

93. *The King*

My relationship with my home country was complicated.

I was raised with all of the nationalism you'd expect a country to try and instill. My indoctrination was instigated by the mighty warships of the navy – Antarus' navy being its main strength – since they were the most glorious thing on the waves a youth could see. My patriotic spirit was tempered by the treatment of my mother and I by the nobility – I'd carried a chip on my shoulder regarding positional authority for years. I still did, if I was being completely transparent.

That was all before I'd been cursed, hunted down, destroyed multiple ships from their proud navy and killed my own father who'd been a promising admiral.

Now I had the ruling monarch using blood magic to try and have a discussion with me via the girl I fancied.

Bloody hell, these were strange times.

The vampire I'd engaged in mental combat – forget what he said about just delivering a message, he'd have tried to get what he wanted by dominating me – forced his way out of Tadra. I quickly followed back to my ship lurking about 20 fathoms under the surface. Hali regarded everyone surrounding her with her foreign, crimson eyes before inhaling deeply and freezing. Her body became so still I glanced at Drese to ask if he'd forced a stasis spell somehow.

The stillness suddenly ended as Hali jerked and stumbled, flailing her arms out for balance and making us all jump and ready spells or weapons. She teetered and remained upright. Her violent motion had flipped some of her short hair into her face. She tried to swipe it away but smacked her own face with her hand instead. She growled under her breath.

The sound was distinctly unnerving.

Slowly and deliberately Hali stood and regained her poise. Her hair was removed from her face and she stood straight-backed with shoulders squared. I'd seen Hali revert to such proper posture on occasion, like the lady she'd been trained to emulate, but her identities were usually tied to more relaxed or slovenly personas. Now she stood like a queen.

Or a king, I suppose.

“Captain Seaborn,” the Hali said with her feminine voice but unique intonation. “I am king Jovan using Desdemona as my mouthpiece to you. There are matters I wish to discuss.”

I forced my mind into pushing past the sense I was speaking with Hali and instead with someone completely different; someone I considered an enemy most days. I also forced myself past the unprofitable questions or statements that wouldn't do any good but show my uncultured roots: things like ‘using blood magic to puppet a trusted friend was a bad way to get my attention.’

“I hope that by talking like this we can part under more agreeable circumstances than I did with your proxies.”

I thought that was clever; politely agree that I didn't want Hali harmed but remind him I'd killed the nobility he'd had captaining the vessels I'd previously fought with.

On second thoughts, maybe that wasn't the right move. Oh bother, if Hali wasn't being puppeted she'd roll her eyes at me right now.

If king Jovan took umbrage at my insinuation, he didn't show it on Hali's face. “I wish to make a deal with you.”

“I am more than willing to negotiate!” I said with a false smile. “I am sure you're aware of the terms I have for non-aggression on the seas?”

“I know your ultimatum,” he said a touch impatiently, irked that I had the power to make an ultimatum to him. “However, I wish to make a deal with you of an entirely different sort.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “I've developed an aversion to hostage deals. Tell me why I should make a special arrangement with you.”

“I've had a list drawn up to answer that question,” he replied, and his eyes went slightly out of focus as though he could read the list from a system message. “It has two columns: the first says ‘carrot’ and the second says ‘stick’. The ‘carrot’ options have a wide range I am willing to negotiate, from amnesty to supplies of goods.”

I couldn't help my eyes widening in surprise a bit. I'd led my crew into a position where we didn't need Antarus for a single thing. I still had to admit ... those would be pretty good carrots if I was more homeward-minded. To offer amnesty? I was pretty sure I'd earned a laundry list of capitol offenses, so to make a blank slate from my record cost political capital. And offering supplies? That wasn't just outfitting my ships, that was tacit support of me and anything I did. He'd make enemies out of lots of his allies.

I remained silent, since that was one of the best ways not to mess something up or overplay your hand. After several moments, king Jovan continued.

“For the ‘sticks’ I have several items here, some of which likely would mean nothing to you. You flaunted the might of our navy when it was stronger than it was now, so I don't expect that to frighten you.” She – he, dang it, I was talking to the king even if it was Hali here and it kept confusing me – looked at me as though to judge whether their words were true.

