

Shadow of the Storm

By Westley Braswell

Heaven's arrow pierced the sky as a bolt of lightning struck down from the storm onto the mast of *The Scarlett Wave*. The voice of the gods rang out across the sea, joining the chorus of cannon fire, steel blades, and the cries of the commanders as they conduct the whole bloody symphony. Aboard the deck of *The Scarlett Wave*, Arnorian Red's clashed with a Solisian Navy boarding party. While the Solisians advanced on the deck in relative silence, the Red's whooped and hollered with an assortment of shanties and curses. Even as some laid aboard the deck, mortal wounds clutched tight as their blood mixed with the rainwater to make the deck slick with crimson, the words of Redbeard's Revenge were on their lips.

One of those wounded, Viviroux, crawled across the deck and pulled herself to sit up against the side rail. One of her long ears had been cut, and as the Faefolk elf closed her eyes to embrace the stars, she muttered, "And Redbeard was... enraged..." She was caught off, though, by a stream of light. Sisila leaned beside her, a warm smile on her face despite the bitter cold and torrent of rain.

"There's no giving up now, young lady. Cleaning you off the deck wouldn't be good for their spirits, now, would it?" Sisila said.

Viviroux smiled back and pushed a bloody mat of her pink hair out of her face. "I guess not. Sisila, where's the capta-" she said, but a scream cut her off. Both their heads snapped to the side to see El-barajja hit the deck. He crawled backwards to the stairs of the aft-deck, one arm favored. Sisila saw the wound Frekit; he had caught a gunshot to the shoulder, and his right arm seemed limp. A Varl in Solisian plate advanced on him, axe in hand. El-barajja tried, but as he pulled with what strength he had, his other arm caved, and he collapsed on the stairs. He turned onto his back just in time to see the varl tower above him, a mountain of steel and muscle, lift his axe and ready his finger on the trigger.

"Ge' off me fuckin' ship," a voice called out from the top of the stairs. The Solisian varl lived long enough to see both barrels of the gun pointed at his face. Right before both his eyes were turned into craters, and he fell back onto the deck with a crash that could have been mistaken for thunder. The Red's

and Solisians turned to the aft deck. Freki stood at the top of the stairs, The hand cannon known as Stormbluff held in hand and a wicked grin hidden behind the dip off her tricorne. She strode down the stairs, careful to step around El-barajja as she holstered the weapon on her hip.

The Solisians all readied their blades as the Red's retreated to positions behind their captain. Freki was soaked from tricorne to hakama from waves broken over the bow and the tears of the storm, but she flexed herself into a low stance with no resistance and wrapped her fingers around the hilt of her katana-saber. The imperial's tensed, their officer taking the front of their wedge with his meinz sword outstretched. It was impossible to tell behind the mask if the shake in his hand was from the storm's waves, or his own nerves.

"Charge!" the Solisian officer called out. The remaining Solisians rushed forward in their phalanx position, as the Red's prepared to meet the clash head-on.

The lightning struck once more, and before the light had faded, Freki's blade was out as she cut two strokes along the lines of the Solisian phalanx. They were all dead on the deck before the roar of the thunder reached the ship.

"Well now tha's been deal' wit'," Freki sheathed her blade and looked to a young catta sporting his own stylish tricorne, "Kehda, ge' up on the crows nes' and make sure they don' sneak up on us again."

Kehda gave Freki the Red's salute. "Aye, captain!" he said, then bounced up the aft-deck stairs and climbed the ropes with his nimble claws. Freki turned to a human woman in an officer's jacket. "Ellice, see to the wounded. Looks like Viviroux's down for the nigh'." Ellice saluted, and ran back across the deck to the door to the hold.

"Alright you lot, gather up wounded and dead and bring them inside! I'll see to them myself!" The Red's all shouted back, "Yes, Lieutenant," as they got to work.

"And get these damn steel-rats off of me ship!" Freki laughed to the crew. "Let the sea 'ave them, cause I sure as shi'e don' wan' 'em!"

The crew buzzed around them as Freki kneeled beside Sisila and Viviroux. She grabbed ahold of one of Viviroux's arms, put it across her shoulders, and helped her stand up. Sisila moved to support the other side; though much shorter than either of the two, Sisila kept a healing hand on Viviroux's wound.

