

Chapter 25: The Moments Before

Ryvolim

And so, I found myself here once more.

Standing on the fringe of the forest that separated two Enforcers' regions, I look out over a cracked and blasted land, grateful that Doldimar had kept such destruction to one portion of Auden this time. He'd certainly spread ruin like this over the whole of it in past cycles. I wasn't sure what had withheld him from doing the same in present day.

I was glad this journey was almost over. Keeping to a bright and happy façade had been wearing on me, which hadn't been helped by how little time I'd had to myself over the last week. I'd found enough of it to let my magic's energy drain run its course, but besides that, there had been no time to drop my disguise, and unlike other instances where I'd done this, my pretense had been *exhausting* this time around.

If that weren't enough, I'd been so busy and had such a lack of alone time that I'd been unable to speak with Creation since taking Da'kul. I needed to question them. They were keeping something from me, and *I knew it*. So, the fact that they'd been complacently hovering at the edge of my vision for the last week and I'd been unable to do anything about it hadn't been pleasant.

All of which had made me irritable. I'd been fighting to keep the others from noticing my growing bad mood, but I wasn't sure how successful I'd been with it, especially with the spies in our midst.

Rising from where the others had been discussing the plan into the ground once more, one of said spies, Little, headed toward me with a mischievous grin in place. Great. What sort of trouble was that kid about to throw me into?

As he came closer, I withheld from making a face at the stitches holding his face together. When he'd returned to Tiro, Little had gone to Chela for treatment, and while she was one of the better healers among our people, I could have done a better job than her. I hated that the necessity of my deception had ended with this young spy receiving less than the best treatment for his wounds.

As he joined me, Little said, "Relax. I won't bite you. And drop the fake smile, would you? It's clearly hurting you to wear it."

I snorted at that.

“Noticed my tension, did you?”

Laughing, Little said, “I’d be surprised if any of us could relax, given what’s coming.”

He waved toward the cracked, dry land in front of us.

“But no. This tension’s been riding you for a while now, hasn’t it? Rhylix.”

Freezing, I turned to the spy in slow motion. Had Oswin shared my secret with his subordinates? I thought I’d impressed the importance of keeping it on him!

“*What* did you call me?” I said. “My name is-”

“Rhylix,” Little said. “Don’t try to deny it. I know it’s true, although you shouldn’t worry about the others seeing through your pretense. Your persona’s convincing! It almost fooled me, and I have a gift for reading people. But then, I was given some warning to look for you.”

“Really,” I said with my voice empty. “Who did that, might I ask?”

Because if someone unknown had figured out my deception, it could get... bad for me.

As if he hadn’t heard what I’d said, Little asked, “Back in Da’kul, how did you convince so many people that they saw your corpse? Did you doctor a body to look like yours? Or maybe you ingested an easily reversible poison. And *why* would you make people think you were dead? Was it to gain some sense of safety, or was there another reason?”

Gods, that had been a lot of questions, and far too many of them had struck close to the truth.

“None of that is your concern,” I said before repeating. “Who warned you about me?”

“Oh, you know. The one who did this.”

When Little waved at his face, I sucked in a gasp.

“Doldimar?” I somehow said.

Oh Alouin, what else had that bastard revealed to this spy?

“What did he say?” I snapped.

Shrugging, Little said, “Merely that you weren’t dead, despite what I’d heard. He gave me a message for you. It went, ‘Arivor has received your letter and says hello’. What’s that supposed to mean, do you think? And why does Doldimar know who you are?”

So, my message had reached my old friend. Sure, I’d happened across that straggling Conscripted soldier after I’d told Raimie about the Eternal War, months ago, but on hearing about how the

citizens of Tiro had massacred the remnants of Teron's army, I hadn't been sure if the hapless kid had survived. I was glad to hear he had.

And horrible as it might be, I was glad to hear from my friend as well because if he'd received my letter, then Arivor knew an end might be in sight. Maybe that would give him a small amount of comfort.

"You going to answer my questions?" Little said.

As I looked him over, I understood why he seemed so agitated. I'd had what must seem like a secret correspondence with the enemy. He was probably questioning whether I was a traitor.

Sighing, I said, "Raimie knows everything there is to know about me, including any relationship I might hold with the Dark Lord. If he's seen fit to keep details about that from you, then I don't see why I should share my secrets. You seem trustworthy, Little, but the things in my past have a tendency to get good people killed. I don't want that for you, if I can help it."

Cocking his head, Little examined me for a moment before nodding.

"I can accept that reasoning," he said. "You going to be ok if Raimie ever decides to spill your secrets to me?"

That was an easy question to answer.

"I trusted Raimie with the secret of my primeancy for *months*," I said. "If he decides others can know a secret that's even more deadly, then it will be for a good reason."

And... there was that smirk again.

Clapping my shoulder, Little said, "Good to know, Rhy. And *thanks for shaaaaring!*"

As he sang those last words, he spun back toward the others, and I rolled my eyes. I didn't know how I'd gotten myself surrounded by a bunch of snarky assholes, but it... wasn't that bad of a spot to be in.

I hoped we could get through the coming battle with all of us intact.

For several more hours, we waited to hear the inevitable *boom* and *crash* of Marcuset's bombardment, coming from the nearby Birthing Grounds. Each of us prepared for violence in the way that worked best for us. For me, that was to sit quietly, empty of thoughts, and wait.

When the ground eventually transmitted a rumble to the group, each of us was on our feet almost immediately, and we left the cover of the trees.

Little led us to a nearby trapdoor, hidden amongst the wild scrub and cracked earth. Its disguise was so effective that I might have missed it, if not for the spy's directions.

