play one of two roles. Ryvolim would either be an expert in a subject Raimie needed help with, or he'd have knowledge about the Birthing Grounds that Raimie wanted him to share.

It was also possible that the stranger had a unique skill set required by Raimie's plan, but on observing the man, I dismissed that notion. Ryvolim was a skinny man, made up of awkwardly proportioned limbs and little-to-no muscle mass. He looked more like the scholarly type than the weapons master that a battle would require.

But...

For a moment, I narrowed my eyes. Was this stranger really a *stranger*? Now that the shock of his arrival had passed, I recognized him as the man who'd been hanging around Raimie in the week since the battle of Da'kul. Was he a new friend? That was... curious. Raimie usually didn't make friends so quickly.

"As I was saying before the interruption—"

Again, the kid glared at the stranger.

“—Little has recently returned from the Birthing Grounds. He brought information with him that... well. I'll have him explain.”

When Raimie waved at him, Ryvolim opened the door, and the spy I'd met earlier shuffled inside, supporting his weight on Ryvolim's arm. At the sight of him, those seated at the table gasped while I pursed my lips.

I'd seen the spy's face when it had been a mess of weeping splits in flesh, and although I knew the stitches now holding those cuts closed were necessary for his healing, that knowledge didn't stop the horror of observing what seemed like a further destruction of the spy's countenance.

The wounds slashed across his forehead and cheeks would have been bad enough, but one particularly deep gash near the corner of his mouth would forevermore draw what had once been attractive lips into a permanent sneer. Another slice ran from the corner of his eye to the join of his neck and jaw, stretching so close to the eye that its lid had partially peeled away from his face.

“Little!”

Stepping forward, Oswin reached out for his subordinate, but Little merely brushed past him.

“I'm fine, Middle,” he snapped. “Let me do my job. We can debrief later.”

Unsteadily pulling a chair from under the table, Little collapsed into it, and Oswin reluctantly returned to his corner.

“Please, forgive the appearance,” the spy said. “It was a parting gift from Doldimar.”

“You met the *Dark Lord*?” Tanwadur squeaked.

But Little ignored the question, facing Raimie instead.

“I'd like to shorten my report if that's all right, Your Majesty,” he said. “I can hear a bedroll calling my name.”

At that, Raimie frowned, but I knew his displeasure wasn't in response to Little's suggestion. The kid still hadn't adjusted to his rise in station.

“I'd prefer if you kept it short and sweet,” he said.

Nodding, Little turned back to the table.

“In that case, does anybody need an overview of what to expect at the Birthing Grounds?” he asked.

As that final word stretched his lips, he winced.

While Tanwadur and Kylorian shook their heads, the rest of the table looked lost. Fortunately, one of the Audish natives jumped in, sparing Little from further pain.

“The place where Doldimar creates his Kiraak is based in a pit, one that’s a mile or so deep and wide with sheer drops all around it,” Kylorian said. “The only way down is via temporary staircases, carved from the cliff face by using primeancy.”

Nodding, Little added, “Exactly, although that description isn’t perfectly accurate. There’s another way down. One of your men showed it to me, Kylorian.”

That had the teenager brightening.

“Ibilfer?” he said. “How’s that old bastard doing?”

“It was Ibelfer’s partner, actually,” Little said with a pained grimace. “He wanted me to tell you he’s sorry he couldn’t protect your friend.”

Kylorian’s delighted smile tilted downward.

“Does that mean...?”

“He’s passed on, yes,” Little said. “An Overseer killed him while I was there.”

“*Damnit.*”

Slamming a fist on the tabletop, Kylorian sprang to his feet before striding to a corner, there to blankly stare at the wall. After an awkward beat of silence, I cleared my throat.

“I’m sorry for your loss, son. Truly,” I said, “but we should get on with this, considering how our messenger’s appeared to us. So, Little. You mentioned another way down?”

“Indeed,” Little said with a nod. “There’s a sinkhole not far from the Birthing Ground’s pit. Doldimar’s people have carved caves into its walls, and one of these leads to a crevasse in the sinkhole, one that also has a ladder. The crevasse is narrow and tight, but it would make an easy entry point for a saboteur team.”

Stroking his chin, Aramar said, “A small advantage that could prove useful.”

I suppressed an eyeroll. Leave it to that one to point out the obvious.

Leaning on the table with a grin, Raimie said, “Tell them the best part.”

With the smallest smile I’d ever seen in my life, Little leaned back while folding his hands in his lap.

“I have reliable intel that Doldimar will be leaving the Birthing Grounds in the next few days,” he said. “Normally when he’s there, the Enforcers from the regions nearby—Adrinostk, Betlisa, Dalinasth, and Arabelna—attend to him, but if he follows his established routine, he’ll be taking

several of those Enforcers with him, leaving a token force of Overseers. From what I understand, the Enforcer for that specific region, Adrinusk, will stay behind as well, but even still, the Birthing Grounds' defenses will be much lower than normal for a while."

"Obviously, you have a plan to take advantage of this, grandson," I said.

It was best to reinforce our familial relationship before the kid explained his plan. If the idea was brilliant, the others in the room would subsequently relate it to me, even if it was only in the most tangential of senses. If it was terrible, I could berate the plan as much as I pleased while keeping the appearance of a wise mentor intact.

"I do," Raimie said, "but first--"

"I'm free to go?" Little said.

Patting his shoulder, Raimie said, "Enjoy your well-deserved rest."

Climbing out of his chair, the spy bowed. His white knuckles around the table's edge spoke to the effort it was taking for him to remain standing.

"Your Majesty," he said.

As Little stumbled out of the door, Raimie turned to the stranger in our midst.

"Ryvolim..."

"I'll be right back," the stranger said before sprinting after the spy.

We all watched as the door closed behind him before turning on Raimie.

Revision #1

Created 7 September 2024 21:27:07 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable