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The Chosen One

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Lucio Michael David Rodriguez

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DEDICATION

To Jackie, the present telling of the story. To Madison and Riley, the future of the story.

Chapter One

“Please, Miss. Sign right here.”

The man in front of Merryn was old. Back in her small home town she had heard the word “wizened” before, but now imagined the word referred specifically to this man. His hair was sparse, as if the dozen hairs on his head had decided to spread themselves evenly over his mottled scalp. His reactions were slow; she had to repeat everything she said to him multiple times. And he smelled of onions and cabbage.

“This one, right here?” Merryn pointed to a line in the large leather book, a line that clearly showed her name. “I already signed it.”

“Yes, sign it. Right here, Miss.”

Four times was Merryn’s breaking point. “I already signed it!” She hoisted the tome, holding it to the old man’s face. Dried pages escaped, fluttering to the table and ground.

Two soldiers approached the commotion. They were wearing light travelling armor and carrying muskets. The younger of the two addressed her. “Miss, put the book down. That’s an official document, and is only to be in the possession of the Racing Commissioner,” one nodded toward the old man, adding, “Please don’t make us arrest you.”

A few more soldiers gathered; all of them had been standing around since sunrise, and Merryn could only guess at their boredom. Merryn herself had been standing here for almost two hours, waiting to register for yet another race. *Yet another*, she thought. *Well, second, really*. This was the second race the crew of the Lady Ansa would be

participating in since she joined them; the first was the Horizon Run, a debacle more than a race. The only rules for the race were the start and finish lines. Between those lines, anything could, and did, happen. She saw more airships on that day than she had seen in the rest of her seventeen years. She also witnessed the destruction of most of them, and saw more than one man killed.

This race, the one she was currently moments from throttling an old man over, was far more organized and civil. It was a test of endurance and flying skill over time—more akin to a marathon, really. It had been hours now, and there was no sign of the Captain or Broche. She reminded herself to find a way to repay them both. For whatever reason, Captain Tanim and Broche mutually agreed that Merryn would be brought off deck in order to register for the race. Broche had returned to the ship as soon as he saw the line. Captain Tanim waited with Merryn for a whole five minutes before disappearing.

“Lady...” The guard peered at the book, still held inches from the old man’s face. “Lady Merryn. Please put the book down.” He adjusted his rifle to emphasize his point, but his face told Merryn he was trying to be as non-threatening as possible. For a moment it appeared the guard was deciding whether or not to bow to her as well.

Perhaps that was why the captain insisted she clean up. She had washed and pinned up her long brown curls. Only then did he give her the green gown she was wearing. The dress fit surprisingly well, but with its corset and flared sleeves it was difficult to move around, and it restricted her breathing—she wondered how anyone got any work done in such a dress.

Right now she did not look like a member of an airship crew.

Merryn returned the book to its position on the table with more force than was necessary.

The old man dusted the book, pressed out the pages. “Now, Miss, please sign here.”

Her face flushed red. The guards were placing themselves between Merryn and the old man when she felt someone grab her arm and pull her away.

“Now, dear, we need to go. Let’s leave the nice man alone.” It was Captain Tanim; he adjusted their arms, linking hers into his. She noticed he moved stiffly, the elbow of his other arm locked against his body.

“Uh, yes, Ca—”

The Captain gave her a slight shake of his head, then motioned to the guards with an eyebrow.

“I mean, yes...Father?”

Captain Tanim squeezed her arm a little too tightly, and, noticing a guard, said, “Now, dearest...*daughter*. We need to get back to the ship, your mother needs your help preparing supper.” The Captain’s voice and gestures were more than exaggerated.

Merryn glanced back. Several of the guards hid smiles, but several others simply watched her leave. “What are you—” Another stern look from the Captain, another squeeze, “I, uh, yes, I’m sorry for dallying, Father.”

They reached the ship, no longer the *Lady Ansa* that Merryn recognized, with its beautiful dark wood exterior and brass and copper ornamentation. Now it was a bright

blue monstrosity. They had spent the last week painting the sides and deck of the ship with a thick, sky-blue paint that smelled of flour. The Captain helped Merryn aboard, guiding her by the hand up a set of retractable stairs they had recently installed onto the ship. The captain's sudden bout of manners added to Merryn's confusion. Several times she caught Captain Tanim looking back toward the race registration site.

"What was that about?" Merryn said, watching as more guards assembled back at the registration table.

Captain Tanim threw himself up the last few steps and stared Merryn in the eye, "Father? Father! Not husband, or even *brother* for that matter?" The Captain motioned to Broche, who approached from the quarterdeck. "Let's be off, top speed. Any direction that puts us over water and away from here." Immediately Broche called out orders to the waiting pilot.

"I'm barely seventeen, you're...forty?" The look she received from the Captain was, at best, a scowl. She ventured again, "Thirty...eight? Anyway, you're far too old to be my brother or husband."

The Captain continued to look offended, and replied, "Take that dress off and put on your work clothes, you look ridiculous. And for your information I'm...thirty-two."

Merryn threw on her long coat she had left on deck, only too eager to get below and change. "You gave me the dress," she said to the Captain as she approached the *butt*, the barrel on the main deck where they kept drinking water. Catching her reflection she quickly undid her hair. She gasped. "Goodness, I look like some merchant's daughter."

The Captain removed his own coat, the brown one he had “acquired” from their last pilot. Tucked beneath his right arm was a—Merryn thought to call it a medallion, except for its size. It was two inches thick and a nearly a foot across. At first look she thought it was made of calcite, but when the Captain tilted the disc, it caught the light, and took on a marbled appearance. Writing crowded the face of it, but the language was unfamiliar. The whole of the text created an image of the sun.

“Where did that come from?” she asked.

Taking a last glance back, Captain Tanim folded the stone disc into his coat and handed the coat to Broche. From behind, one might not have even seen the stone. Broche quickly disappeared into the Captain’s quarters.

“Wait—” Merryn removed a sheaf of papers from her pocket. It took her no time to find the one she was looking for.

“Race of a lifetime!” she read, “Win an artifact from the old world!” An image of the stone disc sat in the dead center of the flyer. A flyer for the race they had just entered. “That thing is the prize for the race. Did you just *steal* that?”

This had apparently become the race they were now running from.

Tanim put his hand to his heart. “No, no, we’re just...okay, yes, we stole it.”

“Why? The only people entering are a bunch of merchants we’d easily beat. That race is nothing compared to The Run.” Merryn instinctively braced herself against the tilt of the ship. Their new pilot was quickly taking the *Lady Ansa* to the air.

“That race is a month long.” Captain Tanim widened his stance, then adjusted his coat. Since they had picked her up he had moved his holster from inside his vest to his

hip, and the unusual, large cylindered gun was prominent at his waist. “We have bigger things to worry about than a silly race. Besides, it’s not like it’s the first time we’ve stolen something.”

“What pressing matters do...wait, did you say ‘not the first time?’”

“Yes,” the Captain replied matter-of-factly. “Where do you think we got the entry fee for the Horizon Run?”

“What?”

“Two ships off the port bow!” Joseph called out. Of the group that had joined along with Merryn, Joseph was one of the few who had re-signed with Captain Tanim’s crew.

Both Merryn and the Captain rushed to the portside rail. Indeed, two military ships had just shoved off. They were a mile away, but the posture of everyone aboard showed that wasn’t far enough. Something in Merryn’s mind clicked. “So, just how much *have* you stolen?”

Captain Tanim looked at Merryn, the blankest of stares on his face.

She looked at the ship, at each member of the crew. It was as if she was seeing them all for the first time. “Oh my gods, *you’re pirates!*”

Broche returned from the Captain’s quarters with the captain’s coat hung loosely over his arm. He chimed in, “I feel this is a good time to remind you that you’ve signed aboard the *Lady Ansa* for six months.”

Now it was Merryn’s turn to stare blankly. Snapping to, she replied, “Oh, gods, *I’m a pirate!*” She looked down at her clothes, the clothes of the merchant character the

guards would certainly recognize, and began loosening them. Stumbling on the hem of the dress, she made her way to the stairs. “Oh, no, they’re coming after me. I’m going to be arrested...”

“Not to worry, Crewman Merryn,” Captain Tanim assured her, “There’s no way these men will catch us now.”

“But, they know who we are. They’ll find us. Wherever we go—”

“They’re looking for a merchant and his daughter...on an ugly blue ship, I might add. As soon as we lose them, we’ll wash this blue stuff off and be on our way. It’s not like you...” His voice trailed off.

Merryn dropped her eyes to the deck, glancing up at the Captain only briefly.

“You used your real name, didn’t you?” he asked.

“No.” Her response was high-pitched and completely unbelievable.

Captain Tanim’s voice exploded from his mouth, “Why would you use your real name?”

“I didn’t know you were going to be stealing from those people!”

“I can’t believe you did that! What were you thinking?”

“I don’t know, *Dad*, maybe you should have let me in on the plan!”

“She does have a point, Sir.” Broche added, “I told you to let her—”

“Her demeanor had to be genuine. I told you it would work better if she didn’t know what she was...” Realization crossed Captain Tanim’s face and he turned to Merryn. “Please tell me you didn’t list the *Lady’s* name as well.”

Merryn dropped her eyes again.

“You, I can’t believe—” Captain Tanim clenched his fists, silently shaking. He turned to Broche, who shrugged his shoulders in a way that clearly said, “I told you so.” The Captain, still silent, pointed a single finger at Broche, a warning not to speak.

“Okay,” Captain Tanim said. His words were slowly paced, an attempt to calm himself. “First thing we need to do is lose these guards. I doubt they’ll follow us very far. We just need them to think they can’t catch us, and they’ll turn around. After that we can worry about that bastard, Captain Granger.”

The *Lady Ansa* rose higher. The overcast sky threw strange shadows on the deck.

“Are you sure we can outrun those ships?” Merryn looked back at the ships, both clearly better maintained than the *Lady Ansa*. Each was borne aloft by orange balloons and flew the orange flags of Alina, the Third Kingdom. The hulls of the ships were darkly stained. Though smaller than the *Lady Ansa*, they were heavy warships. Judging by the number of guns alone, each crew was likely near a hundred men, several times the current skeleton crew the *Lady Ansa* carried. “They look angry. They know we took the—” Something dropped from the sky and slammed into the deck immediately in front of her. Merryn jumped back and let out a scream, and screamed again when she realized it wasn’t *something*, but *someone*.

The man—Merryn guessed it was a man based on his clothing—lay face-down on the deck. His arm was bent awkwardly behind his back, and he didn’t move. She stared. His clothes were in horrid condition, heavily torn and even burned in some places.

Above them she heard a voice, gruff, but carrying easily over the distance.

“Ahoy, Captain Tanim! Looks like you’re in a bit of a spot.”

“Dammit.” Captain Tanim scanned the air above them. “He found us.”

The *Lady Ansa* cleared a patch of cloud, and Merryn caught sight of a white-wood airship—*What kind of wood is that? Too stark to be oak. Holly, perhaps?* Its sides and hull were polished. It caught the bit of sun that was available. A glint of light followed it from bow to stern as the white ship passed overhead. A man leaned over the side of the other ship, looking down on the *Lady Ansa*. Even without the military garb, Merryn recognized the man’s white speckled hair, the harsh lines of his face. The man looking down at them was the captain of the *Witch Hunter*, a ship that had been a fierce competitor at the Horizon Run.

Captain Tanim shouted, “Captain Granger, you appear to have dropped something.”

Captain Granger replied in his gruff tone, “That’s very funny, Tanim. We’ll see how funny you think it is when the Guard catch you.”

“They’ll never catch us.” Captain Tanim paused as if remembering something, then added, “You must have had quite the savings. How’d you get a ship so quickly?”

Captain Granger hesitated, “Well, Captain Tanim, when—” Captain Granger disappeared momentarily, though Merryn could hear him arguing with someone. Suddenly the largest head she’d ever seen appeared at the side of their ship. Thick brown curls formed a dense mat over the top of the man’s head.

“Is this the ship?” this new man asked. His voice was pleasant, round-toned. “Get me on that ship. I’ll bring it down in ten minutes...” The man leaned half his body over as if to get a better look at the *Lady*. Merryn could see he was wearing fine leather

traveling armor with green accents and more shiny buckles than she imagined were in a cordwainer's shop. Captain Granger pulled the man back from the ship's rails...or *gunwales*, as she had recently been informed they were actually called.

Out of sight but easily heard, Captain Granger yelled at the man, "Wakeland, what are you—I told you to stay out of this, I don't need you meddling—"

"Ah, a lovely ship. You don't get such fine ornamentation on modern vessels." This voice was higher, a man's voice, but elegant. Another head appeared. This man's skin was pale, the more so because of the powder makeup he was wearing. The clothes he wore were fancy, no, *too* fancy—definitely not clothes designed to travel in. "I'd like to get a sketch of that door there, we can recreate it for our next production, *The Sailor's Delight*. It's about a couple lost at sea under surreptitious circumstances, but who eventually fall in—"

The pale man disappeared with a grunt, and Merryn caught sight of Captain Granger shoving the fancy-dressed man aside. Immediately the other man, Wakeland, returned to the rail.

"Is that an acting troupe aboard your vessel, Captain Granger?" Captain Tanim began laughing. "Captain Granger, are you running a tour ship?"

Captain Granger's stern face immediately popped over the side. "It's not a tour ship, Tanim. I'm escorting these men across the country—"

"Are you stopping to show them the sights?"

There was a pause as Captain Granger struggled to answer, causing Captain Tanim to laugh even louder.

“Move aside, I’ll get him for you,” Wakeland’s deep voice called above. Captain Granger disappeared among the sound of a struggle. After a moment Wakeland’s head appeared again. His right hand swung over bearing a crossbow. Captain Granger called out some profanity as the crossbow twanged, releasing its bolt.

Merryn wasn’t aware Broche was nearby until he shoved the Captain aside. The bolt struck where the Captain had been standing, lodging firmly in the deck.

Without missing a beat both Captain Tanim and Broche blurted out, “*I hate adventurers.*”

Captain Granger called down, “We shouldn’t keep you—but I’ll leave our guest with you. Don’t worry, Tanim, I’ll visit you in prison.” With that their ship rose, disappearing in the clouds above.

Soon the ship was out of sight. Merryn realized she was still pressed against the rail, the person still lying in front of her. “He’s not moving. Is he dangerous? Quick, should we tie him up?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” Captain Tanim was ascending the stairs to the quarterdeck but didn’t look back to respond.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s been dead for a month.”

“What?” Merryn panicked. She was trapped. The person, the *body*, was too close for her to step around. It was bad luck to step over someone’s grave, but it was worse to step over a dead body. A sound, something between a squeal and a scream, escaped her mouth.

“What in the high heavens is that noise?” Captain Tanim called from the quarterdeck, clenching one ear.

V, who sat on a nearby barrel, gestured indifferently. “I believe Crewman Merryn has a problem with bodies.”

“Probably just the dead ones.” Broche eyed Merryn. “V, this girl’s going to be no help. Give me a hand. We don’t want this lying around if the Guard catches us.”

“I heard you,” the captain shouted from the quarterdeck. “They’re not going to catch us. Is everyone trying to be difficult today?” A turbulent wind rushed at each end of the deck. They were approaching their top speed.

“He’ll be easier to carry if we roll him over.” V stood near the man’s arms, pulling a pair of leather gloves on. “On three. One...two...three!”

Broche and V flipped the man over, and Merryn let out a true scream, “What’s wrong with his face?”

The man’s face was something from a nightmare: the eyes were unmarred, but the remainder of his face was a mass of shiny, twisted scar tissue. The man’s nose and lips, or at least the spots the nose and lips should have been on his face, were uneven lumps of flesh.

Broche looked about the deck. “His mask came off. Does anyone see...there it is. Merryn, get that.”

Not an arm’s length from her, a metal mask lay face-down at the base of a cannon. She knelt only briefly, realized who the mask belonged to and quickly pulled her hand back. She turned to Broche, shaking her head.

Broche boomed, “*Crewman* Merryn, pick up the mask!”

There was a reason Broche was the ship’s quartermaster. Merryn reacted on instinct, compelled by the anger and command in that voice. She tossed it onto the body, slung like a hammock between V and Broche. The inside of the mask was oily. It left a slick residue on her hand, which she vigorously tried to wipe off onto her longcoat.

Broche and V carried the man below deck. Merryn watched, then called up to the Captain, “What is with you people and dead bodies?”

“It’s only happened two times...well, two times that you’ve been with us. I’d hardly call that a regular thing.”

“I’ve only been with you two times.” Merryn paused, “Why did that ship drop him here?”

“We had some...complications. Let’s just say King Angel won’t be terribly happy the next time we see him.”

King Angel? Merryn thought to herself. *What were they doing in the month I was gone?*

Chapter Two

One month ago...

Tanim pulled the longcoat tighter around his shoulders. The leather had made a valiant effort at repelling the rain, but with the passing minutes it had gone from tan to a waterlogged dark brown. It now sat heavy on his shoulders. Broche stood beside him, wearing only his white tunic, unconcerned with the rain. In Broche's hand was his loaded blunderbuss, the powder inside the pan guarded by a wound canvas strap. Six men stood across from them in the shallow clearing.

The wind had picked up, the force of the storm increasing. Tanim had to lean against the wind and shout to be heard above the storm. "What is one man going to do to the Witches?"

"You know of the prophecy?" The man, who had introduced himself as Tores, wore chest and shoulder armor. The armor would normally be hidden by the fine white surcoat, were the coat not at the wind's whimsy—hidden, except for the large pauldron on each shoulder. Those pauldron, each bearing a red clenched hand on a field of white, signified this man as one of The King's Fist, a group of Alahvin's most skilled warriors chosen by King Angel himself to carry out his most essential tasks. It was Tores who had arranged this surreptitious meeting, bringing his men to meet Tanim in a forest in the middle of nowhere. Four of the men wore a similar uniform, and like Tores, were dark haired and square jawed. The fifth man, the man about whom Tanim and Tores spoke, wore clothing not much better than any commoner would wear and a meager hooded cloak that hid the man's face. Judging by his build the man wasn't yet twenty.

Tanim scoffed, “Bah, prophecy. You know how many ‘the One from the prophecy’ I’ve met? I could fill the King’s great hall with the outright liars, and again with the bodies of those who thought they were telling the truth.”

“David,” Tores called behind himself, “come here.” The cloaked man stepped forward. Tores took David’s arm, declaring, “Behold, his birthmark.” Tores yanked the sleeve up, exposing a forearm covered with a single glyph, a twisting knot often used as protection from Witches.

In the distance a bolt of lightning struck down, temporarily casting everyone in a flash of white light.

Tanim leaned in—*it couldn’t be*. After all this time. There was a sense of longing and hope inside him. He had to be sure it was real. Tanim removed his pistol, a large-cylindrical and awkward thing, and immediately was met with drawn swords and crossbows. He realizing his mistake, then raised his arms and repositioned the gun so its barrel pointed toward himself. He moved it toward David’s arm, and the glyph began to glow orange, intensity increasing as Tanim brought it closer. The glyph shifted, appearing more aggressive than protective.

It was him. David was the one predicted in the prophecy. The Chosen One.

Tanim holstered his gun. “So, he’s the One. What are we supposed to do?”

“You are to transport him and keep him safe. He has two tasks to complete, and his final destination is Corrun Gate.”

“Corrun Gate? Why don’t you just ask me to set my ship on fire and crash headlong into a cliff face?” Tanim paused before adding, “I assume we’re being offered sufficient compensation?”

“The King is aware this is no easy task.” Tores gestured to one of his men, who brought forth a scroll. “That is why I’ve been empowered to offer *this*.”

Tanim took the scroll and opened it. His eyes widened in surprise. When he turned to Broche, the man’s mouth was hanging open. “The King’s Favor?”

Tores made no effort to hide his smile. “Yes. I think you’ll find that it’s better compensation than mere money.”

Broche leaned down to speak in Tanim’s ear. “The Merchant’s Guild would give half their wealth for the King’s Favor.” Broche looked toward the guard, then added, “This seems too easy.”

Tanim replied, speaking over the storm but not loud enough for the soldiers to hear, “Risking our lives is too easy?”

“I’m just saying we’re not being given the whole story.”

“Yes, perhaps.” Tanim thought for a moment, then turned toward David. “Remove your hood.”

David turned to Tores, who nodded his consent. David pulled back his hood, revealing wavy blond hair, and a face covered by an iron mask. The metal of the mask was dull, the features simple—it was designed for utility, not decoration. David’s blue eyes stared out from within.

“Show me your face.”

Lightning struck again, followed quickly by the clap of thunder—the storm was closing in.

David hesitated, then began working at the straps. It was clear he was unaccustomed to removing the mask. When he pulled it away he revealed a face marred from ear to ear. Scars and uneven tissue plagued his skin, and the left edge of his lips was missing, revealing the corner of a skull-like smile. Only the small area around the eyes was untouched. Broche was stoic, as always, but Tanim had to fight to keep from looking away.

“Never mind,” Tanim said, holding back bile. “Put the mask back on.”

David replaced the mask.

