

“Tie it off!” the man screamed over the howl of the storm. “Tie the damned thing off, now!”

“I can’t, Athelos! She’s breaking! She’s breaking!”

Right before his eyes, the foremast snapped like a twig against the ocean wind, swinging wide and knocking a dozen overboard as it cracked against the mainsail and dragged itself and its rigging into the black abyss. As soon as it was under, the drag of the fallen sail against the water turned the whole ship on a hard ninety degrees against the waves.

“She’ll pull us under, sir! The whole ship’s going down!”

Ignoring the words of his underling, Athelos Mar ran like a madman across the deck, sliding sideways when a wall of water beat against his back and legs. Pulling the knife from his clenched teeth, he hacked furiously at the knot of ropes that threatened to kill the last of his people. The cord snapped. ‘Finally!’ And he turned to see the results of his work. But what he witnessed surprised him.

Several others were leading the rest of the people into the lower decks to safety. When they were finished, they looked to their captain, all of them bearing faces of shock and dismay. Athelos turned his eyes forward to see a fist of the ocean come against him alone. Thirty feet tall and as wide as the eye could see, he stood still and silent in awe of its might.

The wave hit the mainsail first, flicking it, like a finger flicks a card, into the body of Athelos Mar. At the same time, the rope he’d cut finished unwinding, catching his ankle and jerking him through the railing and off the ship as the mast broke itself upon him. Pulled by tidal drag and the sheer weight of both masts, the human man was quickly flung into the crushing depths, into everlasting darkness.

He opened his eyes. It was bright out. He was back in Hildemar, the capital of Albus. Home.

No. It wasn’t home. Not anymore.

He looked out over the city as it burned, watching as his people were slaughtered left and right by the invading army, their bodies cast into the forever deep to be consumed by its beasts. It was an image that would forever be ingrained in his mind exactly like that- Hildemar burning- and he knew that he could never hope to return to that place. He’d led his people away on a simple cargo ship along with several others that fled. They were to go east, but were cast north in the storm. They were directionless and alone, and here he was dying at the bottom of the sea.

It was silent. He couldn’t hear the groaning of the wood. There was no distant sound of storm. Nor did the bubbles from his mouth make a sound. He felt like.... like he had died.

He opened his eyes, for real this time, and saw what was before him. There in the darkness was a light, a small, blue light that flickered like a dimming bulb. He almost believed death was playing tricks on him, but the light grew and grew until it swelled into something much greater. He felt the water move against him as that luminescent blue took form. It wrapped upon itself and undulated, bending

and bowing as it became defined. From that darkness and the cold, cerulean light, the face of an azure serpent too enormous to describe leaned toward him.

So infinitely vast was the beast that, though it was several hundred feet away, Athelos felt like he could reach out and touch it. Even greater was its body, large enough that its thousand-meter head seemed small by comparison. The human was frozen, unspeaking. Terrified by the creature that loomed before him; he dared not say a word. The beast didn't move, but words emitted from it in the deepest voice Athelos had ever imagined.

"You.... fear me.... human. You should not.... do so."

"What- What are you?"

"I am that I am. I am one who has been.... since before the dawn of the oceans. I have watched over.... all creatures that have ever been in its depths.... and all that shall ever be. I have.... many names. Kraken.... Ozumat.... And your kind calls me.... Levitan. I have come to you.... Athelos Mar, because your destiny.... is not here in this place. There is much.... for you yet to do."

"My destiny? You know my fate?"

"I know many things. You must rise up from these waters, young human.... and lead your people to a new world. They will be safe. They will be cared for. And you shall be.... their father and protector."

Athelos shook his head in the water, still surprised that he somehow hadn't drowned.

"You've got the wrong man, Levitan. I'm only a fisherman. I have no status and know nothing of leading people. Surely there is someone else who--"

"I AM ONE WHO HAS SEEN!" The tiny human was flung into a backflip from the outburst. The water vibrated as the creature's eyes glowed red. "WERE YOU NOT THE ONE, SURELY I WOULD NEVER HAVE PRESENTED MYSELF. DO NOT DOUBT THAT WHICH IS BEYOND YOUR COMPREHENSION, MORTAL." It took a moment to calm as its eyes returned to soft blue.

"Fear not about your power.... for it will not be your power.... that leads them. You will be one who is master of your kind. And you shall be revered for all time. Now go.... tiny human. Go, and tell no one that you spoke to me.... for you will not be believed."

Levitan emitted another force of will, breaking the mast and rigging into splinters and dust around the man and pushing him like a bullet toward the surface. Just as light began to filter through the depths, he blacked out.

