

I checked to make sure my party had abandoned ship before our caravel was shredded by 40 cannons, full broadsides from two different battleships. Varrin had leaped out onto the water and was now literally sprinting across its surface. Etja, Xim, and Nuralie all hovered up and into the air under the effects of Siphon.

I jumped off the edge of the ship, then cast Shortcut when I could see inside of a gunport, appearing next to a rather surprised Littan cannon crew. I pulled out Somnres and extended it into a two-handed form, then brought it down on the cannon before me. The mundane iron crumpled beneath the magically enhanced blow, rendering the cannon useless.

I began marching down the line, ignoring soldiers who tried to prod me with spears and blades. Their weapons either broke or were turned aside by my armor. Here and there I shoved one roughly aside as I rapidly made my way down the entire length of the ship, dismantling every cannon I came across. While my Strength alone wouldn't have been enough to make such casual work of the materials I was tearing through, Somnres and my recent buffs to Blunt added a lot of oomph to my swings.

As I wrecked each piece of artillery in turn, I began to consider that there may have been a few ways to handle this situation that would have been... better than how I'd approached it.

Could we have called the admiral's bluff and tried to run the blockade? Maybe. However, when someone points a gun and says they're going to shoot, I believe them. Turns out, that was the correct assumption to make.

Could we have dived below the water and hidden in the Closet, then used our combined magic prowess to figure out a way to swim *under* the blockade once the Littans thought us dead or in the wind? Possibly. But, I hadn't thought of that.

A soldier landed a spear in my cheek, but it failed to penetrate the skin. I snatched the weapon away and glared at him. He backed off, with several more around him abandoning their attempts to subdue me.

We'd had passes that granted us the *legal* right to travel through the blockade. My first instinct had been to argue my *legal* point, rather than fall back on committing a 'crime' to avoid an asshole with power. In retrospect, that was naive of me, but it was how I'd always done things. I hadn't been given much time to think, so I'd relied on what had worked for me in the past. Of course, my past self had never interfaced with foreign military elements in possession of a fleet of ships and what appeared to be *carte blanche* to use them however they saw fit. I'd wanted to 'talk it out' with the guy.

Unfortunately, in order to *talk* with the admiral, I'd had to get *close* to the admiral. Teleporting onto the man's galleon in full Madrin plate was, I supposed, a threatening gesture, but it's not like I'd attacked anyone. I didn't even have my weapon out. Again, it was probably naive of me to think he would have reacted any differently.

Once I'd disabled all the cannons, I smashed through the planks below me, exposing the ship's lowest deck where the hull went below the waterline. I began channeling Explosion!.

Now, I was in a predicament. The admiral had just tried to kill my allies. He'd had no chance of succeeding, but that attempt irked me nonetheless. I'd already seen red when he'd demanded that we turn Nuralie over to him, so this wrinkle added to my irritation with the Littan. Unless he had more Delvers—ones a lot better than the level 3's he was rolling with—his insistence on keeping his ultimatum would do nothing more than result in the deaths of his soldiers while my party carved its way to shore.

I turned to the soldiers who were either brave or stupid enough to still have weapons leveled at me.

"You guys should get out of here," I said in Imperial. They glanced at my upraised hand, then ran.

Maybe we could fly over the blockade, banking on the idea that their cannons wouldn't get a good angle on us. Then we might have Littans chasing us into Eschendur, which was an entirely different can of worms to open. They also had ballistas, but if they weren't mana-woven in some fashion I doubted they'd do any real harm to anyone in the party. That was an assumption, though, and a risk that I wasn't completely comfortable with. Also, Varrin could run on water and I could use Gracovus, but I wasn't confident Etja's mana would hold out while transporting three people across the mile of sea left between us and the Eschen shore. It was all very frustrating.

I snapped my fingers and cast Explosion!. A pressure wave rocked through the belly of the ship as planks and iron bands were obliterated. Seawater began pouring in through the massive breach. I looked up and brought my hammer around on the planks above me, tearing open a hole. I hopped up, grabbed the edges, and hefted myself back topside. Several soldiers scattered from where I emerged, and I marched back over to the admiral.

The woman Delver in the sand-colored robes—Sandy, I decided to call her—had pulled out a second dagger and tried to intercept me, but I sidestepped her. Her physical attributes had to have been abysmal and some part of me couldn't believe she was

trying to fall back on them after I'd tossed a few Dispels at her. I grabbed the admiral by the collar again, then positioned him so that Sandy couldn't keep coming for me.

"Why the fuck wouldn't you accept our passes?" I said, glaring at him. The ship groaned beneath us, but it would likely take a few minutes to begin listing.

"No Eschen Delver is to cross the blockade," said the admiral.

"Then why did *your* government give us passes that gave us the express right to do so?"

"My orders are given with the weight of the Imperial throne," he said. "An administrative blunder does not overrule the emperor's authority."

