

THE ALBATROS IS FLYING

Captain Frey sat lazily on a stool, leaning against the bar and watching a young boy, barely old enough to grow a beard and dressed in scholarly robes, as he vigorously interrogated one of his crewmen. Frey's crew made up most of the inn's current patrons and the group assailed by the young boy's inquiries seemed very amused by him. After a few exchanged sentences and not so few laughs, no doubt directed at the boy's age and clothing, one of the crewmen pointed at captain Frey. The boy turned his attention to him and quickly paced through the inn, ignoring everyone else.

"Damn you, Rickard," the captain grumbled and turned back to the bar, grabbing for his half-finished drink.

"Excuse me, are you captain Edgar Frey?" A voice sounded behind him. It was younger than he expected, but had just the right amount of entitledness and omniscience that he immediately knew what he was dealing with. He took a heavy swig, finishing the last of his drink.

"Does your mother know you're here, boy?" He said to the newcomer, not even turning to face him.

"I assure you, captain, that my mother's concerns are none of your business. Now please, if you wouldn't mind, can we speak in private? I have an offer you might find interesting. And lucrative." The reply was bland. If the captain's biting remark offended the young scholar, he didn't show it, much to the captain's disappointment. The captain sighed and stood up, turning around to face him,

"Alright, fine. Follow along little mage." The captain strode through the inn and then entered a private room through a side door. There was a table with a circle of chairs around it. He plopped down into one and gestured for the young mage to follow suit, resting his legs on top of the table.

"What do you want?" the captain asked simply as his companion took a seat.

"I'm sure you already know I am an apprentice mage from the Silver Cities. I am working on a thesis concerning the reliability of told stories throughout history. To compare, I need both recent and old stories. And I have heard that you and your crew managed to sink the pirate Erwin Ralay and his ship, The Umbra. I will pay you well if you tell me how it happened." The captain examined his expression with a raised eyebrow for a while before giving a hearty laugh.

"Well colour me impressed. This is the first time I'll be payed for tellin' someone about my proudest achievements. Make yerself comfortable, young mage, I'll tell you a story of the shittiest day I've had since my pa sunk six feet under. It was one problem after another." the captain said excitedly and began telling his story:

"I'm sure you know what me and my boys do for a living, right?"

"You hunt sea beasts. Your ship, The Albatros, is famous for its design."

"Aye. Well, it was a normal day on a seemingly normal job. We were tracking a thunderhawk. You know what a thunderhawk is?"

"A bird-like wyvern that likes to hunt during storms. Supposedly a distant relative to a phoenix."

"Riiight. Anyway, as I said, we were tracking it. The hunt could've been way easier, but we missed our first shot and the damned chicken bailed to the Stormteeth."

"There are plenty stories about the Stormteeth. That place is truly fascinating. I should like to hear more about it."

"I'll tell you after I am done with the story. Now shut up and listen. All you need to know now is that the Stormteeth are the asshole of the seven hells where storms are about as common as the burning sun in the desert and the Stormteeth themselves are rocks as sharp as swords that reach three masts into the sky. The bloody bird flew in their direction, which made the hunt a challenge. And the problems just kept piling up."

The Albatros sailed swiftly across the waves, heading straight toward the distant shapes of the Stormteeth. The crew were singing, but they were not in a jolly mood. They were simply making as much noise to attract their prey. Frey could easily see his men were tense and ready for anything, throwing worried glances at their destination inbetween rhymes.

"Look. There." Frey's second in command pointed at a shape among the clouds, small for now, but quickly getting closer.

"Attacking? Now? That must mean a storm will be abrew right in front of us any moment. It wouldn't attack without the cover of roaring thunder." Frey said and let go of the helm, letting the lieutenant take it. He leaned over the railing and shouted at his men,

"Alright, boys! Load up the ballistas and prepare her for a storm! We'll be having company!" As if sensing his thoughts, the clouds above started swirling and darkening at an alarming rate.

"I have heard of rapid storms like this appearing suddenly and without warning, but thought them to be nothing more than a rare anomaly." The young mage said, looking sceptically at captain Frey. The captain grinned.

"A rarity, aye. When you're on open sea. But when you're this close to the Stormteeth, there can even be three or four of these storms stacked in one place with waves rising fifty meters above. But The Albatros is made to handle the toughest sea beasts. A storm is nothing but a nuisance."

"And what of the pirate?"

"I was about to get to that. Do you know what they say about his ship?"

"It was called The Umbra. That means shadow in the language of the erudite. They also say it can turn invisible and that it feeds on the souls of the pirate's victims."

"Don't care what it's called and I dunno about the souls. I was sceptical about the invisibility too... until I saw the bastard appear right in front of my eyes..."

The crew kept singing their song as they braced the ship for the incoming onslaught. Frey looked them over proudly. They were good men. Their rythm was suddenly cut off with the deafening roar of magical arcannons. Massive blue balls of magical energy blasted into The Albatros' broadside, shattering wood and tearing ropes. The whole ship shook.

