

Chapter 65: Battle at Sea

Raimie

After two days of drifting, I met with Commander Marcuset, Eledis, my father, and Captain Oswin to discuss our situation. So far, all we'd produced was frustration.

Eledis had been surly since Oswin had asserted his right as the ship's captain to attend this meeting, and Marcuset had yet to shake off the hassle of transferring from the ship where he held command. Add to that how much my father had always hated being around Eledis, and one found oneself surrounded by grumpy men.

"How is it that the Queen's navy is reliant on Alouin damned wind to get anywhere?" Eledis snapped. "Have none of you heard of rowing?"

Rubbing his temples, Marcuset said, "How many sailors have you known who are willing to man the oars? Given that and 'desa's reluctance to use slaves, we've never thought it prudent to equip our ships with them. Besides, we have other ways of discouraging combat than running away."

"Will these other means get us across a still sea?" Eledis asked.

Sighing, Marcuset hugged his elbows with a headshake.

"I thought not," Eledis hissed. "I guess we'll just have to *beseech Alouin* for wind because otherwise, we're STUCK HERE!"

Throwing his hands overhead, he stalked a few paces away, muttering to himself.

"I hate it when he gets like this," Aramar said.

Glancing at him, Marcuset forcibly relaxed, lowering his arms.

"He'll be fine soon enough," he said, "but after the last few years, I'm sure you know that better than most, don't you?"

Rolling his eyes, Aramar said, "Unfortunately."

I coughed into a fist, grimacing when all eyes landed on me.

"Sorry," I said. "I just thought that we should focus on our current problem. Can we do anything about it? And if we're truly becalmed, should we prepare for the coming days?"

“Well, we can’t do much about the wind,” Aramar said, “and from what I’ve heard, our supplies are already running low, which I find surprising given how long this trip’s been planned for. We were just waiting for our instigator to begin it.”

When he inclined his head to me, I did my absolute best not to blush.

“What’s left?” I asked.

“A week or so of food,” Marcuset said, “but our problem’s with potable water. We have a couple of days before we run out of it.”

Yeah... that sounded bad.

“So, what do we do?” I asked. “The Esela can’t summon anything from the mainland, not when we’re this far from it. Right?”

With a short laugh, Aramar said, “Yes, that’s unlikely.”

But no one else spoke, and no ideas were shared. After a moment of silence, Oswin clicked his tongue.

“If we don’t have a fancy solution, we do the only thing we can,” he said. “Rationing. It’s not ideal, but it’ll buy us a day or two.”

“But that’s great!” I said.

The others looked at me like I was insane, and I shrunk on myself, if only a little.

Standing firm against a total collapse, I said, “What? In our current circumstances, time is everything. With time, we’ll overcome this problem without an issue.”

After a heartbeat more of silence, Oswin cracked up laughing, lifting a hand in placation when I opened my mouth.

“I’m sorry,” he coughed when he could. “It’s just... your optimism. It’s refreshing. I’ve missed it.”

Grinning, I said, “Kind of hard to be optimistic when nature herself is trying to kill you.”

The others turned to me, gracing me with expressions I couldn’t interpret. My father looked relieved while the other two seemed melancholy, but I couldn’t be sure. They were revealing little through the blank masks they were showing me, and I’d get no clues about it from Bright or Dim. I’d sent them away not long after we’d been becalmed.

Before I could figure them out, Rhylix flew up the final rungs of a ladder, racing across the forecastle to me.

“You need to sound the alarm,” he called.

Without question, I started for the nearest set of bells, left secured to the deck for just such a purpose.

Behind me, Marcuset warily asked, "Why?"

"Because someone's about to attack. Why else?" Aramar grumbled. "Who's the enemy?"

"I'm not sure," Rhylix said. "They're flying black and green colors and using oars to maneuver. Considering they're using scoured skeletons in place of a figurehead, I thought I should mention them to someone in charge."

"That sounds like the Serpent Pirates," Oswin said. "Slavers, commander."

After hissing out a breath, Marcuset clicked his tongue.

"Fine," he said. "I can see the ships you're talking about, so you're not lying, but I can't pick out their details. How did you?"

"He's Eselan, Marcuset," I shouted. "He can shape change, remember?"

Freeing the bell, I rang it, watching the deck burst into activity, and to my satisfaction, the alarm was quickly carried to other ships in the fleet. At least some of these people had good reaction times.

With little time to prepare, I sprinted for a hatch, sliding down its ladder before running to my cabin. Silverblade was already at my side, as it near constantly was these days, but I'd probably need more weapons for this confrontation. After adding a few knives to my arsenal, I slung a bow and quiver over my shoulders, adjusting everything to where I could easily reach it.

