

# Chapter 68: Life at Sea Part Two

## Raimie

When I woke up to darkness with the comforting noises of maritime life all around, I wondered if I'd dreamed about the battle. How else could I be alive? The last thing I remembered was a giant with a mace preparing to swing at me, but if that had been a dream...

Unsteadily, I made my way to my cabin's door, wincing at a rush of light when I opened it, and stopped short when I saw the soldier leaning against the bulkhead opposite me. Snapping to attention, the man might have mumbled two hated words, but I'd heard them in such a jumbled manner that I chose to ignore them. Glancing down the passageway, I frowned at him.

"Do you need something from me?" I said.

With a confused expression in place, the soldier said, "You... said to give you a message when you woke up."

Interesting. I didn't remember doing that.

"What's the message?" I asked.

Stiffening to attention, the soldier said, "Apologies. I had to improvise a bit."

When he fell silent, I wrinkled my nose, replaying the words for something understandable, but I came up empty.

"What's that supposed to mean, do you think?" I asked.

"I'm sure I don't know, Your Majesty," the soldier said. "You did say something about a concussion before you retired, though."

A concussion? That could explain why I couldn't remember the final part of the battle, which seemed to have actually happened. I should find out what had happened during the time I was missing, but first.

“Alouin, it’s spreading,” I groaned. “First, Marcuset and Oswin, and now, a random soldier. Oh. No offense meant.”

“None taken,” the soldier said. “I’d rather not have my name remembered. You important people tend to have miserable lives. Your Majesty.”

“The last few months have been... interesting,” I mused before shaking myself. “But there it is again! Why are you calling me that? I’ve made it clear that I don’t like it.”

Wordlessly, the soldier examined me, intently enough that I wondered what he was thinking. Frowning, he started and stopped speaking before cocking his head.

“May I be frank with you?” he asked.

“I thought that’s what you were doing,” I said with a smirk.

“Fair enough,” the soldier said. “When we soldiers call you ‘Your Majesty’, it’s our way of showing our support, both to you and to others. Doing this when at home is important for many reasons, of course. What’s essential right now, though, is that when we honor you, outsiders see that you have your army’s devotion, which honestly, is all the Audish royal family has to its name right now. Knowing you have our loyalty will give you a stronger place at the negotiation table, among other things, and you’ll need that if you want to advance your cause. Unless you think we should take Auden through violence alone?”

“No. I’d rather avoid violence if possible,” I said.

Much as I hated to admit it, I could see the logic behind this soldier’s words. I’d read similar arguments in books about how a leader could earn their legitimacy, but that made it no less palatable.

“Of course,” the soldier said with a nod. “Now, if I may, I’d make a suggestion, since that honorific obviously makes you uncomfortable.”

“Please,” I said, waving for him to continue.

“When you’re in public, people will call you ‘Your Majesty’ or any other title they believe you deserve. There’s no getting around it,” the soldier said, “but among those of us who participate in your daily life, you could ask that we drop the formal means of address. I doubt you could get us to abandon all forms of respect, but if you like, you could let it be known that unless something more formal is required, you’d rather have us refer to you with familiarity. Say, with something like ‘Your Honor’ or if you don’t mind how crude some people would see it, ‘sir’, like we do in the military.”

Smiling, I crossed my arms while leaning on the doorway.

“You know, random soldier, you’re very wise,” I said. “Are you sure you won’t give me your name? I could see that you’re promoted, and if you were, you’d get better rations, among other luxuries.”

As the soldier grew increasingly still and uncomfortable, I watched with my smile widening until he tried to speak, choking on his reply. Then, I laughed, waving for him to relax.

"I'm sorry. Oh, g- Alouin. I'm so sorry. I couldn't help myself," I gasped. "Please, forgive me. I... hell. Here you are, being genuine with me and I'm..."

Biting my lip, I looked away. What had I been thinking?

"You're coming down off of an extremely stressful few hours, and you're injured to boot," the soldier said. "It's ok, Your Majesty. Trust me. Soldiers understand the need to laugh better than most."

Slowly, I looked the other man up and down, noting his callouses and scars and the worn look of his sword.

"Yes, I suppose you would," I said before straightening. "I'll take your suggestion. If you would, please let it be known that if possible, I'd like all honorifics dropped among my soldiers. I'd rather have you call me by name, but if you must use a term of respect, you may address me as 'sir'."

With a salute, the soldier said, "Yes, sir! I can spread the news right away, if you like."

"Please, do so," I said.

After bowing, of all things, the soldier ran off to follow his 'orders', but before he could disappear, I pulled him up short.

"One more thing," I called. "Since we left Daira, the soldiers from Ada'ir have acted aloof with me, and yet now, you call me 'Your Majesty'. I know that you're one among many, and your thoughts may differ from your compatriots, but I was hoping you could tell me what's changed."

Turning to face me, the soldier cocked his head.

"We've been distant because we were watching you, sir. We may be loyal to Auden, but we weren't sure if you were the best solution for its troubles," he said. "Then, the battle happened. You acted as a good king should today. Leading the charge, fighting with us instead of standing on the sidelines, making hard choices as the situation required. These are the markings of the leader that every common soldier dreams of following, and we will honor you for them."

When he bowed again, I was struck speechless, left gaping as he rose. He must have found this amusing since he grinned at me.

"You should go back to bed, sir," he said. "Concussions are no joke. You'll need plenty of rest over the next few weeks."

Snapping my mouth shut, I nodded before twirling into my cabin.

I was curious who'd decided I had a concussion, whether Rhylix or not, because I felt perfectly fine. Right now, the only thing that concerned me was my loss of memory. If the battle had concluded while I'd been 'unconscious', the time I'd lost must have been long.

And from several things the soldier had said, I'd been active during that span of time. Why couldn't I remember it?

Shaking my head, I collapsed into my bunk. I should figure out what had happened and soon, but first, I'd take care of my body on the off chance that my diagnosis was right. After making myself comfortable, I drifted off.

*No panic greeted me as I entered my nightmare realm today. Hanging from Nylion's shoulders, I didn't move, content to keep my face pressed into his back. With nothing life-threatening facing me in the real world, I could take the time to appreciate how wonderful my reunion with him had been. It might seem strange, but being with him had been...*

*It had been everything. I didn't know how else to describe it. Gods, if death hadn't been hovering over me when last I'd been here, I'd have stayed in this place. I'd have stayed with Nylion and his warmth that was just right, his smell that spread comfort with every breath, his body that begged me to fold myself around it.*

*Or perhaps it was the other way around.*

*I'd missed this, the sense of safety and- and home that I'd always found with Nylion. I'd missed feeling...*

*Whole.*

*Here, with someone I'd made up as a child, the gaping void at my core, the one that had always plagued me, was filled. What. the. hell?*

*"Raimie? Are you awake?"*

*Jerking my head back, I sucked down air while skittering my eyes over my surroundings again. Well from the worst moment of my childhood. Unnerving black substance covering its surfaces. The well's lip overhead, closer than when I'd last been here. Nylion.*

*Nylion.*

*What in the godsdamn void had I been doing, snuggling into the other man?*

*With a long sigh, Nylion said, "Yup. Awake."*

*When he released the bond around my wrists, I scrambled to get free, gritting my teeth as a hook reached deep inside of me and yanked something out. I hadn't felt that. It hadn't happened!*

*"Is something wrong?" Nylion asked.*

*I jerked my head toward my friend to snap at him, but for some reason, seeing that hood dried my mouth out.*

*Clearing my throat, I said, "A concussion? Really? That was the best you could do?"*

*With a huff, Nylion faced the wall before resuming his climb.*

*"What would you rather I have said?" he asked. "Hello, Rhylix! My name is Nylion, not Raimie, and despite what you might think, you are not Raimie's best friend. I am. Also, I am only an imagining in his head?"*

*I would argue the best friend part, but mentioning that now didn't seem wise.*

*"Yeah, that wouldn't have gone over well," I said. "Also, have you been rehearsing that?"*

*Ducking his hood, Nylion mumbled, "Maybe."*

*And I laughed. I wasn't sure why I'd had such a strange reaction to Nylion today, but exchanges like this were more what I expected from our relationship.*

*"Is my desire to make a good impression on your friend really so funny?" Nylion asked.*

*With my laughter petering out, I released one of my holds on the wall to wipe my eyes.*

*"No, it's understandable," I said. "I'm sorry. I've just missed..."*

*And there it was again. Excessive sentimentality for as Nylion had put it, an imagining in my head.*

*"I have missed you too."*

*A choked sound was ripped from me as I nearly lost my grip on the wall. What...? WHAT?*

*Sighing, Nylion shook his hood.*

*"Never mind," he says. "Come on, slowpoke. Get to climbing, or I will reach the top before you."*

*For a moment, I considered rejecting this provided distraction. I should talk to Nylion about the host of strange things that occurred when we were around one another but...*

*Next time.*

*"Yeah, you wish," I said, picking up the pace. "I've always been the better climber of us. How many times have you fallen when you had a perfect handhold waiting for you?"*

*As Nylion sputtered, I grinned. Just like old times and I supposed that when it came to things like this, I had missed my friend.*

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Two days after the battle, I was leaning against the main mast with an open book held in my lap. I'd been trying to read it for a while now, but no matter how hard I tried, that wasn't happening. Every time I set my eyes on its pages, I got two paragraphs in before I was listening to Marcuset give his report about the battle again.

