

Chapter 7: Rock on the Harbor

Pan tugged on the cuff of his stiff coat, straightening the sleeve and turning to look at himself in the mirror of his room in the bunkhouse.

Before going to bed last night, the quartermaster, Selton, had come looking for him in order to gain his measurements. This morning, a neatly folded, green uniform had been left outside his door. Apparently every member received one after completing their first mission. The others acted as if it were some kind of profound rite of passage and congratulated him, but Pan was pretty sure the tradition only existed so that they wouldn't have to worry about wasting any uniforms in case their new recruits died on their first mission.

As he looked himself over, Pan furrowed his brow. It *was* a rather nice garment, admittedly. The coat was thick but breezy and had buttons running up either side of the front along with gilded thread stenciling on the cuffs and hem. The trousers were fairly simple and came with a pair of black leather boots that went up nearly to Pan's knees and hugged his calves to keep as much water from getting in as possible. The uniform didn't come with a hat or epaulets like the captain and first mate's, but that was preferred as far as Pan was concerned. In general, the outfit was simple, yet still had an air of refinement and purpose about it that would easily make him stand out in a crowd.

Those qualities didn't mesh particularly well with Pan's skillset.

That wasn't what bothered Pan, however—or it wasn't the main reason, at least. What bothered him was that instead of his reflection, he saw an entirely different man when he looked in the mirror. Gone was the roguish drifter who'd been wearing the same tunic and pair of mismatched sandals for several years. Instead he saw a navalman; a soldier of the open ocean. The man he saw in the mirror stood a little taller, his unkempt hair looking rugged instead of disarming. The man was proud and honest. He was serious and determined when it came to his duties. This was not a man you idly dismissed; if he spoke, you listened.

Simply put, Pan looked... respectable.

He immediately began to undress.

"What's the problem?" Huin asked from his bunk, apparently having been watching Pan inspect himself.

"Doesn't fit right," Pan muttered, haphazardly tossing the coat and shirt into the corner of the room.

"Waves, hearing that'll give Selton a conniption," Yik-Yik chimed in, propping himself up on his own bunk. "Plus, the captain won't be too happy about it either."

"I'm sure he'd prefer it to me tripping over my own coat every few steps," Pan said. Yik-Yik shrugged in response.

"I doubt Captain Miox is the one he has to worry about," Huin chuckled. "Ria *really* doesn't seem to like you, Emin."

"Yeah, what's the deal with that?" Yik-Yik asked.

Pan grinned as he pulled on his tunic then sat down on the edge of his bed to begin prying his boots off. “I guess she just doesn’t handle rejection that well.”

Pan heard Yik-Yik scoff from above him. “As if.”

“I dunno,” Huin said with a smirk. “Certainly were some sparks between them last night... The large, violent, seething sparks that threaten to set everything around them ablaze, but sparks all the same.”

“Besides,” Pan said, “she’s not really my type. That Sersia, however...” He frowned as Huin and Yik-Yik glanced at each other and began to snicker. “What?”

“Let me tell you a secret about Sersia, pal,” Huin said. “Every single man apart from the captain himself has tried his hand at her affections and it has *never* ended well.”

“I’ve never tried to get with her,” Yik-Yik countered.

“You don’t count.”

“Fair.”

“Point is,” Huin continued. “When I tried, she bled me out of my shells for *weeks* before making her intentions clear. She basically had Ud carrying her on a palanquin everywhere she went, and poor Numar... Best not get into *that* tragedy.”

Pan’s grin widened. “Is it strange that I want to try even more now?”

“A bit.”

“Speaking of Numar. Where is he?” Yik-Yik asked.

Huin shrugged. “Left the room to relieve himself a bit ago.”

Silence hung in the air for several seconds. “How long ago, Huin?”

“Just before you woke up. So about an hour,” Huin said casually, then stiffened as he seemed to undergo some kind of epiphany. “Oh no...”

“Huin!” Yik-Yik hissed. “How could you just *let* him leave like that!”

“Well, how was I supposed to know he’d do this again?” Huin said, throwing his hands up into the air.

“What’s the issue?” Pan asked as his boot finally came free.

“The *issue* is that cow patties baking in the sun stink less than Numar’s fecal deposits,” Yik-Yik groaned.

“I take it that we have less than ten minutes before the air of the bunkhouse is no longer breathable,” Huin said with an air of solemnity, placing a hand over his heart. “Yik-Yik, my comrade, you shall inform the others to open as many windows as possible before the Aroma of Despair arrives.”

“Why me? *You’re* the one who didn’t stop him!”

“Ah, but you see, the fact that it didn’t cross my mind means that I am simply too unreliable to carry out this grave task. As the most responsible one here, it must be you.”

Pan frowned as he thought about what they were saying. “Wait, you said he’s been gone for an hour. Does it really take him that long to, ah... ‘cleanse himself.’”

“He makes a full ritual out of it,” Yik-Yik said. “After last time we *promised* we’d stop him and make him go somewhere else to do the deed for the sake of the crew, but *clearly* someone doesn’t seem to care about these kinds of things.”

“I care!” Huin said. “I just forgot.”

The two continued to bicker and Pan listened with half an ear as he continued changing back into his old clothes. All the while, thoughts continued to plague his mind. They were the serious and important kind that Pan had always worked so hard to avoid his entire life. The revelation he’d experienced the night before refused to leave his mind. He wasn’t like these people. He wasn’t—and never would be—the type of person to willingly put himself in danger for the sake of others. He was beginning to wonder if this crew’s strange abilities would even be worth the risk. He’d be able to do wonderful things with it, sure, but that wouldn’t matter if Pan was too dead to get a chance to learn how this kinesis stuff even worked. He took no shame in these thoughts. He knew some would call him selfish for caring more for himself rather than others, but that notion always bothered him. It was *his* life. If he chose to save someone else over himself and he died... Well, how was he supposed to do anything after that?

His thoughts were eventually interrupted by a knock on the door and a voice announcing that Captain Miox wanted to speak with everyone.

Huin grunted and hopped out of bed, throwing his coat on over his sleeping attire—which meant that he was bare chested and only wearing briefs.

“You are *not* attending a meeting like that,” Yik-Yik groaned. He was already dressed, having done so over the course of their argument.

“Hey, if Emin can be out of uniform then why can’t I?” he grinned and confidently strode out the door, calling over his shoulder as he did. “And don’t act like you don’t enjoy the view!”

“You’re a bad influence on him, friend,” Yik-Yik said with a chuckle. He patted Pan on the shoulder and the two followed after Huin downstairs.

In the main foyer of the bunkhouse, a majority of the crew had already amassed. The “Aroma of Despair” hadn’t yet seemed to make its rounds, but Numar was notably still missing. The group gathered around the far end of the room, leaving a small area of open space with Captain Miox standing in the center. The captain looked as if he hadn’t slept the previous night, yet still stood tall with hands clasped behind his back. Pan would’ve liked to say he looked terrible, but he couldn’t. Even while exhausted, Captain Miox had an air of command and responsibility about him that both aggravated and impressed Pan.

Well that’s just no fair, Pan thought as he scooted along the wall for a place to stand at the back of the room. *I skip a night of sleep and I look like a dead fish... Well, an even deader fish.*

As he found a good spot, Ria stepped up next to Miox and her eyes met Pan’s through the crowd. She glared at him venomously and the feeling was mutual. Naturally, to show his solidarity, Pan grinned and winked at her. Once again, her only reaction was to narrow her eyes in response. Shame, that.

Ria whispered something to Captain Miox, who simply nodded, then stepped back into the crowd of green coated mercenaries.

Probably tattling on me for being out of uniform. Pan frowned once she was out of sight. There were many good reasons as to why he should take his leave from this group, but that first mate had to be at the top of the list.

Captain Miox cleared his throat and the room abruptly grew silent. "I see that most of you are here. Some with a... peculiar take on what it means to be in uniform." He glanced at Huin, resulting in a round of chuckles. For a moment, Pan swore that the captain's eyes flicked over toward him as well. "That being said," Captain Miox continued as the laughter died down, his voice growing solemn. "As of yesterday, we have lost six of our own. They gave their lives to protect the people of this town. They each joined the Circle of Waves knowing that any day, any mission could be their last. It's what all of you have done, and you've done it because you know it's for a greater purpose. Each one of you has made the decision to put the lives of the people above your own and, for that, you have my utmost respect." He looked around the room, meeting eyes with as many people as he could. As his head swiveled in Pan's direction, Pan made an effort to look down as if thoughtfully pondering to himself rather than meet the captain's eyes. It wasn't that he couldn't... He just would have preferred not to.

"We are the rock on the harbor," he continued. "Day after day the waves crash upon us in an attempt to reach the land beyond us. Each time we are there to stop that attempt, taking the bludgeoning as a badge of pride. As time goes on, the waves will whittle us down until there's nothing left, yes it's true. Eventually, each of us will likely finish our last mission between the jaws of a lurker beast. But, until then, so long as there's something left to give, we'll continue to protect those from a threat that they do not know exists and your willingness to do so despite being aware of where it will lead you is what makes each and every one of you a hero. And, as a captain, I must say that a crew full of heroes is more than enough to satisfy me."