I was prioritizing monsters as a common plague on the world and didn't want to undermine people's future on the seas, but I had no personal qualm about sinking more navy ships so he was right about that. The fact seemed to weigh on him.

“As uninspired as threatening you with my navy was, there are some threats that even I would regret carrying out, though I deem it necessary. The blessing you gave your mother before obtaining your curse has made her a dear to all who've spoken with her. Carrying out any threats against her would ultimately grieve us both.”

I loved my mother, for all that I'd seen her a week out of every year since I first took to sea. When my identity had been exposed to the world, I'd honestly been surprised to discover that she hadn't been harmed already, the blessing I'd given her unintentionally covering for the grief I might have caused her. I knew her blessing was a flimsy defense. I knew I could offer her no better protection. For that reason, I'd accepted that I'd never see her again and thought I ought to consider her as already dead to me.

I discovered now that having made my peace with our separation felt vastly different from causing her pain or death.

"That's an effective stick to threaten me with," I said, folding my hands behind my back and letting my teeth show a shark's smile. "In case our discussion is cut short, I feel I ought to return the favor: I would make sure that you and I are not alone in our grief. Every Antaran with a man at sea would come to mourn her passing."

"I understand you; and we need not devolve into threatening each ..."

"That's exactly what we're doing." I snapped, feeling a rush at having interrupted a king. "We're threatening each other as a start to negotiations so we take each other seriously. Now alright, you have my attention, what's this bargain you wish to strike?"

"I wish for the complete cessation of hostilities between us; safe passage from Antarus to the mainland for several hundred individuals; for you to act as an intermediary in truce talks with the non-human alliance; and the option of hiring you as a defensive measure against future enemies."

Slice and dice me with fishguts and bury me in wooden armor, where did those requests come from?

I was flabbergasted. As I closed my open mouth it occurred to me that the king had deliberately shocked me as a punishment for interrupting him. Maybe I was reading into this too much ... more likely I wasn't reading into things enough.

"Why in the world would you try to make an ally of me now?" I probably should have stopped and considered my response for a minute, but my question was the one thing my mind could focus on.

"Since your ascension, my court has contained a minority that believe you to be a benign or even useful force. Initially, those among our confederacy agreed that your threat was too great and attempted to cull you. Given how things have played out, that seems to have been a mistake."

I avoided voicing any smart remarks. A king was humbling himself enough to admit a mistake, why interrupt?

"Several weeks ago I ordered our navy not to pursue you under any circumstances, and to surrender if attacked."

I mentally calculated when the last time I'd attacked a ship from Antarus. I hadn't attacked any vessels since the ocean increased its difficulty. It was before my fight with Jones. Before that ... hmm.

I was rather pleased that I could say in good faith that I hadn't attacked any ships from the Antaran navy since this order went out. It would have looked bad if people had been trying to argue my merits and I'd sabotaged them.

King Jovan didn't look too pleased to hear my assessment. When I pushed him on it, he said "we'd been estimating that a percentage of the ships we've been losing have been because of you. If what you tell me is true, then the danger from monsters is even greater than we thought, and I can't rationalize with them."

Yeah, that was terrible. I was very curious just what 'percentage' meant in numbers lost – I did want future generations to have a chance at sailing the seas – but judged that asking would be impolitic since we hadn't officially agreed to non-aggression yet.

The king returned to an explanation of his reasons. "We've seen a nearly equal loss of ships since the ocean's message regarding danger as we did the entire war with the alliance. Our island's defense is in its naval superiority. If it's only a matter of years before our navy is gone, we need to examine alternatives with urgency. Among our options is a truce with the alliance. Given the state of the ocean and breaking of diplomatic ties, having truce talks is virtually impossible. You are their ally. You could be the bridge that lets that happen."

If he could get the Madu and Tarish to stop sinking ships, he could try and consolidate his forces and outfit them against monsters instead. Trying to supply a ship to fight everything on the sea wasn't optimal. Refitting was a good idea.

"Does the rest of the confederacy share your desires?" Could the war really be coming to a close just like that?

"The rest of the confederacy has *land*." King Jovan said. "They can quit the seas entirely and still continue their war for decades."