"What in the seven hells was that!" One of the crewmen shouted.

"We're under attack! Load up the hullbuster!" Frey shouted, wasting no time.

"Over there!" Somebody else cried. Everyone looked and none could believe their eyes. Out of thin air, suddenly a heavily armed frigate slowly appeared on their broadside. Its hull was painted black and white with sales of dirty red and a pirate flag flying high in the crow's nest. It's arcannons were charging again, their blue glow getting brighter by the second.

"Forget the bird! Open full sail, unleash the stormbreakers! Heave left and load the hullbuster! Load! Load! Load!" Frey shouted and then turned back to his lieutenant. The man's expression was amazingly calm as he spun the helm left at top speed. He looked at his captain with slight smile and not a pinch of fear.

"This day is getting better and better, eh, captain?" He said and turned his attention back to handling the ship. The crew managed to open the side sails, called stormbreakers, used to turn during the roughest of storms, and The Albatros was swiftly gaining distance on their sudden assailant. The pirates fired another

round but missed completely, not expecting the hunting ship's burst of speed, and quickly turned to give chase.

"So, you just ran away and let the storm take its toll?" The mage asked, not a hint of mockery in his voice. The captain grimaced.

"Not exactly. True, we ran for a bit, but the storm broke out almost immediately after. We couldn't afford to go full speed. The stormbreakers are fragile and can only be open for a little bit, exactly long enough to turn during a storm. And we still had the bird worry about."

The pirates disappeared out of sight behind a massive wave.

"The hullbreaker is ready, sir!" The captain looked over the massive arcane cannon in the centre of his ship. It was their only heavy weaponry they could use against another ship. The rest were designed to fire at sea creatures. An ear-wrenching screech pierced the already loud rumbling of the rain, the wind and the raging sea. The crew immediately moved into position and everyone was scanning the sky above. It came down from behind, trying to grasp one of the men. The captain got out his pistol crossbow and shot the thunderhawk, narrowly missing its eye. The wyvern missed its mark and flew over the ship, earning a few more stray shots.

"Hold fire! Give it distance!" The captain shouted over the storm. A massive wave was approaching. The captain waited a little longer.

"Now! Fire all we got and turn! We gotta face the waves head on!" His experienced voice could easily be heard even over the loudest storms and the ship got into motion. The ballistas fired and the thunderhawk got hit with one, piercing its leg. Just then, The Albatros got hit with another barrage of cannonfire. Frey frantically looked for the pirate ship, but it was nowhere in sight. The thunderhawk turned wildly in the air, wailing like a banshee and lining up another attack. Frey nervously watched its approach, still looking for the enemy ship. Then he saw it. There was a blank space in the thrashing surface of the ocean, resembling the outline of a ship's hull and spraying water everywhere.

"Over there! In the water! Hullbreaker, fire for the centre!" He pointed furiously at his discovery and his men were quick to catch on.

BOOM!

The cannon was so loud it made everyone go deaf for a bit, their ears ringing and their eyes blinded by the shimmering blue blast that soared through the air at breakneck speed. The blast hit its mark and Frey watched with a devilish grin as one of his problems was revealed from its invisibility and the ball of light crashed into its hull, breaking it in twain. One down, one more to go, he thought. Another wave was approaching. A big one this time. They were already headed straight at it. And the thunderhawk in tow.

"Brace for impact!" The captain roared. Everyone held on to what they could and were almost immediately blinded by the sudden hit of cold, salty water. The ship flew straight up and then, it felt as light as a feather. Before beginning to plummet down at great speed. Then came a screech from behind them. The captain looked back, still clinging to the ship's railing. He saw the thunderhawk diving down on them. He let go with one hand and gripped the handle of his crossbow, which he managed to reload after shooting the first time. He took aim.

"See ya in hell, you son of a whore." He fired. And then everything went underwater. His eyes were burning from the salty water and his mouth was full of it.

After they emerged from the water again, the thunderhawk was nowhere in sight. Just the rain, the waves and the dark clouds overhead, rumbling with thunder and flashing with lightning. The captain grinned again. They made it.

"We made it! The Albatros is flyin' boys! Now let's get out of this cursed place before the thunderhawk changes his mind! I don't have the nerves for this anymore!" The crew cheered back, despite the still raging storm. Not a single one had the nerves to continue the hunt.

"Your story does not seem likely, but I feel inclined to believe you." The student-mage said, looking at the captain who seemed very pleased with himself.

"Why is that?" Frey asked and gave him a grin.

"I saw the damage on your ship a few days back. In the port. I suppose you deserve this." He finished and placed a pouch on the table between them. It rang with money. The captain stood up but didn't take it.

"What's better for research than experiencing what you're researching first hand? Keep the money, so you can pay a captain who will carry you out on the sea. I am sailing out on the morrow. Find me if you want to tag along." He said and left.