

Chapter 99: Battle on the Beach, Part Two

Raimie, Rhylix

Raimie

If I'd learned anything from the battle, it was that Daevetch was incredibly helpful when it came to beheading Kiraak. As I dragged my blade through another neck, Dim cackled beside me, drunk on power, but I couldn't match their energy level. Already tired, I nearly burst into tears when Bright popped in front of me, sending my next opponent stumbling with a burst of white light.

I didn't know how much longer I could keep this up. What I was doing was physically exhausting.

And there was that. I was trying very hard not to think about what I was doing.

If you did not cut them down, they would kill us, came floating through my head.

This stray thought made me hesitate for the briefest moment—sure, I was far distant from the world right now but enough to lose control of my own thoughts?—and this almost got me killed. Something deafening burst on my ears, emphasizing the ringing already in them, and the Kiraak who'd been about to run me through dropped to the ground with a messy hole in his head.

Jerking me behind him, Oswin snapped, "*Focus! Sir.*"

I was focused enough to realize that if I was to survive this, I'd need respite soon, and so, I scanned the battlefield for an opening into a more cleared space, disarming and dispatching a Kiraak as I did it.

As soon as I found what I sought, I started for it, trusting Oswin to follow me.

"Why are you retreating?" Dim snarled, getting in my face. "Don't be weak!"

How is surviving weak? I snapped back.

Even as I burst into a patch of relative peace, I stayed on my guard, perfectly aware of the violence all around me. Hell, how could this be real?

“You could draw from me,” Bright said. “My whole could ease your fatigue.”

That would have been handy to know a quarter-hour ago.

Even as I drew Ele to me, though, I stayed in place. Beside me, Oswin took a potshot at a Kiraak who’d been advancing on us, dropping her, but I was more interested in taking advantage of this quiet, identifying where I could best be put to use.

Drawing my own pistol, I shouted, “How are we doing, Oswin?”

During our limited breaks in the fighting, I’d noticed the runners coming and going, so I knew that Gistrick and Marcuset had been delivering reports, despite our disagreement before the battle had started. I hadn’t deigned to ask about them yet, knowing Oswin would inform me of any significant changes.

Really, given my newly accepted position, I should be with the commanders, observing the fight so I could make changes as needed, but despite having first outlined this plan, I only had a few months of book-learning under my belt when it came to military tactics. I’d thought it best to leave managing this battle to more experienced people.

With his eyes roving over the strife around us, Oswin made a face.

“As well as can be expected, sir,” he shouted. “We’re holding our own but...”

But we were severely outnumbered on an open field, and our enemy was composed of nigh invincible soldiers, yes. Clever tactics only went so far in leveling such an uneven playing field. Unless something changed soon, we were probably fucked, but then, I’d known that since Rhylix had returned from Da’kul, bringing news of how prepared Teron had been for us.

I didn’t know what drew my eye to the tree line, but when I saw a distinctive figure dumbly standing in the sparsest patch of cover around him, my stomach dropped through my feet. I ran toward him, hoping the whole time that the soldiers around me wouldn’t think I was abandoning them.

As we worked our way through the melee, Oswin and my splinters kept me alive. I defended myself too, of course, but this was my first time in true combat. The other three were better at seeing the threats I’d never have noticed.

When we reached the figure, I dragged him deeper into the trees.

“The hell are you doing here, Hadrion?” I growled.

With his mouth left gaping, the teenager had eyes only for the battlefield, and I didn’t have the time to indulge his shock. Grabbing his face, I forced him to look at me while lightly slapping his cheeks.

“Hadrion!”

Blinking, Hadrion focused on me.

“Raimie...” he said before shaking himself. “I’m sorry. I came with news, hoping to reach you before the enemy army, but it looks like I was too late.”

His eyes started drifting back toward the battle, so I gently smacked him again.

“Hey!” I said. “What’s the news?”

“Um...” Hadrion dumbly said, licking his lips. “Dury changed his mind. He offers your people refuge in their time of need.”

A way out, one where the killing could stop! Gods, how I wanted it.

I wasn’t sure how to take advantage of it now, though. How did one make an organized retreat when chaos had captured both sides of a fight? I was sure Oswin could help with that.

