

Chapter 64: Life at Sea

Raimie

With shaking hands, I opened the hatch above my head before climbing the last few rungs of the ladder, and when sunlight splashed over me, I held perfectly still, turning my face up to it. After so long trapped in the ship's hull, I hadn't been sure if I'd ever see a clear sky again.

"At least one of us is enjoying himself," Dim grumbled. "I can't imagine why you'd want to leave that delightfully wonderful bedlam behind."

Smiling, I said, *I'm sure YOU don't. Bright's probably happy to get away from it.*

"Actually..." Bright started.

"Uh... Your Maj- sir- Shit. What do I...?"

"It's just Raimie," I said as I lowered my head.

When I saw the sailor waiting on the ladder below me, though, I jumped before moving to the side.

"Sorry," I said. "Being outside again just feels so good."

"Can hardly blame ya. Bad passage, that was."

Chuckling, the sailor scrambled to get out of the way, ambling toward fore after casting a cautious glance at me. I wasn't sure why they did that. Since leaving Daira, I'd done my best to prove that I was perfectly normal to these new people, but still, they treated me with deference or like I was an unknown, dangerous entity.

As always, I shrugged the reaction off.

I wandered toward a railing at the ship's aft, chewing on my lip while keeping an eye on the storms, still visible in the distance. The Accession Tear loomed above us, and even reduced in size as it was, I couldn't help but shiver at the memory of it reaching so far above me that I'd thought it would swallow the sky.

"That's why I don't want to leave that place, so antithetical to what I am, behind," Bright said.

"Because we're also leaving it behind."

I thought you wouldn't like such proximity to a tear, considering it makes you hostile to Dim here, I said.

"Please. Why would I care about keeping a piece of the enemy safe?" Bright said with a sniff.

At that, I rolled my eyes, smirking when Dim started chortling.

"As if- as if I need you to keep me safe," they gasped.

As Bright opened their mouth to snap something, I growled, *Can we focus? Are we going to have problems when leaving a tear now? I don't want a repeat of what happened under the mountain.*

"Yeah... no, that won't happen. You're moving away from the influence that a break in reality holds over us, which means we won't revert to our natural states," Dim said. "But we are leaving it behind, and it connects us to what we are. So, we might be grumpy for a while."

Great...

They'd provided me with some interesting information, though. How did a tear connect Ele and Daevetch to their splinters? Was it a door between the planes as well as one between worlds? If that were true, how terrifying would it be?

"Kid, you have no idea," Bright said.

I glared at them, sedately standing at my side, but at their raised eyebrow, I relented. Dim's antics—pacing atop the railing while purposefully swaying, as if trying to lose their balance—only helped my decision to ignore my splinters for a while.

"Do you know the tale of the Tear?"

Without looking at who'd spoken, I nodded.

"In the long-forgotten past, only humans inhabited this world, caught in a centuries-long conflict against a foe that no one remembers," I said. "On another world, the Esla fought to survive in a reality that was slowly dying until Alouin came along. He ushered the Esla to our world and at the point of their arrival, created the Accession Tear, thus ending one conflict for humanity and making a new one."

"And what about Alouin? Most people revere him as a god, but you said you've met him. What do you think he is?"

Cocking my head, I sucked on my lip while watching the Tear.

"I don't know what to think," I eventually said. "I've never liked the idea of gods, although I couldn't say why, but after everything I've seen, I don't want to discount the possibility of their existence. Until I find definitive proof one way or the other, I'll just have to keep an open mind."

“Would that more people were like you.”

Rhylix stepped up beside me with a smile on his face.

“So, now that you’ve had a months-long break, are you ready to resume your training?” he asked.

Was I ready to once more learn about my magic? To once more enjoy sessions where I learned the ways of the sword with my friend?

“Oh, *hell* yes,” I said.

The smile on Rhylix’s face widened.

“Good,” he said. “Let’s start with why tears affect you and Bright so much.”

For a week, I did nothing but train with Rhylix, read the books that Eledis assigned me, and helped with various mundane tasks.

I didn’t learn anything new when it came to my primeancy. From what I could tell, Rhylix seemed satisfied with what I currently knew, so instead of teaching me more, he had me practicing my skills instead.

Long were the hours that I spent hidden from the world in an Ele bubble while jumping between the ship’s rigging, working on my precision. It was a word that Rhylix seemed obsessed with.

When it came to the martial side of my training, he had me practicing my sword forms, but most of our sessions revolved around learning to wield other weapons. Knives, unarmed combat, and daggers were all thrown into the mix. One afternoon, Rhylix even had my father join us, watching while he and I revisited long-forgotten lessons about the bow.

Today, we were sparring with staves. I liked this weapon over most of the others because it fit with my hope to avoid killing people. It also helped that I was quite good with it.

When I jabbed the end of my staff at Rhylix’s face, he batted the strike aside before swinging for my side. I blocked, shoving Rhylix away, but he just rebounded, punching his staff toward my stomach. I wasn’t quick enough to avoid that blow, and as a dull ache spread across my abdomen, I raised a hand in surrender, backing away.

“Don’t give up, you weak-willed, placid, useless human!” Dim snarled. “Fight him.”

