

Chapter 43: A City and the Sea

Raimie

Sev was the strangest place I'd ever seen. To be fair, it was the only human city I'd visited, which might have something to do with the awe I was feeling. I'd thought Fissid was a wonder of civilization, but seeing this place, I knew differently.

So many buildings rose above me, homes and shops alike, and it didn't matter that only a third of them looked inhabited. It was still evidence of more people than I'd seen in my life.

Then, Eledis led me into a marketplace, and I couldn't move. People had flooded this open square, rushing about their business or taking a leisurely stroll or pausing to speak with merchants and friends, and so many bright colors assaulted my senses from both merchant stalls and the clothing of passersby. Dozens of conversations merged into a muted roar while the rumble of cart wheels and thunk of dropped crates interspersed it.

I couldn't get enough of it. This display of humanity was like nothing I'd seen before.

It was also *a lot*.

At my side, Eledis said, "This is busier than I expected it to be."

Jumping, I stared at my grandfather. This was the first time he'd spoken to me since the Withriingalm, even when gathering me for the outing this morning, and hearing his voice now was jarring. I wasn't sure what this meant, whether he'd relented in his silent treatment or not, but I'd take advantage of the opening.

"Why's that?" I asked.

Slowly turning my way, Eledis examined me for a moment, looking down his nose all the while, and I returned his stare as blandly as I could. With a long sigh, he crossed his arms before looking away.

"In the last few decades, Sev has fallen on hard times. Pirates have attacked the city, blockading Blackwell Bay far more often than they have in the past, and no one knows why," he said. "Funding the city's defense has stretched its coffers, which has led to higher taxes, and this has, in turn,

seen a mass exodus of citizens from Sev. Hence, why I expected to find most marketplaces deserted here. In the end, though, it works out for us. More people in the city means a greater chance of finding a ship's captain who will make the crossing to Auden."

"I see."

I didn't know what else to say. Fortunately, Eledis wasn't looking for much from me.

"We should start asking around," he said. "I'll take the city proper. You head for the docks. We'll meet here when the sun reaches the horizon. Can you handle that?"

An entire day in an unfamiliar place, a city no less, with no one to guide me. Swallowing hard, I focused on keeping my hands from shaking.

"I think so," I said, marveling at the confidence in my voice.

"Good."

Eledis rummaged through a pocket, withdrawing a sack from it.

"Take this. It should move things along," he said. "Careful with it, though. That's the last of our coin. Don't throw it away on unnecessary bribes."

Accepting the sack, I said, "I'll do my best."

With a fond smile, Eledis ruffled my hair, which I tolerated with as much dignity as I could.

"You're a good kid," he said. "I'm sorry I've been so hard on you lately. Ignoring you as much as I have was a mistake. Maybe once we're done here, we can stay in a waystation tonight so we can talk some things through. What do you think?"

I thought that my grandfather had waited for far too long to bridge the gap between us, but I wouldn't tell him that.

"It would be nice to sleep in an actual bed instead of on the ground tonight," I said, "and I could use a proper meal."

"And you shall have both!" Eledis said, grinning, "but first, we need to find passage across the Narrow Sea."

"Naturally," I said, returning the smile. "So, I'll see you in a few hours?"

"That's the plan. Good luck, Raimie."

Eledis quickly merged with the crowd around us, leaving me wondering what to do. After pocketing my gifted coin, I started wandering, hoping to learn where the docks were located.

In the end, they were easy to find, which made sense. If Sev controlled Blackwell Bay and the bay was the only safe haven from the Accession Tears storms on this coast, of course the city would focus on naval trade. Because of that, a large chunk of its revenue would be devoted to its harbor, making it a focal point.

After taking the road to the bay, I set foot on its docks and couldn't take a single step more while my mouth went dry. I looked out at branching, sprawling piers and the many ships anchored near them, and a little voice in my head started screaming, although I wasn't sure why.

Maybe it was the expanse of water behind this view. Maybe it was the type of people who were strolling and running over these wood planks. Gods, their appearances and bearing were so different from anything I'd ever seen!