Before I could race back above deck, though, an understanding of what was happening crashed into me, and I leaned against the bulkhead to stay on my feet. Since Allanovian, I'd hovered in the uncertainty of what I'd do if caught in a choice between someone else's life versus my own.

If required for my survival, could I kill a stranger? Because that was what this battle would demand.

Gods, this was senseless! One group of people doing its best to eliminate the other. What a waste of life and for *what*? So one group could profit off of the lives of others?

And thinking about that, I straightened from the wall.

Killing to save myself? I didn't know if I could do that. Killing to save the people in this fleet, people who'd left their homes behind because of the hope my presence promised? Doing that sounded much more feasible.

Still, once I'd joined the others, I was quick to retrieve a staff from their crate. If I could avoid taking someone's life, I would.

While I'd prepared, the enemy's ships had advanced more quickly than I'd expected. Two of them were barreling down on the fleet.

Normally, this wouldn't be a threat, considering my people had twice that number, but right now, the enemy had superior maneuverability. They could attack one of the fleet's ships, kill and pillage on it as they wished, and get away, all without worrying about the others. Greater numbers didn't count for much when the enemy had speed on their side.

When I stopped beside Marcuset, he was chewing the hell out of his lip, watching the enemy approach.

"Let's hope they'll see reason," he said as he gave a signal.

"What-?" I started.

A bell loudly rang, one that was deafened by a cracking boom. As smoke plumed into the air, water splashed in an incongruous line halfway between the fleet and the enemy ships.

With my mouth gaping, I didn't think to ask what *that* had been until I heard Marcuset's growl through the buzzing in my ears.

"Stubborn bastards," he said. "We'll have to blow them out of the water."

He raised his hand again, but I snatched his wrist before he could drop it.

"No," I said. "Those are slavers, right? That means innocent people are aboard their ships. I won't condemn them to a watery grave."

When Marcuset rounded on me, I almost lost my hold on his wrist, such was the incredulousness he showed me.

"Even if saving them will cost our people's lives?" he hissed.

Holding Marcuset's gaze, I said, "Isn't this what soldiers are made for?"

With gritted teeth, the commander closed his eyes, took a steadying breath, and bowed.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said.

Then, he spun toward Oswin and the soldiers standing with him.

"Prepare for boarding," he barked.

I'd already unslung my bow, nocking an arrow. The enemy's ships were fast approaching, and on them, I could see my potential victims.

Slavers.

Their eyes were bright with a fear I recognized, one that sang through me too.

They'd chosen to embrace that fear and inflict it on others.

Lifting my bow, I sighted on a man who was swinging a grapple with practiced ease. He was wearing a cruel grin, and I would protect my people, my family, from men like this.

But what if that man had a family too?

The distinctive twang of my father's bow sounded in the air, quickly followed by the release of other bowstrings, but I couldn't do the same. I was stuck, frozen, *petrified* by the consequences of ending a stranger's life. What connections in humanity's vast web might be cut with a single person's death?

With an exasperated groan, a sailor heaved me behind her. I stumbled a bit, lowering my bow, and as my soldiers drew their weapons, I watched with a clogged throat.

How useless was a king who couldn't protect his people?

Someone pulled my staff from its place on my back before pressing it into my hands.

"You don't have to kill to protect," Rhylix said.

He shoved me, and careening toward the soldiers, I instinctively pulled on Ele and jumped. For the most glorious of moments, I was suspended in the air with chaos and death below me.

For a moment, I was free.

Then, I landed on the enemy ship's deck with a muted crack, sweeping my staff around my body. As I rose, jabbing for a pirate's chest, someone else thumped to the deck nearby, and I smiled.

Two Ele primeancers against a host of vicious norms? The enemy didn't stand a chance.

Dodging a cutlass's arch, I blocked another sword, coming from the side, before knocking a dagger out of a teenager's hand. Sharp pain in my shoulder spun me in place, but I used that momentum to drive the air from a burly man's gut.

In my peripheral vision, I noted people in a familiar uniform swinging across the gap, an addition of allies that lessened the pressure on me, but by that point, I was too far gone in Ele's embrace to care.

Humming along with its rhythm, I danced among the pirates, serving my primary purpose. I knocked arrows out of the air and blocked killing blows in the moment before they'd have landed. I would protect the people who belonged to me, whether through love or faith, and damn anyone who tried to stop me.

Unfortunately, Ele wasn't as willing to accommodate that desire as I'd thought. As I went up against a man wielding a mace, it fled from me, and its abrupt absence had me faltering in my strike. Snarling, the man shoved me, and when I fell back, my head smacked into something solid.

After dropping into my nightmare realm this time, I resisted everything that was muddling me, scrambling to get off of Nylion's back.

"FUCK!" I shouted before turning to my friend. "Either wake me up, or switch places with me NOW."