Still, while Tanwadur’s change of heart was beyond welcome, it had come a little late, although better late than...

Wait.

“My people?” I asked. “He said specifically that?”

Grimacing, Hadrion said, “Unfortunately. From what I understand, if you or your family come near Tiro right now, you’d be shot full of arrows. Dury can only accept helping ‘the people that bastard’s duped’. His words, not mine.

Oh. *Oh*, if that didn’t hurt, setting me even more adrift than I already had been. Who liked having a breath of hope ripped away from them?

“Ok. Thank you for the news,” I said before addressing Oswin. “We need to get our people into the woods, where they can lose the Kiraak before reconvening at our rendezvous point. After they’ve gathered, Marcuset can lead them in Tiro’s direction, and once they’re close to the city, we’ll have to trust that Tanwadur’s people can get them the rest of the way. Even shaky as that is, though, taking this offer will give our people the greatest chance at survival. It’s best if they accept it.”

“Certainly, sir. I’ll send a few runners to see it done,” Oswin said before hesitating. “And you? Are you...?”

What? Ok?

With a significant glance at the bedlam we’d just left, I said, “You’re *really* asking that now?”

Turning to Hadrion, I dropped into a shallow bow.

“Again, thank you for bringing me this news,” I said. “You should get home. If you don’t, Ren will kill me. Meanwhile, I have to...”

Trailing off, I frowned. What the hell was I going to do? Find my family and run, obviously, but how would I do that?

Those were questions for the future. For now...

“I have to fight,” I said.

“I’m so sorry, Raimie,” Hadrion said.

Biting his lip, he looked like he’d say something more but only ended up nodding before taking off. Oswin had moved to the side, signaling to a nearby runner. I should probably be more curious about how he was staying in contact with people across the battlefield but... but...

You can do this, came from the depths of me.

I knew I could.

Glancing at Dim, I said, “Not going to protest this retreat?”

Snarling, the splinter snapped their teeth at me.

“Just get back to the fight,” they growled.

Which only made me smile. They *would* like the utter Chaos we’d found ourselves in.

Once Oswin had returned, we hurried into a struggle for survival once more, and for a while, it was enough to drive the plight of my situation away from me, not to mention the question of how my people would extract from this. Soon enough, though, these concerns were crowding my mind again, making me careless. Thank Alouin for Oswin, my splinters, and Rhylix’s extensive training over the last few months. I couldn’t say how often a sequence of moves, practiced until it was instinct, saved my life.

But this, my inability to keep my mind on my present danger, drew my attention. Ever in the past when facing peril like this—great enough to throw me into such a strong state of detachment—I’d been keenly attuned to keeping myself alive, shoving all fear aside. It was why I detached at times like this. So, why was I still afraid?

Hang on a minute. Fear.

“Oh, no,” I whispered. “Bright? Dim?”

The Daevetch splinter was too distracted to answer my unspoken question, but Bright acknowledged it, cocking their head. When their breathing hitched and their face drained of color, I knew how they’d respond.

“Oh no, no, no,” they hoarsely whispered. “Not again.”

So, this is battle magic? I said.

When they nodded, I glanced at the soldiers around me, wondering how they hadn't been reduced to gibbering messes yet, but despite that question, I was strangely relieved.

I knew what the future held. I knew how to help my people.

“Sorry, Oswin,” I called at the spy's turned back. “Please, don't hate me.”

Spinning away from his current opponent, my... friend looked at me with something like horror spreading across his face.

“What are you-?” he shouted.

Then, the Kiraak who'd been attacking him swung her sword at his face again, and he had to answer her threat. I left him like this, darting to the battle's fringes in bursts of white light.

Where is he? I asked.

“Are you sure-?” Bright hesitantly started.

“Yes!” Dim and I both shouted.

But only the Daevetch splinter continued.

“Think beyond yourself, you sniveling coward,” they snapped. “If we're to have a chance at crushing the enemy, we must draw him away. I know he destroyed you once, but come on! Show some strength for once, and take this chance to get even.”

That probably hadn't been the best way to convince an *Ele* splinter of what I must do, but as Dim turned their wild energy on me, I said not a word.

