

Chapter 61: The First Oath

Raimie

I was half-aware of my grandfather relaxing opposite me, mostly occupied with watching my splinters regain their composure on the carriage's floor.

Will you tell me where you went, or is this another mystery that'll never get resolved? I asked.

Wincing, Bright said, "We're not trying to keep secrets..."

They trailed off as I raised my eyebrows.

"We were beside the nearby break in reality," Dim hoarsely said before coughing up a storm.

While they pounded on their chest, Bright said, "Besides the area around you, breaks in reality are the only place where we pieces of our wholes can exist on the physical plane, but considering proximity to one isn't conducive to our survival—"

They glanced at where moments before, they and Dim had been caught fighting.

"—we don't typically use them like that."

"It does, however, make it so that we can... hmm."

Pausing, Dim tapped on their chin.

"The best equivalent for it is 'talking'. So, breaks in reality let us 'speak' with one another," they said, "which means we can more easily discuss things that are off-limits when on the physical plane."

"Like our purpose for you," Bright said.

I let that sink in for a moment, unsure how to identify this roiling storm inside of me. While I waited for a clear head, I shifted in my seat, smiling at Marcuset. Best to appear somewhat normal, right?

You won't tell me anything specific about what just happened, will you? I eventually said.

Bright and Dim exchanged a glance.

“I know it’s a difficult thing to ask, given what I am, but trust me when I say that I’d tell you everything if I could,” Dim said. “You deserve to know, but...”

As they trailed off, Bright grimaced.

“It’s difficult for us,” they said. “Remember what happened the last time we tried to share this with you?”

I winced, clearly remembering my splinters’ distress.

Understood, I said. It’s just... I can’t help but wonder, yeah? To my great surprise, I trust that you two won’t hurt me, but... I’d still rather know your plans.

Tears sprang into Bright’s eyes, and they turned away from me while Dim rested their incorporeal hand on my knee.

“You epitomize my whole’s strength,” they said before displaying a cheeky grin. “Besides, you won’t be in the dark for much longer. We’ll keep trying to convey our wants to you. Isn’t that right, rigid asshole?”

Sniffing, Bright glared at Dim.

But still, they said, “That’s right.”

The rest of the carriage ride was monotonous and boring for me. My companions, both real and not, didn’t seem inclined to make conversation, and the curtains over the windows prevented me from getting an up-close view of Daira. Eventually, however, the carriage stopped, dumping us at the city’s harbor.

So many ships stretched to both sides of me, a confusing mishmash of wood and rope and sail, with the sea beyond. Opposite that, a tall wall rose, completely white in color. I wasn’t sure how they kept grime from showing on it, but I could appreciate the indomitable, unbreachable sight that it presented.

Marcuset led the way up the gangplank of a moderately sized boat, one that was bustling with activity. As we passed, people wearing the uniform of Ada’ir’s military stopped what they were doing to cast quizzical looks at me and Eledis. No matter that they couldn’t know who we were, they pressed their fists to their chests and bowed.

It was a bit disconcerting.

Activity died down after we climbed onto the quarterdeck, although soldiers were going about their business here too.

Only one of them wasn’t moving around, leaning on a handrail instead. Firelight made his blonde hair glint, and when a soldier approached him, saluting, he turned toward her, revealing a trim physique as well as a distinctive profile.

And I was socked in the gut with an increasingly familiar sense of recognition, but this one was *strong*. I stopped short, staring, while Marcuset continued toward the man, and my splinters watched me with their heads cocked.

Resting his hand on my shoulder, Eledis asked, "Are you all right?"

"Who is that?" I said with wide eyes.

Eledis glanced toward the man in question.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps this ship's captain?" he said. "Why?"

Taking a deep breath, I shook myself, shrugging the peculiar sensation off.

"It's nothing," I said before striding toward the others.

I should really look into these twinges I'd been having. By now, they'd happened too many times for me to dismiss them as a strange happenstance.

When considering how to best investigate them, however, I found myself reluctant to bring the phenomenon up, especially with Eledis. Maybe I could do that with my father but Eledis? That idea made me want to shudder.

But then, I had no more time to consider the question. Marcuset turned to me and Eledis, extending a hand as if in welcome.

"This man will be in charge during our voyage: Captain Oswin," he said. "If you have any questions, you should come to him."

A set of eyes landed on me, and at that, another jolt of recognition passed down my spine. As if from a distance, I watched the captain bow to me.

"Your Majesty," Oswin said.

Without my permission, my hands lifted from my sides, jerking the captain upright, while barely considered words spilled out of my mouth.

"Don't do that. I told you to never-"

Cutting off, I fell back into my body with a wrench, noting the alarmed expressions surrounding me. Carefully, I released my grip on this *stranger's* jacket before taking a step back.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what that was," I said. "Maybe you reminded me of someone, although I don't know who that could be. Either way, I shouldn't have manhandled you like that. I am deeply sorry to have offended you."

