

This is the first of several tales pieced together by scholars and storytellers from all over the globe, pertaining to a mysterious ghost ship called the Stormpiercer. This is the account of a goshawk griot by the name of T'Jibli, who was an eyewitness of the freak equatorial cyclone that struck Afkambash in the late 17th age. This story has been passed down through the generations to us through his descendants, and this version was recounted by his descendant Odia. I believe it gives us considerable insight into the origins of the Stormpiercer, seeing that it is very likely the original ship was lost to sea during this event.

---

The Doom of Afkambash came like a thief in the day; lo did the heavens fall upon the people with a mighty roar and a ferocious wind. The tribes saw the storm as a dreadful omen, a sign that their gods were angry with the decadent ruling lion kingdom and their corrupt ways. The southern shores were decimated, particularly the slaver ports between Argo and Zarka. Many fell to the terrible storm, buried under sand and rubble, and many more went about naked and seen exposed, their garments stripped off their bodies that had been hurled about and swept into the great gusts! Lo, how I remember traveling West after the cyclone, the earth, grasses, and even trees brought down by the storms as far as the eye could see! Surely there has never been such a storm before or since!

The morning saw brisk winds and a blue sky, nary a cloud in sight. The port was already bustling with activity, the shopkeepers at the bazaar displaying their wares for customers, colorful fabrics and tents festooning the vicinity. The harbor was far more crowded than typical, a scene that had transpired soon after the traders from the north arrived days earlier. They came in giant longships of oak, anywhere from 7 to 10 oxen long and 1 and a half to 2 oxen wide, loaded with silver, silks, glass, sheep, horses, timber, iron, furs, skins, and pottery. Much was exchanged between these northerners and the locals, with many slaves departing in chains after being sold at the market. There had been nothing that foretold what came soon after.

The birds soon rushed the skies above us, all speeding away from the sea, thousands of them of all varieties, while those in cages panicked, some even escaping from their masters. It was a deafening cacophony of flapping that would presage what would come next. Then I saw the heavens roll up like a papyrus scroll, a mass of clouds blanketing the sky like the maw of a great monster. First the waters receded, leaving many perplexed, and some of the boats and even some of the larger ships beached upon the sands. At the same time, the horizon turned white

underneath the torrential veil, the rapids edging ever closer to shore as the clouds loomed over us. Many began to wrap themselves up in their robes, shawls, and cloaks, while others began hauling in their wares and spreading canopies over their booths to protect them from the rains, an effort that would soon be for naught.

First, the waters rushed ashore like a great tide, catching many by surprise and knocking down others, as well as pushing the ships into disarray, some smashing the docks and others tipping onto the beach. Then the rains began to fall, first as a drizzle, then a shower, until it intensified with the force of a hundred monsoons. The chaos that ensued only left us exposed to the winds that would follow, heralded by a strong gale like those of the worst summer storms. Trees bent and rocked like blades of grass in the gusts, and many people were blown to the ground, including myself. The livestock proved uncontrollable, many stampeding for cover and trampling unfortunate fallen souls.

I could only watch as the winds blew stronger and stronger, causing much mayhem in its wake. Tents, booths, even the cloaks and shawls of some were all flapping in a deafeningly loud manner, which was barely heard over the roar of the wind. I shielded my eyes from the blinding sand, rain, and dust, now falling sideways as the winds rushed us. Tents instantly collapsed, ripped to shreds, or blew away wholesale as the residents and merchants ran after them, truly panicked now. I had the wisdom to wrap my own cloak tightly around my body with one hand as I took shelter behind a rock, but others were not so lucky. All sorts of ripping and flapping sounds, much like the fluttering of so many wings that I heard earlier, howled around me as the storm stripped away any fabrics that had not been secured previously, with many silks and linen wares being whipped into the sky as soon as they fell to the ground, for the gales to catch and rend them into so many billowing, colorful sheets.

