

I felt seasick.

Forcing my eyes open was difficult, as if I could not control my own eyelids. Perhaps I had been drugged. A very dim light came from overhead, squeezing through spaces between the boards. I felt a terrible itching in my side and tried to scratch, but then realized that my hands were tied.

The feeling of disorientation only lasted a few minutes before I understood the terrible situation I was in. My head was spinning because the ship (in which I was apparently a prisoner) rocked back and forth in a way that made being awake quite uncomfortable. Before I could take an action, a slamming bang echoed around me and I heard heavy footsteps coming down stairs. I turned toward the noise.

“Awake, are we?”

Her voice was dark and gravelly, as if she'd been spending most of her life smoking the pipe that hung from the side of her mouth. She slowly pranced down the stairs to the lower deck of the ship, holding onto the rail to steady herself. Her bright blonde hair cascaded in waves and curls as if it was the sea itself fighting against her tight tri-corner hat. Her skin showed signs of weather-beaten torture from years of sailing through salty waters. Her long leather coat dragged along the stairs behind her and the tight boots held her dark brown pants in place.

I blinked to try to get a better view through the darkness. “Who are you?”

She dragged a small barrel to my bunk and sat with her arms on her knees for a few seconds.

“Name’s Captain Grimshark,” she said. “Read all about you, Terin Ostler. About how one prophecy said you would seal the Arch, and you did, and another said you would bring peace to the barbarian tribes, and you did, and how another said you would stop the fighting between the goblins and the humans. And you did.”

I shook my head. “It’s a lot more complicated than that. Those were all fake prophecies and I just happened to fall into solutions by accident. Well, most of them. Well, sort of. Look, I could explain it all if you would untie me...”

She frowned and reached into a pocket, pulling out a worn piece of parchment. She grabbed a lantern, held it before me, and then pushed the paper into my face. “This you?”

The parchment had a map showing various islands off the coast of the Ash Forest barony, near Synvia. There were nautical measurements and notations of the sort beyond my knowledge. However, what instantly grabbed my attention was the drawing of my face in the right-hand corner.

*Not again.*

“Where did you get that?”

She rolled it up and a smile crossed her face. “Had this for a few years now. Been looking for you. Meantime, you’ve done a lot. Made a name for yourself. Squire to Duke Frost and everything.”

I had been in worse situations. At times like these, I knew the best solution was to act. I mean that most literally. As a bard, I do have some experience in this area, and it has helped me get out of terrible situations in the past, because I

can take on the persona of someone braver than I. “Very well, Captain,” I said with false bravado. “I think I figured this out. You believe I’m somehow connected to this treasure map of yours and that I will lead you to some treasure. Am I correct?”

“Been through this before, have you? Yes, that’s exactly right…”

I rolled my eyes. “But it’s not true. I have no idea what this treasure is, where we are, or even who you are. You apparently had some fortuneteller see me in her scrying device. Right?”

She sat back but said nothing.

“Thought so. That’s how it usually works. There was this whole time-travel thing that’s very complicated but ruined me. It made me show up in everybody’s crystal ball and visions by mistake. I’m not who you need. Can’t help you. Nothing personal.”

She took off her hat and scratched her head. “That may be,” she said. “However, people been looking for this damned treasure for more than a hundred years now, and you’re our first possible real clue to finding it.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” I replied. “Let me explain in another way. I’m squire. You are a pirate. You are a criminal. I cannot help you, because it would violate all my oaths to the duchy of Ashbury.”

She placed her hat back on, stood, and lifted the lamp. “Yes, that’s what Darlissa said, too.”

That got my attention. The last thing I remember was sitting in a tavern with my fellow squire, Darlissa. “Where is she?”

Grimshark turned back to me, a smile playing across her face. “Oh, now you’re interested? Up on deck enjoying a glass of Askitir wine. Understood her situation much better than you.”

I grumbled. If Dar was cooperating with the pirates, it was to deceive them in some way. While the Code of Chivalry requires us to not lie, it does not prohibit us from misleading our enemies. Or something like that. I didn’t remember exactly all of the lessons Sir Polycarus told us but it was along those lines.

“So she’s not a prisoner.”

“No, and neither will you be if you cooperate. Can untie you, but if you try to cast spells, know I have a crew full of fighters and spellcasters on my side. And even if you two defeat us, doubt very much you could pilot a ship back to land by yourselves, even if you knew where you were.”

I didn’t seem to have much choice, so I allowed her to lead me to the deck. She removed my restraints as I blinked into the sunlight.

Rubbing my wrists, I looked around. We were at sea somewhere without any sign of land. It was mild day with a mostly cloudless sky that betrayed the way I felt.

A dozen or so pirates of all races watched me, smiling menacingly. Most were human, but I saw one hobling, a couple of elves, a grumpy-looking dwarf, and a doleful-looking rabbitkin, who clearly did not like what the saltwater was doing to her fur.

Captain Grimshark led me to a door, which she opened grandly and sarcastically as if presenting royalty to its chambers. This produced some

laughter from the crowd. I completely ignored them and walked in like I belonged there.

Inside, Darlissa sat at a small table, holding a glass of wine. A thick-necked ogre with too many rings on one ear stood in the corner, watching, weapon at the ready. Dar gave me a smile and raised one feathered eyebrow, but I knew her well enough to tell when she was acting. As a secretive biata, she had a tendency to keep her thoughts to herself while scheming constantly.

“Have a seat,” said Grimshark.

I strode ahead and pretended to be perfectly happy to be there. I took a seat and accepted a glass of wine. Grabbing some cheese off the table, I ate, realizing how hungry I was. Dar met my eyes for second then turned back to the captain.

“As I said before,” Dar said to Grimshark, “we cannot cooperate with you, prophecy or not. Perhaps had you asked politely, we may have been more willing to assist.”

