

Chapter 97: Unexpected Complications

Rhylix

Ever your friend,

Arivor

The next day dawned clear and beautiful. Any other day, I might have run through weapons drills, anticipating a pleasant morning once I was finished. Today, I watched enemy soldiers march down a slope toward my allies.

Behind me, someone crashed through the forest, which made me wince. The enemy wouldn't hear their minimal noise over the sound of their advance, and my new companion was trying to be stealthy, but still. Their efforts pained me.

When Raimie lowered himself to the forest floor beside me, it only made me cringe harder. Apparently, I should add stealth lessons to everything else I was teaching him.

That was provided we survived today, of course.

Then, Oswin stepped into view on my other side, again having managed to sneak up on me, and I chuckled to myself. Maybe he could take that slew of lessons off my plate.

"How's it going?" Raimie whispered.

Wrinkling my nose at the unnecessary noise, I glanced at my friend.

"As expected," I said. "You're not wearing armor?"

Flashing a smile, Raimie said, "What? You don't like the uniform?"

He picked at its sleeve before turning serious.

“From what I understand about a *certain ability*, I thought armor would only slow me down, and I’ll need speed today,” he said. “Plus, I don’t see you wearing any.”

“I don’t need it,” I absently said. “Are you sure using... *that ability* is a good idea?”

When I glanced at Oswin, curious if he was listening, I found him coldly smiling at me, which was odd. Had I angered him in some way?

“Rhy, we’re likely to die today,” Raimie said. “By the time this is done, no one will care what I am.”

“Fair point,” I said.

Like he’d said, his identity as a primeancer wouldn’t matter if he was dead, and on the off-chance that we achieved victory today, his efforts to guide us toward it would negate anyone’s murderous desires toward him, at least for a time.

Toward me, on the other hand...

“You’ll have to be careful, as usual,” Creation said above me.

I shot a glare at them, but that was all the attention that I could spare for them now. Something about the advancing enemy had caught my eye.

A while ago, I’d noticed that their size was smaller than projected, which had seemed fortuitous at first. As they’d approached the cliffs, though, our people’s archers had started raining arrows on them, and this had raised some concern.

Getting to my knees, I shifted my eyes to resemble an eagle’s, scanning the enemy soldiers, and failed to see lines of black painted under their skin. When an arrow took a soldier in the neck, bringing her down, she failed to rise, which had me cursing under my breath.

“Something wrong?” Oswin drawled.

I didn’t have time to address the hostility found in his voice. Focusing on Raimie, I pointed at the enemy.

“They’re not Kiraak,” I said. “They’re Conscripted, normal people who were forced into service for this fight.”

Rapidly blinking, Raimie said, “All right. That’s unexpected, but it works in our favor, right?”

“Except for that unit is much smaller than one with nine thousand in it. Shit,” Oswin said. “I was just wondering about that.”

Huh. I didn’t know why Oswin’s insight had surprised me. He was a spy for a godsdamn reason.

“Exactly right,” I said. “Teron’s probably using this Conscripted unit to test your ruse. Once the people on the beach retreat, forcing us into a charge, he’ll send in the Kiraak that he’s held in reserve.”

Raimie went pale and still.

“Fuck,” he said with his lips barely moving.

I caught the briefest glimpse of a pained look spreading across his face before he vigorously rubbed his face, and this told me exactly what he’d say next.

Not that he’d have much choice with it. If this plan was to maintain the slightest chance of success, we only had one course of action available to us.

He looked up at me, almost as if to beg for my forgiveness, but all I could do was nod, encouraging him to continue.

“If this is so, then our plan must change,” he said. “Those volunteers on the beach will have to stand their ground, holding until Teron believes that no one is coming to their rescue. The rest of us can only relieve them once he orders the Kiraak forward.”

“Yes,” I softly said.

Beside us, Oswin had gone stiff, looking between us, but fortunately, he chose not to interrupt.

“I need someone to carry the order,” Raimie said.

“You know I’ll do it,” I replied.

“You don’t have to stay with them once it’s done.”

“You know I will.”

As Raimie stared at me, I itched to get going—gods, we were approaching a point of no return—but he had to ask me to do this. He had to truly understand everything that was coming for him if we continued down this path.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Raimie turned away for a moment, taking a few shallow breaths, and when he turned that blue gaze on me again, my friend was gone. Before me, I saw a king, one I’d follow to my dying breath.

