

Chapter 4: Myth Come Alive

Pan had been to many places across the Normyst Empire. In fact, he was fairly certain he'd been to almost every island at least once. All the regions and islands varied in some way, each having something unique about them that made them special. For instance, the Western Region was special because it was awful in almost every way.

Pan glared down at his feet as burning sand lapped over the tops of his sandals at every step, scalding his exposed skin. Pan kicked at it in annoyance, which proved to be a very bad idea, as it only resulted in a cloud of the stuff to fly up into the air in a puff, dusting Pan's face and tunic. He spluttered, spitting out grains that had found their way into his mouth.

Yes, the Western Region was by far the worst of the lot. It was hotter, culturally dull, and ridden with malicious wildlife. Not to mention the never-ending swarms of blood-sucking insects—A problem Pan was currently dealing with, as he had somehow managed to have attracted a particularly nasty variety of pest that simply *refused* to leave him alone.

"What, exactly, is it that you think you're doing?" Ria said.

"Isn't it obvious?" Pan asked, spreading his arms and gesturing to the beach in its entirety. "I'm looking for clues!" What kind and for what reason, Pan had no idea. Over the several days it took to reach YeePudel, Pan had asked around about what it was that they were doing, but everyone just gave him the same fable as Huin had about lurker beasts. Pan assumed it was some kind of hazing ritual for new recruits on their first assignment, but that didn't make being left in the dark any less frustrating.

"Are you? Because to me it looks like you're recreating a toddler's first trip to the beach," Ria said, crossing her arms.

"It's all part of my process. The minds of children aren't confined to adult perceptions, making them far wiser than us, you see. For example, while I may only see a stick, a child will see a harpoon. Or while I see a Ria, a child will see an evil hag with warts and pus-filled cysts on her face."

Ria just scowled at Pan, which only served to further validate his allusion—minus the warts and cysts, unfortunately. "Just get to work."

Pan rolled his eyes and continued moving along the beach. "It'd certainly be easier if my *partner* actually helped me with said work." Shortly after everyone began combing the beach, Ria had approached Pan with some story about how Captain Miox had assigned them to be together, since he didn't want Pan working alone on his first mission. Over the past few hours, however, all Ria seemed to do was loom over Pan's shoulder and complain about every little thing he did. "Can't you just use that kinesis stuff?"

"It doesn't work like that," Ria said, eyes narrowing.

Waves. It had been worth a shot, at least.

That had been another thing Pan tried to find out more on during their voyage, but he only got vague responses saying that it was 'hard to explain' or that he'd 'see in time.' Frankly, Pan was just about ready to cut his losses and make his departure from this group early due to

how cryptic everyone was being. Alas, he lost his chance of that when Ria caught up to him while he was getting acquainted with Emperor Hardshell—which Pan aptly renamed to Emperor You-Dirty-Piece-Of-Flotsam-I’m-Going-To-Boil-You-And-Eat-You-If-You-Don’t-Let-Go-Of-Me-Right-Now when he nearly took Pan’s finger off.

Pan sighed, wiping the sweat and sand from his forehead. “Look, there’s probably less than an hour of daylight left. Soon it’ll be too dark to even see what we’re doing. So can’t we just call it a day?”

“We’re finished when the captain says we’re finished,” Ria said flatly.

“Is that what you tell yourself when you’re in his cabin and—”

“*Stop it!*” Ria suddenly hissed, jaw clenched and fists balled at her sides. “Is what we do a burning *joke* to you? Do you think you get to be the hog walking around in a fur coat while we’re the ones that bleed?”

Pan blinked. Then laughed.

“I’m sorry, what?” he said in between breaths. “A... a hog... in a...? What does that even *mean!*”

As Pan composed himself, he looked up to see a cold fury in the first mate’s eyes. She said nothing, but her expression made it clear to Pan that she very much wanted to punch him in the face. Fortunately, she wouldn’t get the opportunity as Captain Miox’s voice boomed across the beach:

“WAVEDASHERS! THE SHORE!”

Pan turned lazily to look where he was told and immediately froze. Something— No, *many* *somethings* were swiftly gliding their way through the water, slowly rising as they made their way toward the shore.

Pan stared, wide-eyed at the closest one and felt himself gasp. The creature was massive and almost looked like a dog or wolf, but slender and even *more* bestial and primitive somehow. Its torso and head were adorned with overlapping layers of bulky boneplating that looked as if it should have weighed the beast down far more than it actually did.

Crashing Waves, Pan thought in shock. *It’s one of them! A... A...*

A lurker beast.