“Follow me,” they snapped, leaving me no chance to argue.

So, I didn't. As they led me around the battle, I kept an eye on it and Bright. The *Ele* splinter seemed caught in turmoil, something I'd normally try to alleviate, but I was a bit preoccupied with watching for any stray Kiraak who might to attack me.

Surprisingly, they didn't make a move my way. Perhaps they were drawn to the nearby source of violence, but I still found their avoidance of me ominous. For some reason, it screamed of a trap, although I had no clue how Teron would have spread an order like that through the ranks.

Dim took me up the rise of the hill, but by this point, I no longer needed their help with locating my quarry. I saw the figure ahead, striding toward me with a cloak fluttering behind him. We came to a halt, several feet from one another, with an unspoken truce floating between us.

“Greetings,” I uncertainly started.

How was one supposed to interact with a monster like this? Attacking him without warning seemed wrong but-

“How are you alive?” Teron said. *“I laid open your throat.”*

Ok. We were starting there, were we?

“Guess I’m just lucky,” I said with a grin.

Teron didn’t like that, setting loose a growl from beneath his hood, and with sudden clarity, I knew how to continue.

Flapping a hand at him, I said, “Yes, yes. We both know you’re very intimidating. Can we move on from that? How’s your Volatility splinter? Do they still hate me?”

After a moment of tense silence, Teron said, “You’re unusually calm for a man who’s about to die.”

At that, I snorted, crossing my arms.

“What? You think because you killed me once, you can do it again?” I said. “I swear! The arrogance in you! Given how little people can resist your paltry magic trick, though, I suppose it’s only fair.”

“If you’re trying to provoke me, it won’t work,” Teron said. “I’ve struggled for decades to undermine Daevetch’s influence on me. My control on it is absolute. What makes you think that you can shake me?”

Cocking my head, I squinted at him.

“Is it absolute, though? I seem to remember an outburst you had not long ago in the hold of a-”

“This is pointless,” Teron said, sweeping a hand in front of him. “Whatever your plan is, enact it. Once I get rid of you, I have to finish cleaning this pestilence from my master’s shores. He won’t accept anything less, and I’d rather be done with it.”

He was right about us getting on with this, if not for the reasons he’d stated. This posturing was getting pointless.

“So, let’s move on,” I said. “Your next step is to kill me, yes? Try it. I doubt you’ll be able to touch me, so I’m curious how you mean to accomplish my death.”

Bursting into laughter, Teron slapped a hand to his mouth.

“Oh, you’re amusing. I’ll give you that,” he soon said, “but you’re forgetting that I destroyed your Ele source, would-be king. You’ve had far too little time practicing with your primeancy to stand against me with Daevetch alone.”

With a smirk, I said, "Who said I could only use Daevetch right now?"

And drawing Ele to my feet, I took off, heading away from the battlefield. Maybe Teron voiced the confusion that he must surely be feeling, but if he did, I wouldn't know. I was far too focused on Bright.

"Can you get a message to Rhy?" I asked. "Let him know where I'm going and what I'm doing?"

Bright, who'd been cowering to this point, suddenly... brightened. I didn't know how else to describe their change in demeanor.

"Oh. Oh! That's your plan," they said. "Smart of you. I'll leave at once."

When they disappeared, I made a face.

"Smart? We'll see about that."

As I raced into the trees, Dim barked a laugh.

"I knew you attracted me for a reason, you ridiculous human."

Given the context, I'd take that as a compliment.

Rhylix

For too long, I'd been locating Raimie through his Ele usage. Every time a primal force emerged into the world, I could feel it, although usually, I had to be near its entry point for that, but this method of pinpointing my friend was giving me trouble, if only because he kept moving all over the place.

Really, though, I should have expected that.

I was finally getting close to him when Creation gasped beside me.

"Oh... that's not good," they moaned.

After dispatching yet another Kiraak, I glanced at them, frowning at the distress I saw.

"What's not good?" I asked.

Meeting my eyes, Creation said, "For the last five minutes, your ally's been confronting Teron. He means to draw the enemy and his battle magic away from this fight."

Oh.

FUCK.

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