

## Chapter 5: To Sacrifice

Two hours after the battle on the beach, Pan found himself at the nearest pub, having been dragged there by the rest of the crew in order to “celebrate our friends and mourn our victory,” as Yik-Yik had solemnly put it.

Upon arrival, Pan quickly noted that some kind of arrangement must have been made, as the only patrons in the barroom appeared to be the green cloaked men and women of Miax’s ship. The only person who appeared to not be in attendance was the captain himself, who had mentioned something about returning to the ship to see to the rest of the crew, but adamantly insisted everyone go on without him.

As the sound of conversation filled the air, Pan sat at a table and found himself—for the first time in his life—without anything to say. He nursed the mug that had been placed in front of him and stared at the polished wooden surface of the table, his mind whirring with thoughts of what happened on the beach. He couldn’t escape the disbelief, the fear, the majesty of what he had witnessed. It felt like he’d just discovered a GlowBarnacle that devoured human flesh to survive, but also happened to glow in a color no one had ever seen before. Horrible, yet wonderful.

“Hey. How’re you doing?” Yik-Yik asked, tapping Pan on the shoulder as he slid into the booth, followed by Aia and Numar. The enormous man practically took up the entire booth opposite of Pan all on his own.

Pan blinked himself back into reality then took a long drag of his grog. Awful stuff. Rum was far better, but Pan wasn’t one to complain about free booze. “So... Those are lurker beasts, huh?”

“Yes,” Aia said. “Well, a type of them, anyway,”

“A ‘*type*’?”

“Oh yeah, there’s a bunch,” Yik-Yik said.

“They all range in size and severity,” Aia said. “The ones we dealt with today are called hloa. They’re typically not a big deal, but this pack was abnormally large.” The fact that she seemed excited about that made Pan feel even more uncomfortable. Especially since he was still grappling with the fact that these people might very well be part of some kind of haunted ghost vessel and were all secretly dead... or something. They had at least stopped glowing, thankfully.

Pan groaned. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Just keep drinking your grog,” Yik-Yik said, reassuringly patting Pan on the back. “We’ve all been where you’re at. It’s a... brutal experience the first time you go up against a lurker.”

“We also could have prepared you better for this,” Aia admitted. “I suppose we just assumed you already knew about them somewhat.”

A low grumble came from across the table as Numar leaned in to join the conversation. “My first time was scary too.”

Pan paused, expecting Huin to pop in just in time to point out Numar's poor phrasing, but it surprisingly didn't happen. Actually, as Pan glanced around the room, he couldn't see the Xian man anywhere. Odd.

"Really? You?" Pan said, looking the behemoth up and down.

Numar nodded. "We were on the ship. A numitokok attacked. My hands were shaking with fear."

"What did you do?" Pan asked.

"He killed it, that's what he did," Yik-Yik said.

"On accident," Numar said, humbly. "It is hard to explain."

"He was manning the harpoon. The plan was to potentially spear a whale that was nearby and leave its corpse as bait in order to get away. Numar misfired and hit the beast instead. Got it right in the eye. Really lucky shot," Yik-Yik said and Numar nodded in assent. "But the point is, we've all been where you are. So feel free to freak out a little bit over it if you need to. No one's going to judge... This time, atleast."

"Thanks. That's... appreciated," Pan said.

"I have a very good meditation regiment I used after my first encounter. Here!" Aia said and pulled out her notebook. She flipped to a section near the front then slid it along the table. Pan stifled a wince and pretended to read the page. He even gave a few thoughtful nods to really sell the act before sliding the notebook back, not having absorbed a single thing written down.

"I'll be sure to give it a try," Pan said. "And what about that... erm, other stuff you did? You know..." Pan leaned forward, whispering as if what he was about to say was taboo, "the water-walking and glowing and everything."

Yik-Yik chuckled and took a drink from his mug. "The thing with the water is what we call Wavedashing. And yeah, it uses the kinesis stuff you've been asking about."

"There's a lot more to it than just what you were able to see, but it's probably better you learn over time. It can get fairly complicated," Aia added.

*You people can run across water in order to fight sea monsters and you're telling me that it gets more complicated?* Pan thought anxiously.

"And what does a guy gotta do in order to get some of this kinesis?" Pan asked, trying to sound casual. He didn't want to tip anyone off by sounding too eager.

"Well, actually—" Yik-Yik began, but was cut off as a stern, feminine voice carried across the room from the main bar.

"You have to earn it," Ria said, sitting on a stool, but with her body turned to face their group. She gave Pan a cold glare as she downed the remainder of her drink. "It's not something that gets passed around to share. If you want it, you have to work for it. That simple."

So, she had been eavesdropping on their conversation. Great.

As Pan met her gaze, he couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt. He wasn't proud of how their previous interaction had gone. Pan took pride in being considered a lowlife, but he was still above making fun of people's cultural expressions like some kind of schoolyard bully. The way he laughed at her back on the beach was crude and childish, then she went and saved his life

anyway. Even with Pan's behavior and the clear animosity she held for him, she still stepped in and rescued him from that lurker beast. Perhaps... Perhaps Pan had misjudged her.

"Look, Ria—" Pan began.

"Hloa normally attack in pairs, you know," Ria said. "It's part of the hunting tactics they adopted in order to survive. They've even adapted to choose their mates at birth because of it."

"I, uh, appreciate the—"

"The one that attacked you was alone, Emin. That can only happen if the mate is dead, probably from natural causes. This means the one you faced was most likely old... Feeble... Infirm."

"Well it certainly didn't look it," Pan said tersely. He wasn't liking where this conversation was going and wasn't sure how to get out of it. The chatter around the room was beginning to die off as more and more heads turned to watch the show.

"People died today because of you," Ria said, her voice like iron. "Good men and women gone because you were too afraid to step in."

Pan stared at her, aghast. Yik-Yik opened his mouth to interject, but Pan interrupted him.

"My deepest apologies, first mate," Pan said, shooting up to his feet and giving the most sickeningly mock salute that he could muster. "Next time I'm faced with a mythological beast that I have no idea how to fight, I'll be sure to stick my head right into its mouth in order to report any weaknesses that I might find!"

"Might as well," Ria said, also moving to stand. "We'd be far better off that way."

"We'd also be better off without rats living on the ship, yet here you are, alive and well!" Pan snapped. "No offense, Yik-Yik."

"Huh?"

"Says the one who turned his back on us and ran the first chance he got." Ria sneered. Pan felt a room full of eyes pierce into him at the accusation.

"I... was checking to see if the Dockmaster had fully cleared the area yet," Pan said, but the statement sounded weak even to him.

"Really? Because to me it looked like you were abandoning us in order to protect your own skin, only to come back when it was safer so that you could save face!"

"FINE!" Pan yelled. "You got me! I apologize for *not wanting to die!* I saw a monster that isn't supposed to exist emerge from the sea and look at me like I was its next meal. So tie me up and hang me over the prow for being afraid!"

"Captain Miox asked you if you knew what you were getting into!" Ria said, also yelling. "You said that you did and were willing to take responsibility for your actions!"

Pan slammed his palm down on the table in frustration. "So I was over-ambitious! Crashing waves, what do you *want* from me? For me to have answered differently? Well I certainly would have if I could *see into the future!*"

Ria didn't respond. Silence grew in the air between them like morning fog. No one else in the room dared make a noise and Pan stared into the first mate's eyes. They burned like molten

metal and Pan could sense a fury behind them that outmatched the ferocity of the hloa from earlier. Pan also didn't particularly care at the moment.

*Waves take this woman*, Pan thought bitterly. There was only one person Pan had met in his entire life that he had truly hated, but Ria was making a *very* good argument for him to extend that list.

The quiet in the air was abruptly broken as the door to the kitchen swung open and Huin entered the taproom with a large platter covered with a cloth on his shoulder.

"You lot are never going to believe what I managed to get for us!" he said cheerfully, seemingly oblivious to the current tension in the air. "Look on and be amazed!" He pulled the cloth away to reveal a large pile of small, strange-looking, blue plant rolls. Huin grinned broadly as if he'd just shown them a magnificent artifact from the Old World.

"Huin... What are those?" Aia asked warily.

"They're called *qonshi*. I'm told that they're a WeeQon delicacy. The lovely cook of this fine establishment made them for us by order of the Dockmaster for a job well done," Huin said as he sauntered over to the bar and placed the platter down on top of it. No one moved to take any of the rolls. "Go on! Give them a try."

"You... don't expect us to actually fall for this, do you?" Aia said again.

"They do look rather... strange," said the woman that caught Pan's eye back on the beach before the attack. She was also sitting at the bar, albeit on the opposite side as Ria.

"Oh, come on! Everything I do doesn't always *have* to be some elaborate prank." Huin said and, without another word, reached over and grabbed one of the *qonshi* rolls and popped it into his mouth. As he chewed, he spread his arms to the side as if to say '*see? Perfectly fine!*' Everyone watched for a few moments, still too suspicious to try for themselves, despite nothing *immediately* going wrong.

"Waves. Fine, why not?" the woman said in exasperation. What had her name been again? Sersia? She daintily picked out a roll and placed it into her mouth, chewing cautiously. "Oh my. That's... actually quite good."

One by one, everyone eventually caved in and took a *qonshi* as the platter was passed from table to table. Even Pan broke his staring match with Ria in order to try one. As he began to chew on it, he was immediately perplexed by the rubbery texture of it. There also seemed to be something coating the roll that gave it an incredible acrid flavor. Pan grimaced. Clearly Sersia didn't have particularly good taste... Which gave Pan hope that he might actually have a shot with her down the line.

A man at the other end of the table suddenly coughed and a bundle of stringy, fibrous material began pouring from his mouth. Soon after, the same thing happened to the person next to him, and then another. And another.

Seeing this, everyone quickly began spitting out the "food" before the same could happen to them, gagging and demanding an explanation. Pan felt his teeth break through the skin of the roll and was beginning to feel the fibers expand within his mouth before he managed to spit his out.

“I can’t believe this,” Aia said, picking up the one she had just discharged and inspecting it closely. “This... This is just a wettersprig that’s been cut into slices and painted blue! *Huin!*”

All eyes turned to the man. He stood there silent for a moment, eyes twinkling with mischief, before his lips curled into a broad smile, wettersprig fibers pouring out from between his teeth. Groans spread across the barroom like a plague. Huin began pulling the plant matter from his mouth. Upon finishing, he took a deep, self-congratulating bow. “And let this mark the day that I managed to get all of you to eat a plant!”

“We already eat plants, genius,” Yik-Yik said, then paused. “Actually, wait. What about Sersia? She vouched for you!”

Everyone looked to the woman now, who eyed them all with an expression of amusement before reaching into her cheek and fishing out the slightly moist—but wholly intact—wettersprig disc. “I’ll be taking my twenty shells now, Huin.”

“With pleasure.” Huin grinned then tossed her a small pouch. He then began making his way over to Pan’s table with a jaunty stride, pulling an empty chair along with him. He stopped as he passed behind Pan and leaned in to whisper, “Tensions tend to run high after missions like this. Don’t sweat it.”

Huin pulled his chair to the end of the booth and sat down in it backwards. Pan slowly followed suit, realizing he was still standing. As he looked around, he noticed that no one seemed to be paying attention to him or Ria anymore. They were all too focused on talking and laughing about Huin’s stupid prank or how ridiculous they felt for falling for one yet again.

“Thanks,” Pan whispered.

“For what?” Huin said with a wink.

“I don’t understand this joke,” Numar said, holding up the bundled mess of fibers that exploded from his wettersprig. “This is not meant to be eaten?”

“No, Numar,” Yik-Yik said sufferingly, shooting a glare at Huin. “They’re wettersprigs. We use them to make rope.”

“I do not know this name. Sorry.” Numar said.

“They’re a plant that only grows out in the deep seas of certain regions,” Pan chimed in.

Huin nodded. “Yeah, you won’t really be seeing them up north, big guy. Or around here either, actually. I’ve been holding on to that one since before YeePudel.” He grinned. “Thought that if we were back somewhere where they were uncommon, it would make the *“qonshi”* look less suspicious.”

“Well, it worked, jerk,” Aia said, a slight smirk on her face as she grabbed a handful of nuts from the bowl on the table and threw them at Huin.

“Woah, watch it! Someone’s going to have to clean those up!” Huin laughed, then reached over and grabbed Aia’s mug, taking a drink from him. Yik-Yik caught Pan’s eye and made a quiet gagging motion while the two were distracted. Pan rolled his eyes, then glanced back at the bar.

Ria had since returned to sitting in her stool, but had swiveled around to face the bar. Pan couldn’t see much with her back to him, but he thought it looked like she was forlornly staring

into her empty mug. Pan frowned. He'd done the same thing on several occasions when he'd run out of booze, but he guessed that this was a different case.

"Well, I say we make a toast," Huin abruptly said, bringing Pan's attention back to the table. "We lost a few friends today, after all.

"I agree with this." Numar nodded.

Yik-Yik shrugged. "Sure. But your idea, your speech."

"Yeah, yeah, fair enough," Huin said with a dismissive wave of his hand before stealing Aia's mug again. He sat there thoughtfully for a moment, drumming his fingers on the table. When he finally stopped, Huin's tone grew somber and his face fell. It was by far the most serious Pan had ever seen him. "This isn't the first time we've been here, but that doesn't make it any easier. Every Wavedasher put their lives on the line today, knowing anything could happen. Some good friends died to keep the lurkers back for another day. So... Here's to sacrifice." He held his mug aloft and the others copied the gesture, echoing the final words of his toast. Pan mirrored them, but couldn't help feeling... hollow.

*To sacrifice.*

These people. They risked their lives fighting literal monsters to keep the populace safe. All in secrecy and without recognition. What kind of person did that? What kind of person was *willing* to do that...?

*A good one.*

Pan looked back at Ria's hunched form across the room. He wanted to refute what she had said about him. He *desperately* wanted to rub her nose in the fact that he wasn't some kind of coward, that he could be—and has been—just as heroic as the rest of them. But all the while, one single thought had been continuously running through his head, not allowing room for anything else:

If he had to keep risking his life in order to steal their kinesis, was it really worth it? Shouldn't he just get out with his life instead while he still had the chance?

So, while the other four at the table talked and joked and laughed and reminisced about their dead friends, Pan quietly drank his hot, frothy grog as he came to terms with something about himself.

He was not like these people.

Not at all.