The creature fully padded out of the sea and onto the beach, water dripping from its umbral skin and ivory armor. Its eyes locked onto Pan immediately, filling him with dread as he saw the hunger within those onyx pools ringed with gold.

Pan stumbled back, crying out, but the beast just continued its pursuit. Each step that Pan took to move away only seemed to result in the creature surging forward another yard to compensate. Soon there was so little distance between them that Pan could see saliva dripping from the monster’s ridged maw, as well as the twirling lines of stardust directly beneath its dark skin.

A part of Pan desperately wanted to refute it all. To tell himself that what he was seeing wasn’t *real*, that lurker beasts didn’t actually exist. But he didn’t. Even in his panic he knew it was futile to deny the reality that was before him.

And that reality was slowly opening its jaws, revealing rows of long, serrated fangs.

Pan took another step backwards, but his heel hit something, causing him to fall back and scramble away. He frantically searched for something to use, something to get him out of this situation like he did with Hooks, but found himself unable to think clearly as the fear overwhelmed him. Pan reached for the thing he tripped over, finding it to be a large rock. He threw it at the beast in desperation, but the stone only thumped against the creature's plated chest ineffectively and fell back to the sands. There was nothing Pan could do.

He was going to die.

The lurker beast was now less than three yards away. It slowly made its way closer, step by step. It was near to the point that Pan could hear... music? Why... Why was music of all things coming from this fathomspawn? ...How?

Pan decided it wasn't very important at the moment as he wildly crawled on his back away from the horrific being, kicking up gouts of sand in the process, but otherwise not making much progress. The beast abruptly stopped, its eyes still trained on Pan and its lips pulled back to form a sickening grin. Its body tensed and it lowered itself down closer to the earth, haunches poised to pounce forward.

Frozen. Pan was frozen at the sight. His limbs no longer obeyed him, and he could do nothing but gawk as he watched his demise come for him. Time itself felt like it was slowing down just to torment him further. A part of him found it resoundingly funny that he had somehow found himself in another near-death situation over the course of just a few days. Pan breathed in one final time, severely wishing that his final breath wasn't humid Western air, and prepared himself for the afterlife.

Bang!

The beast howled as its head suddenly lurched to the side. It had taken a blow to the side of the face and the bone plating there was now cracked in a web-like pattern as black powder marred the otherwise white surface.

Pan pulled his gaze away from the monster, blinking as the rest of the world came flooding back into focus. Standing a few yards off to the side, a smoking pistol in her hand, was Ria. She sneered and Pan couldn't tell if the expression was meant for him or the creature.

"Here, make yourself useful!" she said, pulling a second pistol from her belt and tossing it at Pan as the lurker beast recuperated. It snarled; its attention now fully on the one that hurt it.

Pan caught the firearm by instinct.

And immediately regretted it.

He looked down and saw his hands were coated in blood, as was the pistol.

A corpse slumped in a chair...

Pan took a sharp, ragged breath inward.

Blood staining the wood...

Why...? Why was...?

A pistol, still hot from being fired...

Why was it different this time?

One eye staring lifelessly, the other no longer there...

No, of course it was different. The Bad Place was different every time Pan saw it. Or... Mostly different, atleast.

"What did you do?" said a voice, normally so calm, now so furious.

Pan dropped the weapon. As it hit the sand, clarity came with it. He looked at his hands again and saw that they were clean. There was no blood; there never had been any.

Crashing waves, what is wrong with me? Pan thought, not for the first time.

The chorus of gunfire and frantic yelling echoed around Pan. As he came to his senses, Pan could see that Ria was leading the beast back to the shoreline and was miraculously keeping it at bay fairly well with warding sweeps and jabs from her saber. In fact, to Pan's immense surprise, nearly everyone present seemed to be doing well in keeping those... *things* from moving further inland. At least at first glance.

A man in a green coat that Pan vaguely recognized from the ship stabbed out at one of the beasts in front of him, his blade sliding across the pale, bonelike carapace, causing little damage to the creature but forcing it to retreat a few steps anyway. The man raised his saber for another strike, but a second monster that he couldn't see rounded his flank with unnatural speed and bit down into his side, the creature's maw taking up a vast majority of the poor man's torso. His screams of pain quickly turned into a mournful gurgle as the initial monster pressed the advantage and leapt forward, clamping down onto the man's throat and shoulder.

Watching the man quickly get mauled and devoured by the two creatures shattered the surreality of the situation and brought Pan back into reality. He gasped and began to notice more broken bodies lying in bloody pools across the sands. The men and women fought valiantly, but it was only a matter of time before they lost their footing. With that in mind, Pan did the one thing that had always saved him in the past.

