

Chapter 1: Discovery

Raimie

Life in this corner of the woods had always bored me, but what else should one expect when living so far away from civilization? I didn't mind my slow-paced life or its consistency. It was soothing to know that I could predict everything that might happen each day.

As I got dressed, rain drummed on the roof, as always. Its calming cadence set the tempo to my distracted hum, a buzz I kept soft so I wouldn't wake my father on the other side of our cottage.

I stoked the fire, coaxing it to grow, and all the while, I eyed the contents of the cauldron hanging over it. Should I eat more of last night's mush, or should I find breakfast elsewhere?

Rustling drew me out of my thoughts, and poking the fire again, I made a face.

"Good morning, dad," I said. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"You didn't," my father said. "I've been up for a while. Didn't you notice?"

Shrugging, I reached for the ladle, deciding to risk the mush. I scarfed down my spoonful, barely tasting it, before heading for the door.

"Can I borrow mama's bow?" I asked.

"I don't see why not," my father said. "You... want to go hunting today?"

Stopping short, I shot a glare over my shoulder. My father was lying in bed, perched on his elbows, but at the look I directed his way, he shifted his gaze sideways.

"You know I do," I said.

Throwing a cloak over my shoulders, I retrieved my mother's metal bow. I hung a quiver over the cloak, shoving another of my mother's otherworldly possessions in a pocket, before laying a hand on the door.

"I should be home before dark," I said.

"All right. Good hunt, son."

I doubted it would be. When I stepped outside, rain doused me, enough so that it seeped down to my skin.

But that was just another aspect of life here. I didn't mind the terrible weather, so long as I kept warm despite it.

Pulling my cloak closed, I hurried to Eledis' nearby hut in leaping strides. My grandfather had always enjoyed his privacy, but I didn't mind going to the old man. The room behind his door was one filled with magic, after all.

As I waited for him to answer my knock, crackling energy zipped under my skin. Eledis had recently come home from his monthly trip to Fissid, the closest town to my family's homestead, and something that I most loved usually came with his return.

The door was flung open with a wrinkled, scowling face behind it. If I hadn't known better, the sharp glare directed my way might have made me retreat into the safety of the nearby forest. As it was, I grinned at the old man.

"Good morning!" I said. "Did I drag you out of bed?"

Judging from Eledis' disheveled hair and nightshirt, I'd guess I had.

"What do you want, kid?" Eledis grumbled.

"Do you have anything for me?" I asked, widening my grin.

Crossing his arms, Eledis said, "That's the first thing you say to me? Really?"

Shaking his head, he frowned.

"What is it with you and your incessant thirst for knowledge?"

He eyed me, raking his gaze up and down my body, before sighing.

"Do you have your mother's bag?" he asked.

I pulled the requested item out of a pocket, and on accepting it, Eledis scanned my soaked-through state once more.

"Stay here," he said.

Thankfully, he left the door open when he returned to the depths of his cottage. I edged as close to its threshold as I could, taking advantage of the warmth within. At the sight of the books haphazardly stacked on the cottage's many surfaces, I badly wanted to keep going, surrounding myself with this glorious refuge that I'd enjoyed since I was small. I might have listened to those desires if a recent scolding hadn't been fresh on my mind. The produced image of Eledis' reddened face still made me cringe.

Said grandfather stomped toward me, offering a book wrapped in my mother's clear bag. Before I could accept it, however, Eledis retracted his gift.

"You bring it back as it is now," he said. "No food or water stains. No dog-eared pages."

Rolling my eyes, I made a failed swipe at the book.

"I did that *one* time!" I said.

"And I haven't forgotten it," Eledis said. "So?"

Sighing, I said, "I'll return it in pristine condition."

"Good."

I snatched the book from him, ready to leave, but Eledis wasn't quite finished with me yet.

"Is that it? You'll go into the woods as usual?" he said. "Don't you have better things to do today?"

Thank Alouin I'd managed to turn away before Eledis had asked that question. It let me hide my wince, even if my drawn-together shoulders weren't so easy to conceal.

With a cheery grin in place, I twisted toward Eledis as I resumed my trek, waving a wrapped book overhead.

"I have something new to learn," I said. "What's better than that?"

Eledis looked as if he might say more, so I hurried away, loping to get between the trees. I followed a well-worn path through them until I reached my family's hunting blind.

Scrambling up its ladder, I rolled onto the platform above, held between the tree's branches. After scooting into a nearby hollow, I rested my mother's 'compound bow' outside and retrieved the book from where I'd stashed it.

I seriously doubted I'd bring any game home today, but that wouldn't stop me from trying, no matter how half-heartedly. It was my turn to scour the forest with a bow in hand, and any other day, I might have looked for deer tracks or put forth any other effort to hunt.

But today wasn't a typical day. My family knew this, as they knew how much I disliked this chore. They wouldn't expect me to bring anything home.

Still, as I withdrew the book from its 'plastic' bag, I pricked my ear for strange sounds. I opened the book with care, wary of creaking leather, and turned each page as silently as possible. I'd be a ghost in this tree.

Eledis' latest acquisition recounted the recent history of Ada'ir—my home kingdom—in the driest manner possible, but despite that, I devoured its contents. I'd already known most of what I read, but scattered throughout the book's pages were gems of the unknown.

A brief discussion on the Robzul city states' waning power. An analysis of the Southern Kingdoms' threat to Ada'ir. A passing mention about who might once have inhabited the abandoned northern reaches.

But I found the most interesting tidbit in a lengthy passage about our world's current maritime practices.

Since Alouin's arrival here, the point of his entrance—the Accession Tear—has caused the kingdoms around the Narrow Sea undue trouble. Shipping lanes shift near daily because the storms generated by the Tear never follow a set pattern.

In recent years, crossing the sea to Ada'ir's old trading partner in the east has posed such danger and hardship that not many have braved the pass, despite the riches to be made there. To make matters worse, those attempting to cross the Narrow Sea began disappearing with the rise of Doldimar in the year 3225 A.C.E. Soon after this, anyone with a shred of sense learned to avoid Auden on their trading routes.

Frowning, I lowered the book.

Auden. That name had sounded so familiar, and yet, I'd never run across it before, not in my reading at least. It echoed to the back of my mind, and as it did, something responded, or that was what it felt like.

Strange.

Many have speculated about the fate of those who once dared the trip to Auden. Some believe there is no mystery, that all have fallen to the Accession Tear's storms. Others say we should give more credence to the tales of Audish refugees, but almost all in the scholarly community reject this hypothesis. How can the cruelties shared by those people exist in our world?

No. It's much more likely that the refugees have exaggerated their troubles to gain more sympathy here. The question of what to do with them might be the defining moment of King Belqarim's reign.

King Belqarim? As in, Queen Kaedesa's husband? This spread of refugees must have taken place recently. Had I met one, explaining where I'd heard the word Auden before?

That was unlikely. My family and I rarely left our home.

As I continued reading, I looked for more references to Auden, but soon, I'd snapped the book's back cover closed, finding nothing. Storing the book, I made a face.

I hated leaving mysteries unsolved, but how could I solve this one without sounding crazy? At least, that was what I thought my recognition of a previously unknown word would make me seem.

Maybe I could ask my father about it tonight, no matter how much I might hate worrying him. Save for certain subjects, he was fairly accepting when it came to the strange and unusual.

Peeking outside the hollow, I noticed a brief splash of sunlight near the horizon before the tree limbs above dumped water in my face. Sputtering, I retreated into my shelter, wrapping my damp cloak around me.

It was late enough that I could go home if I wanted, but I knew what was waiting for me there. I'd rather sit here, bored and in uncomfortably drying clothes, than face it.

Resting against the hollow's back wall, I listened to the diminished misting of the rain, and soon enough, my eyelids drooped. With another nightmare waking me in sweat-soaked sheets last night, I hadn't gotten much rest, but I didn't want to take a nap so close to sundown. If I wasn't home by dark, my father would panic.

Still, there was something incredibly soothing about solitude found in a familiar place. Shaking my head, I braved the rain, lying belly down beside my mother's bow. I drummed my fingers on the platform, determined to keep... my... eyes...

Black surrounded me, but this wasn't the typical darkness found at night or in a room without light. It shifted and swirled with color peeking through, much like the homemade inks my family used. It was unnerving, uncomfortable, but not nearly as bad as my inability to move.

Something was keeping me paralyzed, although I could say what. No rope was restraining me, but even if it had trapped me so thoroughly, I should be able to flex my fingers or twitch my eyes closed. Instead, the only sign of life I was allowed was the drawn-out scream that I flung into this skin-crawling black.

It was the same nightmare I'd had since I was a child, one whose details fell away from me when I woke up, but whenever I found myself here, I remembered every instance of it. After so many years of experiencing this terror almost every night, one would think I'd have gotten used to it by now.

One would think.

So, when something changed in my perpetual nightmare, it chilled me more than anything. A flicker of motion caught my eye, and my scream faded to nothing.

"Hello?" I rasped. "Is someone there?"

Breathlessly, I waited, wondering if I'd lost my mind. Surprised it had taken this long if I had.

Right as the distraction lost its hold on my voice, settling me into the nightmare's rhythm once more, something hung into my field of view, right over my head. A face, hooded and shadowed, looked down on me, and with my eyes going wide, my mouth went dry. Someone lived in this nightmare with me?

"Please," I croaked. "Help me."

The figure cocked its hood, lowering it toward me. It stopped before I could make out the features within, but even so, I could swear I knew-

Straightening, the hooded figure shook their head before pulling themselves away. I screamed after them, pleas and curses and-

The platform beneath me changed places with open air, and as I fell, something scraped against my leg, shifting down until it was flung away. Sleep only lost its hold on me when the ground halted my fall.

Groaning, I took sips of air until I could roll onto my back, splaying my limbs.

What had happened? Despite my best efforts, I'd fallen asleep, obviously. Had another nightmare plagued me while I'd been napping? It must have. If I wasn't having one of those, I didn't typically move in my sleep.

Slowly, I climbed to my feet, and when my body didn't scream at me about any damage I'd acquired, I strode for the ladder. The sky was bruising purple, and if I didn't hurry, I wouldn't make it home before dark.

When I poked my head above the platform, however, I froze. Eledis' book was on me, bouncing in its pocket, but I saw no sign of my mother's bow on the platform.

After sliding down the ladder, I rubbed at my burning hands while hurrying in the direction I'd fallen. I wasn't afraid of how my father might react to me losing the bow, like I would have been if I'd lost my grandfather's book. He certainly wouldn't be happy that I'd misplaced it, but he'd never let that anger turn violent.

No. I was searching the forest for my own reasons.

"Come on, come on!" I muttered.

I disregarded the setting sun and the gathering dusk. If I'd lost one of my mother's belongings because of a stupid mistake, I'd be repeating a day from exactly nine years ago, one much like today, and I couldn't let that happen again, couldn't-

I tear down Fissid's streets, chasing my friend. The village's square looms ahead of us, and I skid to a stop beside its well.

Mama shouts something behind me, but I'm not ready to listen yet. My friend is climbing on top of the well's roof, sticking his tongue out at me. Does he think he can escape up there? Oo, I'll prove him wrong!

I balance on the lip of the well, reach for the roof's edge, and start pulling myself onto it. As I dangle from it, a hand grabs my leg, and that knocks me off balance. I lose my grip. The hold on my ankle lasts long enough for my chin to hit the well's wall. Stars come with me into its depths.

Shaking my head, I shoved the memory aside. What good would it do me now?

Besides, the last of the day's light was reflecting off of something ahead, and as I approached it, I sharply let out a breath, much as if I'd been punched. My mother's bow was tangled in a nearby bush's branches, and I rushed to retrieve it.

As I finagled it clear of clinging leaves and branches, I cocked my head. When I'd begun working the bow free, a noise—initially soft—had started, but with every second I'd spent here, it had increased in volume, a gong reverberating in y head until its resonance had become painful. It shivered and vibrated, resounding along every bone in my body, and I didn't... I couldn't...

What was that ringing?

Absently ripping my prize free of the bush, I wandered toward the noise, barely noticing the forest growing dark around me.

What could this be? An echo bounced in my head, setting my teeth buzzing. A hum dug into my essence, refusing to retreat.

A part of me realized that I should avoid this anomaly. Anything strange or out of the ordinary usually held grave portents for whoever stumbled across it, but I couldn't stop my feet. A compulsion pulled me along like a fish on a line, but I couldn't thrash against it. It held me too firmly.

When I stepped into a clearing much like any other, I made a face as the ringing noise stuck needles through my eyes. Still, I scanned this place, one that was so loud and yet silent, motionless and yet chaotic.

For light was jittering across the clearing, illuminating the bushes and trees with sporadic rays. I squinted, trying to pierce through this miasma, and to my surprise, it dimmed, present but not as blinding. Through it, I found the light's source.

A sword was lying on the forest floor. If not for the mind-numbing display around it, I might have discounted it as a soldier's weapon, if slightly more well-crafted. As they did with the surrounding clearing, glowing tendrils were shooting down the blade, forking like lightning, and beneath them, I might have seen engravings of some sort, but with what was blazing against my eyes, I couldn't say for sure.

The compulsion that had dragged me to this clearing tugged at me once more, but I dug my heels in. This light show? That sword? My mind screamed at the sight of them, and I always listened to my instincts.

"Nope," I breathed.

With difficulty, I spun in place, marching in the opposite direction.

TTS Chapter One

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