As Captain Miox finished his speech, no one moved to cheer or applaud. Instead, everyone had grown stoic and determined. They all stood a little taller, wore their uniforms with a bit more pride. Even Huin seemed to stand at attention despite the display his naked chest and flimsy shorts made. Pan shifted uncomfortably.

"At ease, all of you," Miox said. The group relaxed, but the hardness in their expressions and bodies didn't fully fade. "The main reason I called everyone together is to discuss our next moves. Despite the fatalities of yesterday, our investigation has uncovered some potentially useful information. The plan is to return home and report our findings and see if the other crews have discovered anything for themselves."

Pan raised an eyebrow at that. 'Other crews'? There were more ships to this mercenary company? The more he learned, the more Pan became increasingly surprised that he'd never heard of this 'Circle of Waves' up until recently.

"Are there any questions?" Miox asked. Before he even had a chance to finish his statement, Aia's hand shot into the air.

"Assuming we intend to report what we found to compare notes and uncover more about what's causing this phenomenon with the increased lurker beast activity, how do we know for sure that any of the others even *have* found anything?"

“We can’t,” Miax said. “but it’s still in our and the Circle’s best interest to relay what we know as soon as possible.”

The discussion continued with Aia providing follow-up questions, Miax answering, and others chiming in with their thoughts and queries. Pan didn’t wait around to hear any of them, however.

With the room distracted, Pan slowly shuffled along the wall as he made his way to the door and slipped out onto the streets of Goven. He’d made up his mind. It was time to go. The allure of kinesis made him hesitate but, ultimately, none of it was worth getting himself killed for while pretending to be someone who *was* okay with dying to some monster for a bunch of people he didn’t know.

As Pan quietly eased the front door closed, peaking in to make sure no one noticed him leave, he jumped as a voice called out from behind him.

“Thought so.”

Pan whirled around to see Ria standing there, leaned up against a building on the opposite side of the street. She stared at Pan, but her expression wasn’t that of anger. It seemed more... resigned.

Pan stared at her in surprise for a second, then sighed. “Yeah, sure, why not?” he said, shrugging as he crossed the street toward Ria, who stood and met him halfway. “Go on, this one’s free. Give me one more good ol’ verbal lashing for the road.”

She looked at him for several long seconds before saying anything. “I don’t get it.”

“Most people don’t tend to get people like me,” Pan said. “I don’t make a habit out of trying to explain—”

“No,” Ria said, cutting him off.

Pan raised an eyebrow. “...No?”

“What I don’t get,” Ria began again. “is what he sees in you.”

Pan didn’t have a response. It took him a few moments longer than it should have for him to even realize she was talking about the captain.

“You have been nothing but a tortoise wedged in a crawlspace, yet he still thinks you have some kind of potential.” Ria continued, her voice devoid of emotion. “Perhaps I’ve been a fool,” she said, sighing and shaking her head. “Perhaps the captain *can* be wrong after all.” She then brushed past him and began making her way to the entrance of the bunkhouse.

Pan blinked. He should really have left it at that. Allowed her to say her peace then walk away. Instead, he spun around once again to face her. “And so what?” he called out. Ria paused. “Why does it matter if he ‘sees something’ in me? What wavescursed difference does it make? Now that someone has decided that I have value I should be content with throwing my life away? Explain to me in what drowned world that makes sense! I’d love to hear it!”

Ria stood there for a moment before turning and marching back over to Pan, shoving her finger into his chest. “Listen, you perfumed flotsam. This crew, the Circle, it’s *everything*. We’re the reason that most people can sleep at night. We’re the reason that the empire doesn’t fall to terror and chaos because of those beasts. We do what’s *right* because it *is* right, not because we

deserve a pat on the back for it. You signed up for this, you *knew* what you were getting into. If you still can't understand all of that then you'll never be one of us. Not really."

She glared at him with eyes that bore into him like icepicks. Pan chewed on the words, then met her gaze.

"I. Don't. Care," he finally said. Ria scoffed. "I don't give a wyver's droppings if I'm one of you. I'm done! I'm not going to put myself through the suffering of wondering every night if my next day on that boat will be my last because some horrific monster from the deepest, darkest parts of the sea will rise up and bite me in two! I'm not going to die sacrificing myself for a pointless cause!"

"It is *not* pointless!" Ria hissed.