"Hey. Heeeeyyyy." A hand lightly slapped his cheek. The waves beat against his salt-crusted legs. He twitched.

"We've got one. Hey, Barbus, we've got one!"

“He’s alive?!”

“Barely. Quick, let’s get him to the village.”

His eyelids slowly peeled open. Light filtered into his shrinking pupils and he pressed his finger and thumb together hard, just to make sure he was truly alive. He was, at least enough to fool himself. Rubbing his eyes, he looked to the room around him.

It was a ship, or pieces of one, at least. Whomever had survived had built a makeshift hut out of a cook’s cabin turned on its side. When he hobbled his way out of the room, he saw that the rest of the area around was just the same. Apparently, several ships had made it to shore and all of them in wretched shape. The people had banded, though, carving squalid conditions for themselves on whatever new land this was.

From the short beach behind him, the wilderness went up at a sharp angle into cliffs and peaks and rocky outcroppings. Like a giant it bore over him, ancient and rugged. He took the corner of the jerkin he was wearing and wiped the grime from his face, looking up at he jagged stone in awe. A pair of men came up behind him.

“Sir? Is it you?” Athelos turned on his heel. “By the gods, it is! We thought you had died, sir.”

“It’s alright. I thought I was dead, too. Why call me sir, though?”

Both men looked downcast. “Well, sir. The governor died. The captain died. The first mate died. The blacksmith, the tanner, the butcher, everyone’s dead; and of all of us who remain, you were the only one who knew how to pilot the ship. After you went over, we were on our own with neither direction nor hope, but for the memory of the strength you displayed when we had to flee Hildemar.”

The other spoke. “We lost nearly everyone else thereafter to hunger and disease, but we found others when we landed. We’ve got about four-hundred from eleven different ships.”

Athelos shook his head. “Four-hundred.... out of thousands....”

“There may be more scattered along the shore. We’re only at the peak of this land. It just keeps going upward and onward forever. We sent scouts, and they say that the land stretches for tens of miles. If nothing else, we can always find more survivors when we go further inland.”

“Yes. With these coastal cliffs, the threat of the sea is too great, and we may have been followed.” He put a hand on one of their shoulders. “Have the people gather everything they can carry and rally to me. We shall find a suitable location on this rock and settle in. With winter approaching, we would do well to secure a more permanent settlement than this.”

The men agreed and bowed themselves out. Within hours, everyone was gathered to the new young master. He’d never been one for speeches, but he tried his best.

“Everyone.... The wilderness is tough, but we survived the siege of Hildemar. The wilderness is tough, but the sea could not break us. The wilderness is tough, but we are watched over by something much greater than this rock, something divine. We shall go forth. We shall make our way. We shall survive!”

So little was their strength that, though many clapped a bit, almost none were able to cheer. He bowed before them and turned to face the mountains.

They say the hardest step on a journey is always the first. That wasn't true in the case of Athelos Mar. There would be many difficult steps on the road to reclaiming some amount of their lost humanity, but he and his people, cast to the winds of the world, would indeed press on and persevere.

In the heart of their new wilderness, they settled on a massive, stony hill surrounded by forest and mountains on all sides. They called their new city “Kourr”, the Alemanth word for “rock”. In time, their influence would spread to cover the rest of this small peninsula that stabbed into the sea like a knife. When they did, they came and met their chieftain as he lay on his deathbed.

The chieftain's housecarl adjusted his collar.

“Lord Athelos, the crowds have come to you, and the lesser lords are at your side. Now that we've conquered the whole of the rock, we believe we've decided on a name.”

Having no strength to speak, Athelos Mar nodded to the man, bidding him to go on.

“Without you, we wouldn't have had the strength to found this place, the wisdom to grow it, or the tenacity to hold it. In honor of you, we wish to name this land in your memory.” He unravels a scroll. “It is by this proclamation that we, the people of this new and wild land, shall henceforth call this place in honor of our lord, Athelos Mar. It shall be “The Rock of Mar”, in our native language, “Kourmar”. Does this please you, lordship?”

Athelos laughed, which amounted to little more than hacking and wheezing. When his chest stopped heaving, he smiled at those gathered around him. “Heh, Kourmar.... Kour-mar...” And the last of his breath escaped him.

And so it came to pass, the founding of Kourmar, and there would be no other land in all of Illyria like it. In all the years of its continuous existence from one empire to the next, Kourmar remained alone, unclaimed by any other. Always only Kourmar.