

The Fickle Sea

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The known world disappeared beneath the horizon. We were alone now, enclosed by the supposedly boundless sea. My ship, the Iriosa, was cutting through the water like a hot knife through butter. Next to it was another vessel, the Urram, a sleek and fearsome longship. Both vessels were on an expedition, commissioned by the high king himself. We were determined to find new land, which was rumored to be located at the northern end of the world. Our spirits were high, with our eyes glimmering with hope. Our supplies were abundant, our crew was experienced, and our navigation was faultless. Success was inevitable.

I turned my gaze away from the horizon and paced towards the bow of the ship. Instinctively, I observed the overcast sky, seeking for a glimpse of the sun. The ashen grey clouds thwarted my best attempts. Sighing, I snatched my sunstone from a case of an assortment of navigational tools. After lifting it to the sky, the stone reflected a ray of light coming from the west. The sun was setting. Night was approaching.

I looked to my right, where the Urram was proudly gliding along. A dozen sea-hardened mariners were rowing against a small zephyr blowing against us. One of them, a man with his lengthy crimson hair tied in a simple braid, was eagerly chatting along with his compatriots. At the front of the ship was a young navigator named Alwyn, who was endowed with arresting silver hair. Sunstone aloft, he was peering through the implement, shifting it around to catch

stray beams of light. Beside him was a detailed star chart spread out on a small table. It was fluttering in the wind, now a strong breeze, only being pinned down with a compass.

I wrapped my robe closer around me in response to the growing wind. My rowers let go of their oars for a moment and unlocked their sea chests, a box that acted as both a container and a seat for the sailors. Inside were spare robes, boots, drinks, and food. The sailors hastily took hold of their cloaks. Already shivering, the front rower, a young man named Talorc, even put on a thick cape above his cloak. Falite, the stout rudderman, did nothing in response to the wind. I had known him for years, and I knew for certain that he had no fear of the cold, having spent years on the bitter seas.

Within a handful of minutes, darkness crept up from the horizon, and the tiresome wind turned into a fearsome gale. We were going directly against the currents now. Miraculously, our resilient sails were still helping us move forward. Even so, our ships were advancing at a shaky course, threatening to collide with each other. Rowing was useless now, and as a result my sailors leaped up and made a hopeless attempt to keep everything in place, becoming a feverish cacophony of distress and desperation. One mariner with a hefty beard kept the rigging in place, and Talorc guarded his sea chest and a nearby weapons rack as if his life depended on it. Nearly all the other sailors were securing the various barrels of food and fresh water that we stored near the end of the ship.

With my right hand on my sunstone, and my left hand on my case, I took a quick glance at the Urram. Alwyn seemed to be giving orders to his own sailors, shouting so his voice was not lost in the wind. The crew clambered this way and that, sheltering their crates, straightening the rigging, and holding down the barrels.

“Rain!”

The shout came from a steely voice at the stern of my ship. Falite, who was still at the rudder, making a last-ditch attempt to steer our ship away from the Urram, uttered the call. A cry of anguish came from a mariner. There would be no shelter from a storm here, not without a cabin or a hold.

Without warning, a colossal wave hit our ships with a sickening thud. In shock, some sailors released their grip on the crates, many of which were flown overboard in the resulting tide. The supplies, filled to the brim with days worth of salted meats, bread, and fish, were gone from our sights in an instant, carried to the south by the merciless current. I could hear the sound of fallen barrels from the Urram, and yells of fury from every direction. My vision was blurred by the rain, and I could only see an arm’s length ahead of me, adding to the chaos and confusion. Shivering madly, my men were at the brink of exhaustion, their clutches on the remaining crates loosening with every second.

“Falter not!” I bellowed towards the wispy figures of my men. “The storm will end, and we will remain. Every crate of food left is another day for us. If we relent now, there will be no hope for us when the clouds clear.”

From the front of the ship I could see the sailors silently obeying, clinging to the supplies that would have otherwise been taken by another wave. I openly prayed to the wind as the storm continued, begging for a respite and an end to the rain. Every minute seemed to drag on for a torturous amount of time. By now, the freezing rain had completely drenched my cloak, and I felt as if I was wearing a robe of ice. I did not know what was worse, the piercing cold, the threat of starvation, or the dread of dying at sea. Despite all this, I held my ground, for abandoning all hope would mean the end of the entire expedition.

I could not tell how much time had passed, a minute, an hour, or a day, but the rain finally subsided. The forsaken clouds scattered, leaving small beams of dawn behind them. Not long after, the gale relented, turning into a docile breeze. I called for Falite to turn the rudder starboard, and change our course back towards the north. Meanwhile, the rowers were restoring order to the ship by themselves. Some were patching up rips in the sail, others organized our remaining supplies. I slowly counted each barrel that we had left. Six. I glanced at the Urram. Seven.