So much for peace.

"I believe I am understanding the picture. Two remaining points: the first being why you wish to retain my services?"

"I expect our attempt to withdraw from the war to not be well received by various groups. There will be non-humans with a grudge or fellow confederates who see us as traitors. You have proven your threat and would be an effective deterrent. If you prefer not to be on retainer, I expect hiring your services to last no more than one or two demonstrations."

The small hope I had that he was hoping to use me as a training aid to condition sailors to the high seas died. I didn't comment on my willingness – or lack thereof – to be his hired protection.

“That brings me to my last point of interest prior to beginning negotiations ...” I pointed at Hali. “Your use of blood magic on Desdemona.” Hali hated her given name.

“Desdemona was sworn to serve the crown in the most binding of ways. After she was tried for treason ... I’ll admit she was lost in the bureaucracy. She suffered in ways that weren’t intended. When her situation was brought to light, I saw an opportunity for her to serve in one last regard; in this way she would also get the life she betrayed her country for, no? She covered clues of your existence for you and after this she will be able to remain with your crew.”

His words caused my face to flush even as I understood his cold arithmetic. He was a king, and pawns were tools. His bureaucracy – the number of people ‘just doing their jobs’ – had caused all the pain that that made Hali sweat and cry at night.

I didn’t need to forgive him for that. I just needed to decide if I was willing to deal with him. To facilitate at least one nation backing out of the war? I’d do it.

Just one last point ...

“Desdemona didn’t commit treason.” I said. “She didn’t hide me deliberately. She’s never joined my crew. You threw away someone who never betrayed you.”

The king didn’t show much expression at my words, which made the disconnect between talking at Hali’s face and her king that much more difficult.

“I would say,” king Jovan said finally, “That to both Desdemona and the court that found her guilty, there’s no change possible now.”

And Hali wouldn’t have wanted to go back. I hadn’t been trying to convince him of that, just ... trying to spite him, I guess. Throw a failure in his face and make him own it. But he’d already owned his mistake as much as his dignity – or his position – would allow him.

“Will she remain unharmed after this?”

“I’m told the effects of blood magic can be disconcerting, but we will leave her as she was. She shouldn’t suffer any more.”

“Then let’s get down to the brass tacks ...”

When it came time to start negotiating, I first put a hold on our conversation to consult with my advisors after Will fetched the rest. They all said the same thing: don’t trust implicitly and make an arrangement that was mutually beneficial. Marcus was still leery of the blood magic aspect. Drese reiterated that the blood mages peacefully relinquishing control over Hali was the only way to free her without harm. He didn’t comment on the potential truce, saying he was biased and the matriarchs should have the discussion as was their role.

I drove the negotiations after that but had my officers at hand, freely adding their input. I thought it might annoy king Jovan but he ... well, he acted kingly. He spoke smoothly and calmly. I often found a layered meaning in his words. I didn’t know what skills he had that

could be influenced through Hali's body, but at the very least a lifetime of experience made him a skilled diplomat.

After discussing the broad strokes, I put a pause on the deal.

"We will have to consult with Desdemona about these plans."

He frowned. "It would be best to resolve our arrangement before breaking contact. We can release her without harm, as promised, but this is not a trifling matter and I cannot speak for continued control."

Marcus leaned over to me but didn't whisper. "Drese mentioned the runes were etched in her bones – they can possess or puppet her whenever they like – the only damage they'd need to cause would be whatever they inflicted to express their annoyance."

"Repeated possession would place a toll on the Miss," Drese cautioned in a faux counter argument. "I'd say she should have at least a day of rest before another ritual."

King Jovan said nothing in rebuttal. I appreciated how my magic experts set up the situation so that if any harm did come to Hali, it would look like bad faith on king Jovan's part. Any motivation to keep Hali unharmed was to the good.

"She is the only one amongst us who could even pretend to claim the title of diplomat," I said to the king, appreciating that Drese didn't react given that he was essentially the Madu's diplomat to me. "I'm certain our conversation has showed you my lack of diplomatic experience. We will discuss the arrangement with her and – if you're agreeable – you have my permission to ... contact us again through her in a day." I didn't like agreeing to let Hali be used this way, but it was our only means of communicating with the king and it wasn't like we could stop them from using her anyway.

The king considered for a moment before accepting the arrangement. He bade us goodbye, put one of Hali's hands behind his straight back ... and collapsed to the floor like a marionette with cut strings.

I rushed to her side, turning her over by the time Marcus's barked warning reached my ears, but there was no threat. Whatever blood mage had been maintaining the spell had removed their influence, leaving an insensate Hali to collapse. A gesture that was rude enough to likely be deliberate but not harmful. I was willing to give the king the benefit of the doubt but not the vampire.

I held Hali's head in my lap as she moaned and shifted her limbs. "Shh, it's okay, you're sa..."

I cut off my reassurances as she abruptly held a finger up in the universal 'wait' signal. After a minute her eyes fluttered open only to be immediately closed again. She groaned and stiffly rolled over onto her hands and knees.

"Someone get a bucket?" she said. "On the off-chance I heave my guts out?"

I nodded to the madu boy who'd been lingering alongside the bulkhead, and he took off like a shot. The promised bucket was unneeded as Hali got her bearings and kept her stomach, but said she felt like she had a hangover.

Seeing no reason to keep things in the middle of the deck surrounded by hammocks, I led us to the officer's mess and had Jack see to getting the crew sorted out and settled down. I don't doubt we'd been eavesdropped on but would wait until the morning after we had a better picture to address them and what had happened.

Hali had no recollection of what had happened while her body was being used, which I'd both hoped for and feared. On one hand it would be a terrible thing to experience. On the other she would have heard everything and been able to parse through our negotiations much better than having them relayed through our account and the notes Will had been taking.

I tried to tell her how it happened but she stopped me and treated it like an interview, making me go back to the moment I'd woken up with the sense something was wrong. When I got to the part where king Jovan possessed her body, her lips pinched but she stopped me again and had everyone else go through the same thing from their points of view.

It took a lot longer for the whole story to come out but when it did, I'll admit she had a much better view of the whole thing than even I'd had when I started briefing her.

She wasn't happy.

That was understandable.

She didn't like that she'd been possessed, that she had so little control over what happened in the future, and that I'd agreed to let it happen again tomorrow. She liked king Jovan's motivations and excuses even less.

"He said I was 'lost in the bureaucracy?' That he 'didn't intend' for me to be tortured?"

"Yes."

She cursed. "That bastard. The king directly oversees a treason trial of a sworn servant. He was there for it all and the judgement requires his signature!"

"Could the extent of your mistreatment have been beyond his judgement?" Drese asked.

"Not bloody likely!" She laughed mirthlessly. "They were all mad at me. Most of them because they thought I was covering up for you," she said waving at me. "And the rest because the files he exposed," a wave at Jack; "made me look incompetent. They wanted my blood and Jovan handed it to them. When it was done, he shipped me off to Andros for them to have their turn as an apology. Or as it turns out, as a hidden lure for Captain Seaborn."

"They baited us with you and Marcus," I said. "We found you, and thought Marcus was a coincidence."

“We’d wondered what they would have done if we’d attacked in the day.” Gnar added. “They had vampires ready for us at night, but we would have given them a good smack-down with the sun above us. Hali’s engraved bones were their daylight backup.”

“About those vampires,” Hali said. “There’s some relevant history there everyone should be aware of.”

I nodded. “Go on.”

“Long, *long* story very short, the vampires and humans on Antarus were in conflict several hundred years ago. That changed when a human leader helped a vampire and placed them in their debt. Said vampire became the leader of their sect and allying themselves with the humans were able to take control of the other vampiric sects on the island. Naturally, with a host of vampires on their side, that human family had an edge cementing their control over their own fellow humans.

“Skipping the story along to present day, those vampires are still constrained by their debts – which monarchs throughout the years have carefully maintained and added to if possible – but the vampires no longer wish to be constrained. The rules restricting their numbers, power, servants ... they want to be done with it all. The court sees a free vampire population on Antarus akin to letting a fox into a henhouse. Only this war has gotten them just as spooked.

“Domenic, you made the king use a favor when he had those vampires ambush you on this ship. He probably didn’t have to pay it since they failed, but now he’s gone to them again. How many human blood mages are there who could do what’s been done to me? None! He went to the vamps again for this. His whole ‘send several hundred people to the mainland to search for answers’ spiel? Yeah, he’s relocating court to rule Antarus from exile. That *might* just be because he’s terrified ocean monsters will cut Antarus and its needed imports off from the rest of the known world, but I’ll bet he’s also getting himself out of the country before the vampires slip their leash and take his head because he’d held it!”

“Wow,” Marcus voiced all our thoughts.

“No kidding,” Gnar muttered.

“I grew up on Antarus,” I said. “I never heard anything close to that story.”

“It’s tightly kept under wraps,” Hali said. “The monarchy didn’t want the population in fear that vampires were going to feed on them, but it didn’t want to paint them as a positive thing either because trust me, the vamps would use that to their advantage. So they discourage talk about it and have erased records of it from the publicly accessible libraries.”

I muttered a curse under my breath, not really in anger but because I was amazed at the scope of it all. And this was the bread-and-butter life of secrets and intrigue nobles had.

“And your thoughts on Antarus pulling out of the war?”

“If they stay in this war, we – they – will lose one way or the other. They were winning against Nilfheim because they ganged up on them with Oorkom, the dwarves stayed in their

mountains, and Makam kept the elves busy. The sea claiming *everyone's* ships is taking away their advantage. If they killed every Madu in Nilfheim tomorrow, they wouldn't even be able to carry off the plunder reliably! It would all wind up in Oorkom's hands or the bottom of the sea."

"Lose/lose situation," Gnar agreed.

"Lose/lose/lose," Hali said. "Even if they stuck it out hoping to siphon out wealth over time through Oorkom as their ally, they can't afford to lose more ships. Makam took over Andros' fleet when their kid king handed the state over. Since then they've been dumping platinum into expanding it. Some not-to-subtle hints have been put out there that Makam considers itself an empire over the other human nations in the confederacy too. Antarus would lose its sovereignty if they weakened themselves too much."

"If Makam is so intent on taking over the other humans," Gnar asked. "How's the confederacy survived to now?"

Hali shrugged. "Beats me? Momentum? The fact they stuck their unmentionables in a beehive when they galvanized the rest of the world against them?"

Gnar snorted. "We could sit back and watch the human's ambitions turn to dust in their hands."

"Only the smaller nations," I said. "Makam would have all their dreams come true: dominion over the humans and weakened enemies." We all stewed on that for a moment. "Why does that sit so much worse with me when they haven't treated me any different than anyone else?"

"Your dislike of arrogance?" Drese suggested.

"I'm arrogant!" I exclaimed. "Every Captain who claims he can lead men on the sea, that they should listen to him and he'll bring them home from the waves has some arrogance in them. Makam could do a lot of good if they play their cards right. Satisfy their expansion with the human territories. Pump all those resources they've got into building and training a navy and trade ships that can handle the increased threats of these oceans. And yet it rubs me wrong that they get what they want."

There was silence around the table. It was Hali that eventually spoke up.

"You're stepping into questions of the 'greater good' on the same scale as kings and emperors. One thing I've always appreciated about you was that you're pragmatic with a heart. Balance your conscience however you can – I'm done with looking after big scale interests myself. I'll follow you on this. I think," she gestured around the room. "I speak for all of us in that."

"I don't know about the 'not looking big' part," Gnar said, "But I'm certainly with you for life, Captain."

I looked at my orcish lieutenant with surprise. "You don't have plans to go raise a fleet for Bandarn?"

“Eh,” he waved his hands like he was measuring something. “Maybe I do, maybe I don’t. Don’t like the thought of having to do the seamanship half of our shtick without you. Even if I do split off though, I’m still your war chief.”

I was truly touched by the sentiment, and the support I got from the others. I didn’t hold any illusions that they’d all stay on with me for eternity, but ... stars, my eyes were getting a little watery.

“Gratitude,” I said, my voice a little gruffer and fooling nobody. “Now, back to task: what should we do about king Jovan’s deal now that these things have come to light?”

Hali sighed and threw her head back to stare overhead. “You should agree and facilitate the peace talks, of course.”

“You’re fine with that?” I said. “Just like that, ignore what he’s done and agree?”

“So much for ignoring the big-picture,” Gnar joked.

“You’re not going to let the Alliance continue fighting Antarus just to spite king Jovan,” Hali said. “But since you’ve got him by the balls, you might as well start brainstorming a wish list of things you want ...”

In the end our wish list wasn’t too extravagant, and king Jovan didn’t find it unpalatable. We struck our bargain, the only hiccup being that I refused to proceed to Antarus directly.

“We have a measure of trust between us, but I won’t run straight to your harbor. I have an errand to run first. I will be signaling your shores before a trade ship could manage the distance, mark my words on that.”

“An errand?” the king required, obviously peeved but managing not to sound like it.

“A long overdue one,” I said. “It’s time I went back to where it all started.”

With Jack’s help, I’d pinpointed exactly where the *Wind Runner* had sunk. We’d been navigating there before the monarch interrupted us. Our course hadn’t changed, only our destination afterwards.

The old galleon had gone down in Lazlo’s Deep, known for its monsters even before the ocean got more dangerous. My arrangement with Davy Jones had allowed me passage into his depths twice in exchange for his passage into my waters. My first exploration had been to recover the *Raven*. This second would be to recover the last ship the *Raven* had killed.

I suppose I technically held that dubious honor.

Like our search for the *Raven*, finding the *Wind Runner* wasn't as easy as showing up at the most likely spot. Wrecks drifted. In these circumstances, the drifting would be on the way down, as the depths were remarkably still.

Two days we searched, every spare hand on lookout. My nerves began to make me jittery. When we found her, it was like the scene from a fairytale story: she rested upright between the fingers of a mountaintop, her tattered rigging still held, her surviving sails draped from the spars into the black waters. The gaping hole in her keel captured the picture of her last scream as she'd sank.

I looked upon her with a bundle of emotions squirming around in my chest. The emotions of the last day I'd seen her; the adrenaline of waking to an attack, the fear of death, the thrill of evading it, the shock and sorrow as my fellow crew fell around me. Spite and vindictiveness at seeing passengers safely into the boats away from the attack. Defiance as I fought against the odds and determined to take the ship down with me.

Anguish as my notifications alerted me that my trap had the unintended consequence of killing Redmund as he'd hidden from the pirates.

Now I felt my nervousness as I was so close. Could I raise the cabin boy as my crew and ease my guilty conscience? Would his spirit be tied to the ship at all, or would it have fled to whatever home he'd grown up in?

I glanced at Jack to try and read his own emotions at seeing the galleon again. He didn't seem to be having nearly the mix that I was – more like he was anxious how the sight of the old ship and memories of his attack and my subsequent treatment might affect my disposition towards him.

We'd already had that conversation. I was past that.

When I'd been practicing raising ships outside Tulisang, I'd always done so alone. No longer. Now I left the ship flanked by Gnar and his team of elites. They sensed the gravitas of the moment and didn't speak more than necessary.

It was necessary as a monstrous moray variant had decided it liked to treat the bilges as its den and poke its head out the hole I'd blasted.

I'd faced a much weaker moray aboard the wreck of the *Galaxy* shortly after I'd gotten my class. At that time, I'd been happy to escape the creature. Now I hung back and shot a few crossbow bolts at it while my defensive detail thoroughly dismantled it, dragging the corpse out of the hold before scanning the ship for other threats.

I swam past the crates of treasure that had gone down with the ship, up to the deck where I believed Redmund had hidden. There was debris, some silt and marine growth, but in these relatively undisturbed depths the space was remarkably the same.

I knelt and activated *Raise Crew*. The list of available crew to raise appeared before me.

I wept tears into the salty sea.

Mana flowed from me to construct a vessel for the spirit I was summoning; the smallest form I'd yet created. It sucked in a breath of water, then his eyes fluttered open.

“Domenic?” Redmund said. “What’s going on?”

“Welcome back, kid,” I said, my voice hoarse. “It’s been too long.”