"Well, lass, I 'ope it was everythin' ye though' I'd be," Freki said, loud enough to be heard over the storm's chorus.

"I'll admit, it's a fair bit scrappier than I imagined! Next time I'll remember to bring earmuffs, too!" Sisila's cat-ears wiggled. "It's loud and freezing!"

Freki laughed as they handed Viviroux off to several Red's, who finished escorting her to the hold. "Aye, lass, I am too! Feels grea', doesn' it?"

"You have a strange idea of great, my friend!"

"Captain!" Kehda called to Freki through her ring-ear. "Solisian Striker is moving against the flagship, aft-side! I don't think they've spotted it!"

Freki looked to the north and ran up the bow of the ship to step onto the rail. She saw the flagship engaged with two Solisian warships. Her gaze turned east and, sure as his word, a small interceptor ship was moving at flank speed. Unlike the other Solisian ships, however, its metal engine breathed out no signs of smoke or exhaust.

"Sneaky fuckin' bastards," Freki said, and reached up to touch her linkpearl. "Scarlett to Flagship, this is Captain Kvennalid! Solisian interceptor is approachin' ye aft side! Repeat, Solisian interceptor, aft-side, movin' to flank!"

The line turned static. The Marshal's voice could be heard in broken fragments on the other end. "Kvenna-...repeat...We'r-...'eavy fire...-" was all that was heard before the line went dead.

"Godsdamned Solisian magics!" Freki eyed the distance between the interceptor and the flagship, then turned to look up at her own sails. "Righ' then," she said, and took ahold of the rope as she spun to face the deck.

"We're movin' to intercept the striker! Full sails, flank speed!" Freki turned to a Varl in red plate. "Kettilmund, ge' El-barajja to ready the cannons for a spell-volley. starboard side. If 'is arms no' gonna

be able to ‘andle it, tell Ceecill to do ‘er bes’.” Kettilmundsaluted and strode to the hold doors. Freki looked to the helm and the Human at the wheel. “Ellice, make way for the flagship, now!” Ellice nodded, and spun the wheel around. A gust of wind from the storm threatened to spin it out of control, but her iron grip and strength of core kept them on course.

Freki stepped down from the rail and stood beside Sisila on the bow. “We’re gonna ‘ave to catch the interceptor’s volley and return fire with our own.”

Sisila looked at Freki, puzzled. “Why not just fire on the interceptor now?”

“I’s movin’ too fas’, we’ll never ge’ the angle righ’ in this storm for a clean shot. And a’ this angle now, we’re likely to catch the flagship with the volley, too.”

Sisila nodded. “Ah. Although at this distance, I’m not sure how much damage our guns would do to the Admirals vessel.”

“Mayhaps, bu’ tha’s a risk I won’ take. Besides, if we do miss, I’ll never hear the end of ‘ow I shot the Admiral,” Freki chuckled, “from ‘er leas’ of all.”

Sisila chuckled, but as she looked at the Solisian interceptor, she said, “those things are known for their fire power. Do you think *The Scarlett* can handle it?”

Freki shook her head. “I know she canno’. Tha’s why I need your ‘elp wit’ this. Scholars can make some impressive shields. Ye think ye can make one to cover the ship?”

Sisila looked to the tip of the bow and swept her gaze across the whole length of the ship. She smirked and said, “I think that’s possible. Well, most of it, at least.”

“Mos’ is good enough,” Freki walked up the aft-deck stairs and took the helm from Ellice. “Ye did grea’, lass, bu’ I’ll take this one. ‘elp prep the cannons.” Ellice saluted the captain and ran down to join the buzz. “Oars ou’, children of the sea!”

Below deck, the crew readied their oars. Elchi, a tall Au Ra, stood at the front of the line and bellowed out, “*Some damn ol’ pirate stole away the gold.*”

“*And Redbeard was enraged ,*” the crew joined in., and rowed in time with the chorus.

“Twas forty-odd stones with bills in the folds,” Elchi beat his lance against the bottom of the ship for rhythm.

“And Redbeard was enraged,” the crew below sang. Up above, the crew prepping cannons joined in their song.

“Left inside was naught but cod and bass,” as they heaved cannon balls into the barrels.

“And Redbeard was enraged” El-barajja sang as he prepared each box of ammunition with laced wards and spells.

“Twas old Blue Molly and ‘er crew with no class,” the crew on deck hoisted the sails and let them flow free. *The Scarlett Wave* picked up speed and cut through the storm’s rage.

“And Redbeard was enraged!” Freki kept the ship on a straight path. One that led right between the flagship and the interceptor.

“She left a letter with a dervish odd lass,” the weapons crew opened the hatches and slid the cannons into firing position.

“And Redbeard was enraged” Sisila, silent, pulled her codex from its book holster and pried it open. *“Celestial Body...Aegis...Aegonix...”* her nail traced the words. The flagship was coming up fast.

“So Redbeard set his sails on her arse,” Freki laughed as she sang, her gaze locked on the interceptor. *The Scarlett Wave* was gaining on it.

“And Redbeard was enraged” the injured crew in the hold, led by Ellice, prepared a makeshift barrier along the starboard side.

“Redbeard’s wrath spares no foe,” the interceptor made it to the aft of the flagship Frekit. Its’ weapon ports opened and an array of magi-tek arms protruded from its steel hold.

“Not devil, nor daemon, nor salty old goat,” Sisila joined the voices of the crew as her codex gleamed with aetheric currents. One flew out from the codex and formed a small clear half-dome, no larger than a human’s shield.

“*Redbeard’s wrath spares no foe,*” aboard the flagship, the Marshal at the aft deck turned. “Admiral!” he turned back to the helm. Admiral Latamma turned from her place at the wheel and saw the interceptor, too late. “Brace for volley,” she shouted to the crew.

“*And Blue Molly learned that, with her last death throw*” A second stream of aether shot out from Sisila’s codex and struck the dome. It grew to cover the near-entire starboard side of the ship. The smooth dome shaped itself into a geomantic, rigid structure.

“Brace!” Freki called out to the entire ship.

The interceptor’s volley began just as *The Scarlett Wave* cut in front of its firing line. The weapons tore into Sisila’s shield, the force of the explosions and shells sending her and half the deck-crew falling off their feet. In several places, the dome shattered, shards of crystallized aether giving way as shells struck the ship. The barrage sent crack after crack into the dome, until the entire structure was obliterated. The air was filled with green aether dust that caught the raindrops and turned them to mist. In that moment of calm, the interceptors barrage ceased, its crew rushing to reload. The order came Frekit from Freki.

“Give ‘em ‘ell!”

The Scarlett Wave let loose its own weapons. As cannon shells struck the interceptors metal hull, they splintered into hardened aether-shards. Each one ripped away layer after layer of armor, until the shells were breaking through the hull. The last barrage ripped their way into the engine room and tore a hole right in the bottom. It was only a few moments later that an explosion ripped through the interceptor, and the flaming ship began its slow descent into the sea, as water filled its lower decks.

The crew of *The Scarlett Wave* whooped with joy. As the ship began to pass the flagship, Freki leaned on the helm and caught sight of the Marshal and Clan-Admiral Latamma looking down at her. Both gave her a Storms salute. Freki removed her hat with a flourish and returned the gesture. *The Scarlett Wave* then pulled ahead of the flagship.

Sisila got up to her feet and looked to Freki at the helm. “Well, captain. I hope my services were satisfactory.”

Freki donned her hat again and smiled down at the Miqu. “Ye don’ know ‘ow ‘appy I am ye came wit’ us now, lass. Ye ‘ave me thanks, now and forever.”

Ceecill stepped out from the hold doors and looked up to Freki. “Captain, we should pull around and rejoin the fleet. We have injured that need tending to and have to re-organize our attack plan.”

Freki nodded. “Aye, lieutenant, thanks for the suggestion. We’ll ge’ aroun-“ Freki tugged at the wheel, and it spun freely. She let go of it, and it continued to spin. She looked to the ships course; even as the wheel spun, the course did not change.

“Wha’ the ‘ell...” Freki said. Nanasu came running out of the hold as fast as his Lalafel legs would carry him.

“Captain! Rudder chain’s been hit! One of the striker’s guns tore it to shreds!”