Licking his lips, Oswin said, "You... didn't offend me, Your-"

With a head shake, he passed a hand over his face while pointing behind him.

“I should finish consulting with Bilensa,” he said. “I’ll rejoin you once I’m done.”

While he stalked away, I fervently wished that I could pull my Ele source around myself and disappear.

“Not a good idea, kid,” Dim said. “Too many people around you.”

I know that, thanks, I growled.

Dim made a funny face at me—which *wasn’t helping*—while I struggled to keep my focus on Marcuset and Eledis. Both men were eyeing me like I’d transform into a ravenous beast at any moment, so I did the only thing that I could.

Move on.

Resolutely facing Marcuset, I said, “You mentioned a voyage. Do we have a course set?”

“Um...”

Marcuset glanced at Eledis, who shrugged, before forcibly casting off his unease.

“Our heading is east,” he said. “We don’t have much more than that, unfortunately. In the last three hundred years, not much has escaped Auden besides the occasional burst of refugees, and they’re usually unwilling to speak about their lives across the Narrow Sea.”

That sounded problematic. Not the most important issue right now, though.

“We’re headed for Auden? What about the people we left in Sev?” I asked. “Have the Zrelnach returned home? And what about my father?”

Best not to mention Rhylix, considering how much disdain the others held him in.

“Despite my attempts otherwise, I couldn’t get my hands on news about our companions,” I continued. “Keeping a queen entertained is a time-consuming job, it turns out, and learning about something that she didn’t want me to know would have taken a lot of time.”

Jerking toward Eledis, Marcuset said, “You didn’t tell him?”

“Tell me what?”

“You know how I said I haven’t seen much of him? I meant that literally,” Eledis said with an eye roll. “Most of the time when I was in our room, he was... out.”

Before Marcuset could reply, I repeated, “Tell me *what?*”

Was everyone ok? What would I do if my friend or father had been hurt? Gods. How would I learn to control my primeancy without Rhylix?

With a heavy sigh, Marcuset rested his hands on his hips, dropping his gaze to the deck.

“When your people arrived in Sev, the reason ‘desa knew you were there was because Commander Ferin told her,” he said.

I blinked for a moment, fitting this new information into what I already knew, before rubbing my forehead.

“Of course she did.”

With a soft groan, I tilted my head back, taking in the black expanse above.

“Alouin, when we were together, she intimated her plan,” I said, “but why would she betray us? She seemed so intent on getting me educated in ‘the relevant subjects’, almost frantic about it. So, was someone or something putting pressure on her? The Council, maybe? Teron? I could see that.”

Slapping my hand to my thigh, I lowered my head, although I didn’t truly see anything.

“It doesn’t matter. If she’s turned against us, we’ve lost the Zrelnach,” I said. “I hope dad...”

With a head shake, I focused on Marcuset.

“So, they’ve returned to Allanovian, then,” I said. “Did anyone stay?”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Marcuset said, “All of them, actually. ‘desa asked them to hold position until the situation there calms down.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“What situation?”

“Nothing too worrisome,” Eledis said. “A bit of socioeconomic unrest, but it should soon pass.”

“Oh! Are you talking about Sev?”

With his thumbs hanging from his belt, Oswin ambled into the conversation again, widely smiling.

“I heard that people from *Ada’ir*, if you can believe it, have been undermining the city-state’s government,” he continued. “I wonder if they’re the queen’s spies. She’s been trying to snatch up Sev for years.”

While he chuckled, Eledis glared his way, and I transferred my narrow-eyed gaze to him. Picking up on the tension, Oswin grimaced.

“Oh, hel- Alouin. I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Just here to take orders, me.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said through gritted teeth. “You gave me information I sorely needed.”

Because who could this group be but the allies I had left among the Zrelnach? I hadn’t been aware that they could cause change on a governmental level, but their activity, coming in tandem with my capture, was too coincidental to be anything else.

“You would have us leave dad here?” I asked Eledis.

As my grandfather flinched, I wondered how long ice would accompany the words I spoke.

“What about Rhylix, the first friend I’ve made in my life?” I continued. “Hell, what about the Zrelnach who’ve chosen us over Ferin? Because of us, they have no home to return to, and that’s not counting the danger they’d face in Teron and the queen. And you’d have us leave them here.”

Clicking his tongue, Eledis crossed his arms.

“You’re not thinking long-term. If we leave for Auden from Daira, we’re unlikely to pass through the Accession Tear’s storms,” he said. “If we depart from Sev, we’ll be heading straight through them, and yes, that was my original intent, but at the time, our priority was to leave this continent as quickly as possible. Now that we’re here, we should minimize the threat to our soldiers’ lives.”

He waved a hand as if encompassing more than this ship alone.