Tanim gestured in the direction of David’s head, “So, what’s that all about?”

“On the day I was born the Witches tried to kill me. There were...sacrifices made, to keep me alive.”

“Your face?”

“That and four lives, including my mother’s. I think I got the better—”

Broche quickly locked his blunderbuss against his shoulder, aiming into the woods to his right.

Tanim scanned the tree line but saw nothing. “What is it, Broche?”

A call came from the edge of the wood, carrying over the storm: “Good evening, gentlemen.”

“What is this?” one of Tores’ men asked.

David looked to the soldiers. “Were we followed?”

A man emerged from the edge of the wood, hands raised. He was an older man, even amounts of black and grey in his hair and scruff-beard. Tanim guessed he was in his forties or fifties, though his eyes looked like they belonged to someone far older. For a moment Tanim had a sense of recognition, but quickly dismissed it. There was no weapon in the man's hand, though Tanim did notice a sword at his side.

"Captain Tanim, fancy meeting you out here. How very opportune." The man approached but kept a fair distance from the soldiers, who had their crossbows trained on him.

"Do I know you?" Captain Tanim asked.

"I am Captain Granger, formerly of the Alahvin Navy."

The man stood tall at the words. His posture did speak to his role in the navy, but his clothing was simple, not much better than a commoner's garb. And now that Tanim looked closer at him, there was something flawed about his posture. Something in his shoulders, sagging ever-so-slightly.

Captain Granger continued. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll be taking the boy."

"You'll find that difficult without a gun," Broche said, waving his own for effect.

The older man laughed, "Guns, swords—all too quick. Tanim has a great debt to pay."

Tanim squinted at the man, and asked, "Wait. Who are you?"

The man exploded, "I'm the captain of the ship you destroyed at the Horizon Run!"

“You’re going to have to help me out, we destroyed a couple ships that day.
Broche?”

“Three by my count, Sir,” Broche chimed in.

“I lost command of my ship because of you!” Captain Granger screamed.

“Wait,” Tanim said. “I thought your ship was destroyed.”

The man growled with anger and frustration.

“Can we just shoot him, Tores?” one of his men asked.

Tores responded, “No. Captain Granger is a citizen of the Kingdom and member
of our King’s Navy—”

“Former member,” Captain Granger chimed in angrily. His eyes never left Tanim.

Tores continued without faltering, “He is afforded the King’s fairness and justice.
He hasn’t done anything wrong...yet.”

Broche lifted his gun. “*I can shoot him.*”

The older man signaled with his hand. Instantly a dozen muskets appeared from
the trees and brush around them.

Tores moved to place himself near the boy, but Captain Granger wagged his
finger. “If I were you, I’d drop my weapons.” He smiled.

Broche and the soldiers reluctantly dropped their weapons at their feet.

“The king will be pleased when I bring your task to fruition,” Granger said.

“Come along, boy.”

Something akin to recognition crossed Tanim's face. He addressed the older man, "You followed me from the Red Cape because you lost the race? You know, that's a bit unsportsman-like."

At that the man drew his sword, bringing it within a foot of Tanim's face. "I am Captain Granger—remember that name, Tanim! You brought this upon yourself, you *circled* my ship. After that I was declared unfit to return to the Alahvin Navy. I won't regain my honor until I've defeated you, but I won't stop there. I'm going to break you down to nothing."

Tanim's eyes narrowed. "I suggest you put that away, Captain Granger, or you won't like how this turns out for you." Tanim turned to the boy, "You aren't going anywhere, David."

Captain Granger grabbed David's wrist. Tanim stepped forward to stop him, but Captain Granger slashed out with his sword, causing Tanim to step back. "I warn you, Tanim, I'm quite accomplished with this."

"And I warn you," Tanim said, pulling his gun from inside his coat, "I fight dirty." Tanim flicked his wrist, and the barrel of his gun began spinning. Uneven arcs of lightning flicked off a crack in the barrel. The brush around them rustled with the sounds of men who were suddenly uncomfortable about the situation; a few of the muskets disappeared.

"I didn't want to finish this here." The two men circled each other, Granger keeping the boy between them. He gritted his teeth. "So be it." He lunged.

There was a sudden burst of light in their midst and an instantaneous concussive blast that knocked Tanim onto his back.

For several minutes only the sound of wind and rain filled the world.

It took a moment for Tanim to regain himself. He attempted to stand, but the ground seemed uneven. His ears rung with a tinny whine. His eyes ached, attempting to adjust to the sudden darkness. He stumbled around. Someone nearby leaned in heavily to support him. Tanim's vision was still fuzzy, but he could make out his Quartermaster, Broche. Like Tanim, Broche appeared to be having difficulty seeing.

"What was that, Broche?" The words stuttered out of Tanim's mouth.

"I think..." Broche coughed, and Tanim thought he saw smoke come from the man's mouth. "I think it was...lightning, Sir."

"That would explain why I can't see." Tanim rubbed at his eyes, looking at the ground around them. "But why is everyone sleeping?" Around them the King's Fist lay scattered across the clearing.

"They're not sleeping, Sir. They're dead."

Behind them they heard someone stumble.

A gruff voice coughed out, "What the gods was *that*?"

"Curse it all, why couldn't he die too?" Tanim stumbled and turned around, catching sight of Captain Granger. He was in the same condition they were. "Captain Granger...we're taking the boy now."

Captain Granger hunched over, leaning his hands on his knees. "We've got you...surrounded." Captain Granger vomited onto the mud.

“In case you haven’t noticed, your men are dead.” Tanim gestured to the edges of the clearing, where a dozen men lay strewn about like dolls, motionless at the bases of trees and inside bushes.

Captain Granger scanned the clearing, then turned back to Tanim. “Where’s the boy?”

Tanim snapped to clarity. “Oh, no.” The words crawled from his mouth. Nearby, scattered among the knights, was the body of the boy—The One. Small curls of smoke rose from beneath the boy’s mask and the corners of his clothing.

“Yep, he’s dead,” Broche said plainly. The mask sizzled with each drop of rain that struck it. “I think the lightning hit his mask.”

“King Angel will not be happy about this, Broche. We were supposed to keep the boy safe...” Captain Granger let out a barking laugh, at which Tanim raised a single eyebrow. Tanim’s arm snapped out, pointing at Captain Granger. “But then you kidnapped him. How dare you!”

Captain Granger’s laugh was cut short. “What? I did no such thing—”

“And then you got him killed! I’d hate to be you when the King finds out about this. Let’s go, Broche.”

“I...you...” Captain Granger sputtered. Attempting to regain control of the situation, he said, “I’m not taking the boy with me. You take him!”

“I don’t think we’re going to do that,” Tanim said. He began picking up the weapons lying among the knights.

“Then...then I’ll just leave him here—”

“Abandoning the body? The King will hate to hear about that. Broche, when we get to the ship we’ll stop at the nearest city and leave a message for the Guard to look here.”

Broche added, “I have to admit, it is pretty impressive that you got the drop on five of the King’s men.”

Captain Granger stared at the bodies on the ground, unsure what to do.

“I’ll...I’ll beat you there. Tell them you left the body, all this was your doing—”

Tanim shook his head without turning around. He stooped, struggled to keep two crossbows and four, now five, swords balanced in one arm. “The word of a disgraced airship captain against that of two men. Two upstanding, *honorable* men who were here at the king’s request.”

“I...” Granger croaked.

Finally, among the scorched earth and debris, Tanim found what he was looking for. He scooped up his pistol and pointed it at Captain Granger, pulling the hammer back. “So, I guess you’ll be taking the boy with you.”

“No!”

“Well,” Tanim said. “There’s two of us and one of you, and we have all the weapons. You should hurry. I imagine you’ll want to get a lead before the Guard starts after you.”

Tentatively, and still obviously confused, Captain Granger leaned down and scooped up the boy. “This isn’t over, Tanim,” he said before he turned to leave.

“Wait,” Tanim called after him, almost laughing. “You’re not walking wherever you’re going, are you?”

Captain Granger turned, his face full of embarrassment. “No...no. I have a ship.”

Chapter Three

“The Guard is turning back!” someone called from across the deck. Captain Tanim smiled at the news.

Merryn was at the hatch beside Captain Tanim. “So, what did he do?”

“What are you talking about?” While Captain Tanim was usually even-tempered, the lilt in his tone told her she was approaching her allotted questions for the day.

“Sir,” that someone called out again. It was Scoot, one of the riggers, shouting from the port rail. “They’re, I don’t know, waving flags at us? What is that?”

Tanim looked at Broche, who shrugged.

“Are they surrendering?” Tanim called over to Scoot.

“I don’t think so.”

“Then ignore them.”

Tanim turned to the quarterdeck, but Merryn placed herself in front of him. “If there’s a prophecy about him, there’s something he was supposed to do. So, what did he do?”

“I just told you, he got hit by lightning,” Tanim said.

“No, I mean, what was the prophecy?”

Captain Tanim balked, but muttered, “The prophecy said he’d kill a Witch.”

“He killed a Witch!” The words erupted from Merryn’s mouth as Broche and V returned from below deck.

“Don’t be silly,” V chimed in. “That’s like saying he held back the ocean, or that he hand-fed a Kern.”

It was true. The Witches were a primal force of nature, one of the essences that shaped the world. *It was impossible to kill a witch, wasn't it?*

The Captain perked up. "Speaking of Kern, did you hear about Westbridge?"

Merryn winced. That word again. As a farmer, *Kern* just wasn't something one said. The word was a derision, among the foulest of names one could call another person. As a child Merryn had been reprimanded so severely by her grandmother that she never again used the word in any context.

Kern were terrible things. They were about as tall as a man, hunched over with large fists that dragged the earth ahead of them, shoveling anything and everything into their maw. They had a nearly square profile, and their skin was a light tan color, similar to doe-skin but pebbly, and impenetrable to any blade—impenetrable to almost anything, for that matter. She had heard stories of villages firing cannons at Kern, dousing them with spirits and setting them on fire, dropping boulders on them from cliffs. Nothing seemed to even startle Kern. They provided nothing; all they did was eat.

"Westbridge?" V paused in thought. "The city in Adiron? There's a Kern there?"

The Captain smiled. "Two."

"Two Kern in the Second Kingdom," Broche chimed in. "How appropriate."

Merryn heard more than a little disdain in his voice.

Captain Tanim continued, "That's actually the headline the Criers used. The Kern showed up outside the city months ago, you know how slow those things are. The city tried everything: food lures, firearms. Of course nothing worked. Funny thing is, their paths brought them face to face with each other."

“What happened, Sir?” Broche looked genuinely interested.

“They’re blocking a major intersection, staring straight at each other. I think the Kern may be as confused as the city is.”

V looked between the Captain and Broche. “Our coffers are a little low. I think it might be a good time to sell some snake oil.”

“Maybe.” Captain Tanim pondered. “Looks like we’re headed that direction anyway, and we’re going to need supplies.”

“What hair-brained thing do you have planned now, Captain?” V asked.

He looked at her incredulously before answering. “We need to talk with Anaise. She’s still in Westbridge, right?”

“The Reliker? I believe so, Sir.”

“Didn’t you steal something from her?” V asked.

“*We* borrowed it. We needed it more than she did.” Tanim glanced to Merryn and added, “I gave it back later.”

Broche and V exchanged a glance.

“Is something wrong with the relic you just stole?” Merryn asked.

“I just said I didn’t—oh, you meant the one from the race this morning. Yes, the center fell out when I tried to use it.” He reached into his pocket and tossed a fist-sized object to Broche. “Any ideas? The craftsmanship is excellent.”

Broche turned it over in his hand, scratched its surface and, surprised, sniffed. “Soap.”

“Soap?”

“Yes, Sir. Soap.”

Captain Tanim stared at Broche before responding, “Ah, you mean soapstone. Like the statues outside the—”

“No, sir,” Broche interrupted. “Soap. Like the kind for washing.”

“It can’t be...the detail—”

By now V had gotten hold of the carved cylinder and was miming washing her armpits.

Captain Tanim dismissed their comments with a gesture of his hand. “Whatever is supposed to be in the center is missing. I was hoping Anaise might know what it is, or at least be able to read the stone itself.”

Merryn was having difficulty following the conversation, the places, the people. She had a vague idea what a relic was: an object from the old world, often imbued with some ancient magic.

“Is the relic, does it do something?” she asked.

Captain Tanim replied, “It’s a null-relic, it will—”

“*Should*,” Broche spoke over the captain.

Captain Tanim cleared his throat loudly. “It *will* cancel out magic in its proximity. I tried it on our walk back but it wasn’t until I was back on the ship that I realized why it wasn’t working.”

Merryn was still missing something. “And you want to cancel...”

V answered curtly. “The captain is cursed. That’s what all this nonsense always is. Only, these ideas of his only make things worse. The last relic we found added another

curse, so now he's got two to deal with."

The captain was about to say something but he stopped himself. Merryn watched him swallow and glance toward Broche. The quartermaster remained stoic, pretended not to notice the captain. Only the corner of Broche's eye moved, fell on the captain, and his brows narrowed for the briefest moment.

V started laughing. "The new one flips him upside down. Only sometimes, though. The magic must be fading."

The captain was starting to look uncomfortable, in that he was trying to hide his discomfort. He had the same look on his face that Merryn's brother got when he'd been in the larder.

"I don't know where he got the first one," V said. "Probably some caster he angered."

Curses. Merryn focused on the word. *The curses.* A forgotten memory fluttered at the back of her mind.

"...but he never thinks of the consequences," V continued. "Not even with the best of his ideas, few of those that he has."

"I've thought through this a great deal," Captain Tanim said. "Tell me one thing I'm overlooking."

V smiled like a cat cornering a mouse. "How about this: Even if this relic worked—which it won't—if it cancels out magic in its proximity, the *Lady Ansa* won't fly."

The captain paused. Finally, he said, "We'll work around it."

The curses. Merryn's memory was cloudy, the details unclear. She was struck by a spell during the Horizon Run and had blacked out from the pain. But just before that her vision...*It had cleared*, her mind told her, but that didn't make sense. Merryn had a vague memory of swarming masses covering the captain's body, and something trying to eat her from the inside. Her right arm tingled oddly. She made a fist and tensed her muscles, trying to shake off the sensation, unsure what was causing it.

By the time Merryn looked up V and the Captain were storming away, still arguing.

V and the Captain had a curious relationship; Merryn originally thought the two were in love. Indeed Captain Tanim's motivations when Merryn was last aboard, the whole reason they entered the deathtrap that was the Horizon Run, revolved around rescuing 'Lady V.' Though the two argued like an old married couple, from the moment they had returned V to the ship both V and the Captain seemed nothing but irritated at having to be around each other.

Briefly she wondered if this had something to do with the curses.

"Crewman Merryn!" The voice was loud, booming. There was only one person aboard with a voice like that.

"Broche, sir." Merryn quickly stood at attention, eyes ahead, arms taut at her side.

"I believe you have duties to attend to now."

"Sir?" This was the first she had heard of this. She didn't expect a relaxing trip when she signed on; everybody pulled their weight aboard the *Lady*. Merryn expected she would again be confined to the hold sifting powder, a boring but important job. Or

perhaps Broche had in mind to expand upon her firearm lessons. As a full member of the crew, she would eventually need to learn to fight—

“The deck is filthy. Get a bucket and brush from the galley and get to work.”

Merryn was taken aback. This was the same task she was given as punishment during her last term aboard. She stuttered. “Yes, sir.”

Del, the ship’s cook, had demanded Merryn return the brush when she was done. He handed it over, having just scrubbed out a pot with it. She thought about this as she scrubbed the deck, black foam rising beneath the brush. It explained the flavor of a lot of their meals.

She leaned into the brush. There was so much dirt and oil on deck that only now did she see that the wood was a redder tint than she first thought, and that the deck also had a glossy shine under the dirt. She had started at the midline of the ship. When she reached the port rail, leaving a stripe of clean behind her, she leaned up to stretch her aching back. She grew squeamish, realizing she was kneeling exactly where the body had landed not thirty minutes before.

Movement along the rail caught her eye. It was slight, something small flapping with the wind. A sheet of paper, she realized, wrapped around one of the rail spindles.

She glanced around. No one was looking in her direction. Scooting forward, she pretended to scrub. She reached the rail and took the paper.

The scrawl was far messy, blocky. A boy’s handwriting, that was certain. Thankfully her aunt had taken the time to teach her to read, though the reading was

difficult.

The soldiers say they are delivering me to another ship, a vessel not aligned with any kingdom. They suspect I am in danger, and that no ship bearing the Alahvin flag would be safe, and that subterfuge, not strength, is the best option here.

It was a page from a journal, she guessed. There was a date at the top of this page. This was written just over a month ago. *Was it kept by the man dropped aboard the Lady Ansa?* If so, the page may have come free from a bound set of pages, and there might be more on his...body? Merryn shuddered at the thought, but her curiosity was easily getting the better of her. They wouldn't keep him in the galley—people ate there. Putting him in a room seemed like a good idea until she realized that in an enclosed space, especially one below deck where it got warm and there was little air flow, the man's body would quickly become foul. And just like that she had it. There was one very obvious location they'd keep him.

She made her way to the bottom deck.

Once in the hold, surrounded by barrels and crates of supplies, gunpowder, an extra cannon, salted and raw foodstuffs for the crew, Merryn wondered if Broche and the captain would actually keep a body here. She hadn't realized she'd brought the brush with her. Turning it over in her hands, she considered the ship again. No, there wasn't anywhere else the body could be—the man was hidden here.

Merryn ignored the several dozen barrels of gunpowder. Regardless of what the captain wanted, Broche wouldn't leave anything to chance around the powder. She looked around the cannon, behind crates of citrus and vegetables. Nothing. She was about

to give up when she looked to the far end of the hull and saw a solitary door.

The brig.

The door was sturdy and fit tightly in its frame. With some effort she forced it open. Large chunks of ice scattered outward and around her feet.

Inside the body was lying there, face-up. She kept her eyes averted, trying to look only with her peripheral vision and steering even this from the man's face.

A quarter-inch thick sheet of ice covered the floor of the brig. Merryn knelt beside him, but without a way to anchor herself she inched this way and that with the sway of the ship. There were no pockets on his cloak, inside or out. This upset Merryn, but she decided she had come this far, and began patting at the rest of the man's clothes. The ice had soaked his through his shirt and trousers. Now wet, her hands were getting colder with each minute she spent in the chilled brig. Patting along the man's left side her hand caught in a few leather straps behind his back. It was a pouch, just the perfect size to store a journal.

The pouch was attached to his belt. She tried to be gentle as she tugged, pushed, pulled. The man's body shifted to and fro along the ice, slush gathering along his sides. Still, Merryn was unable to pull it free. She decided to reach in and take whatever was there. She loosened the straps that held the pouch closed. Peering inside, she could make out paper. She reached in and, to her satisfaction, felt a bound leather book. She closed her hand around the book—

The pouch cinched closed on her wrist.

Horried, Merryn attempted to stand, but the pouch tugged back and she slipped

on the ice, falling face-first on the man's chest. She stifled her scream, lips pressed nearly closed, and pushed herself up with her free left hand.

The man was still dead, his eyes still closed and his appallingly scarred face empty. *Magic*. It had to be. She pulled again and again, but the pouch was caught firm around her wrist. "I hate magic!" she yelled at the pouch.

Decorum had gone overboard. She shoved and pulled, dragging the body toward the door of the brig. The man caught, legs and head crosswise against the door frame. Merryn braced her foot against the door frame, then against the body. She let go of the book, thinking that perhaps then the pouch would let her go.

It didn't.

And then, to her dismay, she heard a commotion coming from above. Footsteps, dozens of them, clanged along the top deck, the sound carrying from the hatch on the main deck to her. Armored footsteps. Someone had boarded the *Lady Ansa*.

And they were descending the stairs.

Chapter Four

“Sir.”

Tanim didn't look up. He was preoccupied with his thoughts: The dead boy. The null relic. The Witches. Tanim and Broche had discussed Witches in the past.

There were the obvious things, the things everyone knew: How dangerous Witches are. The things they touched become blighted. They're an unstoppable force of nature.

There were things the learned men, like Broche, knew: That by all pre-historic accounts and ancient tomes, there were fifteen Witches. The reason Rayar was so dangerous was that the event that ruined Madri, which had set the world and its peoples back so far—whatever it was, it started there.

And there were the things only he knew: Rayar had been the Witches' home, though he doubted any remained there. It wasn't called Rayar, either, so long ago, but when he tried to remember what it was called his mind blurred. There were actually seventeen Witches, but only sixteen remained alive, and another was missing. But again, when he tried to think about that missing Witch his mind refused to remember. He instead turned his thoughts to the tapestry he kept in his quarters...

Still lost in thought, he caught sight of Merryn leaving her bucket on deck. Watched her take the steps at the hatch to descend to the lower decks. She held a piece of paper in her hand.

“Captain Tanim, Sir!”

“Broche, you're interrupting my daydreaming. What is so important that—”

Broche stood at the starboard quarterdeck, near the navigation table. At first Tanim thought Broche was going to point out some boring navigational detail. But Broche wasn't looking at the maps, but at the sky beyond.

There, bearing dozens of resplendent red flags, was a warship. The ship itself was about the same size as the *Lady Ansa*, but at a quick count Tanim saw it carried twice as many guns. At the forecastle Tanim could see one of its crew standing by. They carried flags similar to the ones the Guard ship at the race had been waving.

"Well, this has been an excellent morning, Broche. I wonder what adventures await us tomorrow."

"They're signaling us, Sir. They want to come aboard."

"Let's tell them no." He laughed. Broche, despite his attempt to remain stoic, also laughed.

"I'm certain they'd knock us from the sky, Sir."

Tanim sighed. "Stand ready, men. Prepare to be boarded. It appears our guests this morning will be the Alahvin Navy."

Within moments the ship had sidled alongside the *Lady Ansa*. When they were within fifty feet the crew of the Alahvin warship tossed grapples across the gap. The crew of the *Lady Ansa* fixed these to the gunwales. Attached, the Alahvin crew pulled the ships within twenty feet of each other.

"Permission to come aboard," someone called across from the other ship. The voice was small, barely carrying over the chill wind.

"How do you want to play this, sir?" Broche asked.

“We have the dead body of a prophesied hero in our hold, and we stole a relic from a race that has yet to start. ‘Amenable’ sounds best.”

“We should probably be forthcoming with the disc. If that’s all they want, we’ll get away with a warning. Of course, you’ll have to pretend to be sorry.”

“That’s fine. I can steal it back later. Go ahead, clear them to board.”

The Navy crew stood ready, ropes in hand, waiting for a response. Broche’s voice boomed across to them. “Granted!” It was a voice that carried over the screeching gulls, over the wind, over the flapping of the ships’ sails. Tamin saw more than one of the Navy crew flinch.

The men swung over, landing heavily on the deck of the *Lady Ansa*. Each bore a crossbow or musket, and wore heavy traveling armor. The leather bracers and greaves of each man were dyed red and marked with the Phoenix. They quickly formed ranks, two lines of ten. From their midst another stepped out in front. He wore the bars of a lieutenant, pauldrons marked with three bars, and an air of self-importance. The man’s face and hands were unmarred, his blonde hair too well kept.

This man has never seen battle, Tanim knew.

The man paced back and forth before his men. When he spoke, the voice was forced. “I am Commander Jared, of His Majesty’s Navy. We’ve been tasked with monitoring the border, and recently received a notice of some concern. There is an article from Madri’s past, I believe common parlance would have it ‘a relic of the old world.’ We simply call it *contraband*. It is an article of some power. As a loyal subject of His Majesty, I’m sure you would abhor such an item falling into the hands of another

kingdom. So I ask you, as one of King Angel's loyal subjects do you have any goods or items you wish to declare?"

Tanim straightened his longcoat, making sure it hung evenly on both sides.

"We—"

Commander Jared interrupted, "And you are?"

"Captain Tanim." One of the men took notes as Tanim spoke.

"*Captain* Tanim," Commander Jared repeated, disdain in his voice. It was clear he did not respect the title of one outside His Majesty's service.

"Yes, Captain Tanim, loyal to His Majesty King Angel. We have only one item to declare." Tanim motioned to Broche.

Broche made to move toward Tanim's quarters, stopped himself. He humbly asked Commander Jared, "By your leave?"

Jared motioned with a hand, the gesture just short of dismissive. For the moments Broche was gone, the commander said nothing. While his men stood at attention, Jared took in Tanim's ship.

Broche returned with the disc, presenting it with two hands. Jared took it, turning it over, and showed it to the soldier. More notes. Words were whispered. Some of the nearby soldiers tightened their grip on their muskets.

"Tanim—"

"Yes?" Tanim recognized the slight, but fought to ignore it. "*Commander* Jared?"

"I appreciate you being so... forthright, and accepting of our visit." He handed the disc back to Broche. "I'm sure you won't mind if we inspect your ship."

“Not at all.” Tanim leaned to Broche, whispering, “This is bad. Got a plan?”

Broche shrugged his shoulders.

“Front rank, with me. Back rank, secure this deck. Keep the *captain’s* men occupied. We’ll start in the hold and work our way topside.”

Merryn stumbled up the ramp from the hold onto the gun deck, the dead man hanging clumsily over her shoulders like an ox’s yoke. The man wasn’t much taller than she, and similar in weight. Right now she appreciated her time spent plowing and making repairs to the farm. If this had been late winter, she wouldn’t have been nearly as strong. It wasn’t the weight of the man—or boy—that was making this difficult, but that one of her arms was fully extended above her and angled back into the man’s pouch.

She turned toward the bow when she reached the top of the ramp, but heard heavy feet on the steps above. She quickly turned around to avoid where the stairs opened out, heading aft instead.

“...would make it easier if you told me what you were looking for.” It was Captain Tanim’s voice, shallowly hiding his annoyance.

“Your ship is headed toward Alahvin’s border, so it will be inspected.” The voice was demanding, and more than a little pompous, Merryn thought. “As soldiers in his majesty’s service...” The voices trailed off behind her as she turned a corner.

The commander's men opened every container in the hold, fishing around in dried breadstuff, preserved fruits, and pickles. Turning over cheese wheels. Looking for secret compartments, Tanim guessed. *A good idea. I'll have to remember that for later.* Lids to the containers went back on poorly or not at all.

"What is the door in the back? Is that your brig?" Commander Jared asked.

The door was poorly lit, just a shadow along the wall. Tanim had hoped they wouldn't see it.

"Is anyone in there?"

Tanim balked, but recovered. "Not unless someone is trying to hide from their duties."

Jared motioned his men to the brig door. "Is it locked?"

Curse me, why didn't I lock it? I could have pretended to have lost the key. "No, it's—"

"Never mind," Jared said. "I can see it's ajar. Inspect the brig, men."

The soldiers opened the door, and one called out, "Commander Jared," from inside.

Jared disappeared into the brig.

"Well, Broche, looks like it's time for Plan B." Tanim felt for the gun at his side. *Contraband.* The word weighed on his mind. He approached the brig, trying to be subtle, trying to get the drop on—

"Fish, Tanim?" It was Jared, calling from inside.

"Pardon?"

“I assume you’ve been transporting fish?”

Tanim reached the brig and looked inside. The soldiers had brushed the crushed ice aside, revealing the floor of the hold. There was no one inside.

“Yes, uh, rapierfish, Commander Jared.”

“Rapierfish. Best when cooked in their own juices. You were right not to salt them. I used to spend time with my father off Hope’s Hook catching rapierfish.”

Hope’s Hook. That confirmed it. Jared’s father had probably bought him the stripes he wore.

Commander Jared seemed slightly more amicable toward Tanim as he said, “Let’s continue our inspection, shall we?” Tanim, on the other hand, was growing increasingly annoyed.

“Eat up, none of this is going to keep now,” Tanim said to Broche. The big man was trying, and failing, to replace the lid on a barrel of flour.

Once the soldiers were past them on the ramp Broche whispered, “No body?”

“I don’t understand it,” Tanim said. “It’s not like he could have walked away.”

Merryn walked, tired and directionless, through the gun deck. She passed the port cannons toward the stern of the ship, thankfully unattended, and found herself in a familiar place. During her first trip aboard the *Lady Ansa* Merryn had been given her own room away from the rest of the crew. At the time the room was unoccupied, but based on the possessions inside, it clearly belonged to someone.

Merryn looked at the door. She was losing time. This was the stern of the ship. She couldn't get further back unless she jumped off. She thought to turn around, maybe try the starboard side of the ship, but again heard the heavy footsteps approaching. By the sounds of it there were a dozen soldiers approaching, and there was no way Merryn could get around them now. With her free hand she swung open the door and entered.

A pistol greeted her, inches from her face, its hammer primed. Lady V sat on the floor of her room, eyes on her work, but the pistol was perfectly aimed. Brushes, polishing cloths, and a handful of pistol parts lay on the floor around Lady V. The smell of some unknown mechanical oil filled the room.

No, not Lady V, just 'V,' Merryn reminded herself. No one aboard the ship called her Lady V, not even the captain. The one time Merryn had called her Lady V, V had laughed in her face.

No, 'lady' isn't a word Merryn would use to describe V. Merryn always thought of another word.

Dangerous.

"What are you doing in my room?" V asked, finally looking up.

"I'm stuck. I can't get my hand out of—"

"Unsuitable answer. Your problems are none of my concern."

Merryn was flustered, and had to work to get her words out. "I'm...need the...there's soldiers."

V jumped to her feet, holstering the pistol. "Soldiers? Do you mean the Guard?"

"No, I think it's the Navy."

“And you brought that body to my room?”

“I was running from them, and this is where I ended up.”

“Girl...” V’s voice trailed off.

Merryn caught herself staring past V at the bed. The headboard. The not-so-small arsenal Merryn knew was hidden in its secret panel. She thought to look away, but it was too late. V followed Merryn’s glance, and saw where Merryn was looking.

“You! You’ve been in my room!”

“No, I, well yes, but—”

“How dare you! Why in the great blue would you—let me see your hand!”

Merryn bent at her knees and waist, then rolled the body from her shoulders onto the floor.

She half stood, her hand still firmly held by the pouch.

“Take your hand out of there.”

With the body off her shoulders Merryn realized how tired she was, and her head was beginning to ache with stress. She looked up at V, “I can’t. The bag closed on my hand. I’m pretty sure it’s some kind of magic.”

“Well, then there’s only one solution.” V reached over her bed, taking the cutlass hanging on the wall. She stood over Merryn, raising the cutlass above her head.

From Merryn’s half-standing position, V was a slender silhouette, backlit by the multi-paned windows behind her. “What are you—?”

“It’s impossible to hide both of you, so you either take your hand out of the pouch or I start chopping. You have three seconds...”

“You can’t just—”

“Two...”

“I can’t—”

“One...”

Merryn braced herself, pulling away with all her strength, just as she had done before. The pouch’s ties were pulled taut between the dead body and Merryn’s effort. Inside Merryn something gave, some reserve of strength she was unaware she possessed. She briefly recalled the first time she broke the plow, driving the oxen into a rock, urging them on until the share broke free from the beam.

Merryn fell violently back onto her butt and back, striking her head on the deck.

“I assure you, you’ll find no contraband on this ship,” Tanim said. Jared and the rest of the Guard had been on nearly every inch of the ship now, and there were countless overturned containers left in their wake.

“Is that because there isn’t any, or because it’s too well hidden?”

Tanim and Broche looked at each other briefly, then back to Jared. Both replied, words stumbling over each other.

“No contraband,” Broche said. “We run a clean ship.”

“Not for a while,” Tanim muttered and quickly corrected himself. “Er, we don’t do that.”

Broche looked at Tanim, narrowing his eyes, but thankfully Jared wasn’t listening

to them. He had already wandered away and past the aft-most cannon on the gun deck.

Ahead Tanim could hear talking, escalated talking, coming from V's berth. There was a crashing sound, punctuated by a horrid scream. Merryn's scream, Tanim was certain. It was the same scream she made when the boy's dead body had fallen onto the deck of the *Lady Ansa*.

Oh, no, he thought to himself, just as Jared's head spun toward Tanim. Tanim doubted he could have been wearing a more guilty expression.

"Keep the captain back!" Jared gestured for several of his men to follow him toward V's berth.

Four of the soldiers placed themselves in Tanim's way, crossbows drawn. Tanim looked at Broche on his left. This was a toss-up. Fists or swords, they could take four men, sure. But there was no delay on those crossbows and no chance of a misfire.

"Open the door!" Jared called into V's room. When there was no response he ordered the door opened. Two of his men readying weapons, a third kicked the door opened. All rushed in, followed by Jared, a dual-shot pistol in his hand.

There was a brief commotion. Tanim was certain they were found out.

"Broche, I'd prefer not to go to prison," Tanim whispered.

"Wouldn't be the first time, Sir." Though Broche didn't draw a weapon, Tanim knew his quartermaster was ready. He heard the tightening of skin, Broche balling his hands into fists.

"You ladies be careful," Jared said, smiling and stepping out of V's berth.

"Thank you, Commander. I don't know what we would have done without you."

That voice was so sweet, so endearing, it took Tanim a long while to realize it was V's voice.

"Captain Tanim, I believe were done here. We'll see ourselves topside."

"No, Quartermaster Broche will escort you up. I'd like to check on...the ladies? To, uh, make sure they're okay."

"Of course."

"Safe travels, Commander Jared," Tanim said.

"Witch and Weather," Jared said, offering his hand to Tanim.

"Yes, Witch and Weather," Tanim replied without sincerity.

The soldiers disappeared up the stairwell. Tanim stood for several seconds, dumbfounded, before he entered the room.

Merryn sat on the floor, pistol nearby, finger in her mouth. "You didn't have to actually drop the hammer on my hand!"

V looked at Tanim. "The reaction had to be, how did you put it, Captain? Ah, yes, *genuine*."

The ship swayed.

"That'll be them shoving off." V walked to the porthole. "So long as you're here, give us a hand. We've got to get this in before we show port."

"What?"

V opened the porthole and leaned out. When she returned she was holding a rope. She handed it to Tanim.

"Lower that slowly, we're going to grab the ballast right here." V and Merryn

reached out the window, leaning precariously, while Tanim struggled against the rope.

They brought the ballast in, a large canvas sack large enough...

Of course. Large enough to hold a body.

“You do realize he’s salted?” V said, opening the sack. The boy lay inside, clothing damp from the ice, but his body looking just as it had the day he died.

“What?”

“*Salted.* These shackles are magic.” V pointed to metal rings, shackles without chains, which the boy wore on his wrists and ankles. “Bounty hunters use these to transport their quarry. Keeps the body from rotting, very useful for the, ‘Or dead’ part of Alive or Dead.”

“How do you know—” but Tanim interrupted himself, V staring plainly at him. “Oh, right.”

V tapped on the shackles with a finger. “I’m assuming that adventurer, Wakeland, put these on the boy.”

“Well, that’s excellent. Now, let’s all head topside. It’s been an exciting morning, full of misadventure and people we’ll run into again at the most inopportune time. I think we’ve all earned a big breakfast. Let’s go, this food isn’t going to keep forever.”

Chapter Five

“Oh, wait! This is it,” Captain Tanim said, gesturing to the door of a shop.

Broche lowered the cart he was pushing, a two-wheeled wooden stand, really. The carpenters had taken a day and a half to build it. All that time Merryn had been filling glass jars with grease from the galley, tar, and colored watery concoctions from whatever could be found about the ship. Before they left the ship the captain again put her in the green dress and ordered her to smile and nod if he or anyone else addressed her, but not to speak directly to anyone outside the crew.

“You want to talk to Anaise before we sell our goods?” V asked.

“Probably a prudent idea,” Broche said. “Best to get out of here quickly once we’ve sold our wares.”

So far as Merryn could tell, the shop was the same as any other in the city, except for the charcoal scrawl surrounding the door frame. The walls were solidly constructed, making up simple square structures. They were oak, which made sense: it was a strong wood, and was the most common tree Merryn saw as they flew toward the city. The shops were set up in threes, perhaps to save resources or labor, but it meant that each ‘block’ of shops was three separate storefronts. Right now the captain was standing before the middle door of a block.

“Are you sure this is her shop?” V asked.

“The markings here, it’s a runic tree pattern, part of the crest from King Rayar the Second. Anaise is one of the few people in the world who would know this.”

Merryn looked at the door frame, realizing what she dismissed as a “scrawl” just

moments ago was actually an ornate, twisting image. Tree branches reached out or folded in on themselves, here children were supported upon its leaves, over here a man plucked fruit from a branch. The detail was so fine and so compact that on first glance her eyes only saw the thick lines the full image made.

“Have you been to Rayar?” Merryn asked, somewhat impressed.

Captain Tanim hesitated only briefly before answering, “No.”

“Then why do you know what it is?”

Captain Tanim stared at Merryn for a few seconds. The way he paused, she thought she might have offended him. But he averted his eyes and said, “Let’s not stand around here.”

As the captain reached for the door, V slapped his hand away. With a scornful look Captain Tanim reached again. This time Broche redirected the captain’s hand away from the latch.

“Wait.” Broche placed himself between the now annoyed Captain Tanim and the door.

“For what?”

“We aren’t ready yet,” V replied.

Captain Tanim spread his hands questioningly. In response V and Broche drew their firearms and began prepping them. Merryn stepped back, surprised, but reached to the pistol at the front of her belt.

“Don’t you dare,” V said without looking up. “I don’t want some excited kid shooting me.”

“Why don’t you stay back while we enter, Crewman Merryn,” Broche said. “You can come in behind us.”

Merryn realized that, since returning, this was the first thing Broche had said to her that wasn’t an order.

“I’ll take the left,” V said, pulling back the hammer on her pistol. “Your pan clear?”

With a sliding click Broche disengaged something on the side of his blunderbuss. “Clear and ready. You can open the door now, sir.”

Captain Tanim lifted the latch. As soon as the door creaked its slightest, V kicked it inward and entered. She was followed closely by Broche, who had to stoop slightly to clear the six-foot frame. Merryn entered behind the captain.

“Hands in the air!” V shouted.

In the center of the room stood a woman not much taller than Merryn, dark hair pulled into a series of tight curls atop her head. Her back was to them. At the commotion, the woman’s arms shot into the air.

“Don’t rob me. Business has been slow, I haven’t any money.”

Broche’s deep voice boomed out, reverberating in the wooden walls, “Do you have a weapon on you?”

“No, no I...” The woman’s voice trailed away in recognition. She turned, dropped her arms.

Captain Tanim smiled. “Hello, Anaise. We need your help with something.”

“Dammit, now I wish someone was robbing me. What do *you* want?”

The Reliker's shop smelled of rotten leather, waterlogged wood and ten centuries of dust. The space was crowded with an untold number of items. Shelves along the walls were filled with small glittering metal and carved crystals, and ancient weapons hung from racks. A table near the middle had the odd shield, figures carved from stone, and stacks upon stacks of books. Other items hung from the ceiling by nets, things that looked as if they might have been alive at some point. At the most inconvenient places along the floor sat large carved stone items: gargoyles, protective runes, and a set of column-like stones with holes large enough for her fist bored through them.

All of it was from the old world, the forgotten history of Madri. With increasing awe Merryn realized that some of this stuff was likely from Rayar, the forbidden continent. She ran her hand along the wooden figure, nearly as tall as herself, feeling at the knot cleverly hidden in the maiden's crown. The wood at the base was splintered, the maiden's legs missing below the knee.

At the back of the store Anaise sifted through boxes, packing and repacking their contents as Captain Tanim, Broche and V watched. Anaise wore tight-fitting trousers and a leather harness, its three belts strapping around her waist and torso.

"I'm not even supposed to be here today." Anaise lifted a wood crate, and the buckles of her harness rapped against it. She slammed it onto the table, kicking up whorls of dust around her. "The guy got sick and couldn't come in..."

Captain Tanim motioned to Broche, who removed the stone disc from his pack.

Before the captain could speak, Anaise interrupted him. "I'm not helping you."

“We thought you might find this interesting,” Captain Tanim retorted.

Anaise continued to work, clearly busy-work. Merryn watched her load and unload the same items several times, moving around the store and away from the captain.

“I’m not even going to look at what you brought, Tanim. I don’t want anything to do with you. Every time I get involved things get awful.”

“What are you talking about?” The captain looked genuinely hurt.

Anaise stopped to face Captain Tanim. “Faravel?”

“That was—”

“Alina? If you recall, we all spent a little time in prison there.”

“I got us out,” the captain replied.

“There’s an entire *kingdom* I can’t walk through without risking arrest.”

V cut in, pistol poised. “I might convince you to help.”

“Don’t you start, V,” Anaise said. “You’re not going to just shoot me.”

“I might. This conversation is boring me.”

“You won’t, because we have some settling to do. I might not beat you, but by the Witches I’ll make sure you go through the rest of your life with...with an eye-patch, or a peg leg, or something.”

V’s eyes narrowed at Anaise. “Is that a promise?”

Anaise swallowed hard, but nodded.

“Well, whenever you’re ready. I’ll be waiting.” V uncocked her pistol and holstered it. “Sorry, Captain. We have matters to settle.”

“Anaise—” Broche broke in, but was cut off.

“Broche, please stay out of it. Honestly, I don’t know why you travel with Captain Tanim.”

Broche breathed in heavily. “I, too, have matters to settle.” He looked down at Anaise, nearly two heads taller than her. “You’re the best person, maybe the only person that can help us right now.”

“Broche, I can’t.” She looked at Captain Tanim with contempt. “I have no problem with you, Broche. After Alina, I even kind of owe you...” Her voice trailed off as she realized her mistake. “Dammit.”

He looked down at the woman with a slight smile. Broche opened a hand toward the captain. Tanim slapped the disc into Broche’s hand.

Regretfully Anaise reached out her hands for the disc.

Anaise turned the disc over, examining both sides. She scratched its stone surface, then ran her fingers along the text that circled the disc’s perimeter. “Isn’t this the prize for that race?”

“That’s why we have it, we won!” the captain smiled, adding, “Feel free to congratulate us.”

