

Chapter 69: Arrival

Raimie, Rhylix

Raimie

No other noteworthy events occurred for several days, and during this period of calm, I caught up on my studies. Eledis had taken over as my tutor, working with me on his areas of expertise: negotiations and economics.

He wasn't a good teacher.

When with him, I'd learned to only ask questions when they were needed. Otherwise, I looked for answers in my books, therefore avoiding Eledis' frustration.

Once or twice, I tried to hold casual conversations with the ship's crew, but the formality and deference that they maintained around me didn't make that possible. Soon enough, I resigned myself to staying out of their way.

Even if they'd been friendly toward me, however, I might have avoided them. I quickly lost track of how many times they told me I should be resting, something that only increased in frequency when I resumed work on my weapon drills.

Normally, I'd heed these admonishments, strictly following my healer's order, but...

I wasn't sure if the concussion diagnosis was correct. If Rhylix were here, I'd consult with him about it, but he'd been stuck on another ship while the fleet had taken advantage of the wind. So far as I could tell, though, the only indication of my concussion was my memory loss.

And didn't I just bless and curse the fact that I couldn't remember the battle's ending? On the one hand, if I did remember, the guilt I already felt would be worse.

On the other hand, *I didn't remember*. Not only was that by itself worrying, but I'd had to rely on other people's stories to know what had happened to me.

A week or so after we'd left the Accession Tear behind, I woke up to the bustle of increased activity above deck, which was annoying. I'd been sent here for enforced rest, and now, the ones who'd wanted that from me were making way too much noise.

There must be a reason for it.

Once I was under an open sky, I marveled at the hecticness found here. More was going on now than when we'd been sailing through the Tear's storms, and I still had no idea of anything's purpose. Maybe I'd once more resume my pastime of blindly following sailors' shouted instructions, but first, I should figure out what was going on.

After wandering for a bit, avoiding harried sailors as I did, I found Marcuset on the ship's forecastle. As I approached, he was staring into the distance with a distinctly not-Marcuset look on his face, but when he turned on me, that odd combination of nostalgia and dread was wiped away.

"Sorry to wake you, Your Majesty, but someone spotted land not long ago," he said. "We thought it best to approach quickly, considering how easily we'd be spotted here."

My step faltered until I'd come to a stop.

"Land?" I asked with a dry mouth.

Nodding, Marcuset threw a hand toward the horizon.

"Come and see."

Gods, I'd rather not. I'd rather pretend I hadn't heard Marcuset, returning to my cabin so I could hide, but instead, I let my somehow sure feet take me to the railing, accepting a spyglass when it was offered.

"There," Marcuset said, pointing.

When looking where indicated, I saw a dark protrusion bulging out of the water, one that stretched to either side for quite a distance. Lowering the spyglass, I leaned on the railing, hoping I wasn't putting too much pressure on it.

Licking my lips, I asked, "Auden?"

"So we believe," Marcuset said. "Soon, we'll be on land, and you'll be in your rightful kingdom."

Oh, hell. I'd be sick. We were here, at our appointed destination, and I wasn't ready.

Since leaving home, in all of my ignorance, how had I changed? I had, what? A passing ability to fight? The barest of control on my primeancy? And I'd only scratched the surface of what I should know if I did end up ruling this damn kingdom.

"How... nice," I said, fighting to keep my voice even.

"Once we weigh anchor, we'll need to quickly survey the surrounding territory. We should establish a base of operations first thing," Marcuset said. "Alouin help us if hostiles run across us before we're prepared for them."

That was right. The reason we'd come here was to liberate this place, and what would that be if not a war? How long would I live with only violence and the struggle to survive as companions?

Gone would be the lazy days of studying. Gone would be the carefree conversations with my father and the soldiers' random gestures of kindness. My life would become one of misery and death and...

With my elbows on the railing, I tangled my fingers in my hair, creating a dull pulse behind my eyes.

"I'm not ready," I said.

These people were relying on me for something I couldn't give them. Since I'd accepted that most people would take the foretelling about me seriously, this had been a nagging worry at the back of my mind, but here, with Auden in the distance, I had to face it, and the fear that I'd fail them drove straight to the heart of me. It became a burn in my head, and I pressed harder on my skull, wanting to reach inside so I could pluck the horrid thing out.

"Hell," Marcuset said. "Sometimes, I forget how young and sheltered *you* are."

Why did this sensation feel so familiar? I could swear I'd experienced such gibbering panic and aching pain before, but when? Surely, I'd remember something like...

Sitting outside my family's cottage, unable to move, while a horror had borne down on me.

Fuck.

Jerking upright, I spun to scan the ship. The figures who'd protected me back then weren't here this time, so for the first time in a week, I called on them.

Bright. Dim. I need you right now.

The splinters popped into being nearby, looking disgruntled.

"Finally," Dim said. "I wasn't sure how much longer I could-*OHSHIT!*"

Bright had shrunk on themselves, and ignoring them, Dim glanced about with a panicked glaze in their eyes, sniffing at the air.

Is it him? I asked.

"What the hell do you think?" Dim snapped.

That both of you need to calm-

"Is something wrong?" Marcuset asked.

He was watching me with pinched eyes, probably because of my tense bearing, so slowly, I relaxed, pinning an easy grin into place.

“Just looking for Eledis,” I said. “I’m sure he’s eager to see this land, considering how much he’s obsessed over it for his whole life, and once he’s done gawking, we can discuss our plans.”

Before returning to my scan of the ship and its crew, I caught the furrow between Marcuset’s eyebrows deepening.

“That’s not a bad idea,” he said. “Your Majesty...”

But I was no longer listening.

Suggestions? I said.

“Besides running, obviously?” Bright said. “Much as I’d like to fight this enemy, you’re not ready for him. He’d tear you apart.”

Thanks for that. So helpful, I said. *And I don’t exactly have somewhere to run so...*

Gods, there were so many people here right now, all of whom would die if I stayed. I had to keep them safe and...

On the off chance we survived, I’d like to avoid getting strung up for my magic.

Is there anywhere isolated on this ship? I asked. *Dim, can you check?*

Without a word, the Daevetch splinter disappeared, leaving Bright watching me with approval.

“Good thinking,” they said.

As I inclined my head in acknowledgment, hands seized my arms, forcing me to face Marcuset.

“What’s the matter?” he said. “Are you feeling... or maybe seeing a threat that the rest of us can’t touch?”

For a moment, I just blinked at Marcuset, wondering exactly what he wanted to know. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that he’d been asking-

Getting in my face, the commander hissed, “*Raimie*. Is another primeancer nearby?”

Another... primeancer...

“You know?” I asked with my heart in my throat.

Growling, Marcuset shook me.

“Shock, later,” he snapped. “The answer to my damn question, now.”

Hell. He was right.

Swallowing hard, I nodded.

“Teron,” I said. “He’s here.”

With color draining from his face, Marcuset released me, taking a step back.

“Alouin. We’re dead,” he said.

As if to emphasize the point, a panicked shout rose from the main deck, followed by the typical noises of a commotion, and when I glanced toward it, my blood ran cold. A familiar figure was standing among the sailors, shadowed by an unknown.

Dim? I said.

I was surprised by how calm that had sounded in my head. The same jittering fear that Teron had twice imbued in me had my feet pinned to the deck while my heart was loudly beating in my ears, but a small, alien part of me was isolated, wrapped in the cold calm of logic and analytics.

Popping into being in front of me, Dim said, “The hold. It’s the only place I could find in such a short time span.”

It’ll work perfectly, thank you.

Step by slow step, Teron was making his way to the forecastle, picking his way around frozen people.

My people.

I needed to speak this truth to someone, even if it was just my splinters.