I encouraged and advised my crew as they finished cleaning up. A handful of minutes later, the ship looked as if the storm had never even occurred.

“Gather ’round!” I yelled. The rowers paced towards me, forming a small semicircle.

“Last night was a travesty, there's no way around it. We were blown off course, tortured in the freezing rain, and our supplies were flown overboard. We only have enough food for four days if we start rationing, and we will.”

The rowers were silent, although I knew they were disgruntled. I saw Talorc grimacing from the corner of my eye.

“However, I must commend your efforts in protecting our vessel during the storm. Not a single oar or sea chest was lost, and we have enough food left to survive. Persevering through the blistering cold and forsaken rain is a feat in and of itself. If we make the same effort for the rest of the voyage, then gods willing, land will be within our sights tomorrow.”

I nodded my head, which signaled that they could go. They appeared slightly better, and returned to their posts with renewed energy. Talorc, however, was still unsatisfied, angrily muttering about rations, assuming I would not hear. I caught his eyes with a piercing glare, which promptly quieted him down and set him off to his post.

With the clouds mostly gone, I could finally rely on the sun for navigation. As it always rose in the east, the opposite direction was west. Standing with my left arm to the east and my

right arm to the west, the north was to my front and the south was to my back. On cloudless nights, I could take advantage of the stars and my astrolabe to navigate.

As the Iriosa continued on its journey, propelled by a helpful, but volatile, breeze going in our direction, I took hold of my map of the known world from my sea chest. Gently unfurling it on the coffer, I pinned it down on both sides with two sun stones. I took a quick glance at the several kingdoms located at the very south of the map. France, Iberia, and Germania were the largest of them all, constantly bickering amongst each other like children. My home, the Commonwealth, was located on a large island near the northwestern corner of the map. It shared the isle with the Kingdom of Albion, the fatherland Alwyn and red haired rower. The Commonwealth and Albion were staunch allies, though a minority of subjects in both realms held an ancient grudge against each other. To the island's north were two smaller islets, Ceo and Uan. There was nothing after that, except for three bolded words. '**The endless sea**'.

I frowned at the word endless. If the sea truly had no end, then what would explain the birds flying north every summer, or the occasional stream of smoke drifting down to Uan? An uncharted land to the north would be the only logical explanation. Still, all the map makers of the world couldn't have been completely wrong. I looked at my rowers. What once was a dauntless glimmer in their eyes was replaced with a black emptiness. Days before, they were rowing because they held faith in the expedition. Now, they were only rowing out of necessity. Sighing, I rolled the map back into a scroll, and gingerly placed it back into the chest.

Dinner was a few pieces of hardtack, a slice of salted fish, and water to wash it down. While we were eating, I caught Talorc attempting to get away with a feast of cheese and lamb. He was swiftly reprimanded, with his entire meal being taken away from him. As I poured the food back into a barrel, I took a tentative look at the remaining supplies. Four barrels stood where twelve should have been. Time was running out.

Once night fell, I kept our course with my star chart and astrolabe at hand. The waves were steady, and the wind gently pushed our ships along without causing a disturbance. Taking advantage of this, most of my rowers fell asleep, and the Urram's crew followed suit. Only the Alwyn and I were left. He seemed anxious, neurotically pacing up and down his ship, solemnly praying to the constellation of Draco, and constantly calibrating his astrolabe. Listening intently, I could hear a snippet of his whispers.

It's too quiet.

The storm must have taken a toll on him. Or the lack of sleep. While he was praying, I kept myself awake by tracing the constellations, until I grew tired of it and lay down near my sea chest. Not a second passed before I fell asleep.

A furious voice woke me up. I could tell it was early morning from the orange glow of the sky. Groggily, I rubbed my eyes to see who it was. Talorc, standing at the middle of the ship, was spouting off rhetoric at a blistering speed. My sleepy mind could only catch some of it.

“Storm——heretic——Albion——plot——assault!”

Whatever it was, it was utter nonsense. Half of my rowers were sleeping, and only the Urram’s rudderman was awake. A small crowd formed around Talorc, and they were arguing with him at every chance they got. As my mind grew clearer, I began to hear every word.

“They’re hiding food from us, don’t you see! They’ll starve us, and take the land for themselves. We need to strike them before it’s too late.” His hands were flying up in a frenzy while he rambled.

Having quite enough of this, I stood up and cleared my throat, temporarily silencing the entire ship.