“You were right, I am interested in this.” Unexpectedly, Anaise slammed the disc onto the table, kicking up more dust. “That’s why I picked it up in Rayar six months ago!” She crossed the room to the far corner and began shuffling through stacks of papers and bound ledgers. She seized a sheet, lifting it triumphantly in her fist, and returned to stand in front of the captain. She slammed the paper on top of the disc. It was the same flyer Merryn had just days prior, the one promoting the race. “It starts tomorrow.”

“Okay, maybe I was exaggerating our degree of victory—”

“Exaggerating?” Anaise threw her hands into the air. “The starting shot hasn’t even been fired. You aren’t even registered for the race!”

Captain Tanim raised a finger. “Ah. That is where you are incorrect. We *are* registered for the race.” He looked across the store, catching Merryn’s attention. Her face warmed. She slowly lowered herself out of view behind a shelf.

Anaise ignored Merryn, slapping the captain in the chest. “Why didn’t you just participate in it? It wouldn’t even be a competition. You would legitimately own that disc.”

“A month from now,” Captain Tanim answered, all mocking aside. “I don’t have time for that.”

“What do you even want this for?” Anaise asked.

Now Captain Tanim picked up the disc, running his fingers along a portion of the text. “Have you read this portion here?”

“I could spend the rest of my life translating and only get through half the stuff in this shop. It wouldn’t get me anywhere. Rayar is as dead as Kern dung. I only go there because people are stupid enough to pay top coin for this stuff.”

“You don’t believe that,” Tanim said. “You’re looking for...something...there.” Captain Tanim pressed his fingers through his hair, squinted his eyes as if gnats were at his face. Merryn had seen this from the captain more than once since she returned.

“I’m done with Rayar,” Anaise said. “Once this place is sold, I’m done reliking.”

The captain simply raised an eyebrow, a finger resting on the disc.

“You’re not leaving until I look at this, are you?”

“We’ve got a cart outside,” Tanim said. “We’re going to steal money from innocent strangers, but besides that my day is empty.”

Anaise sighed, took the disk. Her mouth shaped and reshaped the ancient script. She whispered a word Merryn didn’t recognize, still working out the ancient language. “Avoid? No, no. A *void*, but not an empty space. More like... getting rid of—*neutralize*. That’s probably a better explanation.” Anaise looked up at the captain. “Ah. That’s why you’re interested in this. Your curse.”

Captain Tanim nodded solemnly.

“*Curses*. He’s got a new one,” V said. She only pretended to stifle a laugh.

The captain gave V an annoyed look.

“My favorite was the belt,” Broche said, smiling.

V let out a howling laugh, all pretense gone. “Oh, the belt, I forgot about that one!”

“If you’ll recall, the belt is done and gone,” the captain said, attempting to regain control of the room. “We had it less than a day—“

“But what a day!” V interrupted.

Captain Tanim continued. “...and when I finally got it off I destroyed it. It’s been erased from existence.” He patted the large-barreled gun at his side. “Regardless, we’re not here to reminisce. Anaise, please. What does the rest of this say?”

Anaise looked at it, rubbed at her eyes. “Funny. I can see that the words are different, but Heavens be, in my mind I keep reading the same few words over and over.”

She pushed it back into the captain's hands. "This is probably cursed, too. I'm done with it."

Captain Tanim took it, looked at its surface. He, too, rubbed his eyes. "Can you at least tell us where you got this?"

"I told you, Rayar."

"Well, since I'd rather not spend the rest of my life scouring a *continent*, perhaps you could be more specific."

Anaise picked up her crate again. "I'd love to help you...no, that's a lie. I'm hating every minute you're here. I'm only doing this for Broche, and because I want you to leave. But I can't—"

"Then tell us. Where is it from, and where is the other piece?"

"I won't—"

"Anaise, I'm going to stay here until—"

"If you'd let me finish my thought!" Anaise cut in. "I was about to say that I can't tell you where it's from because I *personally* didn't find it. I always take an expedition of ten. We all gather whatever looks interesting. Most people get sick if they stay in Rayar too long, so every expedition is a bit of a smash and grab. Since there's no way we can bring everything back, we pool everything, and pack whatever seems the most valuable. Lucky for one of us," she eyed the captain, "I remember approving that disc. Let me see what I have in my logs."

Anaise disappeared in the back room briefly, and returned with a purple-dyed leather tome.

“Purple?” Merryn asked.

“It’s my favorite color. I found this book in Rayar and I liked the way it looked. It was lodged in a pillar of Stone, so I had to work to get it free.” Anaise flipped to the end of the log and worked backwards, finally stopping at an entry.

“Ha...of course.”

“Good news?” Captain Tanim said, hopefully.

“Of course not. Why would anything ever be easy?” Anaise cleared her throat, then wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. A smear of black dust and dirt spread across her face below her eye.

“Anaise?” Broche, towering over the Reliker, placed a hand on her shoulder.

“That expedition was difficult. I didn’t remember that the disc and that expedition were tied together. I think I’m trying to forget.” Anaise ran her hand along several lines of the ledger, obviously reminiscing. She stroked one of the pages.

“At first I wasn’t sure what it was, a branch, or maybe an animal that had fallen from the forest canopy. In the dark we couldn’t see that smoke trail they give off. The expedition was going really well, so maybe we were a little too drunk, and a little too loud. But we didn’t see it, didn’t hear it. No warning. It was just *there*.”

Broche frowned. “A Witch?”

“A Witch. It landed in the middle of our camp, right on the fire.” At this everyone in the room stood still and silent. “Put it right out, so the only light was a few struggling embers. She grabbed Harris’ arm. The screaming...” Anaise paused for a long time, staring at her own arm, clenching it. “Carlos put a bullet into Harris’ head, no words

between them. Honestly, I think he did Harris a favor. Then the Witch charged Carlos. He was there as a guard, a big man we hired as muscle, but it was his first expedition. He wore older armor, thick and bulky, but modified for traveling. The witch slammed into his chest and bowled him over. He didn't scream, but the armor was smoking where the Witch touched him, so he drew another pistol and put a bullet in his own head. Not two seconds among us and she'd killed two men. Oh, the way she screamed.

"If Pallos hadn't stepped up, we would have all been dead inside a minute. Half our group ran off in every direction. By morning they hadn't come back. We looked for them later, but running off alone, into the darkness, in Rayar..." She shook her head. "We never found them."

Everyone in the shop was still, eyes intent on Anaise. Even the air seemed still. The breeze that had been rattling the store's wares was gone. The stray shouts and laughter, which entered through the window from the town outside, seemed all the more out of place.

"Pallos threw up a wall of energy between us and the Witch, the dim light it gave off was the only light in our camp. It was desperate casting. Stone is plentiful in Rayar, but it was in his bag and he didn't have time to grab it—I could only watch as his hair fell out and the muscles in his right arm eroded.

"It was impressive casting on Pallos' part: it took the Witch a few tries to circumvent the wall. There were only a few of us left. We fired whatever guns were ready, threw everything in reach. By then we had given Pallos some of his Stone, several finger-sized crystals we found in his pack. He burned all of them instantly. The light

flashed so intensely it was brighter than daylight.

“Pallos took me by the hand. Together we grabbed everyone and charged through the woods. We fell into a gully and waited there, blinded and spent, but either the Witch couldn’t find us or it didn’t care anymore.” Anaise slammed the purple ledger shut. When she looked up the look of sorrow was gone, replaced by one of resolute anger. “You all can leave my shop. I don’t care what I owe any of you right now.”

Tanim looked to Broche, who gave a slight shrug. After a moment of silence, Tanim approached Anaise.

“Anaise. We need the disc.” Tanim’s voice was gentle. He looked around sternly at each of his crew before he turned back to Anaise. “We have him with us.”

Anaise started at Tanim, shaking her head.

“*Him*, Anaise.” Tanim paused before adding, “The *One*.”

Anaise shook her head slowly. Tanim stared at her, waiting until she understood what he was implying. “You don’t. You can’t.” She watched Tanim. His face didn’t change. “You have him. *Him*? He’s here?” She looked at each of the people in the room, trying to guess who it was.

“Not here. He’s...hidden. We have to keep him hidden, he has a...a presence about him.”

Someone in the room snickered.

Tanim ignored it, continuing. “Trust me, if you saw him, it’d be really obvious who he was.”

V added, “Yes. It’d hit you like lightning.”

Tanim turned away from Anaise to look at V, his face tightening in anger.

Anaise stumbled over her own words, “Pallos was the one who found the disc, he’s the only one who knows exactly where it came from.” Her tone was eager, her voice filled with hope.

“Then where is Pallos?” Tanim asked.

Anaise looked at everyone in the room. “When he made that flash with the Stone, I...I heard the voices. They weren’t just whispers, they were angry. I was twenty feet from Pallos. I can only imagine what he heard.”

“Where is he?” Tanim’s voice was gentle, yet stern.

“He’s...” Anaise choked up.

Before Tanim could speak again Broche cut in, “He’s at the Asylum.”

Merryn trailed behind the group. They had walked in silence for several minutes after leaving Anaise’s shop.

“Well, this will be a fun trip.” Tanim’s voice was plain. He stopped at a stall, pulling a few apples and offering them to V, Broche and Merryn. Tanim paid the vendor, a short, muscular man who directed them back toward the docks, through the center of the city.

Broche parked the cart and took his apple. He rubbed it firmly, almost as if he were crushing it. “Sir, I hope that’s sarcasm. I have no desire to visit any asylum.”

“Yes, it’s sarcasm, Broche. But we’re going.”

“My vote is against this as well,” V chimed in between bites.

“Fortunately this isn’t up for a vote. I need the other piece of that disc.”

The vendor stalls grew thicker as they approached the city center. They entered into a courtyard several hundred feet wide, a large fountain at its middle. The buildings forming the courtyard were of stone, a few cut from marble, and many had a second story. Stalls were thick along the courtyard edges, and in its center musicians, jesters, and a number of other entertainers were present. A cloud of savory smoke blew past. Merryn recognized it: pork. She could imagine the fat sizzling, dripping at its sides. Someone here was roasting a whole pig, and it was almost ready.

“Another harvest festival?” Tanim looked around, more bothered by the spectacle than impressed. “It seems like there’s always one of these going on.”

“Every few months.” Merryn didn’t mean to answer, but now that she had they all turned to her, waiting for her to continue. “But...it’s the pre-winter harvest, the biggest of the year.”

“What’s going on there?” V pointed to what was obviously the main stage, a wooden structure they had passed near when they entered the courtyard. The stage stood taller than a man. A number of farmers were standing on it, each carrying a handful of wheat stalks, root and all.

Merryn watched, immediately reminded of a tradition carried out in her own town. “It’s bad luck to cut the last of the harvest. Most farmers do one of two things: they either leave it for the poor to collect, or they uproot the whole plant and offer it to the gods.”

“Oh, ho! What’s this?” Tanim was almost laughing. Merryn watched as he edged along a crowd that had had gathered at a smaller stage, closer to the fountain.

A dozen people were performing a play. She was unsure if Tanim was interested in the play itself or something nearby, until she heard a familiar voice. The words recited in the play were regal, but the voice of the performer was high. Approaching closer, she saw the actor from Captain Granger’s airship on stage wearing the same costume he had been wearing days prior. Nearby the adventurer, Wakeland, guffawed at the performance, Nearby Captain Granger leaned on a brass pole, largely ignoring everyone.

Captain Tanim turned to his crew, excited. “Leave the cart! We need to get back to the *Lady*. Granger’s ship is here somewhere. We should have enough time to leave them a passenger and report to the Guard.”

Chapter Six

There it was, docked among a dozen other ships, unmistakable. The stark white wood stood in strong contrast among the rest of the ships, which used darker or darkly stained wood. Someone had gone to extra effort to keep this ship's boards their original color.

"Is that the name of the ship?" Merryn read the words that had been burned into the ship's hull: *The Lacy Cumberbund*.

V looked at it, read it again. Her mouth twisted. "What monster did that?"

Captain Tanim laughed. "Excellent. It looks as if the ship is empty. We'll just hop aboard, drag our hero below deck, maybe hide him in a hammock, and be on our way."

"We could just roll him down the stairs, Sir," Broche said, raising his end of the ballast sack. "No need to be so dramatic."

"Merryn, would you hold this for me?" V gestured with her end of the sack, shaking her face as if some insect was bothering her.

Merryn approached, but paused, staring at the sack. Just looking at it, sagging between them, made her feel queasy. "I don't really feel comfortable—"

"Really?" V asked. "You piggy-backed him through the entire ship. I think holding this end of the rope should be easy."

Regretfully Merryn took the rope, but instead of V brushing whatever it was from her face, she walked away.

"I'll meet you aboard the ship," she called back.

Merryn was too dumbfounded to say anything.

They followed the road toward the shore, then down the short, gentle slope toward ship. It was moored in the water, its long gangplank reaching toward land. Merryn scanned the shoreline and the road. Both appeared empty.

“Alright, crew, let’s get this done.”

They reached the gangplank, and from behind them a deep voice called, “Ahoy, Captain!”

Captain Tanim’s head drooped.

“I hardly think it’s our turn, Captain Tanim. We watched the boy for a good month before returning him to you.” That voice, Merryn recognized, was Captain Granger.

All three turned together. Captain Granger was accompanied by Wakeland. He was still wearing the same outfit, and his many buckles clanged with each step.

Wakeland called out to them, “Just take that body and go before you get in too deep.”

Broche dropped his end of the sack and moved toward Wakeland and Captain Granger. The two men spread out as Broche approached. He would only be able to confront one of them at a time. Broche chose to focus on Captain Granger.

Behind Merryn and Captain Tanim, someone on deck said, “The captain should have returned by now, I’ll go out to meet him.” The foppish man appeared on deck, clearly dressed for a performance: his outfit shimmered, oversized shirt cuffs and cape flapping. He was practically skipping, the large white wig he wore puffing white powder

with each step.

Both Granger and Wakeland called out, “Gallant, no!”

Without looking Gallant descended the gangplank. He was next to Captain Tanim before he realized the shouting had been directed at him.

Captain Tanim flipped his coat open, pulling the large gun from his side. He grasped Gallant, small even by comparison to Captain Tanim, around the neck and brought the gun to Gallant’s temple. “Gallant, was it? Thank you for joining us, you’ve provided us with the leverage we needed.”

Instantly Granger and Wakeland drew their weapons. Wakeland, a musket, Granger a fine pistol—probably something he received while under service of the Alahvin Navy.

Merryn stood, stunned, rope dangling in her hands.

Wakeland approached Captain Tanim, musket trained steadily upon him.

“Stay back,” Captain Tanim said, gun still at Gallant’s temple. He tightened his arm around the slender man’s throat. Gallant let out a gasping choke and grabbed at the captain’s arms, trying to keep pressure off his airway.

Wakeland raised his hands, buckles chiming off each other. “Let’s keep calm. He didn’t want to be involved in this, he was just on his way to his performance. Why don’t you just let him go?”

“Oh. In that case, of course.” The captain made as if to let Gallant go, but quickly jerked the man back.

“Ghk. Can’t breathe,” Gallant gasped.

“Quiet, I didn’t ask you.” Captain Tanim shook his captive again, jostling Gallant’s powdered wig free. It fell to the floor with a puff of white. “Now drop your weapons, both of you.”

Granger didn’t take his eyes off Broche. He held his pistol steady. “I didn’t want them on my ship to begin with. I don’t care if you kill him.”

Broche kept his eyes on Granger but called out, “Captain Tanim, there’s a disgraced naval captain here. His passengers keep dying. Let’s sign on for the next trip before the berths are full.”

Granger hesitated. He looked to Broche, turned to Tanim, and defiantly threw his gun to the dirt. “Drop your gun, Wakeland. I won’t be grounded by your stupidity.”

“Okay, okay.” Wakeland approached Tanim slowly. He held his arms wide, his musket high in his right hand. Wakeland gestured to the ground beside Tanim. “I’m just going to put my gun right here.” Wakeland stooped, lowering the gun stock-first, but rose at the last moment to drive the butt-plate into Gallant’s face. Gallant’s head, in turn, smashed into Tanim’s face. Tanim reeled back, blood streaming from his nose. Wakeland wheeled as he sidestepped, getting out of Tanim’s reach but putting Tanim squarely at the end of the barrel.

Granger was quick to respond, but by the time his sword was drawn Broche was already in a fighting stance: hands raised near head-height and elbows close inside. In less than a blink Broche was inside the reach of Captain Granger’s sword.

Broche’s fists dropped solidly, first in Granger’s face, then a single, perfect strike to his solar plexus. Granger crumpled to the ground, sword clanging beside him. It was

several seconds before he drew in his first strained breath. Broche scooped Granger's pistol from the ground, stepping around the gulping captain.

Broche stopped within ten feet and raised the pistol level with Wakeland's head. The three men stood, looking at each other.

Nearby Gallant knelt on the ground, rocking and clutching his face. "Why would you do that?"

"Why don't you two just take that body and be on your way," Wakeland smiled. He was clearly enjoying himself.

"We've got you outnumbered," Broche said.

"Or do you?"

"Yes, we do. All three of us are standing," Broche gestured to Tanim, then to Merryn, who was still near the gangplank holding her end of the ballast sack. "It's called mathematics."

"Don't bother me with your witchery, I've—"

Wakeland's arm jerked up violently, the gun going off with a deafening bang and releasing a gout of white smoke. Tanim had used Broche's distraction to duck under Wakeland's gun and close the distance. Tanim threw a punch toward Wakeland's sizeable head, but Wakeland ducked it. He swung the musket, catching Tanim in the ribs. Wakeland followed through with the swing, putting Tanim in line with Broche before he thrust-kicked Tanim through the smoke and into his quartermaster.

Broche, caught off-guard, dropped his right arm to catch Tanim safely with his left.

From inside the smoke Wakeland bull-rushed the two men, lifting both off the ground and causing Broche's gun to discharge. The three men collapsed to the ground, disappearing behind a wall of white smoke.

Merryn watched as Captain Tanim's gun spun through the air, clattering and kicking up dirt. When the dust cleared, she saw that it came to rest equidistant between her and Captain Granger. He was already forcing himself to his feet.

Merryn dropped the rope and dashed for the gun. She fought to remain balanced on the uneven slope, using her hands almost as much as her feet. She and Granger dove for the gun together, but, still winded, Granger's dive fell flat. Merryn grabbed the gun with both hands and rolled to her feet.

She couldn't stop herself from shouting, "Did you see that?"

Merryn hoisted the gun, pointing it back and forth between Granger and the dispersing smoke. It was the first time Merryn had seen Captain Tanim's gun this closely. The gun was cast entirely in metal, unlike every other gun she had seen, which had wood grips or stocks. The grip felt comfortable enough in her hand, but the large barrel was actually a cylinder of multiple barrels, and was nearly as wide as her calf. It weighed at least ten pounds, with most of its weight at the front. Merryn struggled to keep it poised.

The smoke cleared and she could make out Broche mounted over Wakeland, fist raised threateningly in the air. Right next to them Captain Tanim lay on his back, shielding his face unnecessarily.

From the floor Captain Granger called up, "Just give me the gun, little girl. There's no need for this—"

“Shut up!” Merryn lashed out with her foot, striking Captain Granger in the throat. There was a sickly crunch and Granger rolled over, again fighting for breath. Merryn’s eyes went wide. “Oh, gods, I’m sorry, I only meant to kick dirt in your face!”

Her arms lowered the gun, fatigued, but she forced them up again.

Tanim stood, looked around, and dusted himself off. He approached Merryn at a slow, confident pace.

Behind him, on Granger’s ship, an armed man appeared, likely drawn from below deck by the commotion. He raised his musket, assessing the scene. He aimed toward Captain Tanim.

“Captain!” Merryn called out.

Tanim spun, right hand reaching for a gun that wasn’t there.

Merryn hefted the gun, using her shoulders as much as her arms, throwing her off balance. She fell back as she pulled the trigger.

Click.

Click. Click. Click.

Tanim had also dropped onto his back, left hand holding a small pistol he had drawn from beneath his vest. Two shots went off. The first, from the man on the ship, struck dirt only feet away from where Tanim’s head lay. The second, the captain’s, dropped the man on the ship.

Captain Tanim stood, then helped Merryn to her feet.

“Your gun doesn’t work!” She pulled the trigger again and again, the cylinder sluggishly rotating with each pull. She realized the firing mechanism, not the normal

flintlock mechanism, had a crack large enough to fit a coin into. “Why do you even carry this thing around?” She pointed it at Captain Tanim, again pulling the trigger, again an empty *click*.

Tanim’s eyes went huge. He chopped down on her wrist, wresting the gun upwards from her. “Are you trying to kill us both?” He checked the barrels then holstered the gun heavily. “Open the ballast sack, there’s a pair of shackles in there.”

“Why are there—”

“Go!” he ordered.

Merryn skittered to the sack and untied it. She didn’t want to reach her hand in, but a look from the captain set her to work. She had to dig to find the shackles. There was a key in one of its locks.

“Let’s go.” Captain Tanim had come up behind her, grabbing one of the sack’s lines, and began forcefully dragging the sack behind him toward Broche and the two fallen men.

Merryn looked behind her, concerned that Captain Tanim had forgotten about Granger, but Granger remained on the ground, rolling on his back and clearly in some new pain. She turned to her captain, who was now several steps ahead of her, and jogged to catch up.

Captain Tanim stopped alongside the actor. Gallant sat on his butt, face bruised, clearly resigned to whatever Captain Tanim was about to do. The captain almost threw the sack onto Gallant’s lap.

“Give me the shackles,” the captain ordered.

Merryn handed them over, and Tanim clamped one onto Gallant's wrist, and used the key to lock it in place. The other end he locked onto the body, still mostly hidden inside the sack.

"Aww, guys. C'mon," Gallant complained in his nasal voice.

"Let's get back to our ship." Tanim stood, looking at Merryn. He used his sleeve to wipe the blood that ran from his nose and down to his neck. "Broche."

Broche brought himself to a full kneel, and used his weight to pin Wakeland's arms. "We can do this nicely, I stand up and go on my way. Or if you decide to fight me—"

"When you get off me I'm going to—"

Broche struck both sides of Wakeland's neck, cutting Wakeland short. Wakeland's head rolled to the side, eyes fluttering.

Merryn followed the two men in the direction of the *Lady Ansa*, amazed and aghast at what had just happened. She was appalled at the violence but, at the same time, excited about the part she had played. She tried to keep in a scream, the words, 'I kicked another captain in the *throat!*' fighting to get out.

Captain Tanim turned back to look at her. He smiled.

Broche turned next. He did not smile.

When the three of them reached the top of the gangplank, V was sitting on the far gunwale. Tanim's vest was torn, as were the knees of his trousers. Dried blood was on both his sleeves and face. Broche, his tunic normally white, was covered in dirt. The

small spatters of blood on him clearly weren't his, as his skin remained unmarred.

Merryn herself was covered in dirt on her back and elbows, and only now realized she was missing a boot.

V glanced up only briefly, then went back to making whatever miniscule adjustment she was performing on her pistol.

“So, what'd I miss?”

Chapter Seven

After departing from Westbridge, Captain Tanim ordered V below deck to inspect the cannons. It was a task she had completed two days prior, and since they hadn't been fired in those two days, it was obvious the captain was annoyed with V and just wanted her out of sight. The captain seemed pleased with Merryn, however, and after a short break to clean up he invited her onto the quarterdeck to teach her the basics of navigation.

Navigation was boring and difficult, and involved a lot of mathematics. She had received some education from her mother, but the speed at which the calculations had to be completed was at the furthest edge of her ability, and the knowledge of angles was new to her.

Joseph, her friend aboard the ship, had taken well to navigation and it had become his primary duty. After a brief 'hello,' he was permitted a short leave while the captain trained Merryn.

Merryn checked the bearing of the *Lady*, the red end of the compass' arrow pointing "mostly east." Apparently this was not an appropriate measurement.

"Mostly East?" Captain Tanim laughed, stopping only when he fumbled the piece of sunstone he was holding. It fell to the deck, nicking the wood.

"Then how should I read it?" The ship rose and dropped sharply without warning. Merryn braced herself on the navigation table.

"Whoa, sorry," the pilot, Alexander, called out to the captain. "Swelling wind, didn't expect that." He tapped the brass gauges near the helm. "Didn't register that one. If

that happens again, we should get these gauges checked.”

“Notify Broche next time you see him,” the captain called to Alexander. He turned back to Merryn, adjusting the compass. “You need to keep the arrow in the red, like this, it always points North. Well, almost always. So long as you keep the arrow pointing at the red, the direction the ship is facing is read off the top of the compass.”

They worked only a short while longer. The captain showed Merryn how to read the evenly spaced marks at the border of the compass, markings so small she didn’t realize were there at first, but soon it got too dark to continue without another light source.

“It’s important to work with the pilot while navigating,” Captain Tanim said as he removed the leather hoods from the glowstone lanterns. Indeed, the whole time he’d been teaching, he and Alexander were calling back and forth, verifying bearings, giving wind and ship speeds. Tanim repeatedly moved the magnetic markers across the map to note their location and course.

Something had been bothering Merryn since she left the Reliker’s shop. The activity on the ship seemed to be winding down for the evening, so Merryn decided to ask.

“Captain Tanim sir, what’s an asylum?”

Captain Tanim looked out into the distance. The *Lady Ansa* was over land and the horizon was hidden by a mountain range. The mountains were squat, with their stone appearing pale blue in the waning sunlight, each topped with a cap of stark white snow. The sun descended just below their peaks.

“It’s a place where they keep the ill.” The captain’s voice sounded sorrowful.

“So, it’s like a hospital?” Merryn had never seen a hospital, but had heard of them. The healers, both magical healers and learned, worked in hospitals. That and the fact that they were expensive was all Merryn knew of them. When her mother became ill a hospital wasn’t an option. Beyond the cost of treatment there wasn’t one within hundreds of miles of her home—far more than a week’s worth of travel.

“It’s similar to a hospital, I suppose. Except instead of the body, it’s the mind that’s ill. We have no cure for these people.”

“Not even a magical cure?”

“Magic can’t fix everything. Often enough it only causes more problems.” Tanim paused as if remembering something, before turning back to Merryn with a large smile.

“Besides, most of the people are there because of magic. Using magic...it does something to them. Some casters get too comfortable using magic. It makes their life easier. Or they just like the power. But it’s not safe. They start to hear voices. Whispers at first, but the voices get louder. Eventually they drown out everything else, even the casters’ own thoughts. And that’s with Stone.”

“Then why use the Stone?”

“Magic needs a tether and a fuel. Without Stone, the magic eats at the caster. Some of that can be mitigated. Either way, if the caster is careful and methodical, they can lessen their risk. Of course, one of the times magic is more useful is during a fight or a battle. The chaos of a fight makes magic—” Tanim paused, letting Merryn think it through.

“More dangerous.” Merryn looked at the mountains. At their altitude she could see the last rays of sun shrinking behind the mountain range, but the land below was already in darkness. “Does that mean the guy at the Horizon Run—”

“He had Stone, I saw him with a lot of it when he walked on deck. If not, with the speed he was casting spells, it would have cost him years of his life.” Captain Tanim looked at Merryn for a moment and seemed to consider something. She wondered if it was the same thing she was thinking about: that caster’s last spell.

Merryn saw that man cast a number of spells during the Horizon Run. The lightning had been bad, causing severe damage to at least one ship, but the last spell he cast... Though her recollection was vague, she was certain that spell was meant to kill. No, the spell would cause death, but an uneasy feeling in her gut told her the spell itself was meant to *linger*. Merryn wondered what a spell like that would cost, why it had been directed at her, and why she remembered so little of it. She remembered the fear, the anguish, but few other details.

“So, why the Asylum? Anaise said it was roving. What does that mean?” Merryn hadn’t been exposed to much magic while living out on the farm, so all of this information was new.

“Too much magic draws attention, the kind of attention populated places don’t want.” Captain Tanim said.

“From the Guard?”

“From the Witches. They’re drawn to excessive magic use, or destructive magic. Or unsafe magic. And all the people admitted to the asylum are, well, they aren’t as

stable as one might hope. For some people, using magic causes stress their bodies and minds aren't able to handle. Let's just say there aren't many casters who die of old age."

"Merryn!"

That voice, it was unmistakably Lady V, yelling below deck. *V, just V*, Merryn reminded herself. *She is no lady*. V's voice was shrill at that volume, but wherever she was below deck, it sounded close. That voice always felt like it was bearing down.

Captain Tanim asked Merryn, almost a whisper, "What did you do?"

"I don't think I did anything." Merryn was nervous before, but with the captain's question she was wondering if she should be hiding. She glanced over the gunwales, over the edge of the ship and down. The distance was immeasurable in the near darkness, pinpricks of lantern-light the only clue to their altitude. There was no escape. Once again she was trapped on an airship.

"You might want to start thinking really hard. Not that V's much for apologies."

Captain Tanim looked at Merryn, a pitying look in his eyes.

"You're not just going to let her...do whatever she's going to do right now?"

Aren't you going to help me?"

"Merryn, everyone on this ship has to handle their own problems. You'll need to come to some agreement—no, what's the word for a thing like an agreement, but it's extremely unfavorable for one person? Anyway, you'll either figure that out, or she'll..." He paused.

The pause felt much longer than it was. "She'll what?"

Tanim balked, looking everywhere but at Merryn. "Well, good luck," he said,

pushing her down the stairs from the quarterdeck.

There was nothing but open space on the main deck. Merryn looked at the butt, the only thing on deck besides the cannons to hide behind. Or inside. She wondered how long she could hold her breath.

“Where is that girl?” V was still below deck, but close. Really close.

Someone with a wavering voice said something indiscernible. Someone else grunted. Footsteps started their way topside. V’s head poked out from the stairwell. She turned toward the bow, then turned to stern to look directly at Merryn.

“Merryn!”

V stomped onto the deck with a wood box in her hand. Merryn immediately recognized it: the fine metal inlay on the case matched the pistol inside. Broche had loaned the pistol to Merryn. He told Merryn that she could use it while...*oh no*. While “*Lady V*” was still in custody. It was her pistol. Merryn had been using V’s pistol *without her permission*.

Merryn’s voice trembled. She could do nothing to stop it. “Yes, V?”

“I spoke with Broche.”

Merryn was too horrified to answer. Even as she blinked her eyelids seemed to tremble. Her knees felt weak so she braced herself, as inconspicuously as possible, on the ship’s railing. She felt nauseated, and leaned herself ever so slightly outside the perimeter of the ship where the gusting winds weren’t held back, and let the chill air fill her lungs.

“Oh?” It was all she could muster.

“He told me you were using this pistol while I was away. Do you know what this

is?”

V was brandishing the box at her. Merryn was certain V would strike her with it. At this angle she might fall right off the ship. She glanced over the side, and the blackness looked even deeper than it had just moments before.

When Merryn didn't answer, V continued. "This is a Gendt Wheellock." V waited for a response. It sounded important, but Merryn didn't know how to react. After a lengthy silence V asked, "You don't know who Gendt is?"

Merryn shook her head. She glanced to Captain Tanim, observing from the quarterdeck. His eyes were wide, staring at the box. He lifted his hand, and appeared to be waving goodbye.

"Gendt is a master gunsmith, his craft is unmatched. Wheellock mechanisms are complex. There's a lot of moving parts so they tend to misfire, but no gun that has left Gendt's shop has ever misfired...*if* it was properly maintained. Tell me, how many times did you fire this pistol?"

Ah, that's what this is about, Merryn thought to herself. *I really tried my best to keep it clean, I polished it...* "Ten. Maybe twenty. Broche was teaching me how to—"

"Broche doesn't know a thing about firearms. Have you seen the condition his blunderbuss is in?"

"I—"

"Do you have a pistol?" V asked, eyeing Merryn's belt.

"I picked this one out from storage." Merryn drew her pistol, presenting it in both hands to V. It was solid redwood with metal ornamentation running along its wooden

stock. The grip was almost too big for her hand and it was poorly balanced. She had only taken it because it somewhat resembled the pistol in the box V was carrying.

V snatched it from her hand and cast it overboard in one motion. It quickly disappeared into the abyss below.

“My pistol!”

“That wasn’t a pistol. It was a knot of Kern dung.”

Merryn could feel the sheen of moisture collecting on her eyes, but fought it back. She wouldn’t cry.

“Hold this.” V lifted the box to Merryn, who took it, holding the box with both hands. V waited a moment, then scolded, “Are you going to stare at the box all day or are you going to open it?”

Merryn had always put the pistol back with as much care as she could. She had cleaned it inside and out, oiled it, polished it. *Something must have happened to the pistol while she was away, I’m going to open the box and it’s going to be ruined, and V will blame me for it.* Reluctantly, she opened the box.

“Tell me what you see, girl.”

The pistol lay there on its bed of velvet. Gold and silver entwined the entire length of the cherry stock. It glinted as it caught the day’s last ray of sunlight. There was a brief moment of true darkness before the blue glow bloomed from the glowstone lanterns. Even in this blue half-light the pistol was as beautiful as the day Broche first showed it to her. Nothing was wrong with it. Now Merryn was even more confused.

“Well?” V sounded impatient.

“It’s the most beautiful pistol I’ve ever seen.”

“Do you know what I see?”

Merryn gritted her teeth. *Here it comes.*

“I see a firearm that was maintained as well as if I had done it myself. If Broche hadn’t told me this was the pistol you were using, I never would have known it had been fired.”

“What?”

But V had already begun walking away. Merryn stood, holding the box and pistol, dumbfounded.

“V, your pistol,” Merryn called after V, but V waved back dismissively, fading away in the dim blue light. The sound of hollow footsteps told Merryn that V had gone below deck. Merryn stared at the box in her hands, unsure what just happened. After a moment she closed the box, and only then realized Captain Tanim was standing next to her.

“Hm. That went well.” The captain smiled at her.

“I don’t know what that was.”

“I’d say you made a friend.” Tanim immediately began laughing.

Merryn felt the tension lift from her shoulders. “I thought she was going to kill me.”

“No. She knows better than to kill any of my crew.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

“She’d maim you really well. Of course she’d have to pay a fine to you.”

Merryn laughed, until she saw that Captain Tanim wasn't laughing. "Wait. Really?"

"We have a dangerous job. If you get hurt following my orders, I pay you. If another crew member hurts you, intentionally or through neglect, they pay you."

Merryn stared at the captain.

He continued. "You know, I think those are the only things she spends her money on: Firearms and fines." He shrugged, adding a final, "Huh," before he walked away.

Merryn shook her head and looked at the closed box. *What if I hadn't kept the pistol so well, would V have*—Merryn stopped herself. She didn't want to think about it. She called after the captain, jogging toward him.

"Captain, what do I do with this pistol?"

"Take care of it, of course. V won't take it back, but if you want to stay on her good side... Anyhow, it's an amazing piece of machinery. You should take care of it regardless."

"Wait, you mean, she's giving it to me?"

"She already did. See..." Tanim pointed to the box, looking Merryn right in the eye. "It's right there. In your hands." He drew out the word 'your.' "I hope you realize how rare that gun is."

"She said it was a Gendt, a Gendt Wheellock? Is that rare?"

“Let’s put it this way.” Captain Tanim smiled. “You’re probably the only person without royal blood in possession of one of those.”

Chapter Eight

Merryn returned to the gun deck where her hammock and personal belongings waited in a pile. She had some free time before supper and the day's activities were catching up with her. Now that the fighting and death threats were behind her, her body was beginning to ache. All she wanted to do was collapse into her hammock and lie there, swaying with the ship.

Merryn grasped one end of the net-like sling, lifting it high toward a wrought iron hook that had been set into a beam. As she lifted the hammock unrolled, her coat and spare trousers flopping out onto the floor, followed by a fluttering slap on the wood deck. She glanced at her belongings. They were almost exclusively loose-fitting clothing. Nothing in them should have made that sound.

It took only a minute to find where the noise came from. It was the Chosen One's book. In all the commotion aboard the ship, Merryn forgot that she had taken the book and stowed it among her belongings.

The book was small and narrow as books went, neither wider nor longer than her hand, bound in dark leather that had clearly spent time outdoors. It smelled of sweat. The binding was loosening, and many pages were only a hearty turn from coming free. She stroked the cover, wary about opening it.

A chill permeated the gun deck and Merryn realized the gun ports were still open. Since the ports would no longer provide light and would only continue to let the cold in, she drew each one closed, making sure each cannon was stowed and secured before she

moved on to the next.

That task completed, she hung the other end of her hammock and climbed in, pulling her coat along, both to keep herself warm and to provide a hiding place for the book should anyone stumble across her. There were only a dozen or so crew onboard and it was unlikely they'd pass through here, as the berths ran through the center of the gun deck, but something about the whole "Chosen One" situation made her cautious.

She opened the book and skimmed the pages. The handwriting was cleaner at the beginning, though hardly what she'd call 'neat.' Dates and locations were sprinkled throughout.

As she had assumed, it was a journal. *But was it his journal?* Merryn wondered what a Chosen One would write in his journal. She turned to the first page:

I have spent these past fifteen years in solitude, the days spent maintaining the monastery, the evenings spent in meditation or in training. This should have been a hint, now that I look back, for it has only ever been Father Fredricks and I present at my training.

I have had no possessions, no ambitions beyond these walls, not even a name to be called by, and yet I've always felt the pangs of...of what, I was unsure, but the pain was like that of a cow un-milked, each day the pain building more and more.

For fifteen years I've been isolated, rarely leaving the walls or venturing past the fields surrounding us. The only times I've ventured to the town has been during periods of silent prayer, processing through town hidden in full robe and hood under a vow of silence. I've never interacted with anyone not of the church. Only now can I see how

finely orchestrated all this has been.

It was his journal! Merryn read feverishly, excited at the prospect of having the Chosen One's journal, and wondering what adventures she might find written in this book. At home her mother had raised her on tales of heroics and adventure, and when she learned to read, those were the books Merryn sought out. She flipped ahead a few more pages.

My heart sank. So great a task, and me, just an orphan, meant to carry it out. "I can't. I don't know where I would even begin."

Father Fredricks smiled at me, "Yes, you do. You speak in your sleep. I know what you've been dreaming this past year, and that your course has finally taken shape. Look inside yourself. You already know what tasks you must complete before confronting the Witch, and where the first stop in your quest is."

The thought only took the time to inhale, and the exhale held the answer—

"Merryn, supper!" Broche yelled. Merry almost dropped the book in surprise.

Supper was taken by the full crew, minus whoever was piloting or on watch. She rolled up the journal in her spare clothing before heading to the mess.

Running at their current skeleton crew they didn't have the manpower to keep the ship traveling non-stop, and had to weigh anchor every sixteen or twenty hours. The ship had dropped anchor over land, catching a crag along the series of bulb-like rock outcroppings that trailed from the mountain range only a few miles away. It had then been moored from its bow to the top of a tall tree. Not that the tree would hold the ship

under heavy wind, but the jerking motion of the *Lady Ansa* toppling the tree would certainly wake the crew.

She arrived in the galley, which was warmed by the stove's heat and filled with the thick aroma of fish stew. Since their uninvited inspection, Broche had been including a number of perishable foodstuffs with their meals, and the meals themselves had become larger. Merryn filled a pocket with the ever-present jerky before taking a gourd of the fish stew and several biscuits—they were apparently working their way through the ground meal.

Come to think of it, this explained why she had been ordered to dump a barrel of fuzzy green stuff overboard earlier in the week. Until tonight they had been mooring in shallow water. As a result, the hold had seemed more humid and dank lately.

Everyone was present: Broche, as always, sat near the stairs that led topside, joined by the small but nimble Scoot. Alton, the grease-covered ship's mechanic, sat among another group of men. The only person not present was V, which meant she was on watch.

Merryn saw an open seat near Joseph and the pilot, who were talking animatedly. The pilot, she recalled him being addressed as Alexander, looked exhausted but happy. Word was he getting a generous take for being the ship's sole pilot.

"...we were going to jump overboard, but up ahead there was a ship being torn apart by giant squid! We looked at each other, and we both did this..." Joseph stood, miming climbing back over the gunwales and backpedaling like he was tiptoeing through brambles. He laughed with his whole body, leaning back and forth, his glasses nearly

falling from his eyes before he pressed them back onto the bridge of his nose. Merryn took her seat near them and Joseph said, through his laughter, “This is her!”

“So you’re Merryn? I’ve seen you on deck several times but we haven’t been properly introduced.” Alexander stood and reached out as if to take Merryn’s hand and bow, but when she reached out to shake he took her cue, gripping her hand firmly. Merryn guessed he was somewhere in his forties or fifties, though it was hard to tell. His hair had more salt than pepper in it, but his features were soft and without many wrinkles. “You’re one of the new recruits, right? What brings you to this ship?”

Merryn answered plainly: “A sap to the back of the head.”

Alexander cringed and looked around conspiratorially. “I didn’t know. Do you...need help?”

She let the smile she was holding back break through. “That was the last time I was here. Some old man tricked me and hit me with his coin pouch.”

“Same guy got me,” Joseph added, “though he had some muscle with him when he grabbed me.”

“Did you fight?” Alexander asked.

Joseph stood, gesturing downward as if displaying himself. “Do I look like I’m built for fighting?” He raised his arms outward. As tall as he was, a little over six feet, he was very slender. With his arms out as they were he could have passed for a scarecrow. “It was also three on one. I tried to run away, but next thing I know I’m waking up on this ship.”

“And you signed back on?” Alexander asked.

“I’m the third son in my family. My eldest brother will inherit my father’s business, and my other brother was apprenticed. I needed to find my own way. Even though my time here started poorly, this turned out to be a great opportunity.”

Again Alexander leaned in. “But, you’re a smart lad. Do you want a life of *piracy*?”

“No, no, no. I signed back on with the captain’s assurance that I’d be taught useable skills. I’m getting paid in the process, which is great. If I wanted to gain these skills aboard a merchant vessel, at best I’d spend a couple years in indentured service.”

“Just don’t get yourself killed,” Alexander joked.