He turned tail and ran away.

"Emin! What are you doing? Get back here and fight!" Ria yelled, but Pan ignored her, sprinting as quickly as he could toward the relative safety of Goven. He didn't bother to use the main entrance to the beach. Instead he charged straight through the unruly brush and tall grass that lined the border between the beach and town, not caring what he may encounter.

Pan's only thoughts were of getting as far away as possible. He had no plan, no ideas on where exactly to go or what to do next. He just wanted to be away from that terrible place, away from the fighting and people dying, away from the image of a man getting torn apart by a myth come alive.

Pan emerged onto the street in a panic. Even though the air had begun to cool and the running wasn't nearly enough to exert him, sweat seemed to coat nearly every inch of Pan's body. He breathed heavily, leaning forward and placing his palms on his knees. Pan could still hear the sounds of battle behind him, but that hardly mattered to him now. He just needed a few moments to catch his breath and then he'd head deeper into the town where he could find somewhere safe to hide and drink himself into oblivion until he forgot all about what he had seen.

A strong hand suddenly grasped Pan's shoulder. By reflex, Pan yelped and tried to pull away, but the grip held firm.

"Woah there, kid," the Dockmaster that Pan saw talking to Captain Miox earlier said. "Steady now. What's goin' on? Did the cap'n send for me?"

"I... Those things!" Pan stammered. Only now did he notice that he and the Dockmaster were completely alone on the street.

"Yeah, I know. I got this here portion of town fully evacuated. You can go on and tell him that he's free to act however he sees fit now."

"*What?*" Pan said. "I'm not going back there! *You* tell him!"

The Dockmaster looked confused at first then his expression hardened as he grabbed Pan's other shoulder with his free hand. "I'm guessin' this is your first run-in with lurker beasts?" Pan only stared back in response. "Look, I know it may be scarin' you to fathoms below, but waves, man! Those folk need you back there! You gotta be there for 'em!"

On any other occasion, Pan would have laughed at the man. He didn't owe that crew anything. They meant *nothing* to Pan. Why should he risk his life just to watch all of them get murdered by monsters anyway?

Do you know the difference between a man and a coward? A voice echoed from the past. Waves, how Pan hated that voice. A man retreats... A coward flees.

"Well?" The Dockmaster asked, looking at Pan imploringly. When Pan gave no response, he let go of Pan's shoulders and cursed. "Bah! Do what you need to, but I ain't lettin' those men die!" The man turned and began rushing towards the sounds of screaming and death.

Pan ground his teeth. For years he ran from the first sight of trouble, abandoning anyone or anything that might be a hindrance. Never once did he care about being a coward; it certainly beat the alternative every time. So why should it matter now?

Pan couldn't come up with a single reason. Not one.

That only made it all the more confusing as his body lurched into motion and began running in the same direction as the Dockmaster.

Waves, this is stupid. I'm stupid. Why am I doing this?

Even in sandals, Pan was a much faster runner than the Dockmaster and quickly caught up to the surly man. "I'll tell the captain that the docks have been evacuated." Pan said. "Is the island's Admiral present?"

The man huffed, clearly not used to this sort of exertion. "Afraid... not."

"Then go and round up all the guards you have posted for this district and send them as reinforcements. There's some wounded who might need help too."

The Dockmaster nodded and Pan sped up, turning down the entryway to the beach.

He spotted Miox almost immediately. The captain stood atop a large dune away from a majority of the conflict in order to survey the battlefield—If one could even call it that. Pan preferred the term "butcher's slab," personally.

"Captain!" Pan shouted, sprinting up to the dune and scrambling his way up the side. Captain Miox finished calling out an order before turning to face Pan, his expression dark. He

almost seemed like he was actually bothered by his subordinates dying. “The Dockmaster says you can act freely! The docks have been evacuated!” Pan still wasn’t sure what good “acting freely” would do, but the Dockmaster certainly seemed to think it was important.

Captain Miox nodded and some of the tension melted from his stance as he turned back to the battlefield and repeated what Pan said in a barking tone. Pan blinked in surprise as he actually heard some of the men and women below begin to let out *whoops* of elation.

Pan finished his climb up the dune and stood next to Miox, preparing for the worst. What he saw instead made his breath catch.

Something seemed to have changed within the ranks of the mercenaries. Their attacks were suddenly more precise; more devastating. The lurker beasts began to lose their momentum, but also seemed to be making mistakes with their pounces.

