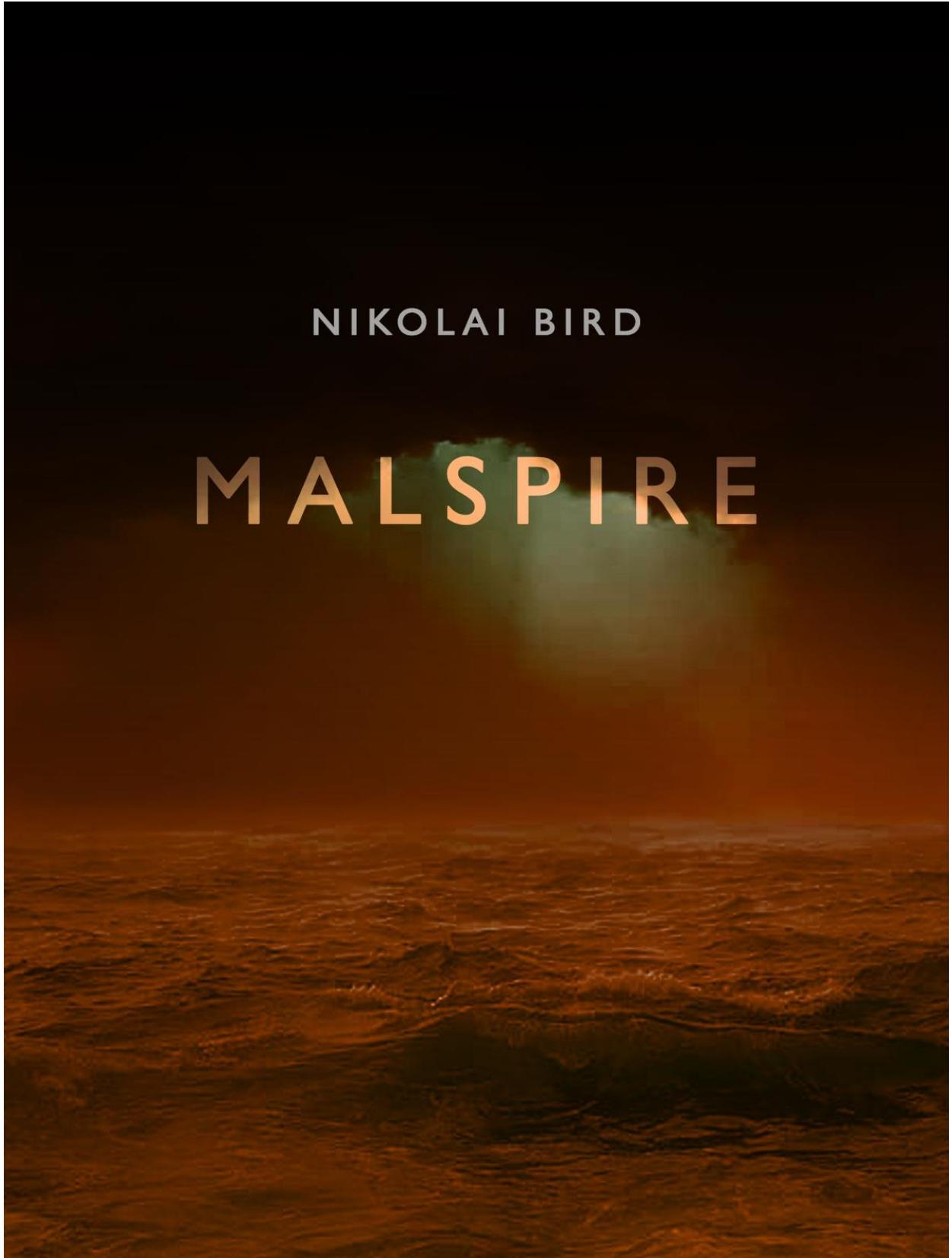


NIKOLAI BIRD

MALSPIRE



Malspire

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Acknowledgements

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Chapter One

I always had a poor memory, but as I grow older, my body weaker and my back ever more bent, memories return to me like flotsam surfacing from the long lost depths of time. Bits and pieces rise to the fore and fill the mind's eye with the years long past. Now, I cannot remember what I had for food yesterday yet clearly recall being allowed eggs the day of my flogging and that was a lifetime ago. I see the faces and remember the names, the smells, the noises, the tastes; all so real and yet gone, so alive and yet dead now. My brother, I remember best, and then the woman I loved. Their faces never faded, but now I can even hear them, their voices like echoes in my mind, laughing, crying. When drifting to sleep, it is often my name they call out. "Malspire," and I awake with a jolt as though they are in my room. The ghosts are calling me. They call for me to join them.

The world grows colder. Already blind, a cripple and unable to walk, I await the malady, pox or fever that will finish me. Perhaps I will simply sleep tonight and never again wake up, joining them in a world of dreams. I might be wrong though. It would not be the first time and so let me return ...

The swiving bastards. My back was laid bare to the burning sun for all to see the cursed hump that gave me my stooped bearing. Somewhere above, steam vented from the engine boiler, a gull cried in distress, a fat fly sucked hungrily on the sweat of my brow.

To be a fly and just fly away. An ugly creature, yes, but free to drink. To be ugly and tied down, thirsting in this heat was just cruel, as cruel as a child that plucks the wings off the fly. I shook my head. Not to dislodge the fly but to clear my wandering mind. Crew mumbled and shuffled their feet as the officers on the aftcastle behind me prepared for my punishment. It was easy to imagine the smug looks on their faces. At least they would be as hot as roasting pigs in their full dress uniforms.

A fly with no wings. It cannot fly, so is it still a fly? It is a crawl! It is an abomination, a cripple, a broken device that must be discarded. Such a thing must die.

I heard the creak of leather as the flaying whip was bent in the hands of the man that would be wielding that cruel tool this day. That man was a huge, grim faced brute called Jodlin - a toothless, bald figure who was all muscle and fat and little brains.

I bit hard into the dry strip of leather clenched tightly between my teeth. It was as dry as my parched mouth and my mouth felt like rough paper. I chided myself for letting this happen. Fool! I should have seen it coming after I had refused to witness the practice of flaying the skin from the backs of seamen by turning my own in protest. I should have understood that Captain Crops would never let such a public display of insubordination go unpunished and find a way to have me put on the rack with my shirt unceremoniously ripped from my ugly, deformed back.

I blame it on my taste for the ladies which had started as a boy at my home, Ardalrion Castle. My brother, Ajator would sleep with the maids after which the girls would whisper and giggle behind his back. I would sleep with them too, but it cost me, and afterwards, there were no whispers or giggles but a shamed silence. Ever since those long gone days I had visited brothels in every port I had been to while serving as an officer aboard the Sea Huntress. It was nothing unusual. All the men did it, but an officer was meant to set an example. Of course the officers also took advantage of the soft flesh on offer, but being discreet about such things seemed

pointless to me, arrogant pup that I was. I was now learning that it was far from pointless. A vindictive and spiteful captain should never be privy to the private activities of his officers. Crops found a way to put me on the rack, which, I realize now that I probably deserved just for being so naive. I was young and foolish.

We were in the southern waters where the exotic ladies called to us from piers, songs of praise to the gods rang out through the day and silence fell when the sins of the flesh were enjoyed by night. As soon as I could, I made straight for the local brothel where one predictably got drunk, and went to bed with a dark seductress who was going to teach me how things were done in such ancient lands, where the stars shone like crystals in the clear heavens after the sun went down, and when it returned it beat down with a ferocious anger. She smelt of spices, wine and perfume. No sooner had the woman taken off her gown to reveal a perfect pair of tanned breasts, than the door was kicked open, and two of the weathered crew stepped in followed by the captain himself.

"What's this, Ardalrion?" Crops said with a victorious sneer.

"Don't know her name, Captain," I growled, jumping off the bed and standing to attention. "I thought I would get to know the locals and found this lady willing to impart some local custom, sir."

The seamen carried nasty looking clubs. Above me a large cloth covered frame fanned the room, stirring the flies and air which was clammy and made my clothes stick to my skin. Crops could not take his eyes off the woman's breasts and licked his sweating lips as he spoke, "Found a ripe pair of titties have you? Conduct unbecoming of an officer, Ardalrion. That's what it is!" he hissed. The toad was enjoying this. I hated the fat, rheumy eyed, bastard. Crops had a sickly, bloodshot pallor and crusted food down his front. There was always a line of drool down one side of his chin.

"But, sir..." was all I could say before the two burly crewmen dragged me off back to the ship, leaving the captain with the woman. The last we saw was Crops closing the door on myself and the crewmen, never taking his eyes off the woman's breasts. Swiving hypocrite.

The air was still and hot. I needed a drink. I shook my head again, this time to dislodge the incessant flies. I couldn't see what was going on behind me, tied to a wooden frame by both hands, my feet just touching the deck. Crops was drawing it out. He was enjoying his victory. I remembered the first meeting we had when I had been assigned to the steam frigate. I had reported for duty and was immediately berated for not standing straight.

"An officer stands tall, Mister Ardalrion," said the captain, spit hitting my face. The man seemed completely unaware of his habit of dribbling or didn't care. It stank.

I tried to stand tall but it was not physically possible with my bent back. As a child I had been scorned and shunned for an ugly little rat. I knew I was ugly with a hooked nose and odd eyes - a light piercing blue. I limped too with a bad foot. I was thin and always looked ungainly in any clothing worn. Now, I simply fixed my gaze upon the window behind the captain's desk.

"It would seem that I have drawn the short straw," said Crops. "You are a junior officer now under my command and I run a tight ship you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Discipline, man. Discipline! My officers will stand tall!"

I said nothing. It was obvious that he could not oblige the captain, but I did my best.

"Your father has requested that I give you an apprenticeship. The Academy have given me notes on your character. Fractious they say. Fractious! I'll have none of that on my ship!" The

man was practically frothing at the mouth. "You're a high born maggot, Ardalrion, but even a maggot that feasts on a duke's leftovers will burst beneath my boot, you hear me?"

I heard it well enough, and had heard it a hundred times from a hundred swivers before. I wanted to lash out with a rebellious retort. "I hope to prove my worth, sir," I said instead. I never was a brave man.

"Your worth? You are the spoilt son of a duke. You've been spoon fed your entire life, given an education and, in my opinion, the most noble of careers. Did you work hard for this?" The captain did not wait for an answer. "I've worked hard to be where I am, Ardalrion."

The captain's cabin was full of dead animals, stuffed and mounted. Behind Crops in a corner was a worn ape dressed in the greens of a rebel officer which Crops evidently used as a hat stand. All the animals and birds stared at me, it seemed, with sad glassy eyes. I recall it was raining that day. Water fell in gusts upon the cabin windows.

"My father was a country priest who gave his last penny to the Academy and even then I had to work for my keep. I worked hard and here I am. You? What have you done to deserve a commission? Nothing! Your worth is little at best. Do your duty as an officer or you will suffer, Ardalrion. Suffer!"

I knew the lashing was going to hurt. I shivered despite the heat. I felt sick. A gentle squall rocked the ship followed by the familiar lapping sound as she settled back. I knew pain, both physical and emotional. Once a boy called Jendon had broken my arm, and then kicked me in the face. The pain had been excruciating and I had screamed like a little girl. I was only a child then, but the memory would always come back to me when threatened with physical pain. I knew pain. I also knew that I must control it. It was all in the mind, and I had a keen mind. Terrible memory, but I was clever. Young, arrogant fool, but clever.

"Silence!" called Qenrik, one of the other junior officers aboard the Sea Huntress. The crew fell silent. I recognised the nasal voice of the small man. Qenrik was another snivelling turd who spent his waking hours sucking on Crops's arse and his nights dreaming of the captain's shaft. All the officers were the same - lackeys the lot of them.

At the start of my tour, the officers knew only that I was Lord Malspire Ardalrion, the son of their Lord Admiral, the commander of the Ardalrion fleet, but when they realized they would gain nothing by associating themselves with me and stood a better chance of promotion by ingratiating themselves with the captain, they took to ignoring me, and then to shunning my company. I suppose this made me sad, but I was used to it and expected nothing less.

I turned my head and could make out some of the crew. To my surprise, some of them looked ashamed. Of course there were those that could hardly wait for the flogging to begin. To see an officer lashed by the cutter was probably a dream for most of the men, but some did not want to meet my eyes while some even looked apologetic. Those men obviously sympathised with me for my protest, weak as it was. One of the men even nodded respectfully. This was Seaman Grandon Harl, the head man, who spoke for the crew and whose job it was to make any orders happen. He was a grizzled old sea dog with an intelligent eye who was master below deck. Harl rarely spoke to an officer, but he obeyed orders and had an obvious knack with the lads. I knew that flogging was a necessary evil, used to set an example and ensure discipline, but the captain dished it out as a matter of course finding any excuse however small to flog a man. It was wrong and cruel and I felt I had to make a point.

"Silence!" Called Qenrik again. "Let us witness the punishment of Junior Officer Lord Malspire Ardalrion for crimes committed in the service of the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy..."

This is it! My stomach felt loose. Damned heat! I wanted to lick my lips but I would drop the leather strip. My wrists hurt where the ropes bit into them. I would probably forget that particular pain soon enough. I was angry, and hated them. How dare the bastards do this? I could feel nothing for those men in the aftcastle. I was not one of them! They were just herd animals dressed in frilly frocks baying for blood. Damn them all, but I would have my revenge.

Soon they would rip my body open. I shivered again, but was resolved to take the lashing like a man, yet knew it was going to be hard. When I had seen the crewmen flogged with the cutting tails, it had made every one of them scream like banshees on the very first kiss of the whip and not stop until the last unless they fell unconscious before then, which happened as often as not. I would hold my tongue though! I did not want to give Crops the satisfaction.

"... conduct unbecoming of an officer," Qenrik was saying.

That little prick had taken a boy not two months earlier. Qenrik had looked embarrassed at the time when I came upon them and he tried to convince me that the boy was massaging a bad back. Of course he was. If there was one word that would sum up every officer and every noble, it was hypocrite.

"... as stated in the Imperial Naval Regulations, the punishment for which is a public flogging of thirty lashes..."

Of course not all officers were bad. I had met a few who seemed decent enough. Ajator was a good man. I was pleased Ajator was not here to see me now - to see my body exposed to the scrutiny of the mob and see me shiver in anticipation and fear. As far as I was concerned, my brother was perfect in every way. Where I was thin, craven and ill to look upon, Ajator was strong, handsome and ever the brave hero. We were twins, but nobody would have guessed it. People said I was morose and brooding whereas Ajator was golden haired, quick to smile and enthusiastic. We were both officers now on different ships. Ajator would be having lunch with the admiral aboard the Grand Oak no doubt, the Grand Oak being the battleship he had been assigned to. It was the general consensus that Ajator would be the next Lord Admiral of the Ardalrion fleet and duke once our father was gone or retired. I was so proud of my brother. Ajator was the perfect choice and a blessing to our family. I could not say the same for myself. I was born a disappointment to Duke Ajorion Ardalrion, my father.

Qenrik had gone silent. The heat and dehydration were getting to me. I had to fight a feeling of panic growing in my belly. My heart pounded, my head hurt. I had hardly heard a word of the rambling accusations, not that I was interested. All I knew was that a sailor had picked out a nasty looking, nine tailed flayer - the long kind with cutting barbs that would soon rip the skin from my back like a knife scrapes butter. The nine tailed flayer was a much nastier tool than the shorter nine tailed switch as used on most ships. Crops was a cruel man.

"Do you have anything to say Mister Ardalrion?" asked Captain Crops. He rarely used my title and when he did, it was smeared thick with bile.

How I was meant to say anything with the strip in my mouth, I did not know and so remained silent, closing my eyes and bit harder on the leather instead. I would have asked for water, but did not want to lose the strip, knowing that the captain would have both ignored my request and continued the punishment without returning the one thing that I would be able to vent my pain and anger upon.

"No? Then let the punishment begin."

I heard the ends of the leather whip fall to the deck. I was shivering uncontrollably. Thirty lashes. I could take thirty lashes. I would bite down and keep my silence. I would not scream. There was a snigger quickly silenced by the sound of a thump. I had both pissed and shat in my

breaches and knew nothing of it until some seaman had found it amusing. I was scared and now ashamed. Finally a grunt was followed by the crack of the whip caressing my back.

How to explain it? How to put into words the experience...? It was as though the world exploded into white hot shards of frozen fire and burning ice. The touch of the flail was the most exquisitely painful shock of physical violation I had ever felt and it was far beyond my wildest dreams of what to expect. The pain was not to be taken and accepted, ground down and locked away, but a physical attack on a scale that dominated my every nerve, cell and spirit. Oh how I screamed!

The leather strip had gone. I felt like my back was on fire and began to panic, but I was trapped. Again the lash fell. Again I screamed and felt tears burning in my eyes. Dear gods have mercy! This was death. I would be killed! It was not uncommon for a man to die on the rack and I knew I could not survive this punishment. Again it fell and again.

I did not count them. That would have been a luxury. They just fell upon my ruined back without mercy, without conscience - relentlessly again and again, each time preceded by my tormentor's grunt of effort. I was a failure and now I was being punished for my sins - the greatest of all being my naive arrogance. They fell again and again and again. All I knew was that it felt like an eternity of damnation compressed into the time it takes to deliver thirty lashes. I screamed with all my breath and then continued, choking gulps of air only to scream the more.

On and on it went until finally - blessed was the unconsciousness that found me, for the assault had stopped. I tasted blood and vomit in my mouth. I groaned with the throbbing pain, but it was now a distant sensation as though I had taken a step back from reality like recoiling from a scorching pan handle. There were footsteps behind me. I opened my eyes but the world was blurred with tears and could only make out a splattering of blood on the back of my hand. My blood. Was I dying? I was hanging from my wrists but could not find the strength to right myself. In a way, I wanted to die. It was better just to die now and be done with it.

Someone stepped up close to my right ear and with a gust of stinking breath, I remember so well as though it is said to me now like another echo from the past, Captain Crops said, "How does it feel to be the son of a duke, so powerful, and yet so impotent?" There was a pause. "Who is the lord here, Ardalrion? Eh? Who is master on this ship?"

"The captain," I croaked, all resolve gone, anger replaced by apathy. I gave up. Crops had won.

"That's right. The captain. Who is the captain?" Crops asked with a patronising and truculent hiss.

"You are."

"Pardon me?"

"You are, sir." The pain was coming in waves now. I could hear my own blood rushing through my head with every thunderous heartbeat. My body was screaming at me.

"I am captain of this ship, and you are an officer and you will behave like an officer, you hear?"

I nodded, defiance the last thing I could even imagine. I felt faint. The little strength I had left was fading.

"If you act like a low born bilge rat then I will treat you like a swiving rat. In future you will have the decency and respect to observe these punishments like a proper officer. Have you learnt your lesson now, Lord Ardalrion?"

"Yes, Captain," I sputtered after swallowing more vomit.

"Well done, Mister Ardalrion," said Crops magnanimously and more loudly so the crew could hear. "Cut him down and see to those wounds," he added with a flick of his hand, then turned away.

A bucket of brine was thrown on my back and I succumbed to the beckoning darkness as the shock knocked me cold.

Darkness. A darkness full of murmuring voices. I knew that time was passing, tick tock, tick tock. I awoke occasionally. Firstly I was on the surgeons table, my ravaged back being seen to. It was not time to wake up yet. I slept on. Next was a dark room. It was my cabin. Feeling the rumble of the engine, I heard the thrashing of the paddlewheel. My body was tight with bandages and it was too hot. Somebody was there in the darkness. That blessed person gave me water. I slept again and dreamt of my mother, a person I have never met, but knew what she looked like from her many portraits at the castle. She would smile at me, yet look sad for not being there. At least I liked to think so. Ajator was there too. He had his mother's looks. Ajator was always there. Even when a thousand miles away, I could feel Ajator; like a beacon of light in a dark room, my brother stood guard and scared away the baying phantoms, but in the darkness was also something else. It did not show itself for it too was wary of Ajator, but it was there and my brother could not see it nor seemed to know of it. I could not see it either, but I felt it. A clock was ticking, its rhythm slowing with every swing of the pendulum. It felt like the end was coming and Ajator could not see it. The clock stopped.

Opening my eyes, it was pitch black. I felt around and realised I was in my small cabin still. Sitting up, I winced at the sharp pain. My back was tight, and wounds cracked under the movement. How long had I slept for? Reaching across from my cot to the desk, I found my silver tinderbox. Opening the box I felt for the flint and steel, then ran the flint along the steel showering blinding sparks into the box at the back of which was a section of char cloth. Blinking away the sparks, I saw a small lick of flame on the cloth. Then I took a piece of ripped paper from the tinderbox and lit this. Using the fragile flame, I managed to light a small oil lamp and snapped the tinderbox shut.

It was a simple cabin with a cot, desk and chair, chest and cupboard with hardly enough room for one man to stand in. All the furniture apart from the chair was crudely nailed to the floor. My cot was clean which surprised me. I looked down and saw my body was wrapped in white bandages. They too were clean. I was weak, but alive.

It transpired that I had been asleep for eight days and the Sea Huntress was again heading north for the Imperial Emben capital of Norlan - the ancient island city at the heart of the Emben Empire.

"We thought you was a goner, sir," said Willan, one of the cabin boys. "You had a fever and there was blood and puss everywhere."

I half sat in my cot where the boy had found me. The first thing I did was order Willan to fetch water, wine and broth which the skinny boy quickly did; an eager lad, not yet ruined by the world.

"You feeling better now, sir?"

"I'm alive," I croaked, gulping down the wine. I felt awful but relieved to have survived the flogging.

"Harl reckoned you had been left for dead. That flail was fouled. Someone's got it in for you, sir. He saw to it that you got looked after though."

"Harl?" I asked, but thinking of Crops. The man had fouled the flail, or had someone do it! That was tantamount to attempted murder.

"Aye. Doctor Feasler came and went but he didn't do nothing. He would sniff the air, check your wrist, then go again. Harl had you cleaned and given water. I helped," Willan added enthusiastically.

I now remembered being given water. It was like tasting the cool tears of an angel. Feasler was a snivelling coward who constantly worried about contagion and rot. The man would have cabin boys touch his patients for him rather than get his own hands grubby. He was constantly sniffing or complaining about some ache or pain.

"It seems I owe you my thanks, Mister Willan."

"Nah. Nothing worse than washing me old nan, sir. Anyway, Mister Harl made me."

I remained in my cabin for another six days and was visited regularly by Willan who brought me my food and drink and emptied my bucket. The pain was awful whenever I moved, and the bandages had to be replaced every day to stop the rot. Peeling off the cloth was excruciating as it opened wounds and pulled at the tender flesh. Willan helped apply a poultice which one of the crewmen provided and swore by. All I knew was that the fatty mixture looked foul and smelt worse. After this, a new bandage was wrapped tightly round me. The captain seemed to have forgotten me as there was no visit by any officer, nor a summons by Crops. Feasler did appear on the second day after I had awoken and checked my pulse after which he wiped his hands on a handkerchief and then hesitated before putting it back into his pocket, deciding, I suppose, it was worth the risk of infection to save on the cost of a new cloth.

"You'll live," Doctor Feasler announced, and then quickly departed. The man had obviously been holding his breath and had to retreat once he made the statement. I could well imagine the stink in the stuffy cabin. Mister Harl never appeared, but Willan had passed on my gratitude.

Eventually I returned to duty. I was still weak and could have spent another few days in my cot, but boredom was ever my worst enemy. The first thing I did was wash and shave as best I could from a bowl, then tenderly put on my uniform, my long dark waxed coat and old fashioned tricorne hat as well as the three buttoned cloak, then I made my way to the captain's cabin. It was getting late, the sun had set and the stars were out. There was a fresh easterly breeze of welcome clean air that I breathed in as deeply as I could without hurting my bandaged back. To starboard one could just make out the distant silhouette of land with the odd flare of coastal settlements. I reckoned we were off the western coast of Horat, the northern most peninsula of the Southern Lands. A few shadows stood at the helm watching the seas, but took no notice of me as I made my way to the captain's door. Knocking, I was left standing for a while.

"Enter!"

On entering the captain's cabin I found Crops sitting at his desk surrounded by his ridiculous stuffed pets, eyes glistening in the light of a single lantern hanging from the beams above the desk and a candle on the desk itself. Crops had been studying a small chart. He said nothing as I stood to attention before him, fixing my gaze on a point on the rear windows as always.

"The doctor told me you were recovering," Crops then said. "Took you long enough, Ardalrion."

"I wish to report for duty, sir," I said, ignoring the captain's criticism.

"I see. I presume you have learnt your lesson?"

"I have, sir." I had learnt to watch out for Crops. I had learnt that I needed allies. I had learnt that I would shoot Crops point blank in the face with my pistol before taking another lashing. The man had tried to murder me, but there was no way to prove it. Not now. Crops was the highest authority on the ship. I just had to play it safe for now.

The captain seemed disappointed. The news that I might not survive my wounds had probably raised his hopes, but now I stood before him. Of course there would have been awkward questions asked if the son of a lord admiral had died from a flogging, but I knew that Crops was well aware of the Lord Admiral's low regard for me and Crops probably reckoned he would get off lightly. Cynically, I thought my father probably would have promoted the swine.

Crops looked over at a large wood and brass encased sea clock, "It would seem you are in time for the night watch. You may resume your duties, Mister Ardalrion. The night watch is yours. Check with the navigation officer." Crops went back to studying his chart.

And so I simply walked out and took the castle. The night watch was a long stint at the helm which ran through the night from the first watch which ended at midnight to the forenoon watch which started at breakfast. I had hoped to return to this watch as it enabled me to avoid the other officers and captain most of the time. It gave me time to think and watch the stars. I loved the stars, always have, and long to see them again. I knew the stars well by now and would marvel at the spectacle on a clear night when there were no other lights about, and wonder at how crystal clear the galaxy was. The masters of astromancy wrote that the heavens were made up of a million stars, all of which were gathered into the galaxy and that the sun was but one of them. Of course the Church of Creation riled at such a notion, but it made sense to me. Tonight the moon was out and half full, riding low on the horizon.

Kravda, a portly sailor whom I remembered seeing enjoy the prospect of my flogging was at the wheel. A man was in the crow's-nest and a couple more were on the aftcastle acting as lookouts. The compass told me we were heading directly north and after checking with the navigation officer, I was pleased to discover that I had been right in thinking that we were passing the Horat peninsula to the east. Willan, the cabin boy soon appeared and brought a warm broth for me and the watch.

"My thanks, Mister Willan," I said, taking the steaming mug. "Is Mister Harl awake?"

"Yes, sir. Just gave me a clip round the ear, sir, for bad language," said Willan, rubbing a red ear.

I could not help raise an eyebrow. "Have him see me at his convenience, boy."

Not long after, the weathered Harl asked for permission to come up to the castle, but instead of inviting him up, I joined him down on the main deck.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"I did. Let's walk." We started along the deck. "I hear you do not approve of foul language."

Harl guessed what I was alluding to. "Not in the boys, sir. Not in the innocent."

"Of course." I paused and considered the innocence of children. As far as I could recall, children were the most heartless and cruel of critics without conscience nor remorse. I had learnt this the hard way and had nothing more to add to the topic and so said instead, "I wanted to thank you for the care you provided."

Harl did not answer.

"Mister Willan tells me I might have died if you had not intervened."

"He talks too much. I wouldn't pay him no heed, sir."

"All the same, I am indebted to you, Mister Harl."

Harl seemed uncomfortable. I knew that the man had no particular liking for officers - few sailors did. I could not blame them. I thought of offering the man some money. I wanted to, but I did not want to risk an insult. There were charities run by rich old ladies in the city for crippled sailors. I could offer money in Harl's name, but I had heard the crew scoff at such things and talk of how the rich hypocrites would simply pay their way into the heavens. After a moment's silent walking and inspection of the ship I pointed out that it was a fine ship.

"Aye, sir. She's well looked after and run tight."

For all Cresp's flaws, I had to admit that the captain's harsh methods seemed to work, as the Sea Huntress was always in fine condition with a drumming engine and crew ready to fight at a moment's notice.

"The crew seem competent," I added. Harl grunted in agreement.

We reached the forecandle and I stopped to take out my pipe, indicating that Harl could do the same if he so wished. I had taken to smoking a pipe while at the Academy, and purchased one carved from sea monster bone with a metal cap to protect the tobacco from the wind. What type of sea monster it was, I never found out, but assumed it was the kind that gets washed up on some lonely strand; either that or a goat. It was a long and curved thing, perhaps a little extravagant for my tastes. I thought it added to my years. Harl took out a shorter, simpler affair which had naked ladies carved into it and awkwardly accepted my offer of tobacco. For a long while we stood in silence, watching the reflection of stars and moon on the waves. Dolphins were teasing the ship's bow, rising and diving in graceful arcs. My back was hurting and I did not try to stand straight and so bent over my pipe in what was my natural posture. Harl stood a respectful distance behind. The pipe had reminded me of the Academy. As the sons of a lord admiral, My twin Ajator and I were expected to join the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy, and so at the age of fourteen, in the year 34320, we were both sent to the Imperial Naval Academy of Norlan to study for five years before being assigned as junior officers aboard a ship. It seemed like such a long time ago now.

After days at sea, a canal boat trip and a short carriage ride, we brothers were left standing in the rain at the foot of the steps to the academy without servant nor guard, on our own with a letter from the Lord Admiral to the captain of the academy. High above us loomed the ancient columns and reliefs of the austere, grand building. Around us were many more opulent and grand buildings lining a square known simply as Admiral Square.

"I never realised the city was so big," I said and could not help but gape at the city and its grandeur ever since making port.

Ajator laughed at my childlike awe having been to the city many times before with our father. "A million souls they say. I told you it wasn't like Ardalrion."

I grunted a chuckle now as I stood on the forecandle with Harl. The sailor kept his silence.

I remembered a horse and cart trundle by, the driver hunched low against the rain. People ran from door to door to avoid getting wet. Some had umbrellas while others used the large newspapers as cover. A gaudy naval officer had a servant in a top hat holding a large umbrella over him while another placed himself in the puddles so his lord would not get his feet wet. Gods forbid a noble naval officer ever get his feet wet. The world would come to an end!

We each had a large trunk, which we helped one another lug up to the mighty entrance where we were met after ten minutes of exhausting work by a sour faced doorman who took the letter and scanned it with a critical eye. The doorman's name was Groblot and he hated students. Groblot kept mumbling as he read the letter and glanced irritably at the pool of water coming off we bedraggled brothers. When satisfied with the document, the man grudgingly pointed the way

to the administrative offices with a bony finger and grunted something about not dragging the trunks along the marble floor. Eventually we presented ourselves to Captain Harkorn, the captain of the academy.

"Discipline is the glue that holds the Navy together!" he told us. "You understand?"

"Yes, sir," we both chorused, standing to attention.

"Did the duke teach you discipline?"

"Yes, sir," we lied. The duke doted over Ajator and mostly ignored me. I was ever the embarrassment to our father who preferred to keep me out of sight and leave my upbringing to the staff, a task they resented.

"We run a tight ship here at the Academy," Harkorn continued. He liked to stroll round his office as he spoke, stopping at his window on each round to look out over the square through the raindrop streaked glass. The room was lined with oak panelling, with a thick rug placed on oak floorboards. It reminded me of captain's cabin with a table set aside for charts and maps, a compass in the corner, a ship's clock on the wall and sea lanterns hanging from thick wooden beams. It seemed to me that the captain missed being at sea when he spoke wistfully of the wooden ships and their brave crews.

Now I had been to sea for eight months. Eight months of putting up with the contempt of the captain and officers, and eight months of being alone. I had seen my brother on two occasions since leaving the academy. We both missed one another but Ajator seemed to be getting on well in his new role. So was I, to a certain degree. I loved the seas and my travels. I enjoyed hunting the enemies of the Empire and the thrill of boarding a vessel, although so far we had had few reasons to run out the guns and had never met any resistance when boarding a ship. I would be the first to admit that I was a craven man, but I did find it exciting if not a release from the boredom that would so easily set in, and when that happened, I would invariably get into trouble.

With Harl standing behind me, I realised that I had the chance to kill two birds with one stone. One of the odd features of an Imperial Naval officer's education was the distinct lack of studying anything to do with the mechanics of operating a ship. At the academy I was expected to learn the fundamentals of being an officer aboard an Imperial Naval vessel. I learnt about the Navy and its workings and the rules of combat, and tactics and strategy. I learnt etiquette together with navigation. I learnt about the classics, history, geography, philosophy, and politics. I learnt old Emben so I could read the ancient scrolls. I learnt a lot about all sorts of things but surprisingly little about the details of running a ship. Of course that was up to other men to worry about. An officer simply gave orders - the subordinates would make it happen.

"Have you been to the Naval Academy in Norlan, Mister Harl?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"Only seen it from the outside, sir."

"At ease, man." I noticed that Harl was still standing to attention behind me. "That's no way to enjoy a pipe." Harl relaxed and leant on the curving gunwale of the forecastle. "It has a long and glorious history, does the academy," I said taking another drag on the pipe. "Or so they say - the paintings and statues and poems and books."

"I wouldn't know, sir."

I suspected that Harl probably did know but would rather not talk, so I continued, "All I saw in those books and poetic words was a long and brutal account of bloodletting and terrorism, glorious to some and a horror to others."

There was no doubt that the Imperial Navy was the best and most accomplished military machine in history, but that simply meant that it was better at butchering people than anyone else had ever been.

"Forgive my cynical view of our masters, Mister Harl, but I prefer to say it how I see it. Don't get me wrong though. We have a duty and we perform a vital task. Would you agree?"

"Aye," said Harl without enthusiasm.

Of course, what did a sailor care? He wanted his drink and his pay and a chance at some prize money for his old age. On the whole, the Empire's business was of secondary importance.

"My brother is an officer too. He would never agree with me. He would never let my cynicism dampen his view of the marvellous paintings that rejoice in the heroics, or the romantic poems that sing of the wooden ships and their iron men or the mighty statues that stand of gallant figures long gone."

"He sounds like a proper officer, sir," said Harl, and when I shot him a glance I saw that Harl had meant it innocently.

"He is. A finer man you will never meet. He is my twin, but you would never know it."

"I did know, sir," Harl stated. This surprised me as I was sure the crew had never met my brother. I gave Harl a questioning look.

"I read it, sir. You and the Young Lord have been mentioned a few times in the Gazette."

The Gazette? So Harl can read. Interesting. "The Young Lord?"

The papers had taken to calling Ajator the Young Lord and openly talked of his bright future as a hero of the Empire and future Lord Admiral of the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy. Of course Ajator had yet to perform any heroic feats in the name of his nation but it only took one look at him to know that the man was made of finer stuff than mere mortals.

"Aye, sir," replied Harl who obviously knew what was coming.

"And what do they call me?"

The man hesitated. "The Undertaker."

I grunted. I did not show or speak of it, but in a twisted way I rather liked being called the undertaker. It suited my mood. It spoke to the young rebel in me.

"How long have you been in the Navy?" I eventually asked Harl, returning to my original line of thought.

"All my life, sir. Sailed from one end to the other, then back again. Top to bottom, then up again. The highways are old friends."

I suspected as much. Harl had skin of leather and a thick seaman's slur. The Navy was the cement that bound the lands of the Empire together. The lands of Gonrah were split into thousands of islands from large land masses to tiny wind swept rocks all surrounding the Inner Ocean. The seas were the highways of the world and he who ruled the ocean, ruled the lands. The Navy claimed to rule the ocean, but in truth the Navy was stretched as thin as a strand of silk. Although none could challenge the might of the Imperial Navy, no one truly needed to for the Empire's arm did not reach the four corners of the continent. So there was piracy and smuggling. There were enemy navies, raiders and strange ships from far off continents beyond the great Outer Oceans. Nobody knew much of those lands. I had read that few had travelled outside Gonrah, and much fewer had returned. It was said that great sea monsters awaited any who tried, and only ghosts lived beyond those Outer Oceans, so no one wanted to venture there. What did I care though? The world was a grim and unfair place and I doubted very much it was any better anywhere elsewhere.

I wanted desperately to learn about being a seaman. I also wanted allies, and knew that the only way was to get Harl and the crew on my side and now here was the chance. This would also enable me to partly repay my debt to Harl.

"Tell me, Mister Harl." I said, knocking my pipe on the gunwale. "How do the men spend their free time on board the ship? I sometimes hear music and laughter." I knew the answer already but wanted to engage Harl.

Harl scratched his head with his pipe, thinking of an answer. "All sorts, sir."

"Games? Cards?"

Harl gave me a sideways look. It was not forbidden, but Crops frowned upon the practice and none of the men wanted to get on the wrong side of the captain.

"I like cards. Would it be wrong for me to join in a game with the men?" If I could simply lose money to Harl, I would be repaying him without the insult. I was good at losing money at games of chance, not that it ever stopped me; my father had deep pockets. Harl considered this for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders as though to say, what choice did he have? I was an officer. He did look concerned however.

"I can assure you, Mister Harl, I am a poor gambler." It did not reassure the sailor. I realised I would have to be more honest. "It is a rare thing for someone to show me any kindness." This was true. All my life I had been shunned and an outcast. Only my brother had ever been a true friend. "I bore easily and I want to know more about seafaring. You and the crew have the answer to both. Perhaps if I make assurances?"

"Such as?"

"I will never play for more than a hand of copper heads and I will drop rank when below deck."

Harl chewed his pipe for a moment, watching me. It was those intelligent eyes again that I had noticed in the past, but never seen him look directly into the eyes of an officer before. Harl had a duty to stick up for the men, and I accepted Harl's scrutiny for I was asking for a place where no officer should go. Of course an officer could go anywhere on the ship, but it was understood that officer's did not fraternise with the men. Eventually Harl seemed to reach a decision and simply said, "As you wish, sir."

Days passed and I did my duty by night and rested by day. At cruising speed it would take another five days or so to round the mainland and enter the inner Emben Sea where we would finally make port.

I was regretting not having rested longer after the lashing, finding the long nights hard to bear, but as we came within sight of Embernia's southern isles I felt my strength returning. Whatever the poultice was and however much it stank, it was working well. I would be scarred for life but at least I was alive and healing quickly. I no longer needed the bandage as tender tissue now covered the wounds and I also took to standing as straight as I could again - a habit, tiring though it was, I had forced myself to observe over many years. I felt I was ready to join the crew below decks and so decided to do so that night before my watch started.

The crew had simple bunks all over the ship where men slept alongside other men who worked. A man got used to the noises and bustle of a ship and would indeed miss them on land, finding it hard to relax in a normal bed. Tonight however, there was not much work to be done on the gun deck as I made my way to the bow of the ship. A sailor was snoring while another was rocking himself to sleep, humming a sad tune, probably thinking of some girl.

At the bow of the Sea Huntress was a closed off area used for storage and recreation. I made for the door where the sound of men, raucous and merry could be heard. The door and walls

were removed in times of emergency to allow a clear run along the deck, but now it was closed to allow the crew a place of their own; a place that I was now going to intrude upon. I did not knock but simply opened the door and stepped into a smoke filled space that stank of sweat, ale, wine and men who lived shoulder to shoulder for months on end. It all happened so quickly that I did not have time to react. A shadow darted away from below me. A bellowing war cry assaulted his ears, and my vision filled with a ham sized fist that slammed with a mighty crack into my face!

As I write this, I realise that some details may be missing, exaggerated or warped by time, but I never have and never will forget the picture in my mind's eye of that mighty fist and the stars that followed.

Chapter Two

I fell back through the door onto my back. Blinded and startled by the punch, it took me a moment to regain my bearings. Blinking away the tears, I looked up and saw a drunk and angry Jodlin, the huge brute that had given me the lashing. The man was holding onto the door frame, squinting at me. Another man darted away behind him from the inside of the door. The deck had gone silent. I looked round and gently rubbed my left eye, which was going to be black in the morning. Jodlin just stood there looking at me. Other men had woken up and watched, eager to witness the drama unfold.

Harl then appeared and pushed his way past Jodlin. "Damn hells, sir. You alright?" he asked holding out a hand. Accepting it, I groaned at the pain in both my poor back and eye.

"He didn't mean to hit you. He's clumsy when he's had a few. Aiming for Sudlas he was, but the man's too quick for him."

I understood then that I had just opened the door at the wrong moment and the gods saw fit to punish me some more, but Jodlin still showed an anger and looked as though he was considering continuing the assault on me. I could see that the big man would like nothing more than to give me a pounding, as though lashing me was not enough.

Harl turned and saw the same. "Get back in there, Jod! It's not worth it, you great bull."

Jodlin did not move but glowered at me under heavy brows.

"He's an officer you fool," hissed Harl.

Jodlin was drunk and his ire was up, his head swaying. I considered my options. I could retreat and lose face, then have Jodlin on charges for striking an officer. The man would hang or at least be lashed if he was lucky. Only, then I would lose my chance at gaining the respect of the men. I wanted to get into that room. It suddenly seemed like my only hope. That room held the promise of a better future. Jodlin was in my way.

I could order the men to detain Mister Jodlin, but then I would lose face too. The way I saw it, this was perhaps a chance to show my colours. It was dangerous, and I was not fit, but Jodlin was finding it hard to stand and focus. That gut born fear rose again as I made up my mind. I swallowed the fear and said, "I told you, I'm no officer down here, Mister Harl," and began to remove my coat, the young stubborn fool that I was!

"Aye, you did, but let's talk to him, sir. He'll calm down in a bit."

I handed Harl my coat, hat and cutlass. Then I faced Jodlin who leered at me and staggered back into the storage room where he waited for me. Harl shrugged as though to say, it was my life.

There were a score of men in the room which was lit by a number of candles and lanterns. I stepped in, watched by the wary, untrusting eyes of the sailors. Harl came in behind me and closed the door, but it opened again as other crewmen, now awake, wanted to view what should make for good entertainment. Men cleared away the space, removing chests that were used as tables and small barrels that were used as stools. The room had bunks, and stores stacked up against the gunwales. At the far end was a pair of large chaser battle cannons currently being used as seating in the now makeshift arena. Some men began to lay odds and coin was passing hands. Jodlin was rocking on his feet. The weasel like Sudlas had retreated into the shadows. Willan was there, a look of worry on his young face. He was bare-chested and as thin as a stick next to the burly tattooed older sailors.

I leant over to Harl. "Are there any rules?"

Harl considered this for a moment, then said, "Don't gouge the eyes, sir. Unspoken rule."

"Is that it?"

Harl shrugged again. That was it. At the Academy, there were so many rules for this kind of situation. There was even a book covering the regulations for a fist fight. I suspected that none of these men had ever read it. Of course this was not the first gutter fight I had found myself in. Back in Norlan was an area of the city called the Waters, built inside the harbour walls where my education in life had been meted out. The Waters were where the serving folk, the poor folk and the unscrupulous folk resided. It was like a small city of its own, built of timber, overhanging the harbour waters, set upon poles and barges. Here I had found the best brothels and bars and gambling. Here I had learnt to fight dirty.

"Go on, Jod. Make him bleet!" called one of the men who quickly hid behind another when I looked.

"A drink!" I called. I desperately wanted one but I also had rather more cowardly motives. Jodlin would be tempted to take a drink too, and I wanted the man to be even more inebriated than he already was. It was the only chance I had. The big sailor would crush me if he got hold of me, so I intended to keep my distance and more drink would help that. I was handed a wooden cup filled with sour wine. I gulped it down and watched as Jodlin too took a jug and drank satisfyingly deeply of it. I did not hesitate and charged forwards, kicking the giant bastard between the legs as hard as I could. Jodlin spat ale then wheezed as the last of his breath left his body. Clutching his groin and stumbling backwards, the jug now cracked on the deck. I followed up with an uppercut to the jaw which was like punching a timber beam. I stepped back, shaking my hurt hand. What was Jodlin's jaw made of?

With a mighty roar, the sailor charged swinging wildly with both fists and I had to throw myself aside only to be thrown back by the hands of the spectators. Jodlin turned and nearly fell.

"Swivin' officers," the brute slurred. He rubbed his crotch again, and then came at me, but this time more cautiously.

"What's a pair of kicked balls, Jodlin?" said a man. "Kick 'is 'ead in!"

"He's only a cripple," I then heard another shout.

I crouched low and felt my back smart at being so stretched. Jodlin sped up. He was going to kick me but I darted to one side then jumped forwards to punch Jodlin round the ear. It had no effect other than to anger the man even more.

I kept low and kept circling. How was I to hurt this man? Jodlin kicked and punched but I darted away, sometimes striking where possible. I now knew I could not hurt the man with my fists, but if I could just put on a show for the men. Show them I had at least some spirit. Suddenly one of the huge fists found my shoulder and I fell to my side, a boot now coming at my belly. Rolling away, I got to my feet just in time to avoid another swing of Jodlin's fist. I kept moving round the giant in an anticlockwise direction. I kept the man turning and turning. Jodlin managed to get a few more glancing blows in when suddenly the big man stopped. He looked pale, dizzy, and swayed.

"Come on," I growled under my breath. Jodlin's eyes were heavy. He was sweating. Suddenly the giant turned and dived for the chasers, went to his hands and knees, and heaved a wave of vomit to the deck.

This was my chance. I jumped and took hold of two iron staples in the beam just above and behind Jodlin, and with both boots, kicked the man in the rear who flew forwards and hit his head hard on a chaser's limber. Jodlin's lights went out, foamy drool running from his half opened mouth. I stepped back, half expecting the brute to shake his head, get up and come for me again. Then Jodlin snored. The relief was overwhelming and I broke into laughter. The crew

joined me, seeing the comedy in the abrupt end to the fight. I hoped they did not realise that my laughter was from sheer relief rather than any bravado. Some men grumbled though. I heard a man talk of how cripples cheat by their very nature. I ignored the comments. A lot of them had lost money.

Harl stepped over and handed back my belongings. "Well done, sir."

I grunted. The room then went silent again. It was an awkward silence for they now had an officer in their midst. Some of the men even stood to attention regardless of my comment about dropping rank. Others looked daggers of hatred and disgust.

"Stand easy, men," I said. "I have a couple of hours before my watch, and all I want is an honest drink with honest men where I can lose some honest copper. No rank, no lord, just easy company."

The men relaxed a little but were still silent. Harl stepped forwards and dragged a large flat topped chest out. He placed a few barrels round it, and then threw a pack of cards on top. He then looked at me, so I sat down, took the worn cards and began to shuffle them. When done, I placed them face down, reached for my purse and up ended a small pile of copper heads onto the chest. I organised them into neat little stacks and then turned to the men. "Anyone care to join me?"

There was a pause which came to an abrupt end when one man stepped forwards. The others, realising they might lose their chance to get at the coppers rushed in too. All of a sudden, it was as though I were not there. Talking began. Men lifted jugs and goblets. A fiddler started up a merry tune and a grimy old-timer went back to witling a bit of wood. Pipes were lit and the place felt like an impromptu inn. There were six men round the chest including myself. Harl did not join us but went to check on Jodlin instead.

"What are we playing?" I asked.

"King, sir," said a tattooed man to my left. "You know it?"

"I'm familiar with it. The king moves round the table. Highest hand takes the pot?"

"That's the one. Highest card starts as King," said the man offering me a card. It was four sea serpents.

"Name's Tabor, sir," said the sailor handing round the cards to each player and taking one himself which he then placed face up on the table. He had nine dragons, the highest card. Another player had nine sea serpents, but dragons beat serpents, so Tabor started as King.

The sailor then reshuffled the deck and dealt five cards to each player who each had to place a coin in the pot. I got three bears, eight dragons, four trolls, three trolls and one sea serpent - not a good hand. Starting with the player to Tabor's left, each man then scrutinised their cards and either stuck with them or placed a coin in the pot and took a new card from the deck, discarding a card which went to the King. The King never replaces cards but simply rakes up any that other players want to replace. This went round the table twice and I swapped cards on both rounds and ended up with one of each of the five realms, having picked yet another troll on my first swap, ending up with two giants in place of the three trolls and so had a low scoring 'Hand of Realms' - one of each beast.

Of course the King was the most popular position as the more coins that were in the pot, the greater his hand was probably going to be and when each player revealed their hands, Tabor smiled as he had won with a ladder of sea serpents from three to seven. It was a game of luck with little skill. At first, I did not try very hard. I saw to it to lose my second and third hand, and then lost another couple of hands. I then tried harder and found that I was still losing. The men beamed with joy as they began to eat away at my pile of coins.

"Gimme the dragon, gimme the dragon," one of the men kept saying whenever the cards were being dealt.

"Give me a fat swiving wench with big bubbas an' no manners," said another followed by grunts of laughter.

This went on for a while and I took to cursing under my breath for the losses, small as they were. It had become a challenge. The men were cunning gamblers and the older ones seemed to have a sixth sense, for whenever I had a good start, they would rarely add to the pot. I was enjoying myself though, losing badly but enjoying the game and company and challenge. I listened to the men and their talk. They talked of women and ships. They boasted about adventures on the seas. Some spoke of family back home and the joy of seeing a son's face when his father steps through the door.

One lad, Paggod was not winning. "Any time now," he kept saying. "Any time now and the winds will turn. They will turn and bless my cards."

"We're just having a run of bad luck," I said. Paggod nodded sullenly.

"How much you got left Paggod?" asked Tabor.

Paggod looked nervously down to his last few coppers on the chest. "That's the last of it, Tabor."

"What. All of it?" asked Tabor. Paggod nodded again. "What about your ma, you stupid boy!"

"Lucks gonna turn. It has to." Paggod said, but did not look convinced. I had seen that look many a time at the gaming tables; desperate people hanging onto unrealistic hope and twisted logic.

"Get away, you crab brained fool. Send what you got or your ma's going cold. Bloody fool idiot. Does she deserve that? Raised you she did. Raised you on her breast and this is how you repay her!"

"But it ain't worth it. A couple more hands and I'm the King. My luck has to turn now."

"Crab brained fool idiot," was all that Tabor had to say.

The young man looked crestfallen and was biting his lip. The boy was a natural gambler of the worst kind. The kind that was no good at winning and blamed it on bad luck, but if I could, I was going to see to it that Paggod's luck was going to turn. The next two hands went Paggod's way. I did my best not to win and I suspected that Tabor was doing the same. Perhaps a couple of the other players did so too, but I would never know for sure. Paggod's pile grew. Then Paggod was the King. Each player put a coin in and looked at their cards. Each player made a show of how confident they were with their hand by increasing the pot on each round so that by the end of the round the pot was full, and Paggod could not help but grin. I had passed him some good cards as had Tabor, I was sure. When we turned our cards over it looked to me as though a couple of the players had good hands and were trying to win that healthy pot, but Tabor and I had done just enough for the young man to win. The delight on Paggod's face was a joy although I just scowled and cursed at my loss to keep up appearances.

Rats scurried along the gunwales in the shadows cast by the lanterns and candles. Willan was proudly boasting to someone about a hair on his chin, telling anyone who would listen that he was a man now. I noticed across the room, Mister Harl, standing, watching, and saw a flicker of a smile on the sailor's face as our eyes met. What surprised me then was that next to Harl was Jodlin, now awake and also watching me. The anger was gone from his eyes, and he had returned to drinking again.

Harl then came forward and placed his rugged hand on Paggod's shoulder. "That'll be enough now. You got lucky. Don't lose it now that you got money to send home."

"But my luck's turned Grandon. I can't stop now!" said the stupid boy. Harl increased his grip and said again, "That'll be enough now." Paggod grudgingly took his small winnings and left the room.

"No more gaming with the lad," said Harl to the rest of the men with his slurring seaman's accent. "Let him send some coppers home before his old ma' starves." He then gave me another lingering look.

I saw the skinny Willan with the single chin hair strut around with his chin up in the air and his chest stuck out. The shifty looking Sudlas grabbed the boy and deftly plucked the hair from his chin which was followed by a roar of laughter from the men. After that Harl sat down and joined the game. Grandon Harl proceeded to clean the table.

I had lost all the copper heads I had taken to the game and now had to go on duty. Before I could leave however, Jodlin stepped in my way. The big man stank of booze and vomit and I wondered how Jodlin was even standing. His nose was broken and a mixture of blood and ale dripped from his chin.

"You fight dirty," was all Jodlin said. The room went quiet again.

"In a minute, my watch starts, Mister Jodlin and then I return to being an officer," I warned him, in no mood for another fight.

Jodlin said nothing for a moment, then grinned a toothless grin. "My head's going to hurt in the morning but it was worth it to hit an officer. You coming back, sir?"

I looked round and saw few obvious objections. "I suppose I will. Let's not fight though. I know I was lucky, Mister Jodlin."

Jodlin nodded and stepped aside. I was not sure what to make of the man, but had no time left to find out what Jodlin's sudden change of mood was all about.

Of course men were allowed to drink in the Navy but not so much so that it impinged upon their duties. The next day Jodlin and Harl were both back at work as normal. Jodlin seemed none the worse for wear other than a black and blue face. After heavy drinking I would spend half a day in bed, but to Jodlin and the crew it seemed to be part of the routine and something they were used to. The next few nights I returned to the game room and lost more money. For whatever reason, Jodlin had suddenly accepted me and so had the crew, in general. As long as I dropped rank, drank and treated the men fairly, they tolerated my presence. It was not universal but acceptable to my way of seeing things.

The city of Norlan rose from the black water of the Emben Sea like a ragged black mountain covered in a million flickering lights. I stood at the bow of the Sea Huntress and admired the sight, but I was also watching for the Grand Oak, my brother's ship, and soon spotted it within the vast harbour. The great wooden fortress with its iron banding and towers and row upon row of gun ports was at anchor in the deeper waters and seemed quiet with few lights and little movement. I guessed that the crew were on land which meant that I would probably find Ajator at the Ardalrion city residence. I wondered if my father was in the city. The old man was spending more and more time at his castle in the duchy, leaving the running of the fleet to High Admiral Barron Villor, a vassal of Duke Ardalrion. I had never met the man but I had seen him on occasion. The duke had never liked to present me to his guests.

"Ardalrion!" This was the distant voice of Crops, who was standing by the helm.

"Sir," I said and made my way back to the aftcastle.

The ship was busy making ready to put in to port. I was looking forward to two weeks of rest in Norlan. I was not privy to the captain's plans but I had heard from the crew that the Sea Huntress was to make for Umuron after her stay in the capital. Umuron was the Empire's last foothold in the far west where the rebellion had so nearly forced the Empire out.

"Follow me," said Crops when I reached his side. With a sinking feeling, I was led down to his cabin.

"Close the door." Crops held his hands behind his back. Something in the captain's manner confirmed that I was in trouble. As soon as I had closed the door and turned round, Crops was in my face.

"Fraternalising with the crew now are you?" shouted the man, spitting in my face. "Those lazy sea scavengers are there to do an officer's bidding, Mister Ardalrion, not be his friend or his shoulder to cry upon. What are you playing at? How am I supposed to keep the dregs of the Navy in their place if an officer drops to their level?"

I said nothing. I had broken no regulations.

"You're little better than they are, I'll give you that, and if it were up to me, you would be down in the bilges mucking out the shit and piss. Oh yes. But you're born high, Ardalrion. Born high, and although I don't give a rat's prick that you're my lord admiral's son, it's my duty to make an officer out of you and officers are above the scum. You will at least behave like an officer!" Crops was ranting now. I had seen it before and just had to let it run its course.

"Those idiots in the Naval Office will deign to make you a senior officer soon enough and then one day a captain. A captain! You! By the gods the world has gone mad when a pathetic boil cut from a lord admiral's arse is made a captain, but so it will be."

It frustrated Crops who had no say in my rank. As the son of a lord admiral, I was automatically set upon a fast track to captaincy and a ship of my own. However unpopular I might be in my father's eyes, it was unthinkable that a son of his would not be a captain and one day an admiral, should I survive long enough. Of course it did not make things better that Crops was getting on in age and had been overlooked for promotion or title, but it rather pleased me to see the crusty toad wriggle and squirm, cursing in vain. I stopped listening.

"Well?"

"Well what, sir?" I asked, returning from my mindless observations of the stuffed animals. The ape was missing a finger I had noticed.

"I order you to stop meeting with the crew, you understand? You are to stay away from the scum!"

"With all due respect, sir. I have broken no regulations that I am aware of, and see no harm in engaging with the men."

"I am the captain!" The man was livid now and had turned a bright crimson colour. I had to resist the temptation to wipe the spit from my face. "You will do as I command or so help me..."

"You'll have me flogged, sir?"

Captain Crops went silent. "You're a petulant fool Ardalrion." he finally said. "You're making an enemy of me and I assure you that I am a ruthless man if needs be. I will have my way on this ship. I will have discipline!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get out!"

I returned to my cabin. I took out my service cutlass, the basic weapon of a sailor and tested its edge. I imagined running the blade through Crops's fat belly, but knew I did not have the courage to do it. I wanted to. It would be doing the world a justice by removing that bitter maggot from its shores, but even the son of a lord admiral would hang for such a crime.

The blade was a clumsy butcher's weapon which I had taken to using during my time at the Academy. One of the classes was on swordsmanship and every officer was expected to thrust and cut like a gentleman with specific steps and moves practiced under the guidance of a master swordsman. His name was Peel and he nearly had a heart attack when I charged him one morning with a heavy sea cutlass.

I knew I was no good with the finer blades - the sabres, rapiers, and ridiculous foils as I was never quick of wrist. I reasoned that an officer who found himself facing a grizzled seaman bearing a shield and three foot butcher's blade would last as long as it took the seaman to hammer his sword into the skull of the officer with little or no regard for any fancy parrying. I had charged Peel and on my first blow shattered the thin blade of my tutor, and barged him to the floor. I may not have been a graceful or skilled swordsman but I discovered that a heavy blade and mindless violence were a workable substitute. Of course the Academy frowned upon the use of such a base weapon but that did not stop me from honing my skill with the steel whenever I could and added to my fighting style by kicking, punching and head butting whenever the instructor looked away. It was ugly and made me no friends, but I learnt to fight, not to dance nor play sport, but to do what was needed to survive.

I sheathed the blade and took some coins from my sea chest which I then locked. We were back in the city and I was going to see if Ajator was about. I needed to vent my anger. I wanted to drink and I wanted to fight and although people might never think it, Ajator liked a good gutter fight too, and so I wanted to find him and then head for the Waters where trouble could always be found.

The ship had docked and I made my way by canal boat along the twisting waterways of the city taking Willan with me who sat at the fore while I sat at the rear of the thin wooden craft. Canal boats were the carriages of the water, and this one was owned by a balding old timer who had taken my coin, then asked for the address. Above us grew the dark towers of the city; floor upon floor of granite and black marble with a network of bridges that reached high into the night sky.

It was the time of the Festival the Old Man, an odd tradition that dated back to darker times which celebrated and made light of death. People dressed up as old men with skull masks, including women and children. I found it haunting to see the laughing skull faces stare down at me from the shadows. What brought me back was the smell. I always forget how much the waterways can stink. All the sewage of the city made its way into the canals and at times it was quite overpowering, but one got used to it after a while.

The boatman heaved and pushed. Willan watched the city glide by and seemed excited to be entering the noble regions at its heart where normally a boy like him would be beaten then kicked out by the Imperial City Guard before getting too far. We reached a sort of water square which was a dead end where the city streets rose from the canals. I set off up a grand, lantern lit cobble road with Willan in tow and shortly came to another square surrounding a small patch of fenced off grass with a single oak tree at its heart which seemed lost in this brick and granite forest. Another "Old Man" was under the tree, standing alone and playing a fiddle before a single candle stuck in the ground. He danced a little but seemed sad.

"Ardalrion House," I said to Willan as I stopped in front of a short flight of steps leading up to a grand doorway painted black with the head of a mountain lion as a door knocker. The mountain lion was the shield of the Ardalrion's and I had often wondered about this as I had never seen one in the duchy, but it was said that they existed. I did not use the knocker though, stepping up to the door, I pulled a chain instead. Shortly the door opened and a sullen looking man by the name of Kanrood Babony opened the door. He was the duke's man and his presence meant that my father was in residence. I had hoped my father was away, preferring to avoid the awkward encounters.

"Lord Ardalrion. What a surprise," said the man blandly. "Please step inside. I will announce you to the duke."

I did not greet the man, but simply went in. Babony had been in the service of the Ardalrion's for as long as I could remember and in all that time, the man had only ever shown a complete indifference to me. I thought him a stiff of no imagination.

"Is my brother about?"

"I believe the Young Lord is in the city, sir, but not in the house."

Babony left us two standing, making his way up a grand flight of steps at the far end of the vestibule. "You sit there, Mister Willan." I indicated a chair next to the entrance. "Don't move and don't touch anything. Are you hungry?"

Willan nodded. The boy was in awe of the house. The hall was high, the walls covered in paintings and tapestries. He looked completely out of place. I had wanted Willan along simply as a servant, to carry things if need be and run errands. He was a good lad and I trusted him.

Soon Babony returned. "The duke will see you now. He is in the study."

"I know the way," I said irritably when Babony started to lead the way. "This is my house too. Get the boy some food. I'll not be long."

Babony gave Willan a disdainful look, but nodded his head in acknowledgment.

I climbed the steps to the first floor where a wing led off to a distant door that was slightly ajar with lamp light seeping into the corridor. My frugal father did not like the unnecessary use of candles and lanterns and so the house was a dark place with little pools of light here and there. Neither had the lord taken an interest in using the gas powered lighting so popular now with those that could afford it. Opening the door, I found my father at his grand desk with a large book in front of him, holding a brass rimmed magnifying glass to the pages. The room had a small fire burning on one side. There was a dry and dusty feel. The walls were lined with books and scrolls. I could just about hear the lone fiddler outside the window.

"Malspire," said Duke Ajourion Ardalrion, forcing a quick smile.

"Father. I hope you are well?" My father looked tired, even haggard and thinner than the last time I had seen him. He was still strongly built but age was catching up with him.

"I am, kind of you to ask. How is the Navy treating you?" Ajourian asked, pinching the bridge of his strong nose. I thought of the lashing. "Have you found your sea legs?" Standing in the shadows of the room, the lord had not noticed or chose to ignore the bruises on my face.

"The Navy is good for me. It would seem that I was born with sea legs."

"Good." said the lord followed by a silence filled only by the sound of the "Old Man". I always felt my father's discomfort in my presence. The duke was trying to be civil but I knew that I was not wanted. My mother had given her last breath giving birth to me, and my father had always resented me for this, although he had never said so directly.

The Lady Ardalrion had been young and beautiful when Ajourion Ardalrion had married her. I had only ever seen my mother in portraits. The staff said she was full of life, kind and generous.

When she became pregnant there were celebrations and news sent far and wide to rejoice in the fact that Lord Ardalrion would soon have an heir. Then came the trouble. I did not know the full details and father never spoke of it, but from what we two brothers could surmise, a servant woman had tried to poison our mother. Why? We did not know, although there was talk of cults and blood magic. It had weakened my mother so much that she did not have the strength to give birth to us twins and survive. I had heard that I came into the world screaming like a banshee, clawing for the warmth of my dying mother's womb.

Ajorion was quiet. Was he thinking of his lost wife too?

"I hear the beastmen are pressing hard on the eastern shores," I said, trying to find a subject we could perhaps discuss. It was a rare thing for the two of us to have a conversation, but I always felt that I should try. I had no particular love for my father, but felt duty bound to at least be polite. All I really wanted was to find Ajator.

"They are. They seem to be endless, coming from the Outer Oceans, attacking our shores. A damned strain on our resources. You know what they do when they make landfall?"

"No. Or at least I presumed they were looking for lands to settle? Food, resource?"

"Ha! I wish that were the case. No, they move inland and kill anyone and everything they find. They keep going until they are hunted down or starve themselves to death. They eat their own just to keep going!"

I considered this. In all of nature, there was one law that all men, beast, bird and fish obeyed and that was the law of survival. The Church of Creation often talked of how the gods create so there can be survival. Create, survive, die - the natural cycle of the universe. Even the dark powers seem to follow this law, but killing until killed is insane. There is no reason for it. Only the mad would break the law of survival.

"Why? Are they mad? What is the reason? They must have some purpose."

Lord Ardalrion raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "Mad? Probably. Something is driving them though, but they're not human. They look part human, part beast, but even an animal would not eat its own. The Emperor suspects a greater power at work."

"Or an illness perhaps?"

"Perhaps, but if that is the case the disease is spreading. The northern tribes have been pushing south into Imperial lands. One report spoke of trolls joining them. Trolls!"

"Trolls fighting alongside men? There was nothing in the paper about this."

"Of course not. Organised too. Tribes are joining one another to stage larger and larger raids. The Emperor has decided to keep this news from the masses for now." Ajorion leant back. His chair creaked. "The Empire is threatened on three fronts, Malspire. The rebellion is spreading. Thank the gods we managed to hold onto the port of Umuron or it would simply be impossible to gain back the western colonies."

"Surely a focussed effort by the Navy would finish them off," I said, having often wondered at the lack of strength shown by the Navy in regards to the rebellion.

"How naive," said my father. "Do you have any idea how much it costs to run the Navy? We are borrowing heavily as it is just to keep the wolves at bay. The Guild of Sea Merchants are always happy to lend us more but every penny they lend the Empire is another link added to the chain they have round our necks. Soon we shall all be the slaves of the blasted guild. No, the Emperor will not allow that. We must make do."

"I thought the Emperor had a large stake in the guild?"

"As do I, but an empire is not run by a group of shareholders. It is run by an emperor and his lords. The Guild of Sea Merchants has its uses to us all, but it grows too powerful and influential."

"I see."

"And to top it all off, that damned cult is spreading like wildfire, preaching the end of days, infecting the Empire like a rotting plague."

"The Black Cult?"

"Yes. Now they are insane!"

The Black Cult or Cult of Sciorl was an ancient order of secretive villains, as far as I could tell, intent on the destruction of everything. Chaos was their goal and the end of the world, the prize, although I was not so averse to the idea. The world was a cruel and bitter place and perhaps it was time for a new start, I had to admit. The group was different to the dark gods and their evil followers in that the dark powers simply wanted control whereas the Black Cult wanted death. Again - madness. "They worship the black god, Sciorl don't they?"

"The Destroyer, yes. Religion, Malspire!" said Lord Ardalrion, shaking his head but said no more. The Navy was my father's life, made of solid wood, hard men, rules and regulations, discipline and order. Religion was a mystery to both myself and Ajourion, there to be respected and honoured but of little use when it comes to the tides and navigation and tactics and logistics. In general the Ardalrions acknowledged the gods and dutifully prayed and donated when required, but otherwise lived by more practical philosophies.

After another short silence, I then said, "I was hoping to find Ajator here."

"He is in the city. Not staying here though. You'll probably find him at the barracks... You're a Ardalrion, Malspire," the Duke added now wanting to discuss another subject. "You do realise that the name means something don't you?"

"Of course. I'm second in line to the duchy."

"Exactly," said Ajourion who did not look too pleased about it. "I have had reports."

"Reports?" I knew that Crops had been sending reports back to the Naval Office. The captain had no qualms about telling me so.

"Crops doesn't think much of you. I can't say I blame him. Look at you! The Undertaker! Clean yourself up boy, trim that hair. To be an officer, you have to look the part and act the part. Stand tall."

I did not answer.

"Well?"

"Well what, father? I will never measure up to Ajator's standards even if I tried. I am sorry if my appearance displeases you."

"Damn your black soul boy! As an Ardalrion, you will make an effort. You are the son of a lord admiral."

"I am that. I shall clean myself up," I said reluctantly. I was in no mood for a fight with the duke.

"See that you do. That damned Crops is starting to annoy me, but he is right!"

I left my father to seek out my brother picking up Willan on the way who I found stuffing his mouth with bread and fish. I was keen to find Ajator.

On route, I considered Ajator; he was the perfect officer. I was unkempt, where my twin was pristine in his naval uniform with its thick cloth in rich blues and gold and bicorn hat. I had taken to wearing an older style, wide brimmed tricorne hat, and long coat waxed and worked to a near black with cheap buttons, yet well made. Made to last the rigors of the sea, wind and rain. I wore comfortable and serviceable clothing while Ajator wore what was expected of the son of a lord admiral.

“Frilly fool,” I would tease Ajator who would then laugh, agreeing with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

I did not find Ajator that night, but the next morning Ajator found me instead, standing not far from the Sea Huntress where the ship was taking on supplies. About us men were busy loading the ship, with carts trundling past, gulls scavenging dropped food and women calling to the sailors to come and spend a little money. A rat dared anyone to hit it by standing atop a barrel sniffing the sea air. A cat was crouched low, creeping up on it. A ship’s bell chimed and a drunk sat singing under the eaves of a tavern, singing the Lost Maid of the Far Shores song. He would stop every so often to greet passers-by with a “good mornin’ to ya, sir.”

“It was an honest fight, brother.”

“Who did it?” Ajator asked, tensing.

“It doesn’t matter. I gave as good as I got,” I grunted.

“He gave you a black eye.” said Ajator, relaxing a little when he saw my flippant disregard for the hurt. It did hurt.

“Aye. It’s true. It was one of the crew. A huge man called Jodlin. Lost all his teeth already, but I broke his nose.”

“One of the crew struck an officer?”

“I dropped rank for the evening,” I pointed out. For a second Ajator looked shocked, but then smiled, obviously realising that he might have done the same.

“We had a fight, we gave each other a beating. No harm done,” I said, rubbing my cheek which still ached from Jodlin’s crushing right fist.

“And what did Captain Cresp say when he saw your face?”

“I told him I fell down some stairs, to which he remarked that I was always falling down stairs.”

Ajator laughed, at which point, Jodlin appeared on deck and smiled a toothless grin when he saw me.

“Stop grinning you gormless idiot and get back to work, Mister Jodlin!” I scowled. Jodlin knuckled his forehead and wondered off, still grinning.

Ajator, bemused, said, “The man’s a monster!”

“Not too bright either, but when the time comes for a proper fight, I’m pleased we can call upon his services. As long as he isn’t too drunk.”

Then Captain Cresp appeared on deck looking stiff and stuffed up in his finest clothing, hands held behind his back. He was doing his rounds and pointedly ignored me although he nodded at Ajator.

“That bastard’s a mean one,” I said in darker tones.

“You shouldn’t speak like that about your captain.”

“No? What’s the admiral like then?”

Ajator thought about this. “A little stiff perhaps,” he smiled.

How my brother could lift my mood. Even I would smile in Ajator’s company which would make the crew stop and stare as though something were wrong.

"How goes the fight against the beastmen?" I asked, changing the subject.

"A deadlock, it would seem."

Ajator had recently been fighting the beastmen invaders in the east. I had never seen one but I had read about the creatures in the papers. It seems they are men, but so twisted in shape and barbaric in nature that they could just as easily be compared to rabid dogs as human beings. Some even had the heads of animals it was said.

"Is it true they eat the flesh of men? Father says so." I had always wondered what that would taste like. Biting my own fingernails does not count.

"I believe so," said Ajator. "To be honest we've never been that close to them. We've sent a few of their crude vessels to the bottom of the ocean but I've never been close enough to study one or observe their eating habits. Next time I see them, I shall take notes for you, Mal."

"Could you?" I said, rising to the game of sarcasm. "Perhaps interview a few for the Gazette?"

Ajator punched my shoulder. It hurt. "How about the rebellion?" he then asked.

I thought for a moment. "Another deadlock I would say. We travel the seas as messengers and hunters mostly. We've had a few fights but nothing worth bragging about. The Empire is weak, Ajator."

"What? How can you say that?"

"Father said as much. There aren't enough ships. Not enough men. The seas are too big for us to hunt them down, their ports too well defended for a strike at their heart. We just keep them in check, but we can't stamp them out. We need the full fleet."

"These invaders can't go on forever losing men and ships. When they dry up, the full Ardalrion Navy will come down upon the rebels and then we'll see who's weak," Ajator said with a stubborn certainty.

"I hope so. I would like to see an end to this fight. It feels wrong to be at war with men so like ourselves. They were Imperial settlers not long ago, ploughing a piece of civilisation out of those barbarian lands. I think I would rather be fending off the beastmen or pirates. Perhaps even the Sea Lords of the Free States."

"We shall be captains soon enough, Mal. Then we can strike at them, you and me. We'll show them how the House of Ardalrion are the finest masters of the Inner Ocean."

"I would like that. I like the sea. I like the ships and the men," I said, extracting my pipe. "You know when we were children at the castle? I was not sure about going to sea."

"I remember. I told you, you'd like it."

"You did. It can be tedious, but I have found a place, Ajator. I fit about as well as a thorn in an admiral's arse, but I'm here and I think I could be a good captain one day."

"A thorn? Literally or figuratively?"

"Both," I said, smiling at the thought. "I would like to see more action though. I want to strike at our enemies. I want to show the fleet that the Sea Huntress has a sting."

"Be careful what you wish for, Malspire. The gods might be listening."

Chapter Three

“Smoke to starboard!” called the lookout high above me.

I stood at the taffrail. Due to another officer's illness, I was still on duty having already passed the long cold hours of the night watch. I felt tired and hungry. Cresp was there and we tried as best we could to avoid one another. We were a few days out from Umuron and I was looking forward to some land time after a straight run from the capital. I was expecting my brother to be in the region. Ajator had left Norlan a few days earlier. It had now been three uneventful weeks at sea.

The captain and I stepped over to the side where we did indeed see a stack of smoke like a dark smudge on the grey horizon. It was cold, and a light drizzle made the crew damp and helped the cold reach the bone. Although pleased for my waxed long-coat, even that could not entirely protect me from the constant wind and drizzle.

“Bring us about, Mister Ardalrion. We shall investigate.”

“Aye aye, Captain. Bring us about. Starboard, three points. Full speed Mister Brintyne,” I called. The helmsman acknowledged and spun the wheel.

The ship came round, and the engine pounded to a new beat, the great paddle wheel at the rear of the Sea Huntress churned the water white. I made my way to the forecabin and using my officer's glass, saw a plume of black smoke from a powered boat in the distance. It could have been a merchantman or Imperial Navy, but I had a gut feeling that there was trouble over there. We had boarded many ships in the past but here in the vast expanse of the great ocean, the small Sea Huntress - an insignificant little speck, suddenly felt like a flimsy barrier to the sucking depths and terrors that hunt these waves.

The ship cut a sure path through the grey sea, splattering me with more spray, adding to the drizzle as she rose and fell on the waves. Slowly the distant shapes of two ships came into view. One was a steam vessel of some kind, and the other a large white sailing ship of three masts, one of which was broken. I could just make out the tiny blotches of smoke from gun shots. The powered vessel looked like she was going to board the tall ship. On returning to the captain, I reported what I had seen.

“Clear the deck. Battle stations, Mister Ardalrion.”

“Clear the deck! Battle stations! Run out the guns! Marines to your stations!” I called out and began to walk calmly to my cabin to fetch my arms, observing the crew as I did so.

A boy rang the bell, and all hands ran to their stations. I saw thirty or so marines line the ship. They looked smart next to the seamen in their dark midnight blue uniforms, round helmets crested by a nasty spike, with a metal forehead plate and peak. Each had a musket which was tipped with a long, slightly curved blade. Marksmen climbed to the crow's-nest. Twenty four guns were run out, powder bags taken from storage and placed by each gun which already had shot and water buckets in place. All this happened in the short time it took me to reach my cabin.

All officers took their places, and I returned armed with a service cutlass, which I much preferred to the officer's rapier sword. I liked to cut, hack, stab and slash, not play dandy footsy like the other officers. Although I was inexperienced I was sure they would die fast in a true sword fight. Perhaps we would soon get the chance to find out.

As we got closer, we saw that the steam vessel was a frigate, a little smaller than the Sea Huntress, and was indeed locked with the tall ship. I could make out a running battle on the white merchant with the defenders holding the forecabin, and the attackers making bloody

murder on the rest. The powered vessel was an older style frigate with two large wheels at her rear, and I could now see that her flag was red with a white snake.

"Pirates," I growled. They were not as common in these parts as further south, but with the war and the confusion it brought, they could probably make a good living here now. Rumour had it that the rebels were using privateers to good effect and these probably had a letter of marque from the rebel leader Duke Valthorn.

"I see it. Close the gun ports and make ready to board her," Cresp said, standing resolutely, hands behind his back.

I called out the orders, and more men came up on deck with knives, swords, clubs, spears and a few with pistols. Some had put on chain mail, while others had found shields and tin helmets. I too had put on a fine suit of chain mail under my coat, and just hoped I did not fall into the icy waters. Now I could hear the gunfire and the ring of metal. The stink of powder was in the air as was blood and fear. I saw as the enemy, who had now seen us, were trying to cut free of the merchant ship, but they were so entangled that they soon gave up and made ready for boarding instead.

"We shall board the merchant," said Cresp frowning as he made his calculations. "That way they shan't have the opportunity for a broadside before we enter the fray, and we shall join the defenders, Mister Ardalrion. Push them back onto the frigate then keep pushing until they're either standing on water or drowning."

"Sir," I said. "Permission to lead the boarding party, sir?"

Captain Eezuk Cresp turned to give me a chilling smile. "Granted, Mister Ardalrion. Granted."

A bullet hissed past my ear. It was all I could do not to drop to the deck. The captain watched me. Another shot hit the bulwark.

"Marines may fire," said Cresp returning his attention to the battle.

I looked down at the marine sergeant who was waiting for the order to open fire. They were already taking aim. "You may open fire, sergeant."

"Aim low, lads. Aim for their balls. Fire!" called the sergeant which was followed by a spark from each gun, a gout of flame from the muzzles and the deafening roll of the musket volley. Each gun spewed a cloud of smoke which was quickly whipped away by the sea breeze.

At this range, the muskets were not accurate but there was no point in holding back and a few lucky shots found their targets on both sides. I saw two Marines go down, one dead with a dark stain spreading across the chest of his uniform, and the other screaming with a shot to the shoulder. The man was quickly dragged off to the surgeon. We crept closer. With all the gunfire, both decks were covered in stinking gunpowder smoke, and it was getting hard to find solid targets. The smoke stank, and stung the eyes. It was like a poison in the air, and already gave me a sore throat.

"Kill the vermin. Show no mercy. I want the captain alive," said Cresp.

"Aye, Captain," I said drawing my cutlass. The captain saw it and sneered at the use of such a butcher's cleaver.

The noise of battle was a fearful song. The screams of pain mixed with the roars of warriors. Steel rang on steel and shot punctured the melody with discordant beats. Apprehension gripped me with the sudden realisation that I was about to board an openly hostile enemy, something I had never done before in battle. In the books it was associated with heroism and glory but I knew not to trust such words, and as we crept closer I began to feel that I was right not to do so as I saw the grizzled faces and pointed blades and blackened muskets of the enemy.

The helmsman stopped the engines and let the Sea Huntress glide closer. I ordered grappling hooks which were thrown across and pulled tight, men heaving on the ropes. The enemy did not try to cut them but instead shot at the Sea Huntress or shouted curses, and spat and jeered. Again I had to resist the temptation to flinch or duck as the shots filled the air around me. There was fighting all along the merchant but one man found the time to pull his breeches down and show the Sea Huntress his white arse. The fool was fired upon by just about every musket and pistol on the Sea Huntress but fortune seemed to favour the jester who quickly pulled them up and danced away.

Had I not been so tense, I would have smiled at the show, but instead I gritted my teeth, then called, "Boarding party, make ready!" I stood in the aftcastle and intended to drop down onto merchant's lower aftcastle together with seven or eight marines and a few sailors including Jodlin who I later learned was told by Harl to keep an eye on me. Others would cross over all along the deck, but I did not want the enemy using the aftcastle as a defensive position. With only yards to go, both sides screamed at each other. Shots fired, and even a few harpoons and spears were thrown. An arrow grazed my shoulder and embedded itself in the stock of a marine's musket. Then with a crash of timber upon timber, we were upon them.

"Charge!" I screamed as I turned from the cover of the wooden crenulations and stepped up onto the Sea Huntress's gunwale. It was then that the fear struck me. It had been there the whole time, waiting for its moment to bite. Now it reared its ugly head and bit hard! I was always a craven man in my own mind and it took hold of me like a crushing grip and made me falter. It was a long drop of about eight feet into a pack of braying wolves, but I was now a clear target and so had to either jump or turn and flee. I could not move; either option was too horrific to comprehend, but finally with an effort of will and a sudden fatalistic acceptance, I forced myself to go.

Of course they were waiting and I had a bristling field of blades pointing up at me. That I was not skewered before even landing was a miracle, but I screamed wildly, kicking one blade away, and two more being robbed of my death by the chain mail before coming down with the full force of my cutlass onto a man's head, who, without a sound simply fell dead to the deck. I too fell and rolled quickly aside to avoid the knives and blades hacking at me. One spear point nicked my ear. A blade just missed my belly. I was being kicked and stomped and had to lash out with the cutlass to make space. The blade went deep into a man's shin. He screamed and fell away. I then managed to hamstring another before finding some space. Jumping to my feet, I did not pause or feel fear anymore, or at least I felt something beyond fear. It was a rage and the only thing left open to me, so I embraced it with all my heart allowing it to overcome all conscious thought.

I half shouted, half grunted with effort and hacked at an arm which recoiled, then slashed at a man's head who threw himself backwards. As more men joined the fight, I began to dance around the deck, cutting, parrying, thrusting, dodging, and stabbing. I killed easily, and found that I was indeed a good fighter or at least a nasty fighter and kicked, spat and head butted as readily as I stabbed and thrust. I cut a man's arm from wrist to elbow. The man had tried protect his head. I forced the blade into another pirate's belly and had to twist and yank hard to release it from the sucking grip of flesh and blood. One ragged looking pirate tried to run a spear through my gut but I stepped aside and pulled the spear past me, forcing the pirate off balance at which point I grabbed him and bit his nose. The poor fool screeched and scrabbled frantically to be free of me, but I mercilessly bit harder and with a sickening crunch bit the man's nose clean off. Blinded by pain and stunned by my ferocity, the pirate fell on his side, face in hands, screaming

in horror. I put my blade through the man's neck and left him to drown in his own blood. Why did I bite the man? I do not know - it just felt right.

There was a mighty roar, and the deck shook as Jodlin landed in amongst the enemy. He had a shield and an overly large blacksmith's hammer which he used to terrifyingly good effect. I saw him crush a man's skull with sickening ease. Jodlin then took a blow on the shield, turned to strike, and although the enemy tried to parry with his blade, Jodlin simply pulverised the fool. Each strike seemed to bring a pirate down. A knife stabbed me in the back which was stopped by the chain mail. This returned my attention to my own fight, swinging the cutlass round to slash the attacker's belly open.

Soon the enemy were backing away from us, a look of fear on their faces. I must have looked like death, bent, hobbling and covered in blood with a cold, half mad smile on my face. I saw the opportunity to rout them from the aftcastle and so charged again.

"Kill them!" I cried. "Crush the pirate vermin. Cut them! Kill them all!" I threw myself at them. Again my armour saved my life from a stab to my side. It hurt like a punch and winded me, but it did not stop my crazed onslaught. Suddenly the pirates fell back. We had taken the aftcastle, and I stopped to survey the situation. Blinking, I wiped blood from my eyes. I had taken a cut to the forehead, but did not remember how. Looking across the deck I could see the battle was not progressing well as more of the enemy joined the fight from the pirate ship. Sudlas was surrounded but seemed to be holding out. I was about to order another charge when through the smoke and noise and confusion, I saw her.

I have often wondered about beauty. When I see a perfect flower, or the perfect sunset, or even the perfect face, I nod and think, it is perfect, but I do not admire it. There is something boring about perfection. The perfect beauty is pleasing to the eye, but it is, strangely, of no interest at all. Something close however, something nearly perfect, but flawed is something to wander at. In the broken, is something to admire. It is close but it is not perfect. It is interesting, even fascinating. There is no need to love the perfect for it is perfect. The flawed however can be loved and the closer to perfection, the greater the love can be.

She was tall. She had hazel hair and she was striking; beautiful, but perhaps not a conventional beauty. There was something in her face and bearing that spoke of strength and confidence. Clad in a full yellow dress and a pretty white coat, she looked completely out of place in this battle and would not have looked amiss in one of the Imperial parks on an afternoon stroll with some lady friends. Now the dress was blood spattered and gunpowder stained, her hair was falling about her shoulders and she was gritting her teeth with a grim determination.

The lady stood upon the forecastle railing, firing down on the enemy with a pistol in each hand, not a hesitation to kill. It was obvious she knew how to use them. She was exciting, brave and ruthless. I was lost in admiration for this lady warrior. She looked up and saw me staring at her. She fleetingly smiled, then withdrew to reload. Awakening from my dream, I pointed my cutlass at the enemy below. I had to get to her. I had to save her!

"Ready lads? You four, guard the steps. Don't let them take the aftcastle!" This was to four of the marines who were already defending the steps with shot and bayonets.

"Go now! Go forth!" I cried as I threw myself over the balustrade, grasping a rope with one hand which allowed me to swing and kick a man down before slashing at another. I was alive with the killing and slaughter. I was drunk on the power the cutlass gave me, and the romantic notion of saving a lady from these pirate scum. The fear was truly gone now. Now I was to be feared!

When I landed, I instinctively ducked and felt the wind of a mace pass over my head. Swinging round with my blade, the mace came back again and knocked the cutlass from my hand. Then a boot kicked me in the face, sending me reeling back onto the deck. The man was dressed in leather armour with a round shield and helmet. He had a thick tangled beard and long greasy hair. There was something of the Northmen in him. I could only make out a glint of crazed eyes under the shadow of the helmet but I saw his rotten teeth, as leering, the pirate moved in to kill me.

"I am the slayer!" the pirate growled with a strong Northman accent. "I am the end of your worthless life and I have seen you, little man." He struck out with the mace.

Rolling to one side, the mace just missed my head, crashing into and splintering the woodwork instead. The man stank of rancid fat and was probably covered in the stuff as protection from the cold and rain. I had to roll again to avoid another blow. Then the Northman pirate began to kick me with heavy boots. I tried to get out of the way. I tried to crawl, but the pirate just kept kicking and stomping. Each bone crushing blow sent shots of pain through my already battered body. One connected with my groin and I felt dizzy and faint with the hurt being dealt me, and prayed that it would stop. Then, when the Northman thought I was subdued, he raised the mace again.

"Die well though you have not fought well, Empire man. You'll serve me in the afterlife and be the cleaner of my arse. Prepare for the halls of my fathers!"

I was going to die. I panicked and gripped the deck, half blinded with pain and blood, but well aware of the weight of metal about to crush my skull. The drumming in my ears was deafening, the agony of my beaten body, too much. It felt like the pirate must have broken one or more of my ribs. It was then that my fingers felt something; a bit of wood? I did not know but I gripped it and threw myself forward in desperation, hoping perhaps to put the attacker off balance. I lunged and thrust the bit of wood under the shield with all the strength I could muster. Perhaps I could wind him or at least get inside of the blow. The pain of the sudden movement shot through my hurt body and made me scream. To my surprise, the item I was holding went deep into the groin of the Northman pirate with surprising ease, and the death blow the stinking pirate was mustering faltered high above my head. He looked at me in puzzlement and anger. Warm blood trickled down my arm and I pulled it back to see that I was holding a wickedly long and slender gutting knife which had a gentle curve and proved the perfect weapon to get in and under a shield. The man collapsed, groaning, dropping the mace with a heavy clatter.

Looking round, I got to my feet and had to dodge attacks from all sides. The battle was still faltering, although Jodlin now made it to my side and cleared some space for me with his cruel hammer blows. One of which finished off the Northman. Stumbling, I found my cutlass, and went at them again with cutlass in one hand and knife in the other. They proved a combination fitting to my style of fighting and I slashed at the throat of a man I had unbalanced with the larger blade. I instantly forgot my hurts and revelled again in the fight, tasting blood in my mouth. The spray of blood covered me and I had to admit, that I enjoyed the sensation of being a killer and being in command of both life and death and not just the weakling brother of a greater man for once, my near death encounter forgotten in an instant.

I looked to the Sea Huntress. Although hard pressed, no more men were committed from the Imperial and Ardalrion frigate. Their job was to protect the ship if I failed, and failing we were. There were just too many of the pirates, and they didn't care to protect their own vessel, but flooded over in full, ferocious force. Then there was the ripping crack of a musket and pistol volley, followed by the roar of a charge. The defenders on the forecastle had been given the

chance to organise themselves and now joined the fray. This put new strength in my men's hearts as they re-doubled their efforts and pushed hard with steel and shot. The enemy were now being hit from three sides and some began to pull back to the pirate ship.

I saw then the man who must be the pirate captain, adorned in jewels, gold and finery, with a ridiculously thin and frail rapier and pistol. The captain stood upon the pirate's bulwark issuing orders, and egging his men on. Then he saw me, and for a moment seemed a little undecided, but then obviously thought that as the only enemy officer in the melee, I would have to do. He put his pistol away inside his coat and raised his sword to point it at me. I nodded, recognising the challenge and fought my way towards the enemy captain, as the captain did likewise towards me. The pirate captain seemed to kill with surprising ease, parrying and thrusting his blade deep into his victims. He showed the quickest of smiles when finally we met, looking down his nose at me.

“Your name?” he demanded.

“Officer Malspire Ardalrion, at your service,” I snarled, heaving in air.

The captain looked me up and down, and did not seem impressed. “Captain Charmio Yorlwig,” he then said by way of introduction. “You are Imperial Navy and yet you dress like a pig herder. I wish to fight a proper officer, where is your captain?”

The haughty bastard was already getting on my nerves. “Captain’s rutting with the cabin boy, so I’ll have to do.”

Yorlwig raised an eyebrow and again turned up his nose. I didn't know where he came from or why he thought he was so high and mighty but I wanted cut that swiving maggot down to size. “You dress like a dandy milk maid, now put up and defend yourself, you pirate worm.” I said, trying to anger the man.

My words must have cut deep, for before I could even blink, the pirate captain’s sword whipped up to cut me on the chin as though he were slapping an upstart. Captain Yorlwig then stepped back, and readied himself for the duel. I wiped the blood away, and realised that I was probably out of my depth, but what could I do? I had accepted the challenge and then added to it by insulting the man. Yorlwig smiled thinly as though he knew my thoughts, so I simply lunged at him. My only chance was to break that thin blade with my butcher’s steel and be quick about it. The pirate parried, but rather than take the weight of my blade, he turned it away, then flicked his sword round, cutting my coat, but the chain mail robbed the blade of my blood. Yorlwig looked disapprovingly at the mail, then I attacked again, and again Yorlwig parried, following up with his own attack.

Captain Yorlwig took to lunging at me, hoping to penetrate the mail, which would not be hard with such a fine point, or else swiping at my face and neck which I often had to parry with the gutting knife. With every attack, Yorlwig was getting closer to cutting me, and I knew it was only a matter of time before the pirate captain ended my life with a lightning cut and a spray of crimson blood. It was tiring work as we danced round the deck. The others were still in full fight, but mostly managing to make way for us. There was one moment when I got slammed to my back by a pair of men at each other’s throats, and the pirate captain could have easily ended things for me, but instead stepped back, offering this soul the chance to get to my feet. I did so. The arrogant fool, thought I, but was only just in time to jump aside as Yorlwig again lunged, then danced away from my clumsy hack. Yorlwig lunged again, and again I tried to smash the rapier blade, but still failed.

The deck was getting slippery with blood, and with the buffeting of bodies, and heaving of the waves. It was hard to keep one’s footing although the dandy seemed to have no trouble. I was tiring. Yorlwig was playing with me and I wheezed as I took deep lungs full of air. More blood

was getting into my eyes and I wished I had nails in his boots, and I wished it would rain properly, not just this incessant drizzle. I wished I was stronger, faster and cleverer than this bastard.

In my anger, I drove forwards again, but this time slipped, my left boot sliding out in front of me. Captain Yorlwig saw his opportunity and lunged. All I could do was turn my left shoulder to the captain and the blade pierced the mail, skin, muscle, and stopped on the bone. I screamed with pain as I wrenched myself to the side, and brought my cutlass, down hard on that damned blade, shattering it into many pieces, then with my left arm now free, swung round again with the gutting knife. The pain of the broken blade's shards scraping on bone made me scream in agony. The pirate captain stepped back, the hilt of the broken rapier still in his hand. He looked utterly disgusted. It seemed to be my appearance he could not abide, and it was true; I must have looked like a horror - wet and bloody, my hat missing so my matted hair fell before my eyes, my back bent, and my face purple and blue from being kicked and beaten.

Yorlwig stood for a second and looked as though he was going to turn away, when a long, curving line of red blood appeared across his neck. Sighing, the man looked up at the grey skies, and the cut opened wide to pour a wave of crimson blood down his fine clothing. Yorlwig was saying something. I did not know what. Perhaps some farewell to a distant loved one, or a curse on the gods for being defeated by a cripple. I would never know for Captain Yorlwig's legs gave way and he fell dead upon the deck adding his blood to the pool round my feet. I looked at the knife I had found and kissed its bloody blade for twice saving my life.

The battle lasted only a short while longer. Once the pirate captain was dead, the enemy soon lost the will to fight, and began to drop their weapons, some begging for mercy. I ignored the cries of pain and pleading, and stepped over the fallen and wounded towards the forecastle, passing the bloody but living Sudlas who grimly nodded at me. I wanted to see the woman again. I wanted to know she was unhurt, but she was nowhere to be seen. Climbing to the first tier of the forecastle I then walked straight into her and she looked me in the eyes.

"Never seen a man with such bright eyes before," she said, then ripped some cloth from her dress for a bandage. I hated my eyes. They were not the pretty blue of my brother's but sharp, harsh, cutting, sickly in my own reflection.

She was confident, even cocky. I liked her. She had lost her pistols and was now looking after the wounded. Her dress was a mess of blood and ripped to tatters. Her left shoulder was bare and grazed.

I just watched her, so she said, "Are you an officer?"

"Yes."

"And your name?"

"Ardalrion. Malspire Ardalrion at your service." I bowed wincing a little.

"Of House Ardalrion?"

"Yes."

"I am Veinara Havlon. Thank you for coming to our rescue."

I looked around at the horrible carnage. I wanted to say that it was a pleasure but it would have been a lie. It was awful, yet exciting. A waking nightmare, yet I could not deny that I enjoyed defeating this enemy and conquering my fear. It was by far the most terrifying experience and also the most exhilarating one of my life. I could not find the words so she smiled again and said, "I would have been a prisoner, or dead, or worse if you and your crew had not arrived. They came out of nowhere."

"Miss Havlon, you are unhurt?" I presumed she was not married and happily she did not contradict me.

"I am not, apart from a few bruises. You've taken quite a beating I see."

"It's nothing," I lied. "It looks worse than it is."

"Would you allow me to clean those wounds?"

I hesitated. I did need attention, but was uncomfortable with the idea of her touching my deformed body.

"It is the least I can do."

"I would be honoured," I relented.

She led me to a section of the forecandle where a sail was being jury rigged as a temporary cover where some of the wounded could be seen to. After sitting down upon a crate, she took clean water from a wooden bowl and began to remove the blood from my head and face using the strip she had ripped from her dress. I wondered what had become of my hat, not knowing when or where it was lost. We did not talk for a while. I was wound up and shivering from the rush of the battle and needed to calm down. Her touch was gentle and caring. She seemed to take great pains not to hurt me. Closing my eyes, I felt instantly at ease with her closeness. It was a new experience to be touched by a woman who was simply caring for me, who wanted to heal me.

"Have you seen many battles?" she asked after a while.

"Not like this."

"You fought well."

I did not answer. I had not fought well, but did not want to contradict her.

"I saw you fighting the captain. I knew you would win the duel."

"I was lucky." I could feel her warm, sweet breath on my forehead.

"You could say that of any man who wins a duel."

Opening my eyes, I had to blink away some water. When I could see again, she was close. So close, I could have kissed her. Then behind her, I noticed Harl together with Jodlin. Both men seemed unharmed. Harl nodded and Jodlin just grinned. I tried to ignore them.

"What's your destination?" I asked her.

"I am travelling to Norlan together with my father," she said with a big smile. "He wishes to find a wealthy husband for me."

"He has high hopes for the city?"

"Yes, but I don't. To be honest, I'm not ready. I am young and I have yet to see the world!"

"Not much to see."

"Oh?" she mimicked my stern expression. This made me smile. "We're farmers. My father owns a stretch of land on the western shores of Malolia. We're not poor but my father thinks he can find a better match in the city. At least that is what my father hopes for," she said. "I just want to see the city and its attractions that I have heard of for so long."

"There is little worth seeing in Norlan," I said. "It's big, cramped and smells funny." The city was to my liking, but these days, I yearned for the sea or country whenever there.

"What about the theatres, museums, libraries? Culture? Surely as the very heart of the Empire it is overflowing with art and architecture and music?"

The city had all that, it was true, so I just shrugged, then winced when she placed her hand on my bent back, not from pain but the shame. She did not seem to care though, or at least she did not show it.

Veinara had finished cleaning and bandaging me when Captain Crops reached the fore-castle of the merchant, carefully stepping over the pools of blood. He was escorted by two marines who took up position behind him as he stopped in front of us. "I wanted the captain alive!"

Looking up, I fought the urge to point out the bloody obvious which was that the man was trying to kill me. "My apologies, sir. I had hoped he would yield but I made a clumsy stroke and took his life."

"A clumsy weapon in clumsy hands, Ardalrion! Stand to attention when I speak to you. Damn your manners man!"

I reluctantly and painfully got to my feet and found the captain watching Miss Havlon.

"May I present Miss Veinara Havlon of Malolia, Captain Crops of the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy frigate Sea Huntress," I said.

"Charmed, m'lady." Crops bowed and I saw his gaze fall down to her breasts, more drool forming at the corner of his mouth. "I trust the dogs did not hurt you?"

"They did not get the chance Captain, thanks to your brave officer and men."

Crops ignored the comment. "We shall be sailing in convoy to Umuron. Can I offer you my cabin for the short trip?"

"That is very kind of you Captain Crops, but my father and I have a cabin and I am sure we will be safe enough now that you are escorting us."

"Your father?" said Crops, looking disappointed. "Of course."

Crops left us and an elderly man, probably in his late sixties or early seventies sidled up to Veinara. "Was that the captain, my sweet?"

"Yes father. It was." She then stepped aside and said, "This is Malspire Ardalrion, father. The officer who saved us."

We shook hands. "Lord Ardalrion at your service." I rarely used my title, but suddenly felt I should.

"Lord?" said both Veinara and her father.

"Yes. I am the son of Duke Ajorion Ardalrion."

The old man quickly forgot the captain. "I've heard of you. Read about you in the papers."

"Nothing bad I hope."

"Can't remember. I am Guthan Havlon and this is my daughter, Veinara Havlon. She's not married and not a bad cook. She don't mind a bit of honest work, but she can be stubborn and has a taste for fine clothing and expensive books."

"Father!"

I could not suppress a smile, liking the honesty of the old man.

"Please forgive my father. He has no sense at all."

"I'm getting old my darling. I have to marry you off soon or I'll not have done my duty before I feed the worms."

I waved it away.

"Our thanks, Lord Ardalrion," said Guthan. "I fought as best I could but to be honest I was left to reload the pistols mostly. No strength left in these arms. No speed."

"You did well, father," said Veinara proudly.

The old man shuffled off to find a task. There was not much more Veinara could do to help me. I decided that my ribs were not broken as the pain was abating and had no trouble breathing.

"Well, I must return to my duties. Thank you for your kind attention."

"It was a pleasure, my lord."

"Please, call me Malspire."

She smiled and I forced myself to turn and return my attention to the pirates. Making my way over to Captain Yorlwig's cabin, I had a good look around. The cabin was tastefully done with fine furniture, and charts as well as a wine cabinet that had already been ransacked. The draws had all been pulled out of the desk, and any valuables taken. The paperwork and maps however were left strewn across the floor. Captain Crops would undoubtedly send men to gather it up for the Secret Servants, the agents whose task it is to gather information and intelligence. I, using my cutlass, began sifting through it. There amongst the piles of paper, and scrolls was one particular scroll, with a fine looking ribbon and broken seal. Plucking it up, I unravelled it to discover that it was the marque of the enemy navy granting Captain Yorlwig rights as a privateer. I quickly rolled it up and put it in my inside pocket just as Qenrik entered the room with two marines. Qenrik never liked me, but got on famously with the captain. Qenrik was just a snivelling turd in my eyes. The officer was quick to bully the enemy captives once they had surrendered but had been nowhere in sight before the fight. I ignored them and left the cabin with my token, imagining one day hanging it on a wall to tell of this day's victory.

Eventually, together with the pirate vessel as prize, the Sea Huntress took the tall ship in tow, and set sail for port. The captain of the sailing ship had been killed in the fight, so it fell to me to stay aboard her, and insisted that Veinara and her father join me for dinner each of the three nights it would take to reach port. When I had told Captain Crops that I needed experience aboard a tall ship, the captain agreed and seemed only too pleased to be rid of me. If Crops had suspected that my wish was to be with the lady, he would never have approved, but the captain was thinking only of his prize money and the little extra status the capture would bring him.

To my surprise Veinara seemed to enjoy my company and I tried my best to be the city gentleman women expected of a naval officer. I felt clumsy and unintentionally rude, but she laughed at my gaffs and made light of my fumbling attempts at etiquette. Now, for the first time in my life, I wished I had listened to my tutors regarding such things. I wished I could take a leaf from my brother's book and effortlessly charm my guests with polite banter and topical conversation.

"So you have a twin brother?" Veinara asked. She was dressed in a simple light green dress with a dried cornflower at the neckline.

The three of us had eaten well and were now enjoying a dark wine that Willan had found in storage.

"I do. His name is Ajator. He is the heir to the Duchy of Ardalrion and an officer like myself aboard the Grand Oak."

"Are you close?"

"Yes. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he is not only my brother but also my best friend. Probably my only friend," I added.

"Not your only friend." She smiled. "If I may be so bold."

"And a good cook," Guthan added hopefully. Veinara shot him a glance.

I did not know what to say. I had made a female friend. It was a new experience for me. She made me smile, and I made her laugh. We talked long into the evening and I never once thought of touching her or approaching her in any manner other than gentlemanly. Of course her father was ever present.

That night I could not sleep and ended up taking the watch until the early hours again. In my mind, I kept going over the evening's talk and felt childish for letting my imagination run wild with ideas of sweeping the striking Veinara off her feet. Something about her was exciting. Was I falling in love? The more I saw her, the more beautiful she became.

The next evening was much the same. The old man sat mostly quietly while Veinara and I talked of anything and everything under the sun and moon. It transpired that Veinara's mother had passed away some five years past leaving Guthan with six sons and a daughter. All the sons were married off, and now Guthan just had Veinara to deal with.

On the last evening before reaching port, I felt sad that the perfect arrangement was soon coming to an end. I was enjoying the sensation of commanding a ship and enjoying even more the company, and so forced a brave face and entertained my guests as best I could, even having Willan clean himself up.

"You're a rogue, Lord Ardalrion," Veinara said with a laugh after I had told one of the lighter tavern jokes I had heard – the one about the moon fish and the lost hermit crab.

"Malspire. Please, you must call me Malspire. If I am a rogue then you are maiden warrior of old. I saw how you handled those pistols up on deck."

"My brothers taught me. I can handle a sword too if need be. They thought I should be able to protect myself."

"And I agree with them whole heartedly."

Veinara thought for a second. "My brother's would like you. They're land workers. Farmers at heart with hands like shovels and chests like barn doors. They like the simpler things in life. They have little time for lords and ladies, but you I think they would like. You're not like any lord I have ever met before."

"No? What do you think, Miss Havlon? Am I to your liking too?" I asked tentatively.

"Of course. You are my knight in shining armour, come to save me from sea monsters and pirates."

"I thought I was a rogue?"

"Oh that too," she smiled.

Her father sat snoring in his chair at the dining table. The lanterns cast deep shadows around the captain's cabin. The food was good with fresh fish, meats and vegetables as well as another fine wine. The previous captain liked to dine well. I knew I had been clumsy in my manners. I knew I had the looks of a mongrel and the clothing of a boor, but perhaps this woman could see through such things. Perhaps she had seen something in me that she could learn to love? I felt foolish for even thinking it, but never before had a woman, so striking and handsome shown me any form of affection freely and so happily. The night ended very late. Mister Havlon had to be woken, and in his sleepy daze thanked his daughter by kissing her on the cheek and saying, "Goodnight Falinda, dear."

With a tear in her eye, Veinara explained that Falinda was her mother. "He dreams of her at night," she said.

Not knowing what to say, I felt guilty, for all I could think about was embracing this last private moment with Veinara before the night ended.

"Thank you," I said clumsily.

"For what?"

Her father left the cabin to find his own bed. Veinara wanted to go with him but she hesitated. I felt the need to say something noble or clever or intelligent; anything that would leave a lasting impression on her. Anything that would make her think well of me.

"I mean. Thank you for your company," was all I could think of.

"It is we who should thank you."

There was an awkward silence which ended when Mister Havlon opened the wrong door to some other cabin. Veinara could wait no longer. She quickly kissed me on the cheek, and

thanked me one last time before leaving the cabin for her own. That kiss struck me like a hammer and I would remember it forever. I remember it now like it was yesterday.

When the Sea Huntress, at the head of the small flotilla made port, I helped Miss Havlon and her father with their baggage as well as find lodging in the town. Although the better inns were always full, I simply used the weight of my name and gold to have them put up in a finer establishment, and when the old man asked about the price, I told him the Imperial Navy would pay for it. That was a lie which cost me two gold heads, but Veinara was making the fool of me as women so often do with men. A harlot could be made to dance naked all night long for a couple of coppers, and yet I expected nothing for the riches paid so that the pair would sleep in comfort and safety. They were very grateful to me for my services and insisted that I should visit if ever I was in the region of their farmlands. I assured them that I would.

As they left me in the street outside the inn, carts trundling past on cobble roads, people about their business, I stood for a while and wondered what to do. I forced myself not to think of Miss Havlon. It was hard. There was a sudden emptiness mixed with a joy I had never known before. What should I do? Should I pay her another visit? When? How long should I wait? I breathed deeply and looked round. There were so few civilians and so many sailors and marines and officers. Umuron was a base for the Navy in this region, and used as a striking point for attacks against the rebels.

Winter was coming, and my breath misted in the air. I took out my watch to see that it was mid-day and so turned to report back to Captain Crops who would undoubtedly be wondering where I was. Tomorrow, I decided I would visit her. That would be a respectable amount of time to wait and in the meanwhile, I could find some better clothing and perhaps a gift for the young lady. That was the answer. Just then a voice called to me and looking up I saw Ajator coming up the street from the harbour with a wide grin on his handsome face.

“Malspire!”

“Brother!” We clasped one another. It felt good to hold my brother again. It always did.

“At last I found you. I saw your ship, and asked about you. That man, Crops, told me you had found it in your heart to be charitable to an old man and his granddaughter.”

“His daughter,” I corrected him.

“She must be a rare sight,” Ajator laughed.

“She is a fine lady and was in need of my assistance, nothing more.”

Ajator beamed at the sight of me. I felt likewise and wanted to tell him of my feelings for this woman, but couldn't find the words.

“How are you?” Ajator asked, changing the subject. “You look like you fell off a mountain this time. Was it a hard fight? I heard you ran into pirates, but gave them hells and fire.”

“They gave me hells, but yes we ended their days at sea. We took a prize!”

“Well done! Who was the captain?”

“A Captain Yorlwig. Never heard of him, but it doesn't matter now, he's rotting at the feet of Vorn in the lower depths.”

“Dead is he?”

“Yes. I fought him in single combat and took his life.”

“Ha! I knew you were a hero.”

“No hero, Ajator, just lucky.”

"Malspire?" This was Veinara. She appeared at the steps of the inn behind us.

"Miss Havlon," I said as she approached.

"I wanted to thank you one last time for saving us..." She was watching Ajator, so I introduced her to my brother.

"A pleasure, Miss Havlon," said Ajator, bowing.

"The famous twin of my rescuer. Malspire told me all about you."

They spoke but I did not listen for my heart sank as low as the deepest depths of the Outer Oceans for I saw how my brother met her eyes, and how in an instant, she forgot I was even standing there. Ajator was besotted from the very second he saw her and it seemed he had the same effect on Veinara. Inside, I was screaming my rage at the world, cursing the gods and spitting at the poets of romances. Superficially I stood calmly, and waited as they talked. Life is a dark and overgrown path of many thorns and potholes, rain and ice, fire and pain. I walked this path and sometimes, very rarely I would just make out a ray of light up ahead which would give me hope. Sometimes I dared to dream that things could be better, but always my dreams would crash to the rocky ground and splinter into a thousand shards that would further litter the path before me and cut my feet as I continued my lonely journey. I heard nothing of what they said. Not a single word, for sound had simply become a background noise, played in the chaotic field of emotions that was my broken heart. I saw them laugh. I saw them flirt and I saw them touch as Ajator kissed her hand.

"Malspire? Malspire?" This was Ajator.

I awoke, back on the street outside the inn. Ajator stood tall and handsome, as strong as a lion. Veinara again said her goodbyes and left us with a final glance at Ajator.

"Are you alright?" asked Ajator. "You've gone pale."

"Me? Fine," I answered curtly, but Ajator did not seem to notice.

Ajator talked of Veinara all the way back to the ship. The injustice of it was crushing, and for the first time in my life, I was truly angry with my brother. How dare he come along and so casually take the woman I had saved from the pirates? How dare he simply look into her eyes and make her forget me? It was then that I realised that I had truly fallen in love with Veinara. We had only known one another for three days but I thought she understood me. I felt she was the one I would sail beyond the Great Oceans for. Perhaps it was just an infatuation? Perhaps these foolish feelings would pass, but it still hurt so very much. It was not lust, I wanted to care for her and wanted her to care for me, but she did not care. How could she if she fell so easily for Ajator's charms? It was a betrayal that made my world spin.

"Why the long face all of a sudden, Malspire?" asked Ajator. I had said nothing for a long while.

"What? Nothing."

"Nothing? We've not seen one another in weeks yet you seem sad now."

"My shoulder is hurting," I half lied. "The blade went deep and I helped to carry their belongings."

"It's the girl isn't it?"

"No!" I tried to wave away the accusation, but it came out as angry and hurt.

"Forgive me, brother. I'll stay away from her." Ajator said this with a heavy heart. He tried to hide it, but I knew my brother, and felt a pang of pity for him. Although angry with him, I could not see Ajator sad. It was either the pity or pride that made me say, "She is a fine lady Ajator, but not to my tastes. Please, don't let me stop you. If you like her, go and see her." I even smiled. It was so hard, but I smiled for my brother, and Ajator beamed.

“Are you sure? She is a wonder. Such character. Such wit!”

“I’m sure.” I was sure I had lost her, but knew she was lost as soon as she had seen Ajator, so what was the use in trying to fight it? I couldn’t win such a contest. There was probably no contest to begin with anyway. What was I thinking? How could she ever love one such as me?

“Fine. Perhaps I will visit her. We leave in six days. Plenty of time to get to know her,” Ajator said, rubbing his gloved hands to warm his fingers.

Such confidence. And me? I was never so confident. My brother would simply decide what was to happen and one way or another make it so. I on the other hand always had doubts and worries. Ajator was perfect. So perfect. In any other man, I would have hated him, but this was my brother and although my heart was broken, I loved him still.

Always has the perfect annoyed me. Only the broken, imperfect could be something I loved, but Ajator was the exception I suppose. Ajator was perfect and I loved him still. Of course now I know that the rule still stood. It was not an exception, it was just that then I did not see the imperfection.

I saw no more of Veinara, and avoided my brother. Keeping to myself, I drank heavily whenever Captain Cresp wasn’t about which was most of the time as the captain was staying at the Naval Offices making plans with the other senior officers. Rumour was that the rebels were planning a major strike. The obvious choice was to attack Umuron to try to force the Empire out of this region, but others said that the rebels wanted to capture that strange volcanic island system at the heart of the ocean called the Isles of Ash. At present, the Empire controlled those islands and access was limited. What was so interesting about them, I did not know.

I read the papers and practiced angrily with my cutlass. I played cards and lost money. I never left the ship unless I had to, but simply retreated from the outside world into the belly of the wooden hull. Its crew started avoiding me as I would quickly growl, snap, and chastise them for petty errors. I grew more morose by the day until after the fourth day in port, there was a knock at my cabin door.

"Enter," I said with a slur, having been drinking heavily. My voice even surprised me, but I did not care.

Grandon Harl entered the little cabin and closed the door behind him. The room had a desk, a chair, a thin wardrobe and a cot. I sat at his desk in the dim light of the lantern with a bottle in one hand and a wooden cup in the other. Harl wrinkled his nose and I guessed that I must have smelt like a beggar, but I did not care.

"Well?" I asked of the sailor.

"How old are you, sir?"

"What?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty two cold winters, Mister Harl. What the devils does that have to do with anything?"

"I’m forty eight, sir. Forty eight winters and summers," Harl added.

"What’s your point Mister Harl?" grumbled I. My head was hurting.

Grandon Harl, still standing to attention at the door considered his next words. "I ain’t seen it all, but I’ve seen plenty. I sailed the seas longer than you’ve been alive and I’ve seen things both strange and magical in my time. I’ve seen fish with the heads of lions. I’ve arm wrestled with a man who had three eyes. I once had dinner with the prince of Col-Jah and ate the brains of a swamp monkey. I’ve seen the morning sun rise through the mists of the Tebio Falls and I saw a woman who was so beautiful, men would lay down their lives for one kiss."

Harl now edged closer to me as he spoke, forsaking discipline for passion. I let him. The sailor's words were spoken with a simple honesty that I could not resist.

"It's a strange world, sir. The Gods of Creation know no bounds. I saw a witch bring a lamb back from the dead by blowing through its nose and a wizard raise a ship from the very seabed, sir. I once even saw a giant take a hammer and crush the head of a troll that had killed his family. The giant then threw himself over a cliff top to his own bloody death." This was more than Harl would normally speak in a whole day. I liked Harl. I even respected him and so Mister Harl's words held weight and I continued to listen.

"I've seen some strange things," Harl said again. "Wonderful things and tragic things, but never in all my days and all my travels have I seen something as strange as a man's love for a woman and a woman's way with men. What is this thing that drives us so mad? Eh? What is it that raises us up to the heavens, and then rips out our hearts and drops us back to the deck again, broken and unwanted?"

"What is it, Grandon? Do you know?" I asked, desperately wanting to know the answer, no longer caring for pride or status. Mister Harl was right. I had been raised up in hope and then cast aside like a rag doll in a storm.

"I don't, sir. No man knows. All I know is that it happens to all of us. It happens to the best of us, and when it does, it hurts like the white hot tip of a poker in the gut, sir. Nothing to be ashamed of. You're an officer, I know, but you've been good to the lads and they see you as one of them, sort of, and I look after the lads."

My shoulders slumped. Harl sat down on the cot. "It's hard sometimes, Harl. How did you know?"

"Saw your brother with that woman you were taking an interest in. A fine woman, but not the last, sir. Plenty of women out there, just waiting to be saved from pirates."

"What then?" I asked. "Raised up again, then stabbed in the heart?"

"Oh yes," Harl said lightly. "But then one day, one of them will be right. One will only have eyes for you."

I was aware that all semblances of authority and strength were gone now. I was naked and laid bare. I was also aware that the older man must think me a fool for falling in love after only three days with this woman, but it did not seem wrong. Grandon Harl was offering friendship and I found that I desperately needed it and no longer had the strength to fight the honest offer. "It would be nice. I dared to think of a future with a wife and children. I had never thought it possible before, but she was kind to me."

"I know," said Harl.

"Don't think badly of my brother. I told him to go to her."

"Of course. One day, sir. One day you will have that life."

"Do you think so?" I said, looking at the man, offering my mongrel face for examination.

"Yes I do," Harl said sincerely. "Best not to introduce her to your brother until you're married though."

We both laughed at this.

"What a bloody fool I am, Harl. One pretty woman shows a bit of affection and I fall apart."

"You're a man, sir. We're all fools where women are concerned."

It was the fifth day in Umuron, and I knew my brother would be heading for Norlan the next, so I made my way over to the Grand Oak to say farewell. I was still heartbroken but it could be months before I saw Ajator again, and so I steeled myself and searched him out. After asking some crew, I eventually found Ajator behind a stacked pile of stock, oddly hidden away from prying eyes. I did not call out to him as Ajator seemed to be in conversation with a stranger clad in fine furs with a top hat and golden rings upon his fingers that were wrapped around a silver topped cane. The man was wearing a pair of dark goggles, and had his collar turned up so it was hard for me to make out his face. The stranger was pointing a long finger at Ajator, and telling him something that I could not hear. I backed away round the side of the stack and waited. When Ajator finally appeared, he was surprised to see me and shot a glance back, but it seemed the stranger had gone.

“I was looking for you,” I said.

“I was inspecting the stock. A ship that size has a lot to take on and we leave in the morning,” said Ajator indicating the stack.

“We leave today. My captain returned last night with orders to patrol the region. We’re to hunt rebels, stop piracy and smugglers from supplying the enemy. The Sea Huntress is ready to leave, so I wanted to say goodbye.”

Ajator smiled, and took me by the shoulder. “I came looking for you, but you’ve been busy. Is all well? Are your ship and crew ready for action?”

“All is well, and yes, we’re ready.” I did not want to ask but I couldn’t help myself. “Did you visit her?”

Ajator stopped for a moment. “I did.” He looked at me with a pained expression. “We’ve grown close, but it weighs heavy on my heart, brother. I know you like her.”

“Please. Of course I like her, but as I said, she’s not my type. Don’t feel bad. I much prefer the simplicity and demands of a common girl. Miss Havlon will demand a lot more of you than a couple of coppers and a bottle of wine if you’re not careful!”

“She likes you. She said you were kind and tried to please her and her father, but you were like a fox trying to entertain a hen. She told me you’re a true hero. I agree with her.”

“Shut up, Ajator,” I said, but not in anger. Ajator laughed. I smiled too. How could I not? His smile, the twinkle in his eye. The man had a good heart and deserved happiness.

“She’s coming aboard the Grand Oak as my guest for the return trip to Norlan.”

“I see. She will be safe then.”

“Indeed!”

“And so will you.” This thought at least was a little comfort to me. The two people in the world that meant something to me would be safe for a while on a battleship and then at port in Norlan away from the frontiers and war. I wanted to ask about the stranger, but Ajator had obviously seen him in private and it was none of my business anyway. If Ajator wanted to share it with me, he would have.

“I had best return,” I mumbled as we walked along the dock.

“Why so morose? We’ll meet again soon, and we’ll hunt together for rebels and pirates. Soon we’ll be captains of our own ships, and then we’ll wreak hellish fire upon the Empire’s enemies, eh?”

“Yes. Soon we shall. Farewell.” Again I smiled to put my brother at ease.

“One more thing, Mal,” said Ajator. He stepped closer and in a quieter voice so as not to be overheard, said, “Are you a member of the Ship of Mariners?”

Ajator was referring to a club which was meant to be secret but everybody knew about it. The organisation had lodges all over the Empire. Members had secret signs and performed secret rituals which I assumed they found amusing. I myself was not interested in being asked to join and doubted I would ever fit the mould for membership anyway.

"Of course not. Are you?"

"No." Ajator looked troubled. "I was though. I was asked to join a few months ago by a fellow I had drinks with in the city. Odd man, but a good drinking partner. Name of Obein Klarans. Flame red hair, lost his ear and two fingers in a fight. Intelligent man, but not boring."

"Why did you leave? Did the masks and handshakes not amuse you?"

"At first, yes." Ajator responded frowning at some further thought.

"Tell me Ajator, what's bothering you?"

"Something happened. But..." Ajator paused.

"But what?"

"I might be mistaken. I felt the group, including Klarans were not all they seemed to be after a while. Talk would often be of the Empire and rebellion and I somehow felt questioned."

"Questioned?"

"As though they were trying to ascertain my feelings for the rebellion."

"Nothing odd about that. On the Sea Huntress we have little else to talk about other than the possibility of Captain Crops having an unfortunate accident."

"Yes, but when I said that the rebels had a point, things took an odd turn."

"What? Use your head, Ajator. We all know that war isn't simple. The rebels fight for an idea. They fight the blood system, a system you know that I don't hold with, but we also know our place and know that we fight for an even greater plan. Don't expect others to understand this though! The Secret Servants probably have agents in the Ship of Mariners and they will keep a close eye on you if you say things like that."

"You don't understand, Mal. Shortly after, Klarans approached me and openly offered me a place in the rebellion. He told me that I would be able to keep the title and lands when the rebels win the war. He openly admitted to being a rebel agent!"

"Oh, I see. It's a test."

"A test? I thought of that. At first I thought that they were testing my loyalty to the Emperor after my statements, but he seemed so sincere."

"So what did you do?"

"I don't like these games of shadow and secrecy and tests. You know me. I left the Ship of Mariners. If they can't think for themselves then it's not for me."

"Good. What if he was sincere?" I had to ask. I knew it was not so, but my darker side just had to pick that thread.

"That has me worried," said Ajator and meant it. "Perhaps I should report it to the Secret Servants."

I did not like the thought of that. Stay as far away from the secret police of the Emperor as possible was my gut feeling. "Leave it be, Ajator. Don't dwell on it. Thinking too much has always been a problem of mine. Perhaps it runs in the family and only now have you fallen victim to this malady."

"Ha! You say that I don't think?"

"You have the looks, Ajator. You don't need to think. I really must go now. I'm expected."

I said my goodbyes and left quickly as a carriage pull up which I thought could have been Veinara and her father. I did not want to see her for fear of betraying my true feelings of anger

and disappointment. I felt betrayed, but it was nothing a bottle of Deep Lorcant wine would not drown and so I headed back to the Sea Huntress, giving little further thought to my brother's words, but in time I would come to regret that. In time I would wish I had stayed with my brother, for Ajator, myself and the house of Ardalrion were set on the road to disaster.

Chapter Four

Some things you never forget. When a pistol, no more than three inches away, is pointed at your face, you come to realise how very small you really are. An ant under the gaze of a cruel child, a flea stuck between thumb and forefinger, a fly trapped beneath a cupped hand. I had never felt so small as I now did, staring down the double barrels of the long pistol at the stranger's eyes in which I saw only death.

That morning we had been at sea. To the north was the Quarvor Sea, to the south was the vast Inner Ocean. Dividing these greater waters was a string of islands and rocks that started as the lands of Calandia and ended in Umuron where I could see how the harbour was being fortified as the Sea Huntress returned from her patrol. The entrance had two newly finished gun towers. Not large but under the circumstances, still impressive considering how few resources were being spent on the war in the west. I thought back to the first time I had entered the port of Norlan. The entrance to the port is called the Gates of Norlan where two giant warrior maidens of old stand guard, naked and proud with great-swords granting a minimum of modesty. They are called Emla, and Anla. Old sailors called them Betlan and Pennan - common names as used by common girls. It was regarded as lucky to blow them a kiss on entering or leaving port. I liked them as they were from a more honest era. They neither hid, nor showed any shame at being naked, but instead stood as a warning to an enemy that here, even the women would overcome them. It was either that or Norlan women were easy.

"Angels, Malspire," Ajator said one day when again I had suggested that Emla and Anla were perhaps advertising Norlan's finer goods. "They're angels standing guard against the dark gods, put there by Emperor Sabnor-Arn the Ferocious."

"He was a notorious womaniser!" I teased him, knowing how Ajator disliked any criticism of an emperor.

"Where did you read that?"

"Hollmoor's History of the Emperors."

"That boorish tome? You read too much, and worst of all is the subject you choose. That book should be banned."

"I think it might be. The library is thankfully run by librarians, not officers. Amazing what you can find if you're willing to delve into the back shelves."

I knew that Ajator had read no more than a few pages before discarding it with an incredulous bah! It was far too plainspoken for his idealistic views on the world, and anyway, it was not on any reading list. Sometimes I could only see the rot in the world and however hard I tried to show Ajator, my dear brother only saw the silver. Soot and silver, Malspire and Ajator. Even I sometimes doubted that we were truly twins. Never Ajator though. He never once showed any doubt and I loved him for it.

All along the walls and up the straight backs of Emla and Anla, buildings had grown from the black granite. Behind the statues was the wide gulf of calm water harbour and behind this, the city grew further into a maze of climbing structures and winding canals like a vast termite's nest, but with people running here are there about their business. Carvings and statues adorned every wall. There were plazas and bath houses, markets and shops. There were bakeries, sick houses, smithies, inns, taverns, manufactories, temples and plain old dwellings built one upon the other. It was a magnificent achievement of engineering over a period of thousands of years, and I could certainly believe that the city could boast a million souls all living on what was just a small island of rock now lost somewhere beneath it all.

The poorer regions of the city, called the Waters, were built using good old timber. These regions grew inwards from the edges of the harbour, and the best times where to be had not on land but the planked streets built on floating barges and stilts. It was run down, filthy, impoverished and stinking, but we loved it.

"All fart and no shit," a drunk had once described the city true. "Down here in the Waters we get plenty shit!"

And so our education was not just in naval etiquette and tactics, but also in brawling, drinking, gambling and life. Life was to be lived and not suffered, I would often tell myself, but without my brother by my side, it was easily forgotten. Without my brother, I was just a cripple, a shadow, the Undertaker.

I returned from my daydreaming as the captain called out orders to the men on duty from behind me on the aftcastle, and then I saw The War Tempest at anchor in the deep waters. The flagship was usually found here. Flags of salute were run up followed shortly thereafter by a four gun salute for High Admiral Barron Villor who's flag flew from the mighty ship's mast.

On making port, I made my way to the closest inn where I intended to find a woman. Others of the crew had done the same, and they nodded as I took a table to one side. Harl, Willan and Jodlin were there together with the tattooed Tabor and young Paggod as well as others of the crew. Sudlas was lurking in the shadows as ever. Sudlas was a strange one, quiet and unsettling. I suspected that the man had sworn an oath to the Ardalrion Navy in order to escape a prison sentence which was not an uncommon story. Sudlas always wore a worn top-hat and scruffy waist coat when in town. It looked comical, but there was nothing comical about the man.

"Landlord," I called to the stout barman who waved over a wench to take my order. "I'll have a room and a woman."

"Food, drink?"

"Wine and pork. A free drink for all those men as well," I added, indicating my fellow crewmen. Those that noted, nodded and knuckled their foreheads in appreciation.

"As you wish," said the skinny barmaid. Moments later she returned with a clay jug and cup. "The pork is on its way, sir. Women come along later."

"Good," I said and poured myself some wine. It was still early in the day, but I was not needed back on the ship for the next few days and wanted to relax. Wine and a woman would do that. It was good to be away from Crops and his pathetic lackeys who would be making their way to finer establishments by now. Crops would undoubtedly be on his way to the Naval Office first to send yet another letter complaining of me. Ajator was far away at the moment in the east aboard The Grand Oak as far as I knew, probably fighting beastmen from the Outer Oceans. I thought of the Ship of Mariners and how they had tested Ajator. Rebellion was infectious and it was understandable that such an organisation would want to nip any in the bud. It just occurred to me that testing the son of a lord admiral could be seen as quite the insult. Did they have reason to think there was the slightest chance that Ajator was somehow corrupted? Probably not. It was probably just stupidity or perhaps part of the initiation. Then why did it worry me so now?

The wine was sweetened. I preferred dry. The Naval Academy of Norlan had tried to teach me the finer points of wine tasting and the difference in grape varieties, but to me, it was pointless. You either liked a wine or you didn't. Drink enough and they all taste the same - flippant, I knew, but there was a tried and tested truth to it.

A bowl of steaming pork cuts was placed before me and I knew I was going to get my fingers messy, but before getting a chance, the door opened and in came a thin man in ragged city clothing a size too small. He was dragging a case and had a tatty bowler hat upon his head of

long, greasy black hair. I would have guessed that he had just arrived from the city, but he was no navy man. Perhaps a merchant's agent? Then I saw the particularly long, double-barrelled pistol just inside his coat. As the stranger turned to look at his surroundings, I also saw scars on his face. This was no office worker either, odd. Somehow he did not fit. Something in the air now felt wrong. I saw Sudlas tense and retreat further into the shadows. This more than anything told me that there was more to this stranger than met the eye - something dangerous.

"I need a cheap room for three nights," said the stranger as he reached the counter. "Clean sheets too!"

"Of course, sir. Let my lad take your kit up for you."

"Leave it be. I'll take it up myself."

"Can I offer you a drink?" I said before I could stop myself, wanting to know more about this man's business. I knew I should have ignored him, but the words just came out, and no sooner had I said them than I regretted them.

The man's head snapped round to look down at me. His eyes lingered on the deformities for a long while and I felt the familiar sensation of being the focus of disgust.

"Swive away," the stranger simply said. I noticed a missing front tooth, the rest of them brown and rotting.

Seamen rose and Jodlin growled. I put up a hand to stop them, and the stranger sneered when he saw this.

"Forgive me," I said cautiously, "but I only offered a drink in friendship."

The man looked mockingly at the crew, then back to me. "Friendship? You disgust me. Cripples are the lowest of the low, food for cockroaches and shit crust. You should have been drowned at birth and burnt to ash. Whoever had you must have had a lemon up her kun. A man should not have to see such filth, such boot scraping. I feel sick at the sight of you and bile rises at just the thought of your kind. You're not even human and I doubt even an ape would keep your company. You have no right to breathe the same air as me. I'll have no drink from such a shrivelled prick as you. Friendship? I ain't your friend."

I had heard it before. I had been insulted in every possible way for my deformities, but the bastard's tone struck deep and I was forced to bite back hard and swallow the sudden rage within me. Without further word, I turned back to my drink. The stranger turned away with a grunt of contempt. The anger. The rage. It did not diminish as I had hoped, but lingered, twisting and turning in my belly. Breathe. Just breathe and let it pass. It was like a fire within. It was all too much. I held onto my quivering hand with the other under the table. It was rage. RAGE! I lost control.

Before I knew what I was doing, my gutting knife was in my hand and I threw myself at the stranger. The man looked sideways just in time, or had he known what was going to happen? The stranger turned and put out a foot, then let me and blade flash past him and stumble to the floor in front of the counter. Screaming in anger, I slashed backwards only to come face to face with the long double-barrelled pistol now only inches away. The men moved, but far too slowly. The look on the man's face was knowing and calculating, smug even. He was a killer and he had judged me rightly as a bit of sport and fun. The man smiled and applied pressure to one of the triggers. My heart pounded in my chest. The anger now turned to fear. Did the man not care that the others would surely have him should he kill me? No. He was either that good or insane; perhaps a bit of both. I then thought I would foul my breaches when all of a sudden there was a knife at the stranger's throat who released his finger from the trigger.

"Easy now fella," hissed Sudlas into the man's ear. "I knows what you can do, but you knows that even you can't twist your way out of this one. I'll cut you as soon as breath." Sudlas made the last word sound like a hiss. I had never seen Sudlas look so threatening.

The man looked longingly down at me and for the briefest moment I could see him considering his odds should he pull the trigger. The look of death was on him like I had never before seen in a man. His cold, shark eyes said that he killed for joy. I was not the first, I knew that.

"It would be a mercy killing. Put the dog out of his misery," said the killer with his raspy voice, an ugly voice. Everything about the man was ugly.

"If he dies, then so do you. You'll find no mercy here. I'll cut you a new grin from ear to ear," said Sudlas.

After a tense silence the stranger slowly lifted his pistol. "I Think I'll take a room elsewhere then," he said, putting the gun back inside his coat.

I moved back and got to my feet. Sudlas released the stranger, who took his case and dragged it past the angry crew, some of whom now held pistols and weapons at the ready. The men then joined me as I slumped back into my chair. I had been a hair trigger's whisper from death.

"You alright, sir?" said Harl. Jodlin looked furious.

"I think so. My thanks to you all. Especially you Mister Sudlas."

"Dangerous one that, sir. Kills for sport does his kind."

"Do you know him?"

"No, sir. Saw it on his face though. Also saw part of a tattoo on his arm. He's Cult of the Black God and blood is their only joy. They make assassins, sir. Madmen trained to kill. We had trouble with them back in the Waters. Took an effort to run that lot into the sea."

I had heard of the Cult of the Black God or Sciorl as the demonic creature was known in the books of lore. I now also knew a little more about the secretive Sudlas and could guess that the man used to run with the gangs of the Waters. The city guard only enter the Waters when forced to and so the locals pay protection money. Sudlas had probably worked for one of the bosses as did most lads.

"What do you think his business is here in Umuron?"

"As I said, sir. They breed assassins. Expect a death."

With that, I made my way together with Harl and Jodlin to the Naval Office where we informed the desk clerk of what we had discovered. After an interview with a provost officer by the name of Raits, we were thanked and sent on our way. I could only hope that the stranger had been sent to kill Crops. Then it struck me that perhaps the stranger had been sent to kill me. What if his actions had been calculated to provoke me into attacking him? He would have been within his rights to shoot me and walk away a free man. Who would send such an agent? Crops hated me, but it was not his style. Of course the Duke had enemies, but why target me, his lesser son? There could be any number of reasons. Would Crops hire a killer? He had tried to have me killed in the past, something not forgotten, but could not prove. I had asked Jodlin about the flaying whip, but Jodlin had simply looked ashamed and told me that he did not pick the tool. It was given him by Qenrik and Qenrik did what his master wanted. Qenrik probably fouled the whip at Crops's request; a dog that shits on his master's command.

"Forget the man, sir," said Harl. I had not voiced my concerns but it must have been obvious to the seaman that I was worried.

"It's hard to forget the barrel of a gun put to one's forehead, Mister Harl," I eventually admitted.

A few days later, I was ordered to visit the Imperial Umuron Naval Office again. Those days had been uncomfortable. The encounter with the stranger had shaken me. It was the look in his eyes. It was the way he so casually offered death. Was the man an assassin? If so, was he going to return and finish what he had started? I was also very much aware of my loss of control, but the man seemed to find just the right words and just the right tone to enrage me. It was chilling to know that such people were out there. Hopefully my summons to the Naval Office would answer some questions. Perhaps the man had been arrested.

I was taken to the lower cells by Provost Officer Raits, where I was shown a body. The figure that lay before me in the cold, dank, darkness was a sight that brought my breakfast to my throat and I had to fight not to vomit on the spot. The body was that of a man, naked and twisted and bloated. His face was contorted in agony. His body was black and white with bruising. Every finger was broken or crushed. His feet were the same. He looked to have broken arms and broken legs. His prick and balls were swollen and crushed. There was little blood, most had probably seeped away in the water where he was undoubtedly found. He was left a mere sack of skin containing the broken parts of a human being.

"Is this the man?" asked Raits.

I forced myself to have a closer look at the face. It hurt just to look at him. His eyes had been gouged out. Every tooth was either missing or broken, his nose crushed. Although the face was a mess, I did recognise him as the man who had held a gun to my face. It was the stranger who apparently took pleasure in killing, but I could only feel pity for the bastard, for someone had tortured him thoroughly and to the very end. Did he deserve it? My experience with the man told me that perhaps he did, but it would take a man at least as sick and perverted as he to do this to him.

"It is," said I. "What in the names of the Creators happened?"

"We found him under a pier, face down. We think he was dumped there last night."

"Do you know what sick person did this to him?"

"No. We have nothing to go on other than the tattoos. No name." Raits actually seemed unimpressed, even bored by the body.

I looked at the dead man's arms and saw the tattoo that Sudlas had seen on his forearm. It was of a dragon devouring the world.

"Cult of Sciorl," I said.

"Yes. We can only hope they are not here in numbers."

"One of my men told me that they breed assassins. Perhaps he bit off more than he could chew."

"Perhaps. Either way, the world's better off without his type in it. The cult has long been banned and what with the war, we don't need them causing trouble here."

I had to agree, but could not reconcile myself with the means employed to dispatch this person. Someone had tortured him in the worst possible way, and I guessed that he was meant to be found as a warning to others not to try the same. As I turned to leave, I noticed a cut to the underside of the man's foot. Was that the letter C? Had the killer left his initial? I shuddered at the thought of someone possibly taking pride in this work. Although disgusted, I was also relieved now that the threat to my own life was gone, but I had to get out. I had to have air.

I returned to the ship, deep in thought, only to be rudely awoken by the bark of Captain Cresp. We were to leave port again. I sighed as I had not enjoyed one minute of my time on land,

being all the time worried that the man might return to finish what he had started, half expecting to wake up in the dead of night, face to face with the assassin who would smile as he cut my throat. The look of cool, calculating murder in the man's eyes was hard to wash away and even though he was now dead, I feared him for he was the monster in every man, unchained, free and hungry. To see it up close and naked was not easy to forget. And just to smell it was to be smitten by it as I had discovered when I lost control and wanted to rip the man's gut open. Who was he? Who sent him? Who killed him? Perhaps I will now never know.

At sea I could breathe easy again. Of course I was always wary of Crops, but the men kept an eye out for him and warned me of his mood. I kept playing cards and tried to learn what I could of the sea and its lore. To myself, I reluctantly had to thank my father for the money spent on the games and came to realise that in a way I was buying an education and allies. At first this rankled, but soon grew comfortable with the idea, taking the philosophical view that anything and everything has to be purchased in one way or another. It just so happened that I was rich, and as long as I was bad at cards, I could pay my way into the hearts of these men. Mister Harl and a few others probably guessed this already, but I knew very well that I was not the only philosopher aboard the Sea Huntress.

Once, Qenrik was spied loitering outside the crew's room. I invited the man in and was pleased to see the flustered look of outrage on his face. The very idea that he would mingle with the crew! I suspected that Qenrik had been sent to gather evidence against me and made sure never to talk of Crops in future with the men. Just the evening before, one of them had openly admitted to wanting to cut the captain's belly with a boarding axe and see the worms fall to the deck. I had chastised the man at the time, but it was forced - the thought of seeing a gutted Crops was not so bad.

Chapter Five

I stood, Willan at my side, staring down at the Wraith Deep. It was the ship we had captured from the privateer, Captain Yorlwig, now wallowing in a forgotten part of Umuron harbour, where debris gathered on the water's edge and seaweed rotted on the higher stones. She had never been put to use by the Empire and so was left to slow decay. That was until now, for I had been made a captain and given the Wraith Deep, which was now renamed the Lady Ocean.

"She needs pumping, captain," said Willan.

"She needs a lot of work. How many guns do you see?" I said to the young man who was now seventeen, taller than me, but still as skinny as a stick.

"Ten shooters, sir."

"Only ten? I suppose we should count ourselves lucky." In fact I was originally surprised to see any left at all. The ship was in a bad state, and only had half her guns but I still could not suppress a smile. I was a captain!

"So what did Captain Crops have to say when he found out, sir?"

I thought back to that morning when Crops had asked me into his cabin. He watched me as I read the letter. It was spring of the third year aboard the Sea Huntress. We had spent the last many months patrolling the waters, watching, waiting, but the expected rebel attack had so far not materialised. In fact the rebels had been quiet. Some would say, too quiet.

The letter was from the Naval Office of Norlan. Captain Lord Malspire Ardalrion, it read. It came with a parchment from the Naval Office explaining my new duties. The letter had a fine stamp and the seal of the Imperial Navy as well as the Ardalrion Navy upon it. The parchment simply stated my name and rank but with a lot of fancy filigree and official seals and was signed by some high ranking naval clerk. I was to take the captured frigate and get her shipshape and ready for duty, as well as add to the skeleton crew and find arms and supplies. I was to take her on sea trials for two months to get the crew and ship ready for duty. Then I was to report to High Admiral Lord Villor for orders.

In my cynicism, I was hardly surprised. I had been given a ship in need of much repair with the minimum of crew and then told to make do. No more crew were being sent from Norlan, nor extra supplies, guns or anything else for that matter. I was given the minimum a man would need to be a captain - a boat. Well, I would show them, the bastards, not that I felt anything but suppressed joy. I would show them just what I could do with a ship, any ship.

Crops's lower lip trembled and a line of glistening drool ran down his chin, a visual sign of the hatred the captain had for me. "Well?" Crops finally asked.

"It seems I am to captain my own ship," I said. "It is the frigate we took as prize from that buccaneer, Yorlwig - The Wraith Deep. She's been renamed the Lady Ocean."

"Then I am rid of you! You do not deserve