

Chapter 20: Discussing Next Steps

Eledis

As if the delay with Ryvolim had never occurred, Raimie said, "With Da'kul's capture, we've come into possession of several siege machines. I've asked around and learned that Tiro has the means to transport them. If Tanwadur agrees to assist us, we'll take most of the fort's catapults and trebuchets with us to the Birthing Grounds, leaving only what's needed for defense in Da'kul. We'll use those siege machines to bombard the enemy, softening them up."

"For what?" Tanwadur said. "An attack? By all means, order your soldiers to charge the Birthing Grounds. Watching them leap to their deaths should be amusing. Or do you plan on sending them into the pit via this hidden ladder? Because it sounds like a chokepoint to me. Your people won't make it down the ladder alive."

While holding the older man's gaze, Raimie said, "Ky, your father must think I'm incredibly stupid."

When Kylorian merely shrugged from the corner he was still standing in, the kid sighed.

"Or maybe both of you do?"

Slumping, Kylorian took a deep breath before returning to the table.

"After our last conversation, I think you know my opinion on your intellect, Raimie," he said.

But he spoke not one word more, making Raimie frown, and I... was confused. What conversation had Kylorian been talking about? Had the kid somehow allied with this teenager without me knowing about it?

"Honestly, that's all right," Raimie eventually said. "I'm glad to know what you think of me, Ky, and your father is welcome to whatever opinions he decides to keep."

He bowed to Tanwadur, which had the old man flinging himself into his chair with his arms crossed. Nicely done, appeasing that cranky old man.

Straightening from his bow, Raimie continued, "As I was saying, we'll soften them up before we attack, as you guessed, Tanwadur, but you were wrong about how I plan to get my army into the

Birthing Grounds. I want to send a saboteur team into the pit at the same time as the bombardment. That team's job will be to activate a staircase in the cliff wall-

"How?" Kylorian asked. "Whoever you sent would need primeancy..."

Trailing off, he frowned.

With a huff, Raimie said, "Can I please finish? Questions can come later. I promise."

"He *really* doesn't like getting interrupted," Marcuset loudly whispered.

Rolling his eyes, Raimie said, "The saboteur team will create a staircase so that my people can begin their descent. Once a significant number have reached the pit's floor, a portion of the team will..."

Pausing, he flicked his eyes to the side.

"Really?" he said under his breath. "I won't have to stay near the staircase?"

At that, Marcuset exchanged a glance with me. Was Raimie speaking with the splinter that accompanied his magic or someone else? Perhaps... someone we'd hoped never to encounter again?

Beside me, Kylorian squirmed in place. I could only imagine the younger man's fight to keep from asking the questions surely eating at him. Meanwhile, Tanwadur seemed too wrapped up in glaring his disdain at Raimie to notice said man's seeming break with reality, and Aramar was merely waiting for his son's next words.

But then, this had always been how this sort of thing went. Raimie did something that no normal or sane person would do, and because of who he was, people chalked it up to any number of reasonable explanations. It would infuriate the hell out of me if the kid didn't need that sort of protection in his life.

"Nix the portion of the team idea, then," Raimie continued with a grimace. "The entirety of the saboteur team will join in the attack."

"A large deterrent to us capturing the Birthing Grounds will be the Kiraak. Those unfortunate souls will be helpless to disobey their orders to defend the place. Until we disrupt that command by cutting their ties with their Enforcer, they'll stop at nothing to resist us, but once Adrinok is out of the picture, they'll be dazed, similar to the walking corpses we saw after Teron's death. So, our most urgent task will be to pacify the Kiraak. To that end, half of the saboteur team will locate the Enforcer and neutralize him. Leading that half will be-

"Me!"

Having burst through the door, Ryvolim elaborately bowed with a hand fluttering to the side.

“Applause, hurrahs, and cheers.”

A beat of disapproving silence trailed the man’s entrance, but when appropriate, I cleared my throat.

“And who are you?” I asked.

“Ryvolim. Pleased to meet you,” the man said, bobbing into a bow again.

Tsking, I said, “I know that. I’m asking why you, of all people, should take such a significant role in this proposed battle plan.”

“Oh!” Ryvolim said in an annoyingly chipper voice. “Raimie, do you want to answer that one?”

Collapsing into the chair he’d recently vacated, he kicked his foot against the floor, and Raimie made a face, which only had the boisterous man opposite him grinning wider.

“Rhy’s killed Enforcers in the past,” Raimie tightly said. “He should be able to do it again.”

“Really?” Tanwadur said with a scoff. “Where did you find someone who’s accomplished the impossible?”

Jerking to face the older man, Raimie snapped, “First of all, I’ve killed an Enforcer before, so obviously, the task isn’t impossible. And I didn’t find him. He found me, but must we discuss Ryvolim’s proficiencies? I trust him to do this task, and that should be enough for you.”

The kid was starting to lose his temper. Best to step in before anything unfortunate happened.

“What about the other half of the team?” I ask.

With his teeth still gritted, Raimie forced his eyes onto me.

“They’ll advance on the Birthing Grounds’ center, where Doldimar creates his Kiraak,” he said.

With his eyes shooting wide, Tanwadur practically squeaked, “You’d send your people into that hive of monsters?”

“Who will lead that unfortunate group of soldiers?” Kylorian asked on the heel of his father’s question.

Furrowing his brow, Raimie cocked his head.

“Isn’t the answer to that question obvious?” he said.

“Honestly? No,” Kylorian said.

And several other people around the table murmured their agreement.

“Oh, for the love of-”

Taking a deep breath, Raimie pinched his nose.

“Me. I’ll lead that half,” he said.

And I smiled. At this rate, the kid would get himself killed soon, which while supremely tragic, would further my goals. I hadn’t wanted Raimie’s death to happen so soon or, truthfully, at all, but I wouldn’t pass over such a serendipitous opportunity.

“You want to lead the charge again?” Aramar asked. “Put yourself in real and immediate danger *again?*”

Pulling away, Raimie said, “Well, yes. But-”

“Damnit, Raimie, why do you keep doing this?” Aramar growled, smacking the table. “You’re the only hope we have of defeating Doldimar, and you court death with your every choice.”

Bristling, Raimie opened his mouth to shout, but before that could happen, he slammed his eyes closed, taking another deep breath. When he opened them again, he held his father’s gaze.

“I can’t help it that I’m the only one with the skill set needed to accomplish my goals,” he oh-so-calmly said.

Thankfully, Kylorian cut in at that moment.

“Which are?” he asked.

And silently, I blessed the teenager.

Raimie rounded on Kylorian, ready to tear into him, but he must have seen something in the other boy to pacify him because tension quickly leaked out of his body.

“In this case, I want to return the Kiraak to their natural state,” he said.

“How?”

The question rang in the room, having burst from multiple lips.

“The process is simple enough,” Raimie said with a shrug. “It’s the opposite of what’s done to create them: draw Corruption from under their skin and dissipate it once it’s free. It takes time for those once afflicted to act human again, but conversion is feasible. At least, it was possible for the small group I’ve tested it on.”

“But... that implies an ability to control Corruption,” Tanwadur said. “Isn’t that associated with primeancers, more specifically those who use the dark power?”

“Daevetch,” Raimie said with a nod. “That’s why I must lead the second half of the team. I’d rather give the Kiraak their lives back than wipe them out.”

“Huh.”

Every eye turned to Kylorian, who was sitting with his arms crossed and consternation painted in broad strokes across his face.

“Does that mean the rumors are true, then?” he asked. “I thought they seemed kind of ridiculous, but you’re saying you’re actually a primeancer.”

“Yes. I am.”

Standing tall, Raimie lifted his chin, as if expecting someone to attack him.

“And I mean to use my primeancy to give Auden’s resistance something they’ve been fighting to gain for centuries. Will that be a problem for you?”

After a moment, Kylorian relaxed, and although it took me a second, I realize that the teenager was chuckling under his breath.

“Not at all,” he said. “And I like your plan, although I’d like to make a suggestion.”

Relief was practically blazing from Raimie, but somehow, he kept it out of his voice when he asked.

“What’s that?”

“Put me on the team with Ryvolim,” Kylorian said. “I’ve fought Enforcers before—”

Snorting, Tanwadur said, “More like run like a girl from them.”

This had both Kylorian and me tensing, but the younger man merely responded in an even tone.

“In the instance you’re referring to, I wasn’t about to risk my people in an impossible fight, and I didn’t think wasting my life was a fantastic idea either. Of course, we retreated from Betlisa once we could! At the time, you seemed fine with my decision. Why bring it up now?”

Shaking his head, Kylorian turned back to Raimie before his father could reply.

“At the very least, I have experience with fighting Kiraak. You say that you want to save them, but the crazy bastards won’t be obliging enough to lay down their arms while you heal them. You can’t do your job until the Enforcers are gone, and I can watch Ryvolim’s back while he dispatches those monsters.”

Shooting to his feet, Tanwadur shouted, “You will do no such thing! Let’s not get into you ignoring how *this man*—”

He jerked his arm up to point at Raimie.

“—claims magic similar to the Dark Lord. No. At this point, it seems I must remind you of a fundamental truth. Long ago, you agreed to the purpose I’ve given you, and to accomplish it, you must follow my orders. You aren’t to volunteer your services without my approval, especially not to *him*. You’re to *do as you’re told*, boy.”

He raised a hand as if to strike Kylorian, and I was dropped into a nightmare once more. The past superimposed the present, and my father violently beat my younger brother for a perceived failure.

“*Leave him alone!*” I snapped.

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