“He’s made a good point about the storms,” Bright said at my side. “The Accession Tear makes the weather around it exceptionally volatile, worse than most of what I’ve seen.”

“And isn’t it just *glorious*?” Dim crooned.

Ignoring them, I clenched my jaw, balling my hands into fists, and faced Marcuset.

“Exactly how dangerous would leaving from Sev be?” I asked.

I didn’t know if I could trust the commander to truthfully answer me, but I certainly couldn’t trust Eledis.

Marcuset scratched his cheek, darting his gaze between me and my grandfather.

“I can’t give you an exact answer,” he said, “but of the ships that sail between Daira and Sev, about a quarter of them are lost per year, and that’s when traveling along the edge of the Tear’s influence.”

Damn. That... was enough to cool the outrage sweeping through me. Unsure what to say, I chewed on my lip while working through the problem. Was rescuing a handful of people worth risking so many lives?

Clearing his throat, Oswin said, “If I may?”

Raising my finger to silence Eledis' coming protest, I nodded.

"Forgive me, but we're soldiers, Your Majesty," Oswin said. "Risk is part of the job."

Gods, I could kiss that man, if I were at all attracted to him.

"Oh, please," Eledis huffed. "The risk wouldn't be to the soldiers but to the outcome of this expedition-"

"*Eledis*. I love you, but *stop talking*," I snapped.

While my grandfather closed his mouth with a glare, I took a calming breath.

"Captain, please adjust your course. Your new destination is Sev," I said. "I won't let the people who've helped me suffer, not if I can help it."

With a half-smile, Oswin bowed.

"It shall be done," he said.

Spinning, he headed toward the soldiers watching us. In fact, now that I was aware of it, there were a lot of eyes on us.

Before that could send anxiety climbing up my throat, the scrape of a sword on its scabbard drew my attention to Marcuset, and the sight of him holding an unsheathed blade had me brushing Silverblade's hilt.

With his eyes on Eledis, he said, "Sorry, my friend."

And then, he knelt, lifting his sword with his head bowed.

"I, Marcuset, commander of all soldiers faithful to the Audish royal line, do swear fealty and unwavering support to Raimie, the rightful claimant of the throne," he said. "Ever will I serve as you see fit, ever to be your shield. May my blade always prove true to you."

In the silence that followed, I could only stare. Had... had that actually just happened?

"I'm so sorry, human mine," Dim said. "I know you didn't want this."

"But you have to complete the exchange," Bright added, "unless you mean to reject him."

If I did, it would, at the least, lower Marcuset's standing among the soldiers. Some might even see my rejection as a lack of faith, and from there, naming him a traitor wouldn't be a long leap. With all of that, he might conveniently fall overboard on our journey, all because of me, and no matter that we'd just met, I didn't want any of that for the man kneeling in front of me.

So, ignoring what it would mean for me, I rifled through my mental index for my part in this protocol. Drawing Silverblade, I nicked my thumb before pressing it into Marcuset's forehead,

holding my sword to the side.

“I, Raimie, last in the line of Audish kings, do accept Marcuset as my faithful servant,” I said. “I swear to honor and protect you as best I can.”

I had to add that last bit, no matter that it jumped from the script. How could I keep someone safe with my limited resources?

“Ever will I work toward your benefit, ever to provide opportunity for you,” I continued. “May I always serve you as a leader should.”

Straightening, I offered Marcuset a hand, and while he obviously didn’t need it, he accepted anyway. As he sheathed his blade, he glanced at Eledis, imploring enough with it that even I could read his plea for forgiveness, but with his arms crossed, my grandfather wouldn’t look at him. Slumping, Marcuse shook his head before spinning on our audience.

“All right, you lot! What are you staring at?” he roared. “Get back to it. We have places to be.”

Once more, activity on the quarterdeck flurried to life with soldiers running every which way.

“I should show you to your quarters,” Marcuset said. “If you’ll follow me?”

I nodded my acceptance, but Eledis turned further away from us, which meant we should leave him alone. To my great surprise—or not, considering their relationship—Marcuset read this too. Without another word, he led the way below deck.

When we reached my assigned cabin, I paused before entering.

“Why did you do it?” I asked. “You hardly know me. You can’t know what sort of king I’d make. So, why?”

I still didn’t know what I’d do about this ‘ruling a kingdom’ thing, whether I’d accept it or reject it as I’d like, but fortunately, I didn’t have to make a decision yet.

Instead, I met Marcuset’s eyes, barely noticing the sigh he released.

“Your Majesty, I’ve known you for long enough that I could never doubt what sort of leader you’ll be,” he said. “If you’ll excuse me?”

Despite my confusion, I said, “Of course. Good night, commander.”

Once Marcuset had disappeared, I marched across the length of my cabin to repeatedly bang my forehead on its bulkhead.

TTS Chapter Sixty-One