Ceecill and Freki looked as if Leviathan himself had just risen from the sea. Sisila looked to the two of them, visibly confused.

“I’m sorry, what does that mean?”

“It means we can’t turn...” Ceecill saw Freki staring out in front of them. She turned to look, and saw the bulk of the Solisian fleet assembled, after their tactical retreat. As they sailed straight at them.

“Sails up and drop anchor! Nana, ge’ tha’ rudder chain back on as bes’ ye can!” Freki reached to her ear and touched her ring-ear. “Marshal, this is the Scarlett! Our rudder chain’s gone, we can’ turn back!” She paused, her gaze never leaving the fleet in front of her. The gusts of the storm seemed to pull them a league closer each second that passed.

“Aye, Captain!” The Marshal responded, voice coming clear through with the striker’s jammer at the bottom of the sea. “We’re pullin’ around to ge’ ye. Jus’ ‘ang on!”

Ketilmundgrabbed at the anchor wheel below deck and lifted it from its brake. The anchor spun loose and sank into the sea. The crew above deck hoisted with all their might to get the sails up, but the storms winds threatened to pull them across the deck instead.

Freki jumped down to Sisila and took ahold of the line with her crew. “Lass, we need another barrier, now!” Freki pulled with the crew, and her strength aided the crew in getting the sails moving up.

Sisila pulled out her codex and recited the chant, but as she did, her eyes fluttered. The storms chorus gave way to a drone's buzz in her head. She stumbled and fell to the deck, a white-knuckle grip on her codex.

"Sisila!" Freki let the crew take the line and ran to her. She took Sisila in her arms and helped her sit up. "Lass, wha's wron'?"

Sisila breath was shallow, "I haven't had... a chance to breathe for a bit," Sisila said.

Freki looked to the crew. "Private Love, fetch an Elixir from the stock! Now!" A younger lass ran to the hold doors.

"That was a really pretty song," Sisila said. Freki looked to her, shocked. "I'm glad I got to sing it with all of you."

Tears brimmed at the edges of Freki eyes. "Yer one of the crew, lass. The 'ole crew sings, tha's the rules." The private came running back with a glass bottle of green liquid.

"Here's the Elixir, Captain."

"Thank ye, Private Love." Freki took the bottle from her and fed it to Sisila. The color returned to Sisila's cheeks, and she took a deep breath. Freki looked back to the Arnorian fleet. They were at least two leagues out now from the rest of them. The flagship was on course to them. "Make ready to abandon ship. We'll take our chances with the storm and the Admiral can fish us out."

"That's a lot better," Sisila leaned on Freki and stood up to her feet. "I'll get to work on that barrier, but--"

Sisila's eyes went wide, and Freki followed suit. One of the Solisian ships had broken from the fleet and was making course for them. A massive steel dreadnought, it's deck bristled with heavy artillery. It was leagues out when it turned to face them port-side.

"But they can't have the range to fire yet, can they?" Sisila looked up to Freki.

Her eyes were transfixed. The chorus of the storm and the sea was but a silent conversation in a room far away from her. A pain rattled her chest. Her breath was taken from her.

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Leagues away, on the deck of the Solisian flagship, the void-haunt wearing the prince's face stood at the helm, looking out.

"I would have preferred to do this myself... but pride is the only reason you are still alive."

An officer turned to the prince. "We have them sighted in with the long-range guns. Shall we fire?"

"Tis unfortunate he didn't finish you when he had the chance," the puppeteer looked at one of the viewports screens, and caught a glimpse of the puppet's face in the glass.

"Aye, captain," the walking corpse said, "you may fire when ready."

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"They can't have us in range, right?" Sisila repeated the question.

From the distance, a series of distant pops could be heard that cut through the storm's chorus. Freki looked to Sisila.

"Lass, I'm so--"

The Frekit artillery shell ripped through the bow. The shockwave sent Sisila and Ellice off their feet and slammed them into the aft-deck stairs. Ellice struck her head on the fall and went limp. Below deck, screams rose as water rushed in from the pierced hull.

The second shell, off target, cut through the mast and hit the water behind them. As the mast toppled over, Kehda screamed as he hit the water, and was engulfed by the wave made by the shell's impact.