I wasn't sure what to think about what I'd heard. Wantonly killing people and ordering the surviving enemies executed? That didn't sound like me, but multiple people had confirmed it, even my father when I'd run to him on hearing the news.

Groaning, I set the book into the unread pile beside me before rubbing my face, and when I pulled away, I stared at my open palms. They looked the same. Shouldn't the hands of a mass murderer look different in some way?

"May I join you, sir?"

Jumping, I dropped my hands in my lap, hiding them, before looking up.

"Captain Oswin," I said.

It was amazing how much relief this man brought with him, considering how short of a time we'd known one another.

"Please, make yourself comfortable," I said, waving around me.

Nodding, Oswin folded to the ground, setting a cloth-wrapped bundle at his side.

Once he looked settled, I asked, "How can I help you, captain?"

With his lips twitching, Oswin clasped his hands in front of him.

"Forgive me, sir, but *you* look like you could use some help," he said. "May I try my hand at it?"

Blinking, I blankly said, "At helping me?"

Was that... possible? Since leaving home, I'd gotten used to assisting others while maintaining an aura of strength, and in a way, it had helped me forget that others could provide me with support. Sure, Rhylix had gone out of his way to help me before, but Rhylix was... *Rhylix*. For some reason, the rules had never applied to him.

"Yes, sir," Oswin said. "I'd like to help. If you'll let me."

"Be my guest," I said, "although I'm not sure why you think I need it."

"I'll get to that."

Transferring his bundle into his lap, Oswin started unwrapping it.

“When I was younger, I had a friend, a kid you remind me of. He was as bright-eyed as you, just as giving and unpredictable. I couldn’t tell you how many times he made an out-of-the-blue change in plans that left me reeling,” Oswin said with a soft laugh. “He was also devastated when forced to do something he considered wrong.”

Ah. That was what the captain wanted to help with.

“Sounds like my kind of guy,” I said.

Snorting, Oswin smiled at me.

“Yes, you’d have liked him,” he said. “In any case, when these moments of guilt happened to my friend, he’d ask if he could test my inventions for me. I like tinkering in my spare time, you see, and after he asked, we’d usually spend the day doing just that. I thought... I thought you might like to try it.”

Finished unwrapping the bundle, Oswin offered me its contents, and I frowned at the revealed hollow tube.

“I saw these in Daira. Powerful stuff,” I said, lifting the tube free. “What’s it called?”

“It’s a pistol,” Oswin said. “I based the design on something that came through the capital’s tear and- *Don’t* point that end at someone unless you mean to kill them.”

Blushing, I lowered the pistol.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I wasn’t...”

“Don’t worry. I handed it to you unloaded for a reason,” Oswin said with a grin. “Shall I show you how to hold it properly?”

“Please.”

A lesson commenced where I learned how to safely handle this new weapon. Oswin showed me how to load it while explaining its deficiencies: how much it misfired as well as its uselessness when damp. It was a lot of safety talk and warm-up, more than I’d gotten with other weapons, but then, Oswin had me fire it over the sea’s open water, and I was glad for the instruction.

“Hell, this thing packs a punch,” I said, shaking out my arm.

“That it does,” Oswin said. “I understand if it’s not for you-”

“Are you kidding? That was amazing!” I said. “Let’s do it again.”

For a moment, Oswin just looked at me with something incredibly sad in his eyes, but then, he blinked, and it was gone.

“Of course, sir,” he said. “It would be my pleasure.”

Later, when I tried to give the pistol back, Oswin insisted that I keep it, and standing at the far aft railing, we looked out over the fleet.

“Thank you,” I said. “You were right. I needed that.”

“Happy to have helped,” Oswin said.

From the corner of my eye, I watched him, surprised at how happy I was to see him content. Why, for the love of Alouin, was he so familiar to me?

Why did it matter?

Leaning against the railing, I said, “May I ask you something?”

“Please,” Oswin said, “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

With a nod, I said, “The friend you mentioned before. What happened to him? The way you put it, I’d guess that he isn’t in your life anymore.”

Oswin’s face closed off, and although he moved not a muscle, I could have sworn he’d stiffened.

“He moved on to bigger and better things,” he said before bowing to me. “If you’ll excuse me, sir, I have duties to attend to.”

Hell. I’d upset him.

Internally wincing, I said, “Then, you should get to them. Thanks for this.”

I raised the pistol into view, and Oswin smiled, which loosened the air of tension around him.

“You’re quite welcome,” he said. “Come find me if you ever want to practice with your aim.”

With a chuckle, I said, “I will.”

Watching the captain trot off, I tucked the pistol into my belt beside Silverblade, fully aware that I should find a better spot for it later. I didn’t know what to think of Oswin or what had happened over the last few hours, but one thing was certain.

“That was interesting,” I said to myself.

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Revision #1

Created 25 August 2024 01:29:21 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable