

Chapter 44: Surfacing

For the first time in years, Nylion emerged into the world. He took a moment to enjoy it, breathing in fresh air with a tang of salt in it, but then, his head banged into something, flaring pain beneath his skull, and he remembered why the real world sucked.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself at an awkward angle. The narrow confines of a ship's hall were skewed from their typical up and down, and from the unyielding surface he was bouncing on, he'd guess that he was hanging over one of his assailant's shoulders. Since he didn't know where the other one was, he decided to bide his time.

"This doesn't bother you?"

From the rumble transmitted through his perch, Nylion determined that this voice belonged to the man carrying him.

"What do you mean?" another, higher-pitched voice asked.

"You know what I mean," the man said. "She had us attack *him*, the boy she doted on in years past."

"True," the woman said, "but like you said, that was years ago. We don't know what's changed since then."

The second assailant was ahead of them. With her located, Nylion was prepared to free himself, but he waited, hoping for a better opportunity.

"It still feels wrong," the man said. "I trained him, watched him grow up. How am I supposed to stand idly by while he's taken to Daira for execution?"

"You're following orders," the woman said. "That's all you need to know."

The man stopped short with his shoulders heaving.

"You don't understand. His potential... he could have been the greatest spymaster that Ada'ir has ever seen, and we're supposed to accept, without question, that he's a rebel based on the word of an Eselan?" he said. "I can't do that to little Raimie."

There was a pause, but then, Nylion's perch rocked back and forth, as if shaken.

"He's not little Raimie anymore. Get your shit together, Bryruned," the woman said. "I'll make a circuit of the docks. When I get back, I expect our traitor to be in the brig with you standing guard."

She brushed past, quickly disappearing, but Nylion was too caught on a thought to pay her departure much mind.

Bryruned? Hell, this man's identity would make the next part more difficult.

They started moving again, and with every bang of his body into a wall, Nylion suppressed a yelp, although doing that wasn't especially difficult. He'd suffered much worse than this before.

A door creaked open, and when Bryruned lowered Nylion from his shoulders, he rolled with that momentum, reaching his feet in the same moment he hit the ground.

He didn't stop to enjoy the shocked look on Bryruned's face, instead darting out of the cell while throwing its door shut behind him. When a loud clang failed to reach his ears, he assumed that Bryruned had gotten to it before it had closed. This had him put on a burst of speed.

Fortunately, the sloop followed a layout that Nylion was familiar with, so he quickly reached the main deck, sprinting for the gangplank. He was nearly halfway there when an arrow thunked into the wood, several paces in front of him.

"Stop!" Bryruned shouted. "Don't make me put one of these in your back."

Slowly, Nylion raised his hands before turning around. As warned, Bryruned had an arrow pointed at him with the bowstring half drawn, and when he met Nylion's eyes, he blinked with his features tightening.

"Well, look at you, all grown up," he said before shaking his head. "What are you playing at, Raimie? First, you act like you don't know me and let yourself get ambushed. Then, you almost escape me, something that you used to struggle with. What's going on?"

Nylion wasn't sure how to go about this. After so long trapped alone, he was more than a little rusty when it came to... well, *everything*, but out of every skill he'd once had, talking was definitely the weakest. Considering how shit he'd been at it before, that was saying something.

He'd only just gotten comfortable speaking with Raimie again, and Raimie was *Raimie*. How did one converse with others?

Fortunately, the tinge of hostility infecting the air helped to loosen his tongue, familiar with that sensation as he was.

"Nothing is 'going on'. Last I checked, I was running an errand for my grandfather, and *you* attacked *me*," Nylion said. "What the hell?"

Ugh. Speaking in the singular still felt wrong, setting his stomach bubbling like a tincture in a cauldron. Some of that unease must have translated through the expression on his face because Bryruned narrowed his eyes, scowling.

"You. Running an errand. For *Eledis*," he said. "Yeah, I don't buy it."

"I do not care if you believe me. It is of little importance," Nylion said. "Let me repeat. *You attacked me*, and now, you are keeping me here on threat of death. What. the. hell?"

Shrugging, Bryruned said, "I'm following order, same as you. Or as you used to do at least."

"Yes, well. Children are susceptible to blindly doing as they are told," Nylion said.

Inside, he was reeling. If Bryruned was here on orders, that meant Auntie was probably here too. Why? Was it because of Raimie's family?

No. It had to be a coincidence.

But why else would she be in Sev? Maybe she was negotiating with the city state's mayor, pressuring them into joining Ada'ir again. That fit her personality well.

But Bryruned had said that by attacking Raimie, he'd been following orders. So...

"Does Auntie know I am here?" he asked.

Why not be direct with this? It couldn't hurt anything, could it?

"You know I can't answer that question," Bryruned said.

"Which means that she does," Nylion said.

Shit. This changed things. Fucking godsdamn...

Still cursing in his head, Nylion did his best to show off a rueful grin, despite the pangs of guilt and grief already running through him.

"Well, if she wants to see me, I will have to oblige her. It is not like I can run," he said. "So? How should we do this? I assume you will want me in the brig until she returns."

"Can you blame me?" Bryruned said. "If I put you anywhere else, I'd be risking a lot."

Shaking his head, Nylion patted at the air above his head.

"I understand. You have to do what you must," he said. "I will stay in place so you can put shackles on me."

Wincing, Bryruned nodded.

"That might be best," he said.

Slowly, he approached Nylion with his bow ever at the ready, but once he was close enough to draw a blade, he let the string go slack, pulling a set of shackles from his pocket.

"Hands," he said with a wave.

Just as slowly, Nylion lowered his arms in front of him, displaying his wrists, but before Bryruned could secure him, he slapped his hand to the other man's chest.

"I am sorry," he said.

With his features hardening, Bryruned dropped the shackles to reach for his sword, but Nylion already had a weapon at hand. Dark energy pulsed from him, carving through Bryruned's chest, and with a pained grunt, his essence fled from his body, turning it boneless. Before it could hit the deck, Nylion scooped it up and over his shoulders.

Striding to the sloop's railing, he tossed the body overboard. The noise from the dock covered up the splash.

For a long while, he stared at that patch of the ocean's surface, absently drumming a finger on the railing's wood. He couldn't decide if this was yet another thing he must keep from Raimie.

On the one hand, the Raimie he'd known would have understood what Nylion had done. He'd see why Auntie shouldn't know that he'd been on her ship. He'd see that, in his current state, he wasn't ready to face her. Unless things had changed, the danger from that meeting alone could spell his end.

But that was the thing. Nylion wasn't sure if this current Raimie was *his* Raimie—the implications of which he still obsessed over when he was alone—and this version wouldn't get it. He wouldn't know how easily Bryruned would have escaped any restraints that Nylion could have put on him, and if that had happened, the man would have run straight for Auntie. He wouldn't understand that by making Bryruned disappear, Nylion had been painting a picture of yet another soldier's desertion. Instead, Raimie would focus on the sacredness of all life rather than on his own safety.

And that was Nylion's primary purpose in life: keeping Raimie safe.

So, Nylion wouldn't tell him what he'd done or would soon do. It would be better that way, no matter how much it would eat at him in the coming days.

Slapping his hands on the railing, he told the water below, "I wish there had been another way."

Then, he hurried to find a hiding spot for when the woman returned to this sloop.

TTS Chapter Forty-Four

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