“After the Horizon Run, I don’t think we could do anything more dangerous.”

Joseph smiled at Merryn.

“And what about you, Merryn?” Alexander asked.

“Like Joseph, I signed back on voluntarily this time. I have a mother back home who is ill.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Alexander said. The brightness in his dark eyes said he was genuine.

“She’s doing much better. The captain paid half my wage up front, so she’s getting some of the best care available near home, and my brother is there to take care of her and the farm. When I left she was up and about. She couldn’t do more than walk, but it was the first time she’d been up in years.” That alone was worth everything she’d gone through. She ruminated, wistfully, before remembering her manners. “What about you, Alexander? What brings you aboard the *Lady Ansa*?”

“I’m married. I’ve got four kids at home, two girls and two boys. My youngest son is about your age, Merryn.” He paused, smiling. It was the same smile she got from the farmers near home, the ones who told Merryn that *they* had a son her age. “I’m a pilot-for-hire. Transport ships normally, passengers and cargo, but on the odd occasion I’m without passengers I like to push the ships to see what they can do. I’ll fly low over rough terrain, or see how tight I can bank the ship, or how close I can fly them to a cliff face. Captain Tanim apparently saw me, so he chased me down and hired me. I’m glad he did. This is an amazing ship, I’ve never flown anything like it.”

Merryn smiled. “I’ve always thought it was really beautiful. I mean, I haven’t seen more than twenty airships in my life and I’ve only been on this one, but the reddish brown wood, the bronze, and all the detailed carvings in the doors and railings—”

“Unless you live in a major city that’s more ships than most people see in their lifetimes. But you’re right. This ship is done in the traditional style, akin to the few relic ships Alahvin and Gerrill have. When we regained the knowledge of airship flight the first ships built were modeled after those relics, so they have carvings and metal ornamentation everywhere. Whoever built this ship did an amazing job replicating—”

Alexander stopped abruptly, thick eyebrows rising. “Hmm...”

“What’s that?” Joseph asked.

“By the gods, it must be!” Alexander exclaimed.

“What, what is it?” Merryn asked, riding Alexander’s excitement.

“No figurehead!”

“No what?” Merryn asked.

“Oh my gods!” Joseph obviously seemed to understand what Alexander was getting at.

“What’s a figurehead?”

“It’s the carving,” Joseph responded. “It’s like a statue, on the prow. Usually it’s a mermaid or a lady, sometimes it’s an animal.”

“But, the *Lady Ansa* doesn’t have one of those—”

“Exactly!” Alexander blurted. “This can’t be a replica ship, no one would be fool enough build a ship without a figurehead. It’s terrible luck! My guess, this ship is one of those early ships, *restored*, and whoever restored it wasn’t able to repair the figurehead. Or more likely they just couldn’t find it.” He looked at the beams and over the rest of the galley; Merryn, just as impressed, followed his eye. If Alexander was correct, this ship was over two hundred years old.

“Wow.” Alexander reached down and caressed the deck. “You’re doing a great job, ship.”

Captain Tanim entered the galley, a smile on his face. Broche made to stand but Tanim waved him off. He took up a place in the middle of the galley, within arm’s reach of Merryn and her dinner companions

“Crew, your attention,” he called out, his voice carrying easily over the din. This wasn’t the voice he used in casual conversation, no. This was his command voice.

“We’ve got our next destination. Despite our quartermaster’s sorrow at leaving his dear Adiron.” At this Broche snorted and those seated near him chuckled. “We’re heading into Alina, but I must let you know the Third Kingdom does not look kindly on

me or my crew.” This drew a bout of booing, which included Merryn’s voice.

“I know the Alina ships are no match for the crew of the *Lady Ansa*, for *my* men.”

Tanim paused, and the booing turned to cheers. “But our task requires subtlety. Weather and Witch, we’ll be there in two days. We’ll be flying in under their flag and should be unmolested, but if the Alina Navy approaches, we will not be boarded. I’m sure I can trust my men to that!”

The crew cheered even louder.

They cheered. Good, Tanim thought. He had a crew, they were on his side.

Tanim didn’t know if they could actually take an Alina Navy ship. He had a great pilot, and that counted for a lot. If he were honest with himself, with as few crew members as he had, it would be difficult.

But it didn’t matter what he believed. What mattered was that *they* believed.

“Broche,” Tanim called over to his quartermaster, quietly so he wouldn’t break his crew’s revelry. “Meet me on deck.”

Tanim shook a few hands on his way out the mess before he disappeared onto the main deck.

“You come to relieve me?” V asked.

“Yes,” Tanim replied. “Enjoy your supper.”

Broche passed V on the stairs. She gave him a friendly clap on his shoulder on her way down.

When she was out of sight Broche asked, “What is it, sir?”

“This is going to be difficult, Broche.”

Broche nodded. “We’re looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“An exploding needle in an exploding haystack. But that’s not the whole of it.”

Tanim rubbed his hands together. His fingers were like ice.

“Sir?”

“Did you know that on the rare occasion Asylums will enter Rayar? It’s why they keep to the southern hemisphere. If one of the burners gets too dangerous they go in, leave him there.”

“It’s probably safer for everyone that way.” Broche peered at Tanim, trying to read his face. “What are you worried about?”

“Pallos had direct contact with a Witch.”

“He fought her off from the sounds of it,” Broche said. “That’s a brave man.”

“Brave or not, I fear he’s ruined. I don’t know that we’ll find him at the Asylum, and even if we do he may be of no use to us. If that’s the case, I’m lost. I don’t know the next step.”

“The curses, sir? Are they getting so bad?”

Curses. More than two. More than ten, if I’m being honest with myself. “I’m falling apart, Broche. I don’t have much time left.”

Broche swallowed, part guilt, part relief—Tanim could see it on his face.

Tanim continued. “I just, I wanted you to know, Broche. If it comes to it…”

“Collect,” Broche said.

Tanim nodded.

The two men stood quietly. Tanim looked up at the sliver of moon. Still the same moon, at least. He rubbed his hands together, blew into them.

“Cold, sir?”

“Always.”

“Do you want to borrow my gloves? They’re from my home, you’ll find none warmer.”

“Thank you, but they won’t help.”

Chapter Nine

Merryn lay in her hammock, belly full, a glowstone lantern hanging nearby. Since the lanterns didn't give off heat and there was no actual fire inside, she didn't need to worry about falling asleep without dowsing it. Not that she was at risk of falling asleep. She was absorbed in reading the Chosen One's journal. David—that was the name of the dead boy in the hold—had led a tragic life. Merryn didn't know about his father, but David's mother and her defenders were killed by a Witch within a few days of his birth. He was then hidden away, trained and educated at a monastery.

Instead of skimming the journal, this time she was reading it page by page, but it was slow going. David used words Merryn wasn't familiar with, and she had to guess their meaning by their context, often reading and rereading the lines. Still, she was engrossed, both by the boy's journey and the fact that it was insight into the mind of a future legend. Only...he wouldn't be a legend. Whatever the prophecy said, David was very, very dead.

The ship rocked in the wind, causing the lantern and hammock to sway opposite each other. Merryn held one finger still on the page, trying to mark where she left off. With her free hand she steadied the lantern.

Fourteen days in this wretched mountain pass. If not for our guide's death by snake bite, I imagine we would have been through here long ago. As it is we've had to double-back more than once, stumbling into dead ends or narrowing passages that certainly even the mountain goats have avoided.

But this morning, not an hour into our travel, the mountain path opened up and

we found ourselves looking down upon a clearing, and even from miles distant we swore we could hear the bustle of Dardan, the sounds of a city waking in the early morning.

Thank the gods. We've finally crossed into Alina.

Alina? Merryn smiled, realizing it was the same kingdom they were heading toward. She turned the page, the dry scraping of paper on her coat echoing off the wall beside her. With the whole of the crew in their berths that scrape seemed so loud—

Merryn tucked the book under her coat with as little noise as possible and held her breath. She thought she'd heard something, a soft metallic groan from the darkness at the stern of the ship. A door, perhaps, but the only doors in that direction were V's room and the engine room. Silence again, then the gradual creaking of wood almost mistakable for the normal creaking of the *Lady*. Almost. Whoever was approaching, and they *were* approaching, was doing so stealthily. Why?

She was at a disadvantage. The glowstone lantern cast light in her face and eyes, so whoever was heading this way would see Merryn's features long before she saw them. She feigned sleep, positioning her head on its side, facing the noise. Only her left eye, which she hoped was in shadow, was slightly open.

Alton, the mechanic, emerged from the darkened hallway, bracing himself in visible surprise when he noticed Merryn. He almost turned back, but after several moments continued along, staring at Merryn as he passed.

He wasn't wearing shoes, which is why Merryn hadn't heard footsteps. She watched him disappear toward the galley. Something was different about him, something she couldn't quite place.

Merry tucked the book into her trousers and lay there, waiting and listening for Alton to return. But she was more tired than she realized, and soon fell asleep.

“Wake up!”

“What?” Merryn’s mind was slowed, still coming out of sleep. She was barely registering that the voice demanding her to get up was female.

“The sun will be up soon.”

Time to feed the chickens and milk the cow. Merryn tried to sit up on her bedroll, only it seemed to have been replaced with a hammock. Clumsily she swung her legs from the hammock, arms hugging the twisting net to keep her body upright.

“Get your pistol. Meet me on deck.”

The words didn’t make any sense, but she stumbled toward the wall between two cannons to her few belongings. She already had her coat, which she pulled over her shoulders against the cold. It was always cold in her house in the early morning regardless of season. She grabbed the pistol box and headed to the main deck.

It took her until she reached the deck for her mind to clear of sleep and by then it was too late to head back. The *Lady Ansa* was still moored by tree and anchor, and the sun had recently risen, casting long shadows from the East. V was waiting on deck, sighting down her own pistol at some distant target.

“Let’s start your training,” V said without turning.

“Pardon?”

“Training. The best firearm in the world is useless if you don’t know how to use

it.”

“But, I do know how to use it. Broche showed me how to load it and clean the gunpowder debris after firing.”

V finally turned. “Broche doesn’t know a damn thing about firearms. The only thing he said that *might* help you is his philosophy.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“I’m sure he told you his rules about firearms. The only one I care about is Rule Three.”

“Oh, he did tell me about the gun kicking, protecting your gunpowder...”

“Rule Three is, ‘Only draw a gun if you’re prepared to use it.’”

“I’ve shot that pistol over a dozen times. And I’ve gone hunting with my uncle a few times.”

“Did you hit anything?”

“I fired at a buck, but it got away.” Merryn was beginning to feel defensive.

“And I can assume you’ve never shot a person?”

“No.” Merryn frantically fished through her memory.” But I did hold off Captain Granger with the captain’s pistol the other day.”

V was unimpressed. “Did you expect to use it?”

“No.” Merryn had been wielding Captain Tanim’s large—and broken—gun, but there’d been zero chance she’d have needed to *use* the gun. Broche had already seen to it that Granger was in no condition to fight.

V huffed. “We’ll practice using these first, they’re wheellocks, like the one you

have. V pointed out a rack of six pistols mounted on the gunwale. The rack was wood, designed to slide snugly onto the gunwales, and it kept the pistols pointed at a downward angle off-ship. Merryn hadn't seen the rack before and was about to ask V where it came from, but then realized, *of course V has a rack that mounts onto the ship. Why wouldn't she?*

"These are loaded and ready to go," V said, handing one of the pistols to Merryn and then taking one herself. "Do you know Rule Four?"

"No." Merryn hefted the pistol in her hand. It was sturdy and without ornamentation.

V lifted the pistol to Merryn's head and pulled back the hammer. "I'm going to count to three, and if you don't shoot me first I'm going to kill you."

An awkward smile came, unbidden, onto Merryn's face. This had to be a joke.

"One." V's voice was calm.

"No, wait, I'm not ready—" She pulled the hammer back.

"Two."

"V, I can't—" Merryn squeezed her eyes shut.

"Three."

Click.

Merryn opened her eyes. The hammer on V's pistol had fallen without firing. Merryn's own pistol was clenched, shield-like, in both her hands.

"My pistol wasn't loaded." V placed it back on the rack. "From this point on, while I'm training you, no firearm will be pointed at you. All firearms are to be directed

off ship.”

Merryn let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

V continued. “Broche would say Rule Four is, ‘Be willing to shoot.’ Or you can say it the way I do: Rule Four, ‘No mercy.’ If you’re in a fight, you have to be willing to protect yourself and the crew.”

“That was a test!” Merryn shouted.

V’s voice remained calm. “It was the only test. I needed to know where you stood.” V turned away from Merryn and back toward the rack.

Merryn realized the hammer was still primed on her pistol. She looked at it and realized she needed to drop the hammer. She pulled the trigger.

Click. Ssszzzz...

V spun at the sound of the click. By the time the powder in the pan had begun to sizzle she had cleared the two steps between them. V struck Merryn’s hand outward, grabbing as she did so to redirect Merryn’s arm toward the mountains. There was a loud bang as the gun discharged and filled the air around them with smoke.

For a brief moment Merryn thought she saw V’s outline through the smoke sighing with relief, but when V drew closer, bearing down on Merryn, she only looked mad.

“From now on, directed *off ship*,” she repeated.

“You said they weren’t loaded!”

“I said *mine* wasn’t loaded.”

“Why would you give me a loaded gun? What if I *had* shot you?”

“Well,” V said with a crooked smile, “then I’d know I didn’t need to teach you Rule Four.”

Captain Tanim and Broche appeared from the captain’s quarters, each carrying armfuls of canary yellow fabric and wide awake despite the early hour. Broche turned to Tanim, shifting the fabric to almost free one hand, which he opened and closed repeatedly.

“Pay up, Sir. I don’t know why you agreed to that fool bet.”

Tanim dropped his fabric, which unfurled to reveal a stylized, teardrop-shaped bird with a stubby triangular beak. It was a sparrow, the animal on Alina’s crest. After a moment of fishing through the pouch on his hip Tanim reached over and dropped a coin into Broche’s hand.

“What was that for?” Merryn asked the two men.

“The captain thought it could be someone other than V who was firing up here.”

“It was V against the rest of the crew. I was playing the odds,” the captain retorted, attempting to gather the unfolding flags.

“Oh, it wasn’t,” Merryn said shyly. “It was an accident. I didn’t know the pistol was loaded.”

Captain Tanim again dropped the armful of flags and gingerly plucked the coin from a stunned Broche. “Fool bet, you say? Pay up.”

Broche dropped the flags he was carrying, quickly stomping a foot upon them as they landed so they would remain folded. He quickly tossed another coin over, mumbling something about broken clocks.

Changing the flags took several men much of the day. Scoot, of course, had been assigned to change the flags at the tops of the masts as well as the one atop the balloon, the existence of which Merryn was only vaguely aware. That flag was completely out of sight from the deck. When Scoot returned he made a show of his climbing prowess, swinging wildly and using his arms to leap from handhold to distant handhold. His final descent was on the underside of the ratlines, and he dismounted with a flip to land beside Merryn.

“Good morning, Merryn. Lovely day, no?” Scoot smiled at her, his thin mustache and curled beard stretching with his smile.

“Good morning, Scoot,” she said without looking up. Her voice was small from exhaustion. V had left the deck, leaving Merryn to pick up the pistols and clean the mess they’d made. Her hands ached from cold and use. She’d been repeatedly switching her grip between the ramrod, her powder horn, and the pistols which, although she didn’t realize it at first, were clearly designed for a larger hand. Merryn barely managed. She knew V was attempting to make a point, but whatever it was Merryn wasn’t certain.

They had gone over the basics of the handling and use of powder. Merryn was familiar with this subject already, but too polite and scared to interrupt V. Merryn’s arm was still sore from holding out her arm to practice aiming. The last hour of practice was the worst. For a full hour Merryn loaded pistol after pistol, handing them off to V, who would fire into the distance and drop the pistol to the deck. V was continually snapping her fingers in Merryn’s face until Merryn placed a freshly loaded pistol into her hand.

Her clothes still smelled of spent powder, and her ears rung with the sound of a hundred small explosions.

She must have been lost in thought. When Merryn stood, Scoot had already left.

The *Lady Ansa* had made excellent time and, before dawn on the third day, entered Alina through a saddle in the mountain range. Even in the dim grey light Alexander kept the *Lady Ansa* safe and unscathed, though the mountains drew as close as ten feet on both sides at times. When the sunlight had fully crested the horizon, the mountains that were Adiron's eastern border had become Alina's western border, and the *Lady Ansa* was but another ship loyal to the Third Kingdom, yellow flags flying bright in the early morning sun.

The next few days were uneventful. Merryn's morning practices were put on hold—so as not to draw any unnecessary attention to the ship—but the entire day was filled with the monotonous chore of spying for the Asylum. A man was stationed at each corner of the ship with a spyglass. They were told to look for mid-sized camps near, but not too near, cities. Maybe they'd have tents, maybe not—it was all pretty vague. The entire crew had rotating two-hour shifts.

Thankfully the only patrol they passed was at a distance, and the ship saluted as they passed the opposite direction. From the quarterdeck, where she was spending her current shift, Merryn studied the patrol's flags. They were identical to the ones the *Lady Ansa* flew.

"Captain Tanim, sir, where did we get the Alina flags?" Merryn asked. The

captain was only a few feet away, discussing their course with Joseph. The map held a number of narrow markers noting where they had been, and the thicker course-bearing markers, which noted their next destination. According to the map they would be continuing east, maintaining a course parallel with, but far from, Rayar's border at the southern-most end of the map.

"We found the flags, Crewman Merryn," Tanim answered. He paused, as if daring her to continue this line of questioning.

"Are they patrol flags? That patrol seemed completely uninterested in us."

Tanim looked to the flag mounted at the stern, flapping not five feet away. "I suppose they are."

Merryn looked back once more, the Alina ship a narrowing white speck in the distance. The stark wood reminded her of Captain Granger's ship. She briefly recalled their encounter in Westbridge—

A thought tingled in Merryn's mind. She held out the telescope. "Joseph, would you take this for me, I need to...check something."

"Not a problem, but hurry. I have to go next."

She looked at Joseph, confused, but when he raised both his eyebrows as if urging her to go, she got his meaning. "Yes, that's what I'm doing." She made her way to the gun deck and rifled among her stuff, finding the journal. She recalled that the city name she remembered was near the front of the journal, and after flipping a few pages found the passage:

...and even from miles distant we swore we could hear the bustle of Dardan, the

sounds of city waking in the early morning.

She returned to the quarterdeck and took the telescope from Joseph, who quickly disappeared. She scanned the map, finger tracing the mountain range mentioned in the journal, and wasn't surprised to find Dardan located a few hours travel from their current location. It appeared to be the southernmost city in Alina, but was uncomfortably close to Rayar. On the map the entire continent of Rayar was black. Any further warning was unnecessary.

They needed to stay away from highly populated areas in order to avoid patrols, so their course would soon zig-zag them south and east again, avoiding the city labeled 'Hodan.' They only needed to continue along a little farther than planned...

Merryn looked to Captain Tanim, who was deep in discussion with Alexander.

She switched the bearing marker with a longer one, taking them several additional hours south. She then slid the eastern-bound markers in line, doing her best not to change their orientation. Merryn returned to her post, attempting to be inconspicuous, but repeatedly looking over her shoulder.

Joseph returned just as the captain began calling for their next bearing. Joseph jogged up the stairs and took a quick sight with the astrolabe, a tool that had thus far proven too complex for Merryn to make proper use of. Joseph called out, "Full south," and, deftly spinning the calipers three times along her altered bearing marker, added, "three and one quarter hours."

Merryn sighed with relief. Joseph hadn't noticed.

Captain Tanim raised a hand, halting his conversation with Alexander, and turned

to Joseph. “If it’s that long, Joseph, you’re relieved for the next three hours. Go get yourself something to eat and rest. I need you fresh tomorrow.”

“Yessir.” Joseph nodded to the captain. He waved to Merryn before he left the quarterdeck.

That was it, Merryn thought. They were on their way.

Chapter Ten

“Something is wrong, Captain.”

Tanim turned to Alexander. Again the pilot pulled at the ship’s wheel. The ship veered delicately, maintaining safe distance from the mountain range. This didn’t make sense, the course Joseph had charted was a direct line south, but some thirty minutes ago they began having to make adjustments to their course. Tanim checked the compass. With this final adjustment they were headed true south-west.

“Maybe Joseph made an error, Captain? He’s only been working at navigating for a couple weeks now.”

“Maybe,” Tanim considered. “Or maybe we’re reading his bearing wrong?”

Alexander took a nearby loop of rope and bound the wheel in place. He approached the navigation table and looked over the map with Tanim.

“Maybe we were supposed to go over the mountains?” Alexander asked.

“Doubtful. I asked him to keep us low so we could keep an eye out for the Asylum. And he would have marked the altitude increase on the map...Ah! That must be it.” Tanim pointed to the far side of the markers Joseph had laid.

Alexander immediately understood. “Oh, you think he meant us to follow the border of the western mountain range, and not the eastern? Yes, I suppose if we made poor time heading toward this valley we could have missed our mark. It wouldn’t be hard to have followed the wrong range.”