“You’re to hold the line until the Kiraak join the fray, after which you’re to retreat,” he said. “None of you is to needlessly waste your lives. Once the trap closes, you’ll fall back along the coast, and after you reach the forest, lose yourselves in it. We’ll regroup once the last enemy has fallen.”

And now, he knew.

With the Conscripted unit halfway to our volunteers, there was no more time to waste, so despite how many witnesses were nearby, I pulled an Ele bubble around myself while drawing more of that energy to my feet.

“Thank you, my friend,” Raimie whispered.

And I was gone. With Ele at my disposal, outpacing the Conscripted unit was easy. Even still, I arrived at the volunteer’s camp with hardly any time to spare. Having already ‘roused’ from slumber, they’d formed into ranks, and as I hurried the last stretch to them via mundane means, someone raised a shout.

“New orders from the king!” I bellowed before they could get too agitated.

While on the way here, I’d modified my vocal cords, so my voice carried far, quickly garnering the volunteers’ attention. Stopping in front of them, I stood at parade rest with my arms folded behind my back.

“I have been tasked with helping you hold a nearby position as retreat is no longer an option,” I shouted. “While I’d love to explain the reasoning for this, we simply don’t have the time. Anyone who can’t obey orders should leave. Now. Otherwise, follow me to the cliffs. If we hurry, we can form up before the battle’s joined.”

It wasn’t an inspiring speech, but as I’d said, there was no time. If we were lucky, they’d get one after we’d moved.

Turning on my heel, I flat-out sprinted for the cliffs. Putting our backs to them would undeniably get us surrounded, but it would also limit the fronts we’d have to handle. Plus, if this didn’t end up being a suicide maneuver, I had other means of getting us out of a trap.

“Do you think this is wise?” Creation asked from ahead. “What if no one follows you? You may be powerful, but you can’t hold off that many, not for long enough anyway.”

Eyeing them, I said, “I’m not changing my mind. Will you overrule my decision?”

For a moment, Creation looked torn before sighing.

“Not this time,” they said. “Will you expose yourself? If you do, your companions will string you up after the battle.”

“If I don’t, I’ll die now,” I said. “I’d rather delay death for as long as possible, if you don’t mind.”

Creation had nothing else, and when I reached the cliffs, I spun around, assessing what I had to work with.

Shockingly, most of the volunteers had trailed behind me, leaving me with thirteen hundred at a rough guess. In a strange mix of haste and discipline, they formed up in a semi-circle with the ends touching the cliffs. It was done so quickly that I ended up having time for that speech.

Pacing in front of the volunteers, I shouted, "You have one job: to survive. If you can't avoid death in the coming quarter-mark, I expect you to take at least one of those bastards with you. Fight dirty. Use everything at your disposal, and forget about honor. In this way, you serve your king. The longer we fight here, the more we defang the trap that he will eventually lead our comrades into."

Pausing, I took a deep breath, noting how tightly Creation had drawn their shoulders together. Was this really a good idea?

Did I have another choice?

"I will distract them as best I can," I shouted, "and I can already hear what you now want to ask. 'How will he do that?' It's a valid question. In answer, I'd ask you another one. Do you know what this is?"

Lifting a hand, I pulled Ele to it, and the reaction to its flash was immediate. People drew away from me with their lips pulled always from their teeth.

"That's right. I'm an Ele primeancer," I shouted, "but before you run me through, I'd ask you to consider everything you've heard about my kind. With that in mind, remember that I am on your side, and I will do my utmost to keep you alive. Do you want me dead now or after the battle's over?"

I gave them a moment to think about that before continuing.

"That's the plan. I'll distract them as much as I can, and you'll kill any that get past me. If we last for long enough, we'll have a chance to retreat, and when that happens, you follow me. I'll make us a hole."

I held as many of their gazes as I could before facing the enemy, and as I did, I half-expected someone from my side to end my life. Instead, I continued breathing, watching the Conscripted close on us until they could see me.

Then, I again lifted my hand overhead, shooting a stream of Ele into the sky. With a shiver running through the enemy line, it shifted to converge on my position, and I drew my weapons.

"You and your fool plans will be the death of me someday," Creation said.

With a swing of my sword, I settled into a ready stance.

"Is that possible without Lighteater around?" I asked.

Clicking their tongue, Creation said, "You *know* what I *mean*."

I just chuckled at that. With the enemy nearly in range, Creation joined my position.

"Here we go again."

Spraying Ele in front of me, I charged into the Conscripted with a howl.

Revision #2

Created 28 August 2024 18:38:15 by FatalisticFable

Updated 8 September 2025 01:10:45 by FatalisticFable