

Chapter 94: Battle Plans

Raimie

On the tail end of my shout, a knife sailed between me and Oswin, impaling itself in the middle of the table, and this display, along with my ringing voice, effectively shut everyone up. As Rhylix retrieved his knife, returning to a seat on his crate, I made sure to catch each gaze of the men here.

“We’re not crossing the Narrow Sea. We’re not splitting up, and we are most certainly not running.”

Even I was surprised by how firm I’d sounded there. Damn, that statement had brooked no argument. Hopefully, I could keep it up.

“What we will do is stand and fight,” I continued. “Now, as I was saying, if we position-”

“Forgive me, sir, but are you serious?” Gistrick interrupted. “We’d have to be insane to face such an overwhelming army when we have other options.”

“And what are those other options?” Marcuset said.

“Run! Live to fight another day!” Gistrick said. “You said it yourself months ago, Raimie. Sometimes, that’s all you can-”

Unable to hold myself back any longer, I slammed my hands on the table, making the others jump. I kept my eyes fixed on the map, carefully enunciating each syllable as I spoke.

“I would appreciate it if I could finish a single thought without interruption.”

Lifting my gaze, I fixed Marcuset and Gistrick with it.

“For having sworn your fealty to me, you two have shown me little respect. I’ve come to expect such treatment from my family but from two successful military commanders? You surprise me. You should know the concept of a chain of command better than this.”

With a laugh, Gistrick said, “You’re pulling rank now? After all this time?”

As he continued to chuckle, I waited for his mirth to run out, unceasing in my stare until he fell silent.

“No. I’m not pulling rank,” I said. “The lack of insignia on my collar should make it obvious that I don’t have one. I am your king. I am above rank.”

Blanching, Gistrick gave a slight nod, and when I turned to the other three, they watched me with unreadable expressions in place.

“Can I expect any further interruptions from you, or may I continue unimpeded?”

None of them moved, seemingly locked in place, until Oswin cleared his throat.

“You appear to have their attention, sir,” he said, “which they really should have given to you from the beginning.”

Ok. Maybe it was time to let up a little. Even as I did so, though, I was afraid my legs would buckle without anything to support them. I’d never been so assertive before. I wasn’t sure I liked it.

“Yes, well,” I said. “I suppose I’ll forgive them for it this once since I haven’t been acting the way I should until now. That will have to change. For now, though, it can wait.”

Ignoring the others’ stares, I pulled another map from beneath the one Rhylix had been using.

“As you may have noticed, I’ve been working with a mediator from a nearby city. Her name is Ren,” I said. “She’s working to secure us a place of refuge, somewhere we might hide until this enemy army loses interest in us, but given her people’s disposition toward us, I find it unlikely that her efforts will succeed. Due to this scenario, I’ve been forming several battle plans over the last week, all while hoping we wouldn’t need them, and based off of Rhy’s provided intelligence, I’ve chosen the one that we’re most likely to live through.”

Pausing, I pointed at the edge of my new map, one that displayed a close-up view of our current position.

“We’re situated here, on the beach, with a dense forest to one side of it and cliffs on the other. This beach rises at a nice incline for a couple of miles before leveling off.

“Rhylix has assured me that the enemy is unlikely to approach us from the forest. He says that the Kiraak, which make up a majority of their army, do everything possible to avoid such wealthy examples of life, and given how empty the forest has been in the week I’ve explored it, I’m inclined to believe him. In addition, Ren has confirmed that rebel fighters from Tiro have been keeping the woods cleared of Kiraak for years, leading to a fear of it among them.

“Given this, Teron will likely have his army advance from the east, having had them pass along the other side of the nearby mountains to get here. They’ll approach through the deforested land between the forest and cliffs. I’ve already sent several scouts to confirm this.

“So, what I’m proposing.”

Retrieving a green token, I rested it on the map.

“We send a unit of our best archers into the cliffs, there to hide until the enemy army has passed them. Once it has, they will rain hell on our foe while they approach the beach. Hopefully, these archers will draw their stragglers away as well.”

I placed a larger token on the marked beach.

“Meanwhile, we leave a nominal force here to lure the enemy in. It will need to be large enough to allay Teron’s suspicions of a trap while not dragging too many soldiers away from our main host. Say, fifteen hundred or so. Having some Esela among them would be helpful as well, as their illusions can swell this token force’s ranks.

“Eventually, the enemy will charge, and when that happens, this unit will break rank, retreating along the coastline toward the forest. Once they’re clear, sailors on our remaining ships will use our cannons to decimate the Kiraak.”

After scattering a few red tokens across the beach, I rested my hands on it, hanging over the map.

“Now, to this point, the rest of us will have been waiting, hiding in the forest’s eaves, but with the enemy drawn in, we’ll charge, flanking them. If we continue pressing them between our blades and our cannons, we may have a chance.”

Pushing off of the table, I folded my arms behind my back.

“Questions? Comments? You’re welcome to voice your thoughts now.”

The others, however, refused to say a word. Some of them scanned the map while at least one just *looked* at me, and I fought to keep still.