I was the last one down the ladder, squeezing through the crack of its sinkhole with difficulty. Resisting the urge to light the space with Ele—Kylorian and Hadrion still thought I was an average human, after all—I instead descended the ladder in pitch-black, and at the base, I regrouped with the others. Raimie and Little advanced on the cave's next opening, frantically waving the all-clear after a moment.

I'd been sure that we'd run into enemies while in the cave system. During a bombardment, these underground spaces would become the safest place to wait the siege out. Kiraak and Conscripted soldiers should be packing these halls, but even still, we soon emerged into sunlight without incident, which made me uneasy.

Was Adrinusk merely being flippant with his subordinates' lives, or was this *somehow* a trap? I didn't know how the Enforcer could have learned about our plan. We'd been extraordinarily careful with keeping its details secret, but still, I couldn't help wondering about that.

Outside of the caves, the absolute *noise* of the bombardment made any conversation impossible, not that any of us would have risked doing that while so close to the enemy. The ground shook beneath our feet, which had me shooting a glance at the cliff's edge. This close to the wall, our little group of saboteurs should be safe from all sorts of projectiles, especially since Raimie had ordered Marcuset to focus his bombardment on the center of the Birthing Grounds, but who knew how accurate those crude weapons of war could be? Hopefully, we wouldn't get swiped off the face of the earth before we'd finished our side of the plan.

Little left us shortly after we reached the open air. Earlier this week, he'd shared his plan to resolve some unfinished business in the Birthing Grounds before meeting up with us once he was done, which had me worried. Why would we let a teenager, no matter how skilled and confident, wander alone through a horde of the enemy and during a battle no less? But Raimie had easily given Little leave to do as he liked. Even Oswin, who seemed to be overly protective of his youngest subordinate, had seemed unphased by this idea, so I'd had no ground to stand on with making a protest of my own. Hopefully, we'd see the spy once this was over.

Once we'd gotten into place, Raimie rested a hand on the wall, and shadows flickered away from that point of contact, racing up the cliff in a jagged zig-zag. At each place this line leveled off, portions of the cliff face cracked and lifted away from the rest, anchoring themselves into a ninety-degree angle.

Step by step, a stair rose from out of the wall.

I didn't know when Raimie had learned how to do this with Daevetch, not that I kept track of his progress in that area. It frightened me how well he took to those types of magic application.

When the last step slotted into place, it didn't take long before soldiers peered down at us from the top of an intimidating drop. One of them hesitantly put his weight on the first floating step, and when he didn't plummet to his death, more soldiers followed his example. As Raimie's army flowed into the pit, the bombardment above slowed down, which gradually reduced the ringing in my ears.

After a while, Raimie retracted his hand, ceasing Daevetch's flow from him, and a knot in my gut loosened. I knew that dark energy didn't affect my friend as much as every other Daevetch primeancer I'd met, but the day *would* come when Raimie would wield those shadows and subsequently refuse to let go. I hated imagining what would happen to our friendship when that eventually happened.

Turning to me with a crooked smile, he wobbled in place, and I reached out to steady him. With the glaze in his eyes retreating in increments, he raggedly laughed.

"Sorry, Rhy. Holding that much power can be... intoxicating at times," he said. "Letting it go usually leaves me dizzy."

I could imagine.

"Are you all right to move on?" I asked. "We could take a break, if you need it."

Glancing at how many soldiers had already descended to us, forming up in ranks nearby, I wasn't sure how true that claim was.

"There's no need. I can carry on, no problem," Raimie said.

Pulling away from me, he slapped my back a few times.

"Good luck?"

My friend looked nowhere near recovered from his Daevetch use. Frazzled and distracted, Raimie probably couldn't defend himself from even the mildest of attacks, but if we were to succeed with this plan, he needed to quickly reach the center of this place. I'd have to trust that he knew what he was doing. That effort was helped by the spy, hovering at his king's back.

"You'll watch him?" I asked Oswin.

"Like a hawk," the spy said.

So, I let go of my concern.

"Good luck to you as well, my friend," I said. "See you soon."

After a smile and a wave, Raimie, Oswin, and Hadrion plunged into a break between the barracks, although buildings quickly concealed them, and chewing on his lip, Kylvorian stared at the site of their departure for a moment. Gods, he must be worried about his brother. I wished I could reassure him that everything would be fine—if Raimie let *anything* happen to that kid, I'd be shocked—but it didn't seem wise.

I led the way to the closest cave in the cliff face with Ren's adoptive brother on my heels. Not only would an Enforcer like Adrinosh hole up in the safest place possible during an attack, but I could feel several sources of Daevetch coming from this direction.

I was surprised that all three of the Enforcers had gathered in one place. Of course, the one in charge would seek safety in times of chaos—Doldimar’s reign made it difficult for reckless Kiraak to rise into the rank of Enforcer—but the visitors...

Usually, they followed the higher calling that all Daevetch primeancers responded to. Their primary drive was Chaos, Corruption, Death, and more. Given that, I’d thought that Foln and Arabelna would be out here, drawn to the scene of carnage and—in their eyes—fun unfolding around us, but what I was feeling through my Ele source insisted that this assumption was wrong, for once.

Even with that bit of magic to help me pinpoint the Enforcers’ location, they still took me by surprise. As I skulked around a corner into a new section of the caves, a Daevetch bolt flew for my head, and shoving Kylorian out of the way, I rolled into a crouch with my sword and dagger already drawn.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Yes, thanks.”

Good. We should focus on our enemy.

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