I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that, I said.

Like I had for most of my splinters’ antics over the last week. They were making it difficult to focus on the real world.

“Can’t rely on natural talent alone, Raimie,” Rhylix was saying. “Got to have some practiced skill as well.”

"I... know. Working... on it," I gasped, straightening from my hunch. "Again?"

I raised my staff, but Rhylix shook his head.

"That's enough for today," he said. "You have other responsibilities, you know."

Making a face, I said, "Unfortunately."

After stashing my staff, I gratefully retrieved water from a barrel while noting Eledis speaking with Rhylix. Casually, I hung the ladle over the barrel's lip before inching toward the two.

"-teaching him how to fight with a staff?" Eledis growled. "It's a poor man's weapon, not one to be used by a future king."

So, he'd joined the people intent on making me a king, huh? That was surprising. I'd thought he'd be the last person to do that.

"What if a staff is the only weapon available to him in a fight? Should he die because it isn't worthy of a king?" Rhylix asked. "I appreciate your concern for my student, but I'm not changing his training. As you said, he's a decent fighter now, but in Auden, decent isn't good enough. I'm teaching your grandson how to survive, not how to play a part."

Narrowing his eyes, Eledis said, "What do you know about Auden?"

Oo. That tone... I understood why Rhylix took a step closer to Eledis, gritting his teeth.

"I know enough," he hissed.

Hurrying forward, I slid between the two, forcing them to retreat from one another.

"Let's not have an argument while we're in a confined space, please," I said. "Eledis, I enjoy what I've been learning, and learning as many combat methods as possible can't hurt me. Rhy, you might as well tell him where you're from. He'll find out sooner or later."

Rhylix turned unreadable eyes on me, ones that had me shivering. I imagined this was his version of a glare.

Hissing, Dim stalked to a stop right in front of my friend, standing on their tiptoes to get in his face, and Bright scurried forward, hesitating for the briefest of moments before taking their arm to drag them away.

"LET ME GO, YOU PREDICTABLE-"

"*Stop it!*" Bright snapped. "Stop it, stop it, stop it! You *cannot* antagonize him. Hell, you're making it difficult to maintain the peace right now."

This confrontation had me glancing at them from the corner of my eye, if only because Bright never swore around me. That a curse had slipped through their lips now was telling, and I wondered if I'd have to send the two away. I'd been planning to do it for a few days now, but circumstances kept delaying it.

Meanwhile, Eledis had crossed his arms.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

For a moment, Rhylix looked like he wouldn't answer, but when I pointedly stared at him, he sighed.

"I'm from Keld," Rhylix said, "which is a small town in Auden, or rather, it was. It fell to Harvest ten or so years ago. I escaped and made my way to Ada'ir afterward."

"You're Audish," Eledis blankly said. "We saw your memory in Raimie's second trial."

Wincing, Rhylix nodded.

"It was my price for bringing humans to Allanovian," he said.

Resting his hand on his sword's hilt, Eledis drummed his fingers on it.

"If you're Audish, then why haven't you sworn your fealty to your rightful ruler?" he said. "The rest of these people are of Audish descent, certainly, but there's at least a generation between them and their forebears. You're *from* Auden. You should have been on your knees the instant you recognized my family."

What?

Perhaps Rhylix bristled at Eledis' insinuation. Perhaps he turned to me for help. I wouldn't know, too consumed by my own indignation.

"Rhy doesn't need to swear anything to me or anyone else in this family," I snapped. "In the time we've known him, he's proven his loyalty a hundred times over. He *saved my damn life*. What more could you possibly want?"

"I—"

Slowly closing his mouth, Eledis blinked at me for a moment with his jaw clenched.

"You're right," he said. "I'm sorry, Rhylix. I shouldn't have questioned you."

"I don't blame you for it," my friend said. "Considering who your opponent is, I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't called me out."

“Still, you’ve done more for my family than most, so I hope you’ll accept my apology,” Eledis said. “I should find Marcuset or the captain of this blasted ship. Get an update from them. If you’ll excuse me.”

He took off aft, and watching him go, I shook my head. My grandfather’s tendency to create conflict popped up at the most random of times.

“That man will be a problem,” Rhylix said.

“Oh, I know. Sometimes, I wish he wasn’t family so I could have left him in Ada’ir, but unfortunately, that’s not the case,” I said. “Anyway, I should get some rest. Maybe dig into another book on economics. Gods know if I’ll understand this one. Same thing tomorrow?”

“Unless you have something better to do,” Rhylix said with a cheeky grin.

Rolling my eyes, I started for a hatch, but my friend’s voice chased me, giving me pause.

“You know I’d swear fealty if you wanted it, right?”

That had me snorting. I was already responsible for two people’s safety. Why would I add to that burden?

“I’ll never want that, Rhy. I’m just Raimie with you. Always,” I said before smirking. “Try not to cause a fight, though, will you? It’s been smooth sailing for a week. Hopefully, the peace will hold until we reach Auden.”

Chuckling, Rhylix said, “One can always hope.”

With nothing else to say, I ambled to bed.

I shouldn’t have wished for the peace to persist, it turned out, because as if to spite me, the wind died the next day.

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