"You're saying that the passes were issued negligently?" He didn't give any reply to the question, verbal or physical. "You could have let us turn around," I added.

The man had recovered his composure and was now looking at me with a mix of contempt and bewilderment.

"I am also tasked with capturing any Eschen Delver who attempts to cross," he said. "I will not allow such a weapon to return to Eschendur."

"Then you *realize* that Delvers are dangerous?"

"Of course I do," he spat, insulted.

"But you just threatened a whole crew of them."

"You're level 6!" he said. "My Delvers told me as much. I have been apprised of the capabilities of Delvers in different ranges. The lower levels are dangerous, but hardly a threat to a significant military force."

"Ah, I see," I said. "That's the root of the misunderstanding. You don't think we're dangerous *enough*."

"You're mad," said the admiral. "I know that some Delvers become drunk on the powers they gain, but this... it rises to the level of absurd."

"Sandy," I said, turning to the woman, "have you seen Delvers fight mundane soldiers?" She swallowed and looked between myself and the admiral, but didn't comment. Either she hadn't—not in any serious way—or she wasn't willing to contradict her CO's position.

"What would it take for you to stand down?" I asked the admiral.

He smiled like I was joking. It was contemptuous, and I couldn't stop myself from pulling at his collar, bringing him closer, and lifting him off the ground completely.

"I'm not kidding," I said.

"We won't," he said.

"Even if it costs you the entire fleet?"

Anger marred his features.

"I won't entertain ludicrous hypotheticals," he said. "You may cause damage, you may even kill *me*, but you won't get through this blockade."

"I just destroyed *all* of your cannons and put a hole in your hull in the span of minutes," I said. "That's not a hypothetical, that's something that just happened."

"And what did it cost you?" said the admiral. "You cannot possibly do that more than once! I know the limitations of mana and stamina."

The man was so confidently wrong that it hurt, but I was faced with a choice. I needed to regroup with the party and make it into Eschendur while avoiding as much pointless bloodshed as possible. The question was how much of a spectacle to make while doing so.

I decided to give the man a bit of a show for two major reasons.

One, if I could convince the admiral to stand down there would be fewer mundane soldiers throwing themselves into our line of egress. I had a self-interest in keeping this admiral from sacrificing his soldiers to either us or the next—less pleasant—Delver to come along. If hordes of mundane soldiers were being slaughtered by Delvers on the regular, things might devolve into open conflict very quickly. With the admiral's current attitude, it felt like only a matter of time before he ran into someone who wasn't willing to play games. If the man understood how outclassed he was, maybe that would keep things from escalating like this in the future. Providing the examples for him myself was certainly high-handed, but if there was a chance that it would help him rethink how he was engaging Delvers, I thought it was worth trying.

Two, I was pissed.

To persuade the admiral, I felt that a different tack was needed. First, I'd tried wearing my 'Reasonable' hat. Reasonable-hat Arlo didn't make much of an impression. I'd just

tried out my 'Angry' hat, but Angry-hat Arlo also proved ineffective. I decided that it was time to put on my 'Ass' hat.

Sandy provided Asshat Arlo with his first opportunity to take the stage.

"Coward!" Sandy shouted at me.

I turned to her with an eyebrow raised, the accusation breaking me from my musings.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"An honorable man doesn't use another as his shield," she snarled. I looked at the admiral I held by the collar in front of me. The man had started struggling against my grip again, but his coat was thick and well-made. The seams held tight and he didn't have the strength to pull free.

"Oh," I said. "Listen, Sandy, I'm using this man as *your* human shield, not mine." Her brow knitted at the nickname. "If I let him go, you might try to attack me again. I'm sure that someone, somewhere wouldn't want you to die in vain. It's for your own protection."

"Call it what you will," she said. "You hide behind Admiral Richtin while—"

I set the admiral down and reached out to straighten his coat, letting all the rage and tension flee my body. I smiled up at him as I brushed off his shoulders and pulled at the front of his uniform so that it was flat against his torso, no longer bunched up around his neck. I then placed a hand on the admiral's chest and guided him to the side.

"Don't go anywhere," I said to him. The man looked at me with deep concern over my sudden tonal shift.

Sandy hesitated for a second and the admiral stumbled a few feet further away. Then, she charged me with her daggers. I stepped aside, dodging her with little effort—the woman probably had a Speed of 1—then summoned Somnres and brought it down on the side of her knee. There was a sickening crunch and she screamed as she collapsed, her blades clattering to the deck. She grabbed at her leg, eyes watering from the pain, and I squatted down next to her. She glared up at me defiantly.

"Attack me again," I said, "and I'll start taking you seriously."

I stood and went back to the admiral. A few crossbow bolts plinked off my armor as I closed the distance, but I ignored the attacks. Regular soldiers weren't worth Asshat Arlo's notice. They held their fire when I got close to the admiral, and I placed my hand on the gentleman's back, then guided him forward to the deck's railing.

“Where I’m from, most people dislike wanton violence,” I said, giving the man’s shoulder a friendly squeeze. “There are *some* outliers, but it’s a fairly peaceful place. Here, in these lands, I’ve noticed that the culture is different.”

I pointed at the second galleon and the admiral followed my gesture. Varrin had grown tired of dodging the enemy cannonballs as he danced along the sea’s surface. He’d now crashed through the side of the second galleon’s hull like it was made of graham crackers, making his way into the belly of the battleship. There was a bright flash as the big guy’s blade tore through the vessel, a few soldiers above getting caught in the attack and falling to pieces. I winced at that. Kazandak was at its full extension and, after three strikes, the ship was cut in half from keel to deck. The ship began to split and soldiers started diving off of it en masse.

“Not dangerous *enough*,” I said, repeating my earlier statement. “That guy has a Strength evolution that makes him ten times more effective against mundane objects. Are any of the ships in your fleet made from *magic* wood?”

The admiral looked back at me, shocked.

“I didn’t think so,” I said.

I reared back and hurled Somnres into the deck at the admiral’s feet, who shouted in alarm and stumbled back, falling. The sounds of smashing planks followed the hammer down through the vessel. When it whipped back up out of the hole and into my hand, it was dripping with briney water.

“Well,” I said, “if *your* ship—the *admiral’s* ship—doesn’t have any weaves, then it’s probably safe to say that none of them do.” I squinted down into the hole. “You asked how much it cost me to disable this vessel. I’ll be honest, I couldn’t sink an entire *fleet* of ships with the same speed as what I just did here, but I could sink a few. That guy, however”—I pointed at Varrin, who was speeding out to the next approaching vessel—“What he just did to that galleon didn’t even *use* stamina.”

I reached down and took the admiral by the arm, helping him back to his feet. I looked back out over the water, where several more vessels from the fleet had begun sailing closer.

“Let’s see how this goes,” I said as one ship aimed a ballista at my floating trio of party members.

The massive bolt launched through the air, and a casual wave from Etja sent it flying off course. She guided it into another vessel closing from the opposite direction, leaving a gaping hole in its hull. A volley of bright arrows rained down onto the deck of the

attacking ship from Nuralie, laying out the soldiers manning the ballista along with who I suspected was the captain, though I couldn't quite tell from this distance. Then, a beam of crimson light hit. The boat quickly began to burn.

"You had 30 ships, right?" I said. "Now you have 27."

The admiral looked over the galleon Varrin had cleaved in twain and the one that was quickly becoming a pyre. I clapped him on the back.

"You should tell your men to abandon this one," I said.

He looked around at the soldiers who watched us, many of whom looked uneasy as they adjusted their stance to the ship's increasing tilt. Still, they all held firm and none abandoned their post, despite the display.

"I don't... understand," said the admiral. "The reports said... a level 6 shouldn't be able to..."

"I'll let you in on a little secret," I said. "Levels don't mean as much as you think. Now, you've just made an error." I placed my hands on his shoulders and looked him in the eye. "An error that has so far cost you 10 percent of your fleet. None of my party members have taken so much as a single point of damage. Do you want to *compound* your error, or would you like to withdraw and let us become someone else's problem?"

The admiral stared me down, but then shrugged off my hands and turned to start shouting orders to his men.

"Fly the fallback flag!" he shouted. "Prepare the rowboats for any injured! Ensign, go to my cabin and secure my strongbox!"

The soldiers became a flurry of activity and their focus became survival, rather than me. I turned to will Gracorvus to my feet and found Scimitar climbing back over the railing of the deck, fur soaking wet. He looked from Sandy, clutching her knee, to the soldiers preparing to abandon the galleon, then to me. Gracorvus landed and I stepped onto it. He narrowed his eyes but made no move to stop me. I took off from the ship, aiming for Xim, Etja, and Nuralie.

When I drew close, Xim crossed her arms and frowned. She kicked her feet a bit as she hovered.

"Negotiations go well?" she asked.

“The admiral has agreed to a temporary cease-fire,” I replied, eyeing the ships that were starting to change course to avoid us. A few were approaching the distressed vessels for rescue operations.

“That’s good!” said Etja. Nuralie looked disappointed if anything.

“How long can you keep this up?” I asked, gesturing at the three of them.

“A few minutes,” said Etja. “If I don’t cast any other spells.”

“Think we can make it to shore by then?”

“If no one’s shooting at me, maybe,” said Etja.

“Then let’s get going.” I scanned the area. “Anyone seen Varrin?”

The others looked around as well but came up short. I decided to use an aura trick I hadn’t pulled out in a while and focused on my allies. With focus, I could get a general sense of where anyone in my party was and even see their surroundings to a limited degree.

As I worked on finding Varrin, the big guy’s health dropped by a fifth on my interface. I swore and quickly got his approximate location, then went to view his surroundings.

All I saw around him was dark, endless water.