Pan watched as one of the creatures launched itself at Yik-Yik, only for its trajectory to be just a hair too far away for its jaws to make contact with the man’s flesh. Not a moment later, Yik-Yik drew a pistol at the beast and fired. And while the shot Ria made earlier only served to crack the lurker beast’s armor and annoy it, this one completely shattered the carapace and killed the monster immediately.

As the horde of creatures were slowly forced back towards the waterline, even more miracles began to occur. Pan looked on in awe as pistol shots from over fifty yards away seemed to find their targets with near-perfect accuracy. Crewmates danced and whirled alone amongst numerous beasts at a time, each bite and swipe of claws barely missing. Sabers flicked through the air at armored shells only to suddenly divert from their path and find a weak point at the last possible moment. The sight of it all almost looked... supernatural.

They were holding back, Pan thought in astonishment. *Why? They could’ve fought like this the entire time. Why was it so important that no one was around to witness this?*

As the lurker beasts continued getting pushed further and further from shore, Captain Miox glanced down at Pan. The aging man must have seen something in Pan’s face that he found amusing, because his lips twitched into a hint of a smile and he patted Pan on the shoulder.

“Get ready, son,” Captain Miox said. “This is the best part.”

The crew continued pressing the attack on the lurker beasts until they themselves reached the shoreline. Pan furrowed his brow in confusion as the front line of fighters continued pushing past the threshold. That was odd. Surely the lurker beasts would be more effective in the water and the advantage would be lost, even with the crew’s special... whatever this was.

Then it happened. As the first person reached the point where the water should have begun to rise up their boots and hinder them, they instead stepped *on top* of the water and began to walk across it like it was solid land.

No, not walk. Glide.

There was an uncanny speed and grace to their stride that made their movements look ethereal and majestic. One by one, the others followed suit, strolling atop the ocean the same way one would stroll through a garden, and just when Pan couldn’t believe it could get any weirder, they began to glow.

“How...?” Pan whispered, trailing off. He didn’t even know where to begin.

The members of Miax’s ship raced across the sea in pursuit of the lurker beasts. The beasts swam in a way that struck Pan as almost frantic.

Or afraid.

The crew moved across the waves with a speed much quicker than their gait implied, and their skin glowed with streaks of silver light that mimicked the same ones as the lurker beasts. There was a confidence to their motions, a contentedness. They looked at home here.

Pan’s eyes fell on Huin. Even from a distance, Pan swore he could see the man grinning as a large beast suddenly leapt straight up from the water like some kind of demented dolphin and began diving down, jaws poised to clamp down on Huin and drag him below. Pan almost screamed out to him, but the warning died in his throat as he watched the beast pass straight through Huin and slip back into the water as if he was never even there.

“Phantoms. You’re phantoms,” Pan felt himself say. He had never been much for superstition, but in the face of everything he’d witnessed today, he was beginning to rethink his beliefs.

“Not quite,” Miax said. “At least, not them.”

Pan blinked as the group continued to fan out across the waves—which they stepped up and over as if they were nothing more than mildly cumbersome staircases—and further broke up the lurker beasts, causing them to scatter or dive deeper under the sea in order to evade the reach of their sabers and pistol fire. Pan was so amazed by the scene that he almost didn’t notice as the town guard arrived on the beach and hurriedly began tending to the bodies left on the sands.

The display only went on for a few minutes before Pan suddenly heard a grating sound fill the air like rusted metal rapidly scraping across bone while a parrot was strangled in the background. It took Pan longer than it should have to realize that one of the lurker beasts was the cause for the noise. Several more of the creatures echoed the first, causing the sounds to overlap, amplifying the effect. More and more joined in until it seemed that every one of the beasts were participating in the discordant harmony.

“Sweet winds, what are they *doing*?” Pan yelled over the noise, covering his ears with his hands.

“Declaring us the victors,” Miax replied, though his tone suggested that he didn’t much feel like one.

Pan watched as the swarm of houndlike figures began to swim away from WeeQon at a furious pace, disappearing into the orange light of sunset reflecting across the water. As the beasts made for the horizon, Pan heard a chorus of cheers rise up from the group of mercenaries below. They celebrated and congratulated one another as they stood atop the water, skin still glowing. With such a visage, they really did look like the ocean spirits from old sailor tales.

Kinesis, Pan thought. *This must be what it’s used for.*

These people somehow knew secrets that let them walk on water and dance with the winds. Those were skills that could be *very* handy—and very lucrative—for Pan. He didn’t know how it was done or what he’d have to do to get his hands on it, but he was certainly beginning to wonder if it’d be worth sticking around long enough to find out.