

Of the Sky, Of the Sea, and of the Stones
Chapter 2 - Of the Sky
Part 19 - Along the Canal

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As the Aetherian scholars, the crew of the Bitterwind, and myself raced along the path to the harbour, I noted why this way was not as consumed by the flames as elsewhere in the city. This wide, cobblestone walkway ran along a full canal. So full, in fact, that it was overflowing, spilling torrents of briny, foamy water in here and there.

We continued to run along, though Karcharia soon began shouting orders, “We’re getting close to the lifeboat, get the cargo in place first! Those that cannot fit onto it will run the rest of the way.”

I was confused at first, but then saw a lifeboat appear within view upon the constantly shifting canal. A wooden lifeboat, like a wide canoe, approached swiftly. One of the three upon it, a slim, tall sailor of long, fair hair, used a rope and a boarding hook, like a small anchor, to snare a nearby lamppost to halt their movement close to the path. “Welcome aboard!” Grinned the sailor holding the left oar, he then winked with the eye that was not covered by an eyepatch.

“Quickly now, lads and lasses!” Urged the third, who held the right oar. His high-pitch voice at odds with his rotund physique.

Tarrying not, myself and the Aetherian scholars piled onto the boat, which wobbled at the overcapacity. This lifeboat was meant for maybe fifteen people maximum, but now held close to twenty. Some of the sailors who had joined Karcharia for the rescue mission to the library were able to squeeze on as well. Though, when I looked to see who was not able to make it on, I was surprised to see the First Mate herself still standing on the stone path. She was flanked by a crewmate on each side, both physically superior members from the Bitterwind. “Get the goods onto the ship,” Karcharia commanded, still referring to the scholars, and probably myself as well, as inanimate objects. “Me, Jogo, and Phole will continue on foot.”

“You sure, ma’am?” Offered the long, fair-haired one in a soft, yet resonant, voice.



Figure 26. A depiction of what the canal route would have looked like without engulfing flames surrounding it

The first mate scoffed before responding quickly, “Don’t worry Stella, we’ll probably beat you slug-fish back to the ship by a nautical mile.” Without waiting for a response, she and her two burly comrades began running once more along the canal path.

After this, Stella unhooked the boat and the two oarsmen began rowing us in the direction of the harbour. Against the current flowing inward from the docking bay it was slower going than expected, though we were safer upon the undulating lifeboat than elsewhere.

Looking at the winded oarsmen, some of the scholars decided to offer assistance, as the oars were long enough for three people to use each. The added strength made travelling quicker and less strenuous on those doing all the work.

The rest of us caught our breath before dismaying at the state of the city properly. “Everything... is in flames...” muttered one of the Aetherians, who then began to shed tears. One of her colleagues put a comforting arm around her.

“How has this happened?” Asked another. And as if on cue, a vibrant, serpentine form streaked by overhead. They were belching great gouts of flame, scorching the tops of a few buildings that were merely smoldering as opposed to being fully ignited.

“This...is the ‘cleansing’ the herald must have mentioned,” spoke Cais with disgust. His three feline assistants were all huddled, mewling, quite closely to him, as unhappy about their current situation as everyone else. “The gods must see us as a wound to be cauterized. Whatever seaborne illness swept through Temptes Equit must threaten them greatly. So much so that actual help would not be worth the effort, apparently,” he ended bitterly.

“What about the city’s Soul? Surely such energy, which was initially a gift from the gods, would be worth more to them?” Queried an Aetherian, who was adjusting his toga nervously.

“Energy does not die. Ziz, her children, and her unending grandchildren, probably have some way of reclaiming it, even if it sinks into the waves,” the head librarian responded sagely.

As we continued to make our way towards the harbour, we all discussed what we would do, and the conclusion reached was that, upon my invitation, the scholars would follow me back to Orosilla, where I would help them start new lives. I assured them there would be great merit to their knowledge for the curious Orossians. With a plan for the future in mind, all that remained was to reach the island’s shores via the Bitterwind. All that impeded us were a burning city, violent gods, and a salty tide.