“Listen. We have enough food to last two more days.” I stared straight into Talorc’s eyes as I spoke, despite his best efforts not to meet my gaze. “We can resupply once we find what we’ve been looking for, and return home triumphant. But if they hear this, Talorc, the entire expedition is going up in flames. Without the Urram, the expedition would be much more vulnerable, and you should be grateful for their presence. Any more of this will be considered mutiny. Now, return to your post at once.”

Without skipping a beat, Talorc opened opened his mouth to speak, but I held my hand up before a single word could slip. Instead of snapping back, he spat in my direction and turned away.

When lunch came to pass, I withheld Talorc's plate for a second time. Laughing hysterically, he sauntered back to his station and started rowing. With the wind carrying the sails, his oar made no difference. But he didn't stop, not for a second.

The clear sky from yesterday did not last for long. Heavy grey clouds covered every inch of the heavens, blocking the sun from my view. I incessantly used my sun stone as a result, sometimes checking it twice in a row out of cautious mistrust. If I was obsessive, then the Alwyn was overwrought. Not only did he raise his sunstone at near-perfect thirty second intervals, he was also shuddering despite the gentle breeze. Rowers had to hand him a plate of food during dinner, as he regularly forgot to eat.

I didn't see it at first, but the clouds were growing darker with every hour. The pale silvery-grey of the clouds became an ominous pitch-black. When dusk fell, it looked as if the heavens were covered by a colossal bat's wing. All was quiet, apart from the low whine of the wind. Not a soul dared to speak.

Without warning, a violent thunderbolt crashed into the water with a blood-curdling bang. The shockwave sent both of our ships careening, knocking over one of my sunstones. After

hastening to pick it up, I shouted various commands towards my men, who were already scampering to keep some semblance of order on the Iriosa.

“Tie up the rigging! Hold on to the barrels! Lock the rudder!”

Not long after the first bolt of lightning struck, an earsplitting clap of thunder reverberated around us. A small drizzle of raindrops immediately followed. Heaving, the wind turned from a hushed whistle to a frightening howl. Our sails were fluttering madly, like butterflies in a blizzard. My rowers were trying to keep it in place, but to no avail. Talorc was hiding behind his sea chest as usual, but this time he was guarding his weapon’s rack.

The Urram was faring no better than we were. Mariners scurried in all directions, and some were even at a loss on what to do. The rudderman left his post to protect a barrel, allowing the rudder to do as it wished. Straightaway, it jerked to the right, causing the Urram to slowly cascade towards the Iriosa.

Talorc instantaneously jerked up. A deranged smile flickered across his face.

“The gods are with us! Now is the hour for battle!”

The insubordinate boy was going to board the Urram! As if he rehearsed this, Talorc pilfered a dagger from his weapons rack, and ambled to the leftmost side of the ship, where the

Urram was only a foot away. If he made it to the other side, all faith anyone had in the mission would dissipate. Blood would spill. The expedition would lie in ruins.

Talorc halted, in one last moment of clarity, to see if we were coming with him.

“Put an end to this!” I screamed, quivering.

Slowly, deliriously, he shook his head, his waterlogged hair swaying as he did.

Desperately, I staggered towards Talorc in a desperate attempt to stall him. But it was too late.

Turning towards the Urram, he made a blind leap into the air. Just as his feet left the Iriosa for the final time, a wave drove the Urram to the right by a scant two feet. In a cruel twist of fate, he plummeted into the ravenous waters, swallowed whole within the blink of an eye.

The sea belched, sending a fierce tide towards us before there was any chance to grieve. And then, almost all at once, it ended. The tempest died down to a puff of air, calming down the waves at the same time. Ceasing their downpour, the shadowy clouds gradually brightened to a shade of silvery grey. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a flock of ravens soaring near the northern horizon. Instinctively, my rowers crowded around the front of the ship, sticking their heads out in search of salvation. Two torturous minutes passed.

“Land!” I cried. “Land!”

We erupted in a rapturous roar as a beautiful, verdant island appeared before us. It seemed to perfectly fit the description of paradise, with a lush forest blanketing its surface, birds of all sizes hopping along its beach, and a beautiful, white cloud crowning it all. Blissfully, our sailors began rowing to bring us closer to the isle, all fatigue from the storm having melted away. I joined in, taking Talorc's place as the front rower. I tore my eyes away from the island, and to the Urram. Alwyn was finally at peace, congratulating his men with a smile on his face. His mariners rowed in faultless synchronization, singing upbeat ballads as they sailed.

Within a dozen minutes or so, the wind turned in the opposite direction, propelling our two ships by itself. Savouring this break, I emptied our last barrel of food, filled with aged cheeses, pickled vegetables, salted lamb, and bottles of refreshment. I called for my men to gather for our last meal before we landed. They took hold of their plates with unbridled delight. I could say for certainty that there never was a better meal in the world.