"Well, hello to you too," Nylion said. "It's been a while. Months, I believe?"

And I swore I could see his eyeroll under that all-encompassing hood.

"Mind telling me what's happened before I decide?" he asked.

I related the story as quickly as I could, and once I'd finished, Nylion shivered.

"A battle?" he said. "PERFECT for me. Thank you, heart of-"

He fell silent, but I was too concerned with my real-world peril to analyze what that could mean.

"If you're taking care of this, then get on my godsdamn back," I snapped.

Chuckling, Nylion said, "Bossy."

But he did as he was told, and I was left alone in my nightmare.

Nylion opened his eyes to a giant bringing a mace down on his head. With no time for anything fancy, he snapped his black-smothered hands in front of him, ready to push that energy forth, when a bang deafened him. The giant's head exploded, and as the body fell forward, he rolled out of the way. While he took stock of his surroundings, his eyes landed on something that made his heart stop.

"Ohmygods, Oswin," he breathed.

The captain still had his pistol raised, but at Nylion's exhalation, he turned with a frown.

"What did you say-?" he asked.

Movement flashed behind Oswin, and Nylion arced what he was holding over the man's shoulder, grimacing when he saw that his weapon was a puny staff.

Gods. That was so Raimie.

Dropping the staff, Nylion drew his sword so he could stab his enemy. Panting, he glanced at Oswin, who was eyeing him with wariness.

“Raimie?” Oswin cautiously said.

And for a heartbeat, Nylion squeezed his eyes closed. He let himself feel the hurt of this misidentification, masking it by snapping the fletching off of an arrow. How had Raimie gotten shot like this?

As he greeted the battle again, he snapped, “Where is the pirate captain?”

Because no matter how chaotic their surroundings were, Oswin would know the answer to everything Nylion wanted to know, tactically at least. He always knew.

“Aft. Captain’s quarters,” Oswin said.

He paused with such hope in him.

“Nyl-?”

It was too late. Nylion was already carving a path to his goal. It didn’t matter who stood in his way. He cut through them, although he avoided people in uniform as much as possible. Raimie wouldn’t like waking up to stories of having killed his own soldiers.

When he reached the captain’s quarters, he was disappointed. That had been far too easy, not even a warmup, but perhaps his target would be more of a challenge.

After opening the cabin’s door, Nylion waited for a moment, and as expected, a sword swept through the spot where he would have stepped. With shadows collected in his arm, he snaked it around the door, and snatching hold of cloth, he thrust the pirate away. He only entered the cabin after hearing the thunk of a body hitting the bulkhead.

This place was cluttered and filthy. Unhygienic.

Which was a direct contrast to the man groaning on the floor. The pirate captain was a pretty boy, which was an interesting concept for Nylion.

“Don’t- don’t kill me,” the bastard gasped. “I’ll give you whatever you want. Is it gold? Wine? Women?”

“I doubt that you can give me my heart’s desire,” Nylion said.

Crouching, he rifled through the other man’s pockets, which only had him squirming.

“Oh,” he purred. “If that’s what you’re into, I can happily oblige.”

Ignoring the implication, Nylion retrieved a keyring, bouncing it on his palm before rising. He was unsure what to do here. He knew what he should do but...

“Raimie would not approve,” he said to himself.

Still, this was the first chance he'd had to make a choice for himself in a while. After seeming centuries trapped in a make-believe place, resisting the urge to destroy evil had become... difficult.

Scowling, the pirate said, "Who's Raimie?"

"He is the heart of my heart," Nylion said, "and because of him, I will grant you a measure of mercy."

Shadows coagulated around his hand before shooting through the pirate's chest, and with a choked gasp, the light fled from his eyes.

Then, Nylion set to the slow work of separating a man's head from his shoulders.

Outside, the battle was still raging, which was disappointing. Raimie would need to whip these people into shape.

Climbing a ladder with his burden was difficult, but Nylion needed the height that the quarterdeck would provide. When he was balanced on a railing up there, he surveyed the chaos below him, wondering if the nuisance, constantly hovering at his shoulder, was pleased. He was, if only because he could act out a fleeting fantasy that he'd once held.

Who didn't want to be a pirate king?

"Crew of the *Green Plague*. Members of the Serpent Pirates," he bellowed. "I have defeated your captain, which by all the codes written, makes me your new leader. Surrender, and I may yet let you live."

Nylion tossed a severed head into the cacophony below, and that, along with their diminishing odds, had the pirates dropping their weapons. As they knelt, lacing their fingers behind their heads, Nylion observed them with a bemused smirk. When he returned, Raimie would have a mess to clean up.

Oh, well. He could handle something this small.

Dropping to the main deck, Nylion ambled to the pirate captain's head and kicked it into the sea.

Revision #1

Created 25 August 2024 00:04:57 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable