

# Chapter 98: Battle on the Beach, Part One

## Raimie, Rhylix

*Raimie*

Why had I ordered my friend to do something that would almost certainly get him killed?

In the moments before my portion of the battle was joined, this question rattled around in my head, and I couldn't shake it loose. Did I not care about Rhylix? Why would I be so callous with his life? He was my friend, right?

Into this whirl, a thought, one that felt foreign to me, swirled.

*You did the right thing.*

Scowling, I tried to figure out where that had come from. What-?

"Well, that's surprising," Oswin said.

He had his eyes fixed on the beach, and with his words' help, I muddled my way back to clarity. The Conscripted and my people had commenced their fight, and in the middle of this, Rhylix was putting on a brilliant display.

I couldn't see much of it—the fight was too far distant and he kept getting buried by the enemy—but what I could see made my jaw drop.

Because he was using primeancy. Blatantly.

"The hell is he doing?" I said, mostly to myself.

I already knew the answer to that question, of course. Rhylix was doing what he must to survive, something that would likely be required from me in the coming hour.

How horrible was I, feeling relieved that I hadn't been the first to reveal my magic?

“With how much time you two have spent together, his primeancy makes sense,” Oswin said. “Still, I’m surprised he kept it from me.”

That was right. He hadn’t known this secret, although I found that strange. When it came to his primeancy, Rhylix hadn’t been any more secretive with it than me, but then, Oswin hadn’t been paying nearly as much attention to him as he had to me.

Since he hadn’t known, though, I was curious. How would he respond to this revelation?

When I glanced at Oswin, he raised an eyebrow.

“What? You expect me to be frothing at the mouth or something?” he said. “I’ve been around one particular primeancer long enough to know that you’re not like the ones in the old tales. I won’t make a fuss.”

Hmm. That was a decent reaction. Hopefully, it would be the baseline for when my turn came.

I couldn’t help my warm smile as I said.

“Will you be as understanding when I inevitably follow Rhy’s example?”

With his face souring, Oswin said, “Yes, even if it’ll make protecting you all the more difficult.”

I had to laugh at that, even if I kept it quiet. We were trying to stay hidden, after all.

Turning to the battle, I chewed on my lip, watching my people fall. They were doing better than I’d expected, but even still, the odds they were up against would lead only to a gradual slaughter. I abhorred every moment I sat here, delaying their rescue.

When would Teron order the rest of his army to attack? Damn his rightful suspicion of my trap.

“Did you know?”

Wincing at that restrained shout, I twisted toward Marcuset, who was advancing on me with his hands curled into fists at his sides. Oswin rested his hand on his sword, making to step in front of me, but I waved him back.

“Know what?” I said. “Also, if you mean to accuse me of something primeancy related, you’d better hurry it up. Eledis and the others are coming.”

Drawing even with me, Marcuset acted as if he hadn’t heard me.

“Did you know what he is?” he said.

Raising my eyebrows, I said, “What do you think? You know, for how accepting you’ve been of me, you’re acting rather out of proportion when it comes to Rhy.”

Marcuset didn't get a chance to respond because at that moment, Gistrick stopped beside us, leaning on his knees to catch his breath.

Pointing toward the distant battle, he gasped, "You need to... order the charge. I don't know what that traitor is doing... but if we're to salvage this-"

"Rhy's acting on my orders," I interrupted.

By this point, Eledis and my father had joined us, and as one, they stared at me, although Marcuset took a step back with color draining from his cheeks.

"What did you say?" he breathed.

"You heard me," I say. "Circumstances changed. I had to adjust the plan, and Rhy volunteered to face certain death so he could deliver my orders. He's not a traitor."

With his eyes as wide as saucers, Marcuset whispered, "*Why* would you condemn all of those people...?"

It seemed someone's faith in me wasn't as unshakable as he'd believed. Gistrick didn't have that problem.

Turning to the others, he said, "We should take charge of this situation now. We can still win this if we order the charge-"

"You will do no such thing," I said, barreling over him. "We will not waste those peoples' sacrifice. We will wait."

Snarling, Gistrick rounded on me, getting in my face.

"For what?" he snarled.

In the most impeccably lucky timing I'd ever experienced, the roar of many voices washed over us in that moment, and my companions jerked toward the rise of the distant hill. Within a few heartbeats, the rest of the enemy army started pouring over it, although a space at the top had been cleared for a solitary figure.

Teron, the man who'd chased me across a kingdom and the murderer of countless innocents, stood at the apex of that rise. How I wished I could reach across the distance and cut him down.

He wasn't the priority right now, though.

"Gentlemen! What we were waiting for," I said, gesturing toward the enemy. "Oswin?"

With his sword already drawn, the spy said, "Ready, sir."

Ignoring the others around me, I pulled my pistol out of its holster, tapping its muzzle against my leg while I watched the enemy charge. As soon as I'd deemed them committed enough, I raised the weapon overhead before once more turning my attention on a group of shocked people.

"In answer to your question, Marcuset, yes. Rhy is my friend. Of course I knew that he's a primeancer. I've known since Paft."

Interestingly, of the four who'd been unaware of this, Gistrick was the only one to react.

Pulling back, he said, "What? Why didn't you tell someone?"

At that, I struggled to keep from looking down my nose at him.

"Besides the fact that Rhy's my friend, you mean?" I said. "That's simple, really."

Gods, what was I doing? I should give the signal to charge. I shouldn't delay like this, and I most certainly shouldn't reveal any deadly secrets to the people who would be directing the battle right before it was joined.

Even knowing this, I'd speak anyway. Perhaps anger at their reaction to Rhylix was guiding me. Perhaps it was something else. It didn't matter.

With a fierce grin, I plunged into one of the most dangerous things I'd done in my life.