Grimshark laughed. “Right,” she said. “As if you would not have arrested us immediately the minute we asked. Let’s cut past all that. Need your help to find the treasure and then I can return you. Promise that no harm will come to you as long as you cooperate. Could easily kill both you right now, you know, and no one’d ever find out.”

I was not consoled by that fact. “Let’s not talk about killing each other right now,” I said, hoping to change the subject from me dying.

Dar gave a theatrical sigh. "It's not like we have much choice, Terin. So let's cooperate while we can and figure out what to do about it later." She gave me a look that I recognized, so I played along. I knew a complete change of my attitude would not be believed by my captors, so I frowned and shuffled my feet, which turned out to be a bad idea because it made keeping my balance in the rocking boat difficult. I planted my feet heavily against the floor and tried to sit still.

"Fine," I said. "Fine fine fine. What's this all about?"

Grimshark smiled and sat in her high-backed padded chair and grabbed the sturdy arms, which kept her in place easily. "Heard of Percival Patterson?"

"Percy the Pirate?" I replied. "Of course. I know a couple of Percy songs. I used to play them from time to time. I didn't think most of what they said about him was true, though."

"Probably aren't," she said with a frown. "People exaggerate all sorts of things about those of us in this trade."

"Trade," Dar mumbled. "That's an unusual way of looking at it."

Captain Grimshark stared at Dar angrily and Dar met her stare with a pleasant smile, completely unafraid. "Explained this to you before," Grimshark said. "We move goods. Merchants pay us to move them into secret docks the duchy doesn't know about so they don't have to pay the high tariffs. Don't blame us, blame the merchants. We're just the tools."

"I think the word you're looking for is 'co-conspirators'," Dar said sweetly.

Grimshark stood suddenly and despite the movement of the ship, showed absolutely no sign of unease as she pointed at the door. “See all those sailors out there? Ex-slaves, most of them. Have you know that among our activities is tracking down and targeting Galanthian slave ships and freeing their prisoners. We’re not the bad guys, you stupid squire.”

Dar sat back and spoke slowly. “I congratulate you for assisting in attacking our enemy. As you know, attacking a Galanthian ship would be an act of war, and as we are currently in an uneasy treaty with this evil country. His Grace Duke Frost has prohibited any of his navy to do so...”

“Yet he does nothing to prevent private groups such as the Raven from doing it,” Grimshark finished for her. “Nor has he sent his troops out to try to stop the Raven.”

Darlissa smiled. “Well, yes. He assures the Galanthian government that he disapproves of these actions completely and has no idea where the Raven keeps getting its supplies and support.”

“Wait a minute,” I said to the Captain. “Are you telling me that you belong to that underground group, the Raven?”

Captain Grimshark looked down her nose at me. “Of course not,” she said with a spark in her eyes. “That would be illegal.”

“Oh, of course.” Although I had been lectured many times about how important it is for squires to obey the law, I also learned that even then, there is a place for spies and subterfuge when dealing with an enemy. A pirate captain who smuggled goods to raise money to free slaves made for an interesting question

that I could bring to Sir Polycarus at the next squire's discussion. "So what's this about the treasure map?"

"Story goes that Percy was snatched up by a gryphon," Grimshark said. "Disappeared. His crew searched for him and his treasure but never found it."

Grimshark took a long draught from a jug, then slammed it down on the table and replaced the cork. I could smell the rum from where I sat. Apparently, some of the clichés were true.

"Year or so ago, we went to a soothsayer," she continued. "Asked her where we could find the treasure. She did whatever they do and came back with this map and this drawing on it. Only took a short time before we discovered it was your face. People knew you from the Arch battle and the barbarian trick."

"But those weren't true—" I started, but she waved me off.

"We don't care, 'cause we got no other ideas. We narrowed down the search to a small island off the coast of Synvia, where all the wylderkin live. Bunch of parrotkin there who allowed us to search with the promise that we'd cause no harm to the locals and maybe share a bit of what we found. But what we found was nothing."

Dar had leaned forward. As much as she clearly did not wish to help this lawbreaker, she was nonetheless intrigued. Dar often pretended to be angry at the adventures that went along with being a squire to His Grace, but I knew she really enjoyed a good challenge. "What were you looking for?"

“Don’t know,” Grimshark said. “Something. A sign. A post? An unusual thing that doesn’t belong that means there’s something there. Asked the locals and they had no idea.”

“Sounds like the soothsayer scammed you,” I said. “She knew about me and the prophecy and gave you a fake map, sticking my face on there to make it seem real.”

“No,” the Captain replied. “Lives far away from everyone, deep in the Ash Forest, and knows nothing about what is happening in the world. Assured me she had no idea whose face this was.”

“A soothsayer that has access to magical visions that doesn’t know what is happening in the world?” Dar laughed. “What’s the point?”

Grimshark frowned at Dar and then spun back to me. “So we searched for you but you’re very hard to pin down. First you went off into the barbarian lands, then the Duke sent you on some other mission with a bunch of dwarves, and then you headed overseas to the Hidden Kingdom, and it’s not like we could just take the time to go chasing you everywhere. Bills to pay, you know.”

“Oh, of course,” I said reassuringly.

“Land ho!” came a cry from above. I widened my eyes. They really do say that!

Grimshark stood. “Come with us and help us find this treasure and do not attempt anything that would cause ... *disruption*.”

She pointed us forward and followed as opened the door to the deck. I blinked at the sunlight and tried to focus on our surroundings. Dar and I had been

searched and removed of any weapons upon our capture and thus could only rely upon our spellcasting, but we'd never get more than a few spells off before we would be overpowered by the remaining pirates. I cursed the fact that no wizard had discovered spells that would affect large groups.

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