Freki caught herself from the fall and made her way across the deck. The ship had started to tilt into the water bow-Frekit. As Freki climbed up the deck, she saw Sisila holding onto the stairs, petrified in fear.

Then the third shell hit the aft. The explosion engulfed the cabin and blew the hold doors off their hinges. The last Freki saw of Sisila was a fireball engulfing the entire aft of the ship.

The explosion sent Freki into the sea. Her head struck one of her own cannons. And all went black.

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The burning wreckage of her ship was hovering above her. Freki felt herself sinking down. The storm's chorus was quiet down here. She could see people clinging to the remains of *The Scarlett Wave*. As her eyes regained focus, she could even begin to make out the faces of the dead that sunk down with her.

Ceecill was one of them. A piece of shrapnel had pierced her chest. Blood streamed out of her and formed into a cloud around her, like dust in the wind.

Unable to focus, bleeding from her face and head, Freki swam with one arm to her body. Her gear dragging her down, she hugged her second-in-command. She buried her face into Ceecill's jacket, and cried. The two drifted further down, until all light had faded from view, and the songs of the sea and the storm had gone silent.

Freki felt a sudden tug on Ceecill's body. Then again. Freki grabbed onto her dear friend's remains and looked around, unable to see in the darkness of the ocean depths. With a violent tug, Ceecill was ripped from her grasp. Freki floated in the deep void alone.

As she floated free, Freki turned. A ghost brushed against her leg. An invisible pair of eyes watched her from the darkness. Her body felt the weight of the water crush down on her as she screamed, and furiously swam what she believed was up. Something or someone grabbed at her leg and pulled her deeper down into the dark. Freki screamed and fought until she had sunk into the abyss...

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Her vision faded back into clarity. She was wrapped in warm fur bedsheets. There was a fireplace that illuminated a cozy cabin room. Over the fire was a large stew pot, which a white-furred Feliwyght, one of the lions, was sitting at.

Freki groaned, then rolled onto her side and wretched up half a stomach full of sea water. As she coughed, the lion came over and patted her back.

"Yeah, you've been doing that now for the past few hours. The trident's blessings may let you breathe underwater, but swallowing it makes you as sick as the rest of us."

Freki coughed after she was done throwing up and looked up at the stranger. “Who are ye?”

“My name’s Pic.”

“Wha’... where am I?”

“You’re in my home,” Pic stretched out his arms, “more specifically one part of my home. And more specifically than that, you’re somewhere the Solisians won’t find you.”

Freki stared at him, then sat up in the bed. As she tried to steady herself, she fell to the side. Pic caught her and helped her lay down. She looked to her left arm and realized it was bandaged in a sling.

“The blast you took shredded your arm up pretty bad. It needs to stay still for a while if it’s to heal. And,” Pic sighed, “I did my best, but I couldn’t save the eye.”

Freki looked at what she thought was a shadowed section of the room, but the shadow moved when she turned her head. She reached up with her right arm, and felt a gauze wrap around her face, covering where her left eye once was.

“I know you don’t feel lucky, but you are. Without the trident’s blessing, you’d be fish food right now.”

Freki wretched again, with a violent cough and sputter into a bowl underneath her bed.

Pic sighed. “Sorry, bad word. I know.”

Freki lied back against the pillow, then groaned. Pain cut into her body from her arm, eye, and stomach, and she tried to free herself from the covers.

“Hey, hey, bad idea, lady!” Pic pushed her down with one hand and grabbed a bowl above the bed, with a sticky green gel in it. “Here, eat this, it’ll numb the pain.”

Freki did not reply, but Pic grabbed the gel in his free hand and stuck it into her mouth. He grabbed her chin to keep it closed. “I know it’s hard; I know. But you’re distressed from a lot of things, and the pain isn’t helping. Just rest. When you feel better, we can talk.”

Freki tried to keep from swallowing, but eventually the gel found its way down her throat. Her body felt numb, and she could not find the strength to lift the covers off her body.

“There we go,” Pic said. “Sleep, lady. We’ll talk later.”

Freki vision blurred again, and the darkness crept up on her again. She gasped for air, as if drowning, before she sunk back into the depths.