I didn't know why I wanted to make the long sprint back to camp after observing everything in front of me, but the voice screaming in my head was making it difficult to think.

When someone jostled me, I snapped out of it, rapidly blinking at something I shouldn't fear, before shaking myself. What had that been?

As I joined the flow of foot traffic in front of me, a creepy-crawly sensation still skittered over my skin. One would think that after the last few months of life-changing revelations, another mystery wouldn't affect me, but it did.

It was why I fumbled my way through my first few interactions with sailors and their captains, but soon enough, I was making enquiries of them with ease. Even still, I was laughed at more often than not. Most people thought I was either pulling a prank or had lost my mind, and each rejection had me using a sharper tone with the next group I approached.

Halfway through the afternoon, I'd made it down one side of the dock, leaving only a few more ships to check. Idly, I bypassed most of these, noting their sailors already loading cargo onto them, but one, a sloop anchored off of a secluded pier, caught my eye. With no activity around it, its captain would make a likely candidate for what I wanted, but as I headed toward it, someone stepped into my path.

"I hear you're looking for passage to Auden."

I frowned at the tanned man in front of me, wondering why he seemed familiar.

"I am," I said. "How do you know about that?"

The stranger flashed a smile.

"Word about something like that travels quickly here," he said. "If you're interested, my captain would like to talk specifics for making the journey with you."

A jolt rushed through me, although I did my best to hide my eagerness.

"I'm interested," I said. "Where's your captain?"

"In the city at the moment," the stranger said, "but she won't be long. We could wait for her on her ship."

He gestured toward the seemingly abandoned sloop, and cocking my head, I narrowed my eyes at it.

Was this a good idea? I was already far away from other people. Did I want to further isolate myself, potentially putting myself in danger? Or was that paranoia talking? After everything that had happened recently, I found it difficult to trust unknowns.

But I'd never get anywhere if I didn't.

"That sounds good," I said.

I followed the stranger up the sloop's gangplank, and we headed toward the captain's quarters. Once there, the stranger held the door open for me, and I stepped inside.

The change in lighting briefly blinded me, but when I could see, I found myself in a small cabin with colored-glass windows looking out over the harbor. A bunk was shoved against the far wall while a desk had been bolted to the floor, and I'd started toward it when an arm was dropped over my head.

It pressed into my neck while a hand on the back of my head pushed me further forward, and I managed a choked cry before my airway was cut off.

And all the while I was berating myself for not trusting my gut. Stupid, stupid...

Squirming and raking my fingernails on the arm holding me did no good. The stranger stood firm even as I blindly stomped for his feet.

I only got a reaction when I reached for Silverblade. Freedom was mine for half a second, but then, force twirled me around until my face was smashed into a wall.

A stabbing ache in my nose kept me from taking advantage of my opening. I could only woozily acknowledge my escape before I was caught in a chokehold again.

With panic lacing into the energy surging through me, I reached behind my head, desperately grabbing for a hand. While pinching the skin between the stranger's fingers, I wrenched on what felt like a thumb, but nothing happened. The stranger didn't even flinch.

As my vision narrowed to pinpricks, I was left with seconds before I was at this man's mercy, and the panic lapping at me took over, letting instinct reign supreme. I wasn't sure what I did, but pure power came crashing through me, raw and exhilarating. When I jerked on that held thumb this time, something cracked.

With a restrained hiss, the stranger released me, and gasping for air, I stumbled for the door. I flung it open, catching a glimpse of the uniformed woman behind it before she moved. As she spun, her foot collided with my temple.

I felt the closest to complete that I ever had in my life. The emptiness, ever within me, had almost filled, but this glorious sensation was negated by the fact that my hands were bound together, and after what had happened in the waking world...

Yowling, I thrashed against what was holding me, desperate for freedom. I kicked with my dangling legs, hoping to hit something, hoping to hurt whoever had captured me.

But the only other person in my nightmare realm was...

"-imie! Please, stop," Nylion was shouting with a choked voice. "You will knock us off!"

As I realized who I'd been fighting, I went still, and reflexively, I buried my face into the surface in front of me, one that was warm and firm and smelled like home. One that was moving in time with my companion's elevated breathing rate.

Jerking back, I barely stopped myself from making the movement rough. What was going on? Where was I? Why was Nylion-?

Finally, I registered my surroundings. The unnerving walls of the well rose around me, and I was hanging from Nylion's shoulders, which should have had me asking a host of questions. Instead, I glanced between my feet, finding the ground far below us. Damn, it would hurt if we'd fallen, even if we'd also have survived it.

"You've made progress," I said.

"Yes, well," Nylion grunted.

Quietly swearing to himself, he tugged on my arms until they were in a position where he could free my wrists.

"What else was supposed to do while you were dealing with real world problems?" he continued. "Sit around, waiting for you to return?"

"That doesn't seem like you," I said.

"Exactly," Nylion said. "Now, would you kindly get off of my back? I did not take the strain of your weight into account when starting this climb."

Carefully, I clambered over Nylion with both of us grumbling at each other. When I latched onto the wall, numbness spread up my arms from it, but this time, the feeling was made infinitely worse by the return of my emptiness, something that only happened when I was no longer touching my friend. Strange, that.

“So, why are you here this time?” Nylion asked, starting to climb again. “Did you forget to take a sleeping tincture again?”

Wincing, I pulled myself level with my friend.

“Unfortunately, no,” I said. “Someone attacked me again, but I don’t think they want me dead, considering I’m not seeing colors in the sky.”

Nylion turned the opening of his hood toward me.

“Care to elaborate?” he drawled.

I gave him an overview of what had happened, answering his questions when he had them. At some point during this, we stopped climbing, dangling by our fingers and toes from a substance that shouldn’t exist, and after I’d finished the tale, Nylion was quiet for a time.

When the silence became too much for me, I asked, “Have any suggestions for me?”

Nylion ducked his hood, sucking on his lip for a moment, before facing me again.

“You should let me handle it,” he said. “I can be fast and efficient. You would be back with Eledis before you are supposed to meet him, so he will never know that something went wrong. It would be like when w- you were a kid.”

“You did get me out of plenty of scrapes back then,” I mused before turning serious. “How would we do that, though? This isn’t like when I’d get lost, and you’d help me find my way home with your whispered directions. You’re my imaginary friend. You can’t change things in the real world.”

Nylion just stared at me, and this went on for long enough that I started adjusting my hold on the wall.

“Do you trust me?” Nylion asked.

Thinking back on everything this manifestation of my mind had done for me, I could only nod.

“Then, TRUST me,” Nylion said.

“Ok,” I said in a small voice, shrinking on myself.

Why did I feel like I’d just been scolded?

Nylion jerked his hood in a single nod.

“You will have to hold me for a time,” he said. “Can you do that?”

Could I bear another person’s weight from this far up? Could I have Nylion that close, pressing my body into the wall?

Suddenly, my heart was pattering far too quickly while my throat had closed, and I had to clear it several times to remove the blockage.

"I can try," I said before jerking my chin behind me. "Hop on."

Slowly, Nylion shuffled onto my back, and only after we'd both stopped shifting did I notice that the hole in my being had been filled again. I opened my mouth to comment on it when Nylion spread his fingers in front of my face.

"You will have to keep me in place with your own strength," he said. "Unless you have gained the ability to touch what once pinned you to the floor?"

Wincing, I circled my fingers around Nylion's wrists.

"I won't be able to do this for long," I said.

"Then, I will be quick," Nylion said with his lips brushing my ear. "Do not drop us."

Shuddering with a gasp, I didn't notice the addition of weight on me until it had nearly peeled me off of the wall. After scrambling to maintain my hold, I hissed hot air between my teeth. Gods, my muscles were already close to failing.

"Oh, for the love of..." I said before clinging more tightly to inky black. "Hurry up, Nylion."

TTS Chapter Forty-Three

Revision #2

Created 21 August 2024 04:46:43 by FatalisticFable

Updated 20 March 2026 21:39:47 by FatalisticFable