So, I said, *They’re mine.*

And Bright drew themselves upright while ribbons of light unspooled from them, wrapping around sailors and soldiers and family.

No one touches what’s mine, I growled, baring my teeth.

And with a manic giggle, Dim clapped their hands. At each of those impacts, a wave of darkness blasted from them.

Stopping short, Teron jerked his hood toward me, and slowly, I rested a fist over my heart before bowing, keeping my eyes on my enemy as I did.

“Marcuset,” I said. “Get us to land. Now.”

Then, Daevetch flurried down Teron’s arms, and I bolted.

Below deck, I was racing down a passageway when I spotted someone further along it, and my heart stopped in my chest. I put on a burst of speed right as my father noticed me.

“Raimie, what’s going on?” he asked. “I heard shout-”

Taking hold of his arm, I shoved him into the cabin at our side, slamming its door closed behind him. With a knife already in hand, I wedged it into the jam.

“Sorry, dad,” I shouted. “I love you.”

Then, I was off again. My father would be furious with me for this—how many times had he talked about getting his revenge on Teron?—but he wouldn’t stand a chance in this fight.

It didn’t matter that he was a better fighter than I’d have believed a few months ago. He didn’t have primeancy, and having used only a fraction of my own magic thus far, I was a little shocked that we’d survived our first encounter with Teron. Whether I’d survive this second one was debatable, but hell, if I wouldn’t save my father from it.

Once in the dimly lit hold, I glanced about my battleground, full of barrels and crates. There wasn’t a lot of space here, which could be advantageous.

Or a detriment. How in the void was I supposed to know?

“Ideas?” I said while listening for the sounds of pursuit.

Bright and Dim looked...

I wasn’t quite sure how they looked. Like they were more maybe, larger than they typically were, if not in size, but that was fading fast.

“Hide?” Dim said. “Surprise him?”

They’d sounded distracted with their eyes unfocused, and that was getting steadily worse.

“You want to surprise a battle mage who specializes in terror?” I asked, glancing askance at Dim.

But they didn’t respond, just slowly blinked at me.

“What about the trick you two pulled above deck? The ropes of light and dark waves?” I said. “It gave Teron pause. Could you do it again?”

For some reason, this snapped Dim out of their lethargy. With their eyes focused on me, they rocked in place, filling the hold with laughter, and I sighed.

“I’ll take that as a no,” I said.

“We did nothing,” Bright mumbled. “Was all you.”

Glancing at them, I said, “What?”

But Bright had sunken into a vacant state again, and examining my splinters—one of whom was dazed and the other’s status unknown—I shook my head.

“I am absolutely, totally dead,” I said.

Both splinters fixed their eyes on me with something panicked in them.

“Most likely,” they said.

Slapping my hands to my face, I rubbed it.

“Just great.”

Rhylix

I had a temper. I knew this, and because I did, I actively went out of my way to control it.

Right now, I was considering abandoning my control so I could throw Gistrick overboard.

“Look. You can stay on this ship. You don’t have to go near Teron,” I said. “I just need to get close enough to make my own crossing.”

For a moment, Gistrick considered my proposal, but then, he vigorously shook his head.

“Too risky,” he said. “Can’t you feel it, Rhylix? Who can stand against Teron? Everyone on that ship is dead.”

Glancing at said ship, I watched as Raimie ran—when had he overcome his terror?—among the petrified members of his crew toward a hatch. Slowly rotating in a circle, Teron strode for a shadowed portion of the main deck, and my heart leapt into my throat.

“It’s just battle magic,” I said. “Teron’s not as powerful as you think.”

“No. No, this is madness,” Gistrick said. “I need to get us away.”

He spun toward the ship’s wheel, and rolling my eyes, I took hold of his hair so I could slam his face into solid wood. When he went limp, I moved him out of the way before staring at the wheel.

“How the hell do I steer this thing?” I said.

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