“That must be it,” Tanim said.

The two men were relieved by this for only ten more minutes, when the two

ranges began closing in on each other. Though it was several hours until sundown, with the two ranges looming over them, the deck of the *Lady Ansa* fell into shadow.

Tanim called to Broche, who was supervising watch changes. “Broche, where is Joseph?”

“He’s below deck, sleeping.”

“Bring him on deck immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” Broche called back, handing a telescope to Merryn.

“Permission to come—” Merryn started.

“Granted.” Tanim interrupted; he didn’t have time for distractions. Joseph had taken to navigation so quickly, was so precise with his measurements and estimations. Tanim had only the barest of crew to keep the *Lady* afloat, otherwise he would already have re-signed Joseph as the ship’s official navigator, and happily given the young man shares instead of his meager wage. It could only be that he or Alexander had made a mistake, but that was equally unlikely. But if it wasn’t the three of them...

He watched Merryn as she relieved Brian of his shift, taking his place at the stern. She extended her spyglass and glanced toward Tanim. He couldn’t place the look on her face, but she turned quickly away. *If it hadn’t been the three of them...*

His mind clouded.

Tanim grimaced, fighting the feeling in his head, feeling the weight on his shoulders, the pressure in his skull. Briefly he felt gravity shift beneath his feet, drawing them upward, reminding him of the cursed choker in his quarters, still bound to him. It was the least of his problems, but it saw its opportunity—

From the main deck Broche called, “Sir. Crewman Joseph is in the...indisposed. Sir?”

Tanim breathed deeply. Exhaled sharply. Gravity returned, the pressures around him dissipating.

He turned to face Broche. “What do you mean he’s indisposed?”

Broche gave an imperceptible nod. He had noticed Tanim’s difficulty, but Tanim had it back under control. Tanim returned the nod.

“Sir, he’s,” Broche glanced at Merryn and lowered his voice. “He’s in the head. He’s going to be there for a while.”

“It’s the food, isn’t it?” His own stomach had been bothering him since supper.

“Captain?” Alexander stood over the map, worry in his voice. “Excuse me, but we’re within a few miles of the Rayar border. We can’t continue along in this direction.”

Broche was coming up the steps, his wide arms reaching to both rails, but stopped when he heard Alexander’s news. “Rayar?”

Without looking Tanim replied, “Continue as close as we can safely. When we’re within a mile, turn us around.”

“Captain, Rayar isn’t the problem.”

They had turned so gradually that Tanim hadn’t noticed. They were now headed full east, flying parallel to Rayar’s border and following the course of the mountain ranges. When he looked off-ship the problem was obvious.

The valley below was cast in even darker shadow than the Lady Ansa was, the sparse sun they caught at this altitude hidden behind the western mountain range. Several

miles ahead the two ranges almost merged. The *Lady* might not fit through the space provided, but that was trumped by a larger problem. Much, much closer, at the base of a mountain, a hundred small lights were igniting within a city wall.

“They probably haven’t seen us yet, Captain,” Alexander said. “Should we turn around now?”

“Maintain course, but slow down. We don’t want to do anything too conspicuous.”

Broche joined Tanim at the side of the ship. “The valley is too narrow. No way around them without being seen.”

“What do you think the odds are that they won’t have ships?”

Broche gestured with both arms toward the mountains, walls on both sides of them. “There’s no way they don’t have ships out here. We’re also at the southwest border of their kingdom, so there’s probably a decent garrison in that city as well. We were being so cautious, what happened?”

“I don’t—” There was an inkling in Tanim’s mind, something he had just forgotten. From the corner of his eye he caught Merryn staring at him. She had obviously heard their conversation, and the look on her face said she knew something.

“Crewman Merryn, were you stationed back here this morning?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“But on the starboard side of the ship, correct?” He turned away from her to the opposite corner of the ship, at Scoot, who sat where she had been. Near the navigation table.

“Yes, Captain Tanim, sir.”

“Did someone tamper with our course?”

She didn’t answer, and Tanim could feel his anger rising, heard it in his own voice.

“Crewman Merryn, did *you* tamper with our course?”

From somewhere else someone called out, “Sir.”

Merryn opened her mouth.

“Sir.” The call came from the other end of the ship.

“Crewman Merryn, you will answer me!”

She stumbled over her own words. “I...I thought—”

“Sir!”

“What?” Tanim wheeled, enough fury in him for both Merryn and whoever was interrupting.

“Torches off the bow.” It was Stephen, an older, dark-skinned man who had been with the crew for about a year.

“I know there are torches off the bow!”

“Not from the city, sir. There’s a camp further out.”

He turned to Merryn. Her expression shifted from fear to unreserved excitement in an eye-blink. Tanim wanted to stay and reprimand her, but his excitement drew him to the bow.

Stephen handed over the spyglass and gestured a slight diagonal from the city ahead. “It’s that direction, maybe a mile out from the city.”

It was easy to find, with only two areas of light in the over-dark evening between the mountains. There were a dozen tents, some quite large, and the silhouettes of maybe thirty people milled about. At the camp's perimeter someone was lighting a series of torches.

"Yes!" The voice came from behind him. It was gentle, and still excited. Tanim lowered the spyglass. Merryn was standing beside him, her own spyglass still to her eye.

"Crewman Merryn—"

"We found it, Captain!" she said.

"Let's not get too excited. It's a camp. There's no guarantee this is what we're looking for." He wanted to be as excited as she was, but history—a lot of history—told him his life couldn't be so easy. And there was still Merryn's tampering with the navigation table to address.

"I knew it!" Merryn looked at Tanim, and tried to cover her excitement with sheepishness. "I mean, we've looked everywhere else."

Broche chimed in, "It's not the first camp we've seen. But it is well organized."

That was true. Now that the perimeter was lit Tanim was able to see two large tents set up in the center, and another half dozen arranged evenly around them. At the far end of the camp, another tent stood alone.

"It's got to be it!" Merryn insisted.

"It doesn't have to be anything, we've only started—"

A bolt of lightning exploded inside the camp. From a clear sky.

"Of course," Tanim said. He retreated to the center of the deck, if only to get

away from Merryn's celebratory squeaking.

"Sir, orders?" Alexander asked from the helm.

"Continue ahead, but we need to be as non-threatening as possible."

"High and wide of the city?" Alexander suggested.

The buzzing, the muddiness began in Tanim's head, but again he focused and shoved it away. *It's happening more frequently.*

"No. We're under their flag. Head straight toward the camp. Let's act like we belong here. We're going to draw some attention, let's make them question if they should bother with us."

Alexander brought the *Lady Ansa* within a few hundred feet of the camp, and maintained a safe disembarking altitude of fifty feet. He remained at the helm, counter-steering against the chill, heavy winds that rolled down from the mountains. The ship rocked only slightly. Tanim recognized that this was not an easy feat.

"Drop anchor, but keep the ship in the air," Tanim said. We may need to make a quick escape."

At this Broche sighed. Tanim decided to ignore him.

Tanim walked to the mast, taking a glowstone lantern. It was quickly growing darker, and he wanted all eyes on him. "We need to be quick. We find out who is in charge, find Pallos, ask our questions and leave. Broche, do you have Anaise's map of Rayar?"

Broche already had a pack prepared and slung over his shoulder. He jostled it in reply to Tanim's question.

“When did she give us a map?” Merryn asked.

“Obviously when you weren’t looking,” Tanim replied quickly, cutting her off.

Why did the girl always ask the wrong questions? “Broche, you’re coming with me.

Brian, V—”

“Nope,” V said, eyeing down the sight on her pistol and replacing it in a holster hidden by her longcoat.

“What do you mean, ‘nope?’”

“I’m not going. I hate casters, and these ones are crazy.”

“They’re sick. So long as we’re calm and respectful there’s no reason for them to harm us.”

“Perhaps you’re unfamiliar with the word ‘crazy,’” V responded. “I’m sure they’re reasonable. Clearly that tent needed to be lightning’d.”

Below them one of the tents was ablaze. That wasn’t helping his argument.

“Look,” Tanim argued, “I’m the captain. If I say you’re going, you’re going. We’ll go in, we keep our group quiet, don’t startle anyone, and we get the answers we need. Five minutes, tops.”

At that V opened her coat, revealing a dozen pistols, metal shining blue in the light of Tanim’s lantern. From her right hip a blunderbuss hung, loosely lashed to her belt.

Without missing a beat Tanim said, “But V, I want you to stay here and protect the ship. Brian, Merryn, get your equipment. You’re coming along.”

Merryn almost leaped with excitement at the order. She opened her coat, a look of

surprise crossing her face when she saw the pistol sitting in her holster. “I’m...I’m ready!”

Tanim sighed, looking at the two women on his crew. From experience he knew he could have forced V to come along, but experience also told him she’d just be all the more inclined to find a reason to shoot someone. And it wasn’t defiance, per se, nor was she gloating that she got her way. And, technically speaking, he hadn’t yet ordered her to go.

As for Merryn, if he hadn’t been...*compelled* to rehire her, he surely would have sought out a more experienced crew member. As it was she was shaping up rather well, and her youth and innocence had already proven an excellent distraction when interacting with official-type people. Her main downfall was that she was too excited about almost everything. This wasn’t a game.

“Lower the ladder, Broche.” While Broche gave orders Tanim turned to the rest of the crew. “While we’re gone, no one leaves the ship. We’re in and out, and I don’t want anyone being left behind.”

“Who goes there?” a silhouette called out to them as they approached the camp, voice mellow but commanding. There was no questioning if this was the Asylum now. As they approached Tanim and his group could see a number of bearded men and hear arcane babbling. Thankfully, barring the other-worldly sounds and flashes from half-formed spells, there was nothing to be concerned with.

“We’re here as friends,” Merryn called out through the space between them, just

as they had rehearsed. “We’re looking for a man named Pallos. We need only to ask him some questions.” Merryn turned to smile at Tanim.

Even from fifty feet out Tanim could see the silhouette’s shoulders relax.

The man came out to meet them. He was burly and blond, his faded tunic all but hidden by the thick and unkempt bear pelt he wore. “This is unusual, to say the least.”

“Apologies, sir.” Merryn curtsied. It was a nice touch, Tanim thought. “I am Merryn, member of the crew of the *Lady An...nabelle*. Please allow me to introduce Captain Tanim.”

“Haane.” The man’s face was serious, but he extended his hand in greeting to Tanim, then to the rest of the group. “We seldom receive visitors, I can’t recall when someone has voluntarily approached us. Most people want us to stay as far away from them as they can. They’ve even begun leaving supplies farther out.”

“We cannot blame them.” Another voice, gentle and soothing.

When Tanim turned to see who was speaking he understood why. Approaching them was a woman, dark haired, clad in a thin white robe despite the cold.

“A healer,” Broche said, surprised.

The woman nodded, her robe undulating slowly and seemingly independent of the wind. “This is Sophie,” Haane said.

“What is a healer doing out in the middle of nowhere?” Tanim asked.

“The men and women here need care,” she said. “No one else was willing to provide it, so I volunteered.”

“I thought healers were unable to help these...” Broche paused, attempting to

make a tactful word choice. "...these casters."

"You are correct, I cannot repair the damage done to their minds or souls. But these people are often unable to care for themselves in even the simplest of ways. That type of care I can provide. But they are also a danger to themselves and others, so my healing talents do not go to waste here."

"Admirable work," Tanim said. There was a moment of awkward silence.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your purpose here," Sophie said.

"We are looking for a man named Pallos. He has some information we need. We only have a few questions for him."

Sophie and Haane looked toward each other. Sophie quickly replied, "I'm sorry, we don't have anyone by that name here."

"Are you certain?" Tanim asked. "Is he perhaps under another name? Or is there someone here with no name?"

"You need to leave," Haane said, placing himself between Tanim and Sophie. Broche stepped closer. Haane was several inches shorter than the quartermaster, but held his ground.

Tanim held his hand out, gesturing to Broche that a fight wasn't necessary. "You said your name was Haane?" Tanim asked, and repeated the name, drawing out the long-A sound. "That name's Alahvinian. Are you one of my countrymen?"

"I was born in Alahvin." Hanne's face gave away no emotion.

"I'm from Toln—the, uh, Western Islands. You?" Tanim hoped no one had caught that. Tolnir hadn't been called that for over three centuries, after that group of

islands was subsumed by Alahvin.

“It doesn’t matter where I’m from.” Haane’s face remained stern. “We are under no flag. Our hospitality is without borders, and offered to whoever needs it.”

“And whether or not you believe it, I appreciate your efforts. As does King Angel.”

Both Haane and Sophie’s faces changed from anger to surprise. As did Broche’s, Brian’s and Merryn’s.

Tanim continued, “You see, we are here on the King’s orders.” At this he revealed from his coat a wallet, simple and functional, little more than a folded square of leather bound with leather cord. Its most outstanding feature was that the leather was dyed red and bore the King’s seal, the silhouette of a Phoenix, wings raised high to complete the seal’s circular image. Tanim began unwinding the cord.

“You’ll understand that our efforts here are to be kept in secrecy. You see, my name is not Tanim. It is actually—” The cord snagged, knotted on itself. He regretted not memorizing the name on the papers inside. He continued to grasp at the wallet, aware how long his pause had become. Finally it opened with a snap, the cord surrendering. He flipped it open, hid his surprise, and handed it to Haane. “Madelin. My name is Madelin Horst. As a gesture of good faith, we have a store of extra food we’ll leave with you.”

Broche turned to Tanim with concern, saying, “Sir, we can’t do that—”

“Yes we can, and we will.”

“No...Madelin,” Broche’s smile peeked through his concern. “What I meant was, that food is—”

“Yes, yes. That food is for the King’s men. Well, I say these two are as much the King’s men as you or I. And all the more so for their charity and kindness.”

“Sir—”

“No more arguments, Quartermaster. Now, send these two to fetch the food.”

Haane and Sophie were taken aback. They looked at each other, unsure what to do. Finally Sophie spoke up.

“We, we appreciate the King’s generosity. While we don’t know the man you’re looking for, perhaps we can provide you with some help?”

Haane added, “Yes, maybe he is with another Asylum. We might be able to direct you there. If you would follow me...” He gestured with an open hand toward the camp. Tanim and Broche followed. When they passed the torch perimeter, Broche leaned in and asked, “Where did you *get* that?”

#

In the middle of a clearing a dozen bodies lay strewn about. They hung from trees or splayed from bushes. They had been this way for over a month, and the beasts and birds and insects had taken their share, each in turn. The little meat that was left had become home to maggots and flies. Some of the bodies were gone entirely, having been dragged away by the larger beasts of the wood.

At the clearing’s center three wooden markers protruded from the ground, each next to a pile of stones laid there to discourage the creatures of the wood from disturbing what lay buried beneath them.

Three caped and hooded men crashed through the woods into the clearing,

breaking its silence.

“We’re here,” the man at the lead said. He approached the two piles of stone on the left and knelt between them. “Hello, brothers.” He rested his hands on the graves before standing.

“I’ll get the equipment, Tores,” the second man said to the first. He began removing the stones from the third grave.

Tores looked to the woods in the direction they had come. “Anton, where is Mad Horse?”

At that the one they called “Mad Horse,” a giant of a man, entered clearing. Behind him he pulled three horses, and though the horses fought and pulled at their leads, for the giant man’s progress you wouldn’t have known.

“I’m here, Tores.” Mad Horse’s voice was higher than one would expect, given his size. In his childhood it wasn’t the only thing he had been teased for.

“Here we go.” Anton hefted a sack from the soil. The digging had been easy, for unlike the other two graves—which were true graves—they had left the soil in the third loosely packed. He reached in, began dividing the sack’s contents into three piles. Bracers, helmets, armor and large pauldrons, each emblazoned with a red fist on a field of white. Lastly Anton handed each of the men a carefully folded white surcoat.

As they donned their equipment, Tores spoke. “Both airships were seen in Alina two weeks ago. One of the traders in town told me he saw the light colored ship in Westbridge just last week. That may be Captain Granger—”

“He’s not a captain any longer,” Anton interrupted. “And when I get my hands on

him...”

“All in due time,” Tores continued. “Our first task is to find the boy. Since he’s not here, we can only assume that he’s with Granger or Captain Tanim. With any luck Captain Tanim has David safely aboard his ship, and they’re carrying out the boy’s duty.”

“Anton, would you toss me that sack?” Mad Horse asked. He caught the sack, looked inside, then turned it inside out.

“What’s wrong, Mad Horse?” Anton asked. “You missing something?”

“My wallet and identification papers are missing.”

Chapter Eleven

The torches were too close.

Haane led the way, passing through the perimeter of the Asylum. The torches were mounted on five-foot poles, and Haane stopped at one, which was askew. He wiggled it, then tamped the ground around it when it was upright.

Ten, maybe fifteen feet between the torches. Tanim looked around: the perimeter was evenly lit. Given the option Tanim might have been able to drop into the Asylum from the rock outcropping that abutted the perimeter a short distance away, but he wanted to visit, not look like he belonged.

Tanim looked back. Broche, Merryn and Brian were only a short distance away, heading in the direction of the *Lady Ansa*.

“Broche.”

Without question Broche returned, and before Tanim had said anything Broche realized the problem.

“Too close together, aren’t they?” Broche said.

“Yeah. And I only have these peoples’ confidence so long as they don’t think I’m an idiot.”

Broche made as if to respond, but refrained. Just as Tanim had done, Broche looked for another entrance, but came to the same conclusion. Not a second later he said, “Give me your coat.”

Tanim didn’t hesitate, but was unsure what Broche was planning. He handed the leather coat over. Broche took it, grabbing it with both hands at the collar, flapping it

twice.

“Now walk in,” Broche said. “I’m right behind you.”

“I’m going to catch—”

Broche pointed to Haane, who was a short distance ahead. “He’s going to get suspicious. Start walking.”

Reluctantly, Tanim started toward the Asylum, drawing within a few arm-spans of the torches. His skin warmed. Itched. Burned. When Tanim reached the midpoint, in line with the torches, his skin began smoking. It felt dry, like tinder. There was a sudden flash of light, and just as suddenly he was wrapped in his coat and shoved forward. He stumbled the last few steps and caught himself.

“You okay?” Haane asked. He was looking at Tanim.

Tanim patted at his arm. Small wisps of smoke rose from beneath his coat.

“I think so,” Tanim said. “Wasn’t paying attention. I must have walked too close to the torch.”

Haane shook his head and continued along, taking a few jogging steps to catch up to Sophie.

When Tanim looked back Broche was barely visible, fading into the darkness beyond the torch light.

“I certainly don’t pay you enough,” he said to himself.

“I don’t know how we’re supposed to move all of this,” Brian said. He leaned both hands on a barrel of flour, large drops of sweat rolling from his forehead.

There was a musty smell in the hold. It was hot, and though Merryn wouldn't call the air 'damp,' it was far more humid down here than she could ever recall. Merryn was aware of small flies that gathered around most of the dry goods, attracted to the mold that was growing in some, maybe all, of these barrels.

Something was wrong with the food here. Some of the crew had experienced digestive problems in the last week. Merryn had helped toss a few barrels overboard in the days prior, probably food that had turned or soured.

Thankfully there were few rats on board. It's difficult for rats to infiltrate a ship that rarely docks. But this didn't prohibit anything with wings, particularly insects, from getting on board. The hold wasn't terribly clean to begin with, but some of the barrels had become infested. The barrel Brian leaned on was mostly sealed, but Merryn was able to identify its contents as flour based on the hundreds of weevils that crawled along the barrel's seams.

Brian rolled a fat thumb over a line of weevils. Their bodies popped audibly as he turned his wrist. He brushed his hand on his shirt and trousers.

"It's not so bad," Merryn said. She leaned her body, jerking a barrel around a crate of tools. Her arms ached pleasantly. "We've only been at this for ten minutes and we already got half the barrels on deck."

"On deck? We need to get them over to the camp. We'll have to take them one at a time."

The ache in her arms took on a sinister tinge. Dozens of barrels. There were dozens on the deck already, and it was a ten-minute walk between the ship and the

Asylum camp—and that was without a seventy-pound barrel.

“This is going to take us all night,” she said. Suddenly the barrel she rolled seemed much heavier.

The ship was closer to the ground than when they went below deck. Its main anchor was dropped aft of the ship, and a smaller fore-anchor dropped as well. The ship swayed lightly, creaking as it pulled taut against its anchors. At Broche’s command the crew put the gangplank in position at port. It made a shallow decline, and was tied loosely at the deck so that the ship’s slight swaying hardly affected the gangplank. It hardly moved where it touched ground.

“There’s a wagon waiting below,” Broche said to the entire crew. “Load it up, we should be able to finish in two trips.”

“Where’d we get a wagon?” Merryn asked.

“I borrowed it,” Broche said.

“Borrowed, or *borrowed*?”

“Borrowed, as in, you will be leaving the wagon behind with the second load of foodstuffs.”

“Oh, I just thought, because you’re pirates—”

“We are on an airship, Crewman Merryn. What use would we have for a wagon? And just because *we* are pirates—I remind you that you are signed on for several months yet—it doesn’t mean we steal everything we get our hands on.”

Merryn's face grew warm with embarrassment. Her words failed her. She lowered her head, focusing on steering the barrel toward the gangplank.

The ledger was disappointing. A good majority of the people here were listed by only one name, half of which were surnames. Tanim didn't know what Pallos' last name was. Adding that the people in the Asylum were mostly from this and nearby regions, it was looking less and less likely that this was the place.

"How many Asylums are there?" he asked Haane.

Haane stood nearby, mostly disapproving of Tanim's presence, but bringing out the few such books they had at Sophie's request. They had been packed among tarpaulin, well-used wood boards, and what Tanim assumed passed as blankets.

"Not too many. But, really, not enough." He dropped another ledger near Tanim with a thud.

Some of the ledgers seemed to tell stories. The one Tanim held was burned and brittle, obviously a victim of some fire. He closed this one, lifted the one Haane had just left.

"You have this ledger long?" Tanim asked.

"It's dated inside," Haane said, making a poor attempt to hide his irritation. "Look for yourself."

It was only a decade old, and judging by the condition of the leather, still pliable and smooth, it had been bound around the same time. He stroked the cover, feeling a

coarse dust that grew more concentrated near its upper right corner, where a solid layer of purple Stone had seemingly condensed. Stone was the energy source casters used for their magic. It was valuable. Each of the kingdoms had their own mines, and guarded these mines with earnest. He wasn't sure how it could have gotten on relatively new leather.

"I don't see anything in here," Tanim said. He flipped through pages in the decade-old book. It was well organized where it could be: the dates each caster was collected, locations they were found or delivered, other more pertinent, this-could-save-your-life type information. He had gone through the whole of the current book, but in this one he flipped through single pages, then clumps of pages, and finally he turned to the last page.

And there was his answer. Mostly.

Starting on the last page of the ledger and going backwards, the "burners" were listed, and crossed out. It made sense: these casters would only be with the Asylum a short while. It was prudent to collect all their names together.

Only, this page wasn't in the current ledger. Tanim looked for Haane. He was at the tent's entrance ushering in Merryn and Brian, cart in tow. Tanim noticed a curl of paper just visible in Haane's boot.

Of course. This was the current ledger. It should have been on hand, and yet it was the last one Haane had brought him.

Tanim reached for the current ledger, flipping to the back. As expected, the last page was missing. It had been cut so cleanly he was only able to see its remaining edge

when he pulled the covers back toward each other.

Tanim bided his time, looking intently at the books as if he were still lost in their pages and columns. He needed to be clever, discerning, and deft of action.

Instead, as soon as Merryn and Brian departed, he cuffed Haane in the temple with his gun.

Merryn had heard of the term “sea legs,” and thought she’d have the same problem. She’d spent all day, every day, on the *Lady Ansa* for weeks, but when her feet touched the ground her steps were solid. If she thought she missed that sensation, it was nothing compared to their return trip.

Pulling the empty wagon behind them, she and Brian happened upon a patch of wild wheat. It was completely dark, so she smelled it before she saw it. Not the pungent smell of ground meal. No, it was subtle, fresh, still immature and green. It smelled like home.

She reached out for it, felt the rounded and bumpy kernels that made up the wheat head. The long and slender leaves tickled at the hairs on her arms. She plucked a leaf, placing it between her thumbs and cupping her hands. She blew on the leaf, expecting a shrill whistle. Nothing happened.

“Are you done playing?” Brian asked. “We still have another load to take.” Brian was a silhouette. Behind him the glowstone lantern hung from the wagon.

“Yeah. Sorry. Just lost myself for a second.” She felt the leaf, the bumpy striations running lengthwise. She tossed the leaf aside. “Just out of practice,” she said to

herself.

“Look, the ship’s right there.”

They pulled up to the base of the gangplank, and Brian was instantly irate.

“They couldn’t unload the last of the barrels? What are these lazy bastards doing?”

Only four barrels lay in the grass where there should have been a dozen, and no one was there to help with even those few. The deck was a good thirty feet above the ground so she couldn’t see if anyone was up there, but it was quiet. She found herself becoming irritated as well. “What’s more important than getting these barrels out of here?”

“They’re probably getting drunk below deck,” Brian said. “Here, help me with these.” He placed the board they were using as a ramp for the wagon, and pointed to the barrels.

“Broche wouldn’t let them do that.” She couldn’t believe it. Broche was always so disciplined, so focused on his tasks. Even when he did have a drink, ale or wine—never rum—he wouldn’t finish it.

“He’s the worst of them, and he can’t handle his drink. Once he and the captain had a spat. Oh, the shouting. I thought they’d kill each other. Instead Broche storms off, disappears below deck. When we found him he reeked of alcohol, and beat the heavens from a dozen men, swords against bare hands.”

“Is he that good with a sword, even drunk?” Merryn asked, wondering if Broche had accidentally hurt someone.

“He had the bare hands, Merryn.”

“Twelve men? With *swords*? You’re worse than Salazar with your stories.

“He brushed them aside like they were feathers.”

Merryn rolled her eyes.

“It’s not my job to convince you of what is true.” Brian heaved the fourth barrel in the back of the wagon. He dusted his hands. “Well, let’s get this over with.” He jumped from the wagon and made his way toward the rope ladder.

She was already at the foot of the gangplank, so decided she’d ascend that way. The boards were wide enough, with crossbars that mostly prevented slipping. But what seemed like a moderate incline on the way down seemed much steeper as she made her way up, and the plank bounced more and more with each step. She had to stop occasionally so the board didn’t buck; each time she did she looked at Brian, who was well above her, always widening the gap.

She knew he had reached the deck when he called out, “Aww, dammit.” She looked once more to see his legs swing up behind him and disappear. Her head reached deck level a minute later, and V was the first person she saw.

V stood alone, mid-ship, her arms behind her back. Her mouth moved with intensity, but, quiet as it was, Merryn couldn’t make out the words.

“What?” Merryn yelled.

Again, the same exaggerated mouthing. Three syllables, V’s nose scrunching with the first syllable, mouth prolonging the last, but no actual words.

“I don’t know what you’re saying, V.”

Merryn stepped onto the deck, intending to beeline to V to find out what she was saying. It wasn't necessary. As soon as Merryn's foot hit the deck two men appeared from their hiding places, blocking Merryn's exit and seizing her. They wore leather travelling armor with yellow tunics, and though she couldn't see the symbol, she knew that somewhere these men bore the tear-shaped sparrow of Alina.

"I was trying to tell you *it's a trap*," V said.

"Oh," Merryn said, looking at the two muscular, average height soldiers who held her arms.

"Quiet, you," one of her captors said, giving her a slight jostle.

There were more than a dozen soldiers around the deck, their swords drawn. One stood near Broche. His sword was resting on Broche's collarbone, its tip at his throat. Three more men were on the quarterdeck, their muskets trained on the crew as a whole.

"Is this man your captain?" a voice called from the helm. The voice was gruff, challenging. Its owner was clearly looking for a fight. Merryn looked to the helm. Alexander sat on the ground, his hands tied behind his back. A tall man, thick necked and broad shouldered, stood over him, a hand firmly gripping the wheel.

"That man is one of our cannoneers," Broche answered.

Merryn realized they were talking about Brian, who stood near the top of the ladder he had climbed. One of the soldiers had him by the neck, brandishing a sword as if it were a spoon, and Brian's head a bowl of soup.

"Should I tie him up with the others?" the soldier asked.

"Indeed," the tall soldier said. "The girl also." He descended to the main deck,

taking slow, exaggerated steps on his way down. He wore a yellow military coat. It had two vertical rows of brass buttons, and fit tightly against his upper chest but looser at the waist. A thick, blonde mustache and equally thick eyebrows were the only hair on his head. There was a series of ribbons on his chest and small metal baubles on his shoulders.

Merryn wasn't familiar with military markings or ranks, so these meant nothing to her, but based solely on this man's volume she assumed he was in charge.

"I will repeat this for our newest arrivals: I am Lieutenant Gerald. I require your captain. I don't know where you got Alinian flags, but you must surely know it is against the law to impersonate the military. We can only assume you are spies. Your choices are simple. You can confess your actions, telling me why you are in Alina and what you had planned. If you do this, you may be shown mercy. Or we can take all of you to the Crag, where you will be tortured and interrogated."

There was some commotion from the crew at this. A few people drew in short breaths. The Crag was the central prison for the Sibling Kingdoms—anyone arrested locally within Alahvin, Adiron, or Alina could be sent to the Crag. Though it was an attempt at fair and just imprisonment, more often than not people were simply lost once they entered. Not three months ago V was in a cell in an Alahvin city, and Captain Tanim had hired a number of untrained crew in the hopes of buying her freedom before she was transferred to the Crag. That was when Merryn had first become a part of the crew.

Merryn looked to V, who was staring intently, and began mouthing new words. Again it looked like three syllables were being spoken, but again Merryn didn't know what V was saying.

Merryn mouthed back, “What?”

V revealed her wrists. It was subtle, and took Merryn a moment to realize she was showing that she had undone her restraints. The soldiers here seemed overly relaxed. Merryn supposed that with the crew of the *Lady Ansa* bound they felt sure enough of themselves. They had secured Broche and had a man dedicated to watching him, but for whatever reason there was no one guarding V.

A soldier walked between the crew on the main deck as he continued. Behind her someone began tying her wrists. The rope was thick and bristled, and irritated the insides of her wrists. Even as the soldier tied the lines, Merryn knew it was a half-hearted job, and they would be loose when he finished.

“You doubtless have some clue what you are doing here,” Lieutenant Gerald continued. There was silence on deck.

“No? Well, then, let us do things the difficult way.” The lieutenant approached Broche.

V mouthed the same three syllables. Merryn shrugged, not knowing what to do.

Lieutenant Gerald stood eye to eye with Broche. They were the same height; both were tall men, well over six feet. Broche was no weakling, but the lieutenant’s chest and arms were visibly larger than Broche’s. Lieutenant Gerald reared back and swung, his large fist striking the side of Broche’s head near the jaw.

Broche’s head snapped to the side. Slowly he turned back, facing the lieutenant. Blood ran from a cut on his jaw. The lieutenant looked surprised. Clearly he had expected Broche to fall or beg for mercy. Instead Broche stared directly into the lieutenant’s eyes.

“That was a warning,” Lieutenant Gerald said, with more concern than conviction.

The lieutenant kept talking, but Merryn’s attention was drawn elsewhere. V was staring at her with such intensity and disdain that Merryn thought one of them would catch fire. V was now wordlessly yelling at Merryn, her face contorted as she mouthed...whatever it was.

Finally fed up, V shouted, “I said to *distract* them!”

“What? Distract...oh!” Merryn said.

It happened quickly. When V shouted, the eyes of the soldiers were drawn to her. Merryn’s response, as unaware as it had started, drew their eyes to her. When their eyes turned back to V, they saw a woman carrying two multi-shot pistols.

Three shots rang out so quickly they sounded like one. On the quarterdeck the three musket-carrying soldiers were knocked back, red flashes from two chests and one throat.

V dropped the pistols and thrust her shoulders back. Her red longcoat slid down her arms, revealing the arsenal hidden beneath.

“By the gods,” Lieutenant Gerald sputtered. “Men, to ar—” Broche slammed his forehead into the lieutenant’s face. Blood rushed from the lieutenant’s nose and into his mouth, cutting off his order into gurgling anguish. He staggered back, clutching his face.

The deck hopped to life, the crew of the Lady Ansa leaping into action. A few of the crew, including Scoot, had also freed themselves from their restraints. Those who hadn’t threw unsteady kicks or bum-rushed soldiers near them. Now slightly

outnumbered, most of the soldiers went down quickly, shielding themselves from being stomped.

The soldier behind Merryn had only just finished tying her wrists. He stood beside her. It quickly became obvious that he was a new recruit, newer even than Merryn to her crew. His uniform was unmarred, still stiff from starch, the white bands around his waist and his cuffs stark white. Even his face was unblemished, with just the smallest beginnings of facial hair coming in below his nose. Both looked at each other briefly, and it was Merryn who first realized that they, too, should be fighting.

Her elbows flapped, attempting to free herself from the poorly tied restraints. A memory of fighting with other boys her age came to mind. Always larger, always stronger, she feinted a kick to the young soldier's groin. He instinctively stood on his tip-toes and blocked, and Merryn rotated her hip toward him and raked the outside of her boot against his shin.

He wore shiny leather boots that reached almost to his knees, so she wasn't sure he would feel it, but the young soldier shrieked in pain. Merryn bowled into him, knocking him to the ground.

She moved to kick him, but didn't. It seemed unsporting. She wriggled one hand free from the rope. She stood over him. He looked surprised. A thought crossed her mind. The soldiers hadn't guarded V, and this boy had given no effort in restraining her. Was he surprised because a girl had fought him, or because she had beat him?

She drew her dagger from her boot. The soldier stirred, but Merryn walked past him and cut the bonds from a crew member who had fallen but was still conscious.

“Untie Alexander!” Broche’s voice, loud and clear over all the shouting and clanging weapons: steel against steel against wood. The crew of *Lady Ansa* was fighting with belays or mop handles if their weapons weren’t handy.

Merryn watched Alexander half a ship away, back-peddling up the steps to the quarterdeck as a soldier attempted to subdue him. She could never get there in time, but thankfully two others were moving in to flank the soldier.

Broche dodged a punch from the lieutenant, a huge swing meant to take Broche’s head off. Two quick steps put Broche to the lieutenant’s left side. The lieutenant turned, stepped toward Broche, but as he did Broche did something with his feet. The lieutenant nearly stumbled.

Why isn’t he fighting? Merryn wondered, but quickly realized he hadn’t been able to untie himself.

She never thought moving twenty feet could be so dangerous. She made her way toward Broche, dagger drawn. Men clashed around her, the space between her and Broche opening and closing. A sword swing nearly cut her in half before it clanged against pirate steel.

“Broche, let me free you!” she yelled, but wasn’t sure he heard her. She lunged for his wrists. Her knuckles turned white as she struggled with his bonds.

Broche glanced back, took a fist to the gut for his trouble, and stepped back to avoid being grappled. He shook free of Merryn.

“I’m a bit busy,” he groaned.

She grabbed again, getting a solid grip on the rope this time, and began sawing.

The rope was thick, and though she tried to match Broche's movements, she was jerked wildly as she cut.

"Don't cut my hands off," Broche yelled without looking back.

Merryn heard two smacks, two grunts from Broche, and both of them staggered to the right. Suddenly she was between Broche and the lieutenant, the large soldier looming toward them. Just as suddenly Broche was leaping, dragging Merryn behind him in the air. Broche thrust-kicked the lieutenant in the gut, shoving him back a good ten feet.

Merryn, still holding the rope, was leaning at an awkward angle. Single-minded, she righted herself and began cutting again.

"Almost...done!" she shouted, the final threads of rope breaking free and loosing her to the ground.

The sudden loss of her extra weight pushed Broche forward, and the lieutenant accepted him into a great bear-hug. Lieutenant Gerald began squeezing. Broche groaned. A full arm and one hand were caught. Broche strained, pulling his hand free. He struck randomly, at the man's arms, shoulders, back. There was no reaction from the lieutenant...until Broche brought his fist, hammer-like, onto the lieutenant's broken nose.

There was a howl, and the lieutenant dropped Broche. Both men crashed to the ground. Blood gushed from Lieutenant Gerald's nose, even more than before, and his bald head glowed red with pain. Broche leaped up, rushing toward the lieutenant.

"Sound the alarm!" the lieutenant shouted, deflecting Broche's punch away from his jaw but taking the strike in the forehead. He seized Broche's arm as he stood. Broche clamped his own hand over the lieutenant's, and smiled.

Somewhere on deck a ram's horn sounded, a long, high bray that drowned out all other noise on the ship. To the west, the city garrison came to life, torches filling the windows and watchtowers. A steady, rhythmic stomping sound filled in behind the last sound of the horn, countless feet headed in their direction.

"Get Alexander free," Broche commanded. Merryn found the pilot on the stairs, legs and hands still bound, and began cutting him free. The ropes cut easily, now that she wasn't being tossed around as she tried to cut. When she stood Broche was walking past her. There was no sign of the lieutenant. She followed Broche up, and Alexander scrambled to the helm.

Alexander yelled, "Broche, we've got to get in the air!"

"We're not leaving the captain behind," Broche responded, steel-faced.

"We don't have to leave him, but if we stay here we'll be overrun." Alexander pointed off-ship, to the full garrison of soldiers, a human wave rushing toward the *Lady Ansa*.

Merryn looked over the rails of the quarterdeck, down to the main deck. The crew were still fighting the soldiers, but clearly had the upper hand. She caught a glimpse of V striking a soldier with the butt of a pistol and throwing him over the side of the ship. Just below her, lying at the door to the Captain's Quarters, the lieutenant was sprawled out, unconscious.

"Merryn!"

Merryn spun around, realizing that was the second or third time her name had been called.

“Merryn,” Broche shouted at her. “Go to the Asylum and find the captain!”

She looked at the fighting between them and the gangplank, the distance between the ship and the Asylum. How many tents the Asylum had, and how much land the Asylum covered. Even if she made it off the ship, how would she find Captain Tanim?

“I...I can’t.”

Broche grabbed her by the collar of her coat, pulling her so close she couldn’t look away from his eyes. “That was an order. Find the captain. Tell him the navy is coming. We’ll meet you—” Broche looked at Alexander.

“East,” Alexander grunted, pulling at several levers. The *Lady Ansa* shuddered. “On the other side of the Asylum.”

“Got it?” Broche asked her.

Broche looked angry. She was confused. Of everyone aboard, in every situation she’d seen him in, Broche was always the one to remain calm. It scared her.

“East side of the Asylum,” she repeated.

“Curses!” Alexander shouted. “We’ve got company, Broche!”

Above the garrison, squares of light that Merryn thought were windows began rising. Windows, yes, but they were on navy airships, and those ships were taking to air.

“Go,” Broche ordered.

“Yes, sir,” she responded. *Go*, she told herself, *just go. Like jumping into a cold pond, just make the decision and do it.* As soon as Broche had released her collar, she started running.

She was at the bottom of the steps before she realized it, charging for the

gangplank while dodging between fights. Merryn leaped over one of the fallen soldiers and onto the gangplank at full speed. She'd thought the gangplank bounced before. Now as she ran the board oscillated wildly, extending her stride into six-foot vertical leaps.

"Merryn," V's voice, from on ship. "Behind you!"

She glanced back. One of the soldiers was pursuing her.

A gunshot. It struck between her and the soldier, knocking a fist-sized hole in the edge of the gangplank.

"Oh, gods!" the soldier yelled. He leaped from the gangplank, disappearing in the dark grass below.

"No, don't shoot!" Merryn screamed back. She reached the end of the gangplank on a bad bounce. The top of her toes hit the board, and she fell forward onto her knee and hands, rolling several feet in the grass. Her knee went numb for a moment, making it difficult to stand. She pulled herself up, leaning on the wagon, dull blue light lighting her way. Her hands stung, they were covered in dirt, she thought, but when she rubbed them she felt more than one piece of gravel roll out from inside her skin.

She tried to get her bearings, hobbling on her right leg. Suddenly she was falling forward, air and then grass rushing past her face. She struck the ground before she realized she had been tackled from behind.

Merryn landed on her side, rolling with the soldier. He lost his grip on the third roll, and Merryn quickly scrambled away on all fours. Still on his knees, he lunged for her. He was on her quickly, grabbing at her foot and drawing her closer. Grass slid between her fingers. She attempted and failed to hold fast. She kicked, feeling satisfied

but a little guilty when the soldier made an ‘oomf,’ sound.

That guilt disappeared when she looked back and saw him attempting to draw his short sword. He was scrabbling at her leg with one hand, the other reaching at the sheath on his belt. Merryn kicked with intent now, but every time she freed one leg he caught the other, and then caught her left leg solidly. He pulled himself closer and drew his sword.

Panicked, she kicked. She struck his face but he rolled with it, turning both of them on their backs and dropping his sword. He blindly reached for it, her leg in his face. She patted the ground, looking for a branch, a rock.

Her gun.

They hadn’t taken it from her on the ship, it was still in her holster. Her hands felt big and dumb, trying to remove the pistol, so tiny now in her meaty, clumsy hands.

The soldier let go of her, his surprised shout cut off by the gunshot. She was on her feet and running toward the Asylum, smoking gun still in hand. She hadn’t looked when she fired, she didn’t know if she hit the soldier—the boy. She hadn’t seen his face, it was dark and they were both flailing, but she thought it might have been the young soldier who had tied her.

She was halfway to the Asylum before she dared look back, but no one was behind her. The *Lady Ansa* was taking to air. Everything below it was black, except the single glowstone lantern hanging from the wagon, barely a pinprick of light.

She slowed to a trot, looked at the gun in her hand. It felt so hot and so heavy, the last wisps of smoke curling from its barrel and pan. It fit perfectly in her hand, its stock

contoured against her palm.

She felt sick looking at it. Merryn let it slide from her hand, her index finger catching in the trigger guard before it fell free and disappeared into the knee-high grass.

She staggered away, toward the Asylum.