“How in the *void* did you come up with this?” Marcuset eventually asked, breaking an uncomfortable silence.

With his question, one discomfort got traded for another, but I couldn’t display how unsure I was of this plan. Gods, why would I, an ignorant teenager, think that I could devise a working battle plan?

Forcing calm into my voice, I said, “Over the last few months, my lessons with Ferin and Eledis have covered many topics, to be sure, but strategy and military history were among them. In addition, while I stayed in Daira at Queen Kaedesa’s behest, I devoured the books in her library, getting through a good portion of them before we left the capital.

“All of you know that my memory is... unique, we’ll call it. I find it difficult to forget anything I’ve read, and while that doesn’t always mean that I’ve absorbed a finished book’s contents, I can retrieve it in exacting detail after I’m done. For the last week, I’ve spent far too long reviewing these resources to create what I’ve presented to you, not that I should have to explain myself. My question was on my plan’s merits, not my methods of concocting it.”

After an awkward pause, Marcuset nodded.

"I can accept that. Please forgive me if I caused offense," he said. "As for what you've asked, this plan..."

Falling silent, he again examined the map while the rest of us waited. After all, Marcuset was the most successful commander among us.

"It could work," he finally pronounced with only the barest hint of surprise in his voice. "If you're willing, I'd like to modify it a little. For instance, I'm not sure that we can use the ships' cannons if we leave them in place. We couldn't get those boats in range of the shore, but I can easily fix that problem."

Waving a hand over the table, I said, "Have at it. What about the rest of you? Any thoughts?"

Clearing his throat, Oswin waited for acknowledgment before speaking.

"Could you tell us about the Kiraak, sir? You said you'd explain."

"Right."

I rubbed my eyes while shaking my head.

"Can't believe I forgot," I said before dropping my hand. "Rhy, would you mind?"

As I stepped aside, I was more than happy to fade into my friend's shadow, but again, he didn't move from his crate. Having begun playing with a knife while I'd been speaking, he continued flipping it through his fingers as he explained.

"Before I begin, you need to understand something. In this land, Doldimar is the embodiment of evil incarnate," he said with his eyes fixed on the knife. "With me having said that, perhaps you can fully grasp what I mean when I share that the Kiraak are Doldimar's children."

My father shivered at that, but the others seemed unaffected. Knowing what I did now, I found their stoicism foolish.

"Several times a year, Auden's overlord Harvests the many towns and villages in his domain. In doing so, he rips lovers apart, tearing children from parents, and... well. Suffice it to say that this is where Kiraak come from. Where before they were human and Esela, after coming under his ministrations, they become..."

As Rhylix glanced up, searching for words, he stopped spinning his knife.

"...corrupted," was what he decided on.

With a sharp nod, he sheathed his knife, dropping from the crate to approach the table.

"This is mostly irrelevant for you, though," he said. "What you need to know is that the Kiraak are nearly invincible. If you stab one in the heart, it'll just keep coming. To kill one, you must behead it

or hack it to pieces, but in combat, that second option is virtually impossible.”

Rhylix paused, presumably to allow questions, and frowning, my father took the given opportunity.

Slowly, he asked, “If this is true, then what’s the point of the cannons and archers during the proposed battle?”

This was where I stepped in again.

“The archers will aim for the eyes, when possible. A blind Kiraak won’t do the enemy much good before we eliminate it. Besides, their job will be to goad, not kill,” I said. “As for the cannons, do you really think that a shot from one would do anything less than dismember their targets? Even if they can’t cause such damage, the same concept would apply. We cripple the enemy as much as possible before facing them in combat.”

Giving me an approving look, my father said, “You’ve thought this through.”

I tried not to let that praise go to my head. He didn’t know how much I’d been obsessing over this plan recently.

“I’m glad you think so,” I said, “and I know that the added difficulty of killing Kiraak might make my plan even more unfeasible, but still, this is our best chance. We should fight. We should show Teron and everyone else in Auden that we’ll do what we must to accomplish our goals here.”

For some reason, this had everyone but Eledis smiling at me. My grandfather kept his scowl, but I’d expect nothing else from him.

“Again, I’m reminded of why I swore my fealty to you,” Marcuset said. “Not only are your convictions admirable, but you’re motivated and extraordinarily talented too.”

“Did you expect anything less that brilliance from him, Commander?” Oswin said. “Always, Raimie has astounded and amazed, or don’t you remember?”

Marcuset made a face at him while Gistrick laughed, and all the while, I kept my unease off of my face. I had no clue why these men had such confidence in me, and I wasn’t looking forward to the day when I failed them.

“Well!” Marcuset soon exclaimed. “Now that we have a workable plan, we should discuss its details. If my king approves, of course.”

Waving at him, I said, “Please. Go ahead.”

Which was enough for them. They crowded around the table, and satisfied that I was no longer needed, I tried to relax. Given everything that was coming, I knew that accomplishing this task would be a struggle, one that would be almost as intense as what had happened over the last quarter hour.

Still. At the moment, it was all I could do.

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