I dared to glimpse towards the ocean, my hood almost being torn away by the blast as I faced the wind head on. The sun had vanished, and we were surrounded by the blinding grays of the rains, like that of a great fog covering the skies and our entire field of vision for some yards all around. The panicked words of those who remained exposed to the storm were blown right out of their mouths as they struggled against the winds, their garments being whipped about before their owners were ultimately thrown aside like so much litter. There was no opportunity for modesty, and no one to witness their indignity, so clouded was our vision in the tempest. I

could only catch glimpses of many an unfortunate soul emerging from the gray curtains, as their clothing came undone and tattered about wildly before falling apart and tearing away, while their denuded bodies tumbled away once more into the mist.

Suddenly, I heard a cracking noise and looked up just in time to see a tree, one so thick I would not have been able to hug it had I needed to, uproot like a soft yam and come hurtling my way. I ran aside as it struck the rock with a mighty crash and split in half, as my cloak was suddenly blown open by an updraft, streaming and twisting behind me and upwards, exposing my tunic and threatening to lift me away, light being my stature as a goshawk. The storm caught my wings and flexed them backwards, threatening to snap them like twigs as I felt the painful pricks as the winds plucked away a few feathers that scattered into the rain.

I felt myself getting dragged backwards, wings outstretched in the storm, disheveled feathers left to tatter. I had been focusing on holding my tunic down before I felt the knot of my cloak threatening to come undone. I grasped at it with both hands, my tunic now free to blow inside out and bare my loins to the stinging squalls. I was knocked down once more, and got up with my back to the wind, my cloak wildly billowing and flailing over my head, wings streaming in front of me to my sides. Now the wind was pushing me forwards, away from the shoreline.

I pushed through the storm and let the wind carry me as I ran into a nearby building, frantically grabbing at my cloak to prevent it from being torn free and wrapping it around myself. As soon as I touched the door, the winds blew it open, almost knocking me to the ground once again. The door slammed back and forth in the gales a few times before with a loud crack it broke off its hinges to soar away down the road. I took the opportunity to jump in the building, thankful to be away from the tempest if even for a moment.

Hearing nothing save for the loud whistling of the wind as it rushed outside, I opened my sore bedraggled wings, feathers in disarray and torn like a well-used pen, some broken in twain, others missing altogether. I winced in pain, knowing that even with extensive oiling and preening I would not be able to fly for weeks after this, though I was thankful that my wings hadn't been broken. Tucking my damaged wings in, I undid my cloak and wrung enough water and mud out of it to fill a large jar, so wet I had been. Shaking it dry I saw that it had been frayed and tattered with several small holes from being so violently whipped around by the winds. Though my tunic

was also wet and dirty, it had been shielded for the most part from the gusts, the cloak taking most of the damage.

I hardly had time to realize how wet I was before with a slow snapping sound the roof lifted away and disintegrated, leaving the whole room exposed to the howling sky above. Furniture crashed to the floor and pottery shattered, while lighter objects such as loose cloth and basketware were sucked out with the remains of the roof. My cloak was snatched upwards and was almost lost to the squall, only being held back by the tips of my fingers as I fought with the winds over it. Managing to get a better grip, I swaddled myself tightly with the fabric, curling into a ball and retreating against a corner as one of the brick walls collapsed. Whatever furniture that hadn't already been blown away was hurled across the room, narrowly avoiding my frail form. I crawled behind a broken table and cowered as I was beaten and battered by the gales. Between the fragmented panels I was able to see out into the harbor, and the scene was one of utter pandemonium.

Ships of all sorts were either being swamped, sunk, or capsized by the violent waves, many smashing into one another upon breaking free of their moorings. The storm shredded banners, broke even the strongest ropes, and unfurled many a sail, some already thrashing about like many giant striped curtains, others already reduced to tattered rags as torn strips flew off to parts unknown. I saw the wind blow open the reefed canvas, which instantly ballooned out before bursting to shreds with the sound of much ripping and snapping. Some of the sails were even torn away altogether, being outright stripped from the masts and yards, breaking them as they were blown into the sky like clouds.

The waves battered anything and everything that floated, carrying away and utterly destroying the docks. I watched one of the traders' ships flip over in the air, before landing upon and crushing one of the smaller boats. I even saw the waves fold up another ship, prow and stern shattering the mast as they collided and the ship broke in half. In the distance, I saw many ships already blown out to sea, bucking wildly like a panicked antelope upon the whitecaps, only to be swallowed up by the mist or sinking beneath the waves. I, like so many other unfortunate souls, was completely at the mercy of the storm, like these ships and boats, and everything else the storm touched, though at least I was lucky enough to seek refuge in this place, shielded by the debris that stopped much of the storm from ripping at my body even

further, the screeching and wailing blending into my own pained screams as I fell unconscious in sheer panic.

Upon waking up I was greeted by frantic yells as a Northman climbed onto the wreckage of my shelter and cast aside debris to uncover me. I could hardly hear him as he slung me upon his shoulder, before setting me down upon the beach as they kept on yelling at me. I sat up and he backed away nervously, while the ringing in my ears persisted. I blinked and began to stand upon wobbly legs as he helped me to my feet. Other than the shock, the disorientation, and some mild bruising, I had been left relatively unhurt, though I cannot say the same for many others. We looked around, awestruck at a scene befitting the end of days, the sky blue once again and the wind calm as if nothing happened.

Almost every single building had been damaged or utterly destroyed in the cyclone. Broken pieces of wood, shreds of fabrics, and strings of seaweed littered the shoreline. Ahead of us, boats, both ours and theirs, laid upon their sides, some half-submerged in the waters and others completely piled atop one another in a haphazard pile. Not a tree was left standing, most of them stripped of their leaves, branches, even their bark. Further inland, many of the buildings had either had their roofs blown off or outright collapsed upon any unfortunate people inside. The skyline, so colorfully adorned before, was now the color of mud, with every surface stripped bare in the storm. Where the bazaar had once been was now a junkyard, destroyed goods littering the roads among the broken remains of stalls, much of their coverings now hanging in mere tatters.

Behind us, out in the harbor, the scene looked no better, the ships either left adrift in total disarray or broken and half-submerged in the waters. Tangled ropes that were once rigging hung limply from splintered masts, and shredded rags that were once sails now fluttered in the breeze. The remains of the docks, many of the ships' hulls, and cargo were bobbing on the waves. The head of a snarling dragon reared lifelessly above the water, the rest of the traders' ship swamped and sunk by the shallows.

Truly this was a disaster like no other. Almost the port's entire fleet had been sunken and of the 30 cargo ships and 10 escorting dragon-headed longships the traders brought with them, only 7 cargo ships remained seaworthy, along with 3 very badly damaged but still-floating

longships. They could only recover the wrecks of 3 other longships, the others either having been lost to the sea altogether or still out there, floating adrift. I often do wonder what happened to the missing ships. Perhaps they are still out there, crippled, mangled, and unmanned, floating aimlessly for who knows how long before ultimately being claimed by the oceans.

That did not matter in comparison to the dead, wounded, and missing. That port city never truly recovered from this event and in my old age, I still visit the site of this calamity from time to time. It is only a mere shell of itself, much of it reclaimed by nature.

As for why this became the doom of Afkambash? The devastation highlighted the impotence and corruption of the lion kingdom, laid bare for all to see. I remember the chaos of the following years well as the tribes banded together and overthrew the lions.

I managed to flee with the last of the Northmen, and have since devoted my life to investigating a peculiar phenomenon: The so-called Storm Island. The Northmen claim that the cyclone came from the direction of this mysterious no-man's land, one I have heard many stories of. An island that conceals its might within an ever-raging hurricane, one that would make the storm I experienced feel like a gentle zephyr.

I wonder what other secrets this island holds.