"Yeah? Then how much progress have you made? How many fewer attacks from those *things* are there now than there were five years ago? I'd love to hear it, because, from what I've heard, things are only getting worse."

Ria said nothing. Silence hung in the air between them for a long moment and Pan became vaguely aware that anyone walking by could have overheard their shouting match. He just didn't particularly care at the moment. Ria continued looking down at him, providing no answer. That was fine, her silence was answer enough.

"I am *not* dying without so much as a word of thanks from anyone."

"You're pathetic," Ria snapped.

"Right you are!" Pan said with a laugh. "I am pathetic! I choose myself over others because I actually give a damn about my life. And you know what? I'll continue to put myself first every. Single. Time I get the opportunity. I enjoy living. It suits me far better than death."

Ria dropped her hand from his chest. "Then we have an understanding."

"It seems we do," Pan said, his feelings of anger still fully alight. Pan grimaced at that knowledge. How was it that this woman could get such a rise out of him? Why should he care what the captain thought of him; what *she* thought of him? He never had cared about anyone's opinions before.

Mostly.

Ria shook her head and took a step back from Pan. "Fine then, Emin. Do as you please." She turned to head back inside again, but paused. "If it means anything, most of them will understand your decision. Everyone has similar doubts on their first mission."

Pan shrugged. "Yeah, well, your face looks stupid."

She looked at him in confusion, then annoyance. "...Really?"

"Oh I assure you, it truly does. Plus, I had to say *something* witty to show you what's what before I leave."

Ria shook her head. "Child," she muttered before turning once more and heading into the bunkhouse.

Pan watched her leave him. He stood there for a while, alone on the street, thinking over the conversation. She'd never been fair to him, not from the start. Which is really her loss, considering how wonderfully enjoyable Pan's presence was to everyone around him. He never

intended to go this far with the group, he just needed easy transportation. Pan was only faced with this dilemma now because he'd chosen the wrong ship and ended up with one that took him to the realm of sea monsters and torment instead of the one that'd take him to the mythical island of free brothels and endless alcohol.

But... it wasn't a dilemma, was it? He'd already made up his mind. It was time to leave. What did it matter that he knew about lurker beasts and kinesis? It's not like it changed anything. Most people apparently went their entire lives without knowing about them and they were happy. Surely that meant that now that Pan *was* aware then he'd be even *better* off since he knew what to look out for. Surely.

You can't just ignore what you've seen, Pan.

Of course he could. He'd been doing it for years. One time he walked into a bar while a man defecated in a flower pot in the corner. Pan just straddled right up to the counter and ordered a glass of rum anyway, pretending the other man wasn't even there. This wouldn't be any different. In fact, it'd probably be easier, seeing as that plant defecator *really* knew how to stink up a room. Probably even more so than... than Numar.

Quit lying to yourself. You know things no one else in the empire does. Now what are you going to do about it?

Pan felt his shoulders sag as the thoughts continued to enter his mind unbidden. The worst part about trying to lie to himself, Pan found, was that the other guy always knew he was full of it.

What *was* Pan going to do about what he knew? He couldn't go back to drifting from island to island. He wasn't sure if he'd ever even be able to step foot on a ship again without wondering if he'll have a run-in with the upset cousins of those beasts from yesterday. He also knew he'd never be able to settle down and stay in one place. Just the *thought* of it made Pan feel like the world was shrinking down around him. So... what was the plan?

Ria said most of them would understand if I left, Pan thought. She'd said it to him right before he delivered that incredibly clever and devastating line about her face.

Pan frowned. They'd understand... He'd leave and abandon them because he was afraid of getting hurt... and they'd understand. Could he really keep pretending to be like that? He didn't exactly have anywhere else to go, but... was *this* any better? He'd *just* come to the conclusion that he'd never be able to travel again without fear of being attacked by lurker beasts. How was staying with a crew that were *actively seeking them out* any better?

The answer came to Pan almost immediately, forcing him to sigh in annoyance.

It was different because he'd know what to expect.

And just like that, his mind was made up again for the second time in under an hour. Pan knew he'd never be like this crew. He wouldn't be staying with them for the sake of valor and fighting the good fight. That would never be him.

However, he *could* stay with them to annoy Ria as much as possible until she threw herself overboard out of sheer awe at Pan's capacity to persist out of spite alone.

So, with a grin, Pan shrugged to himself one final time, and made his way back into the bunkhouse just in time to hear the first chorus of gags and retching and complaints as the smell of Numar's putrid excrement wafted its way throughout the bunkhouse.