"I didn't tell anyone that Rhy's a primeancer because I'm one too."

Hell... those shocked expressions.

With an uproarious laugh, I squeezed my pistol's trigger, and its bang was soon echoed by several more from the cannons in the trees. Destruction carved through the enemy army, sending a hiccup through their pell-mell sprint, and spinning to Oswin, I cut off a manic giggle.

"Keep up as best you can," I shouted.

Pulling Ele to me, I joined my people in our race to finish what the cannons had started, leaving a host of new problems behind me.

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### *Rhylix*

Something hot sliced through the meat of my knee, and without thought, I snapped off the fletching of the arrow in it. If not treated soon, that could be problematic, leaving me crippled, but I didn't have time for that now, catching the axe falling on my face with my dagger instead.

Fortunately, the woman behind the strike hadn't thought to defend her legs. When she'd seen me bending for the arrow, she'd probably also seen it as an opening, which was unlucky for her. I hacked at her thigh, and while she collapsed, I scrambled away from her.

As I did, Ele jetted over my head, sending a teenager soaring over his comrades' heads, but I didn't stop to thank Creation, as each of these violent engagements had fallen beneath my awareness. I was enmeshed in a song hidden beneath the world's veil, one that almost no one else could hear.

The Conscripted danced to Destruction's beat. Every intercepted strike was a chord in the song with every ignored feint an added tone in their melody's dissonance.

Meanwhile, I clung to Preservation's harmony, both for myself and the volunteers behind me. Adhering to that strain of music, I disabled my enemy, bruised and disoriented them, and when possible, bodily flung them away. To end an opponent's life wouldn't fit with my portion of the song, and so, I never attempted it.

At some point, I caught sight of a volunteer falling without her head, and Preservation's harmony hitched, which I couldn't allow. Gritting my teeth, I forced it to resume.

And this was how it went.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed before a cracking boom disrupted the song's beat. Disoriented, I barely dodged the sword heading for my stomach, lopping off its owner's hand once the danger had passed.

Had that been what I thought it was?

Pulling Ele to me, I jumped into the air while shooting that energy through my feet, and thus, I rose high above my enemies' heads. What I saw there confirmed my suspicions. A swarm of allied soldiers was spilling out of the forest to flank an advancing Kiraak horde.

Time to get out of here.

"Are you sure about this?" Creation panted beside me. "It'll be a huge expenditure. Will cost you dearly."

"These people are worth it."

When Creation nodded at me, I could swear a smile was twisting their lips, which... what? Had I done something to please them for once?

I couldn't ponder this for long, though.

"Retreat!" I shouted.

The order got carried through the volunteers' ranks, and as it spread, I made a running leap, aided by Ele, into the enemy's midst. Landing with a crack, I tore the floodgate over my source open...

...and Ele pulsed from me in a series of tidal waves. The force of it flung the Conscripted away from me as if they were driftwood, clearing a path through them, but for the volunteers to take advantage of it, I had to stop this outpouring of a primal force through the gateway that was me.

Unfortunately, I was having trouble with that at the moment. Any time I tried to close my source, Ele batted my efforts aside, as if I were a fly, and for a terrifying instant... or perhaps an eternity, I was afraid that the primal force would flow through me until it had drained itself, leaving only Daevetch at the bedrock of reality.

Then, I heard a much-loved voice.

“Rhy!”

Opposite me, my sister pushed into the gale of Ele.

“Rhy, come on!” she shouted. “You’re stronger than it. Isn’t that what you’ve always said?”

What was *she* doing here?

With a frown, I slammed the floodgate closed. What the hell had that been? I couldn’t lose control like that, not in such a devastating way.

As the volunteers sprinted past me, trampling the fallen Conscripted in their haste, Creation dropped to the ground. Panting, they craned their head up to me.

“That was a close one,” they said.

“Mm.”

I had no other comment, too preoccupied with scanning my surroundings. While most of the volunteers had turned tail for the safety of the forest, as they’d been ordered to do, some had split off to enter a newly joined battle.

The main force of both armies had clashed further up the beach. For the moment, my allies had the upper hand, due in large part to the surprise of their ambush, but I knew how quickly that would change. I should lend them my aid.

I’d taken a step to do that when Ren slipped in front of me.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. “Leading this suicide mission. *Revealing your secret*. Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

Raising an eyebrow, I said, “No. I was about to go help Raimie.”

I brushed past her, calling over my shoulder as I did.

“What are *you* doing? You were supposed to stick to the sidelines, on the off chance that Tanwadur changed his mind about helping us. That hasn’t happened, obviously, so why are you still here? You should get somewhere safe, preferably before these Conscripted recover.”

Most of them seemed to have lost consciousness from the blast, but a few were stumbling to their feet. Ren paid them no mind, snatching my hand to stop me instead.

"I'm not leaving you here," she said. "Come with me. Let's survive this together."

Sighing, I glanced at my sister from the corner of my eye.

"I won't abandon Raimie," I said.

"But-

I lifted a hand to stop her.

"I can't. Not only is he my ally, but he's also my friend, and I... I have always been devoted to my friends," I said. "Go home. Years ago, I left you on a battlefield, certain you would die. Now, it's your turn. Please, Ren. Help the people I've saved. Keep them safe, but don't stay here."

After a moment, Ren swallowed, slowly nodding.

"All right," she said, "but don't you dare actually die. If you do, I will never, ever forgive you."

With a smile, I said, "I can accept that."

Biting her lip, Ren retreated a few steps before turning on her heel, and as she hurried after the volunteers, I let myself slump.

My sister was safe. Now for my friend.

Eyeing Creation, I said, "Feel like helping me find him?"

Chuckling, the splinter struggled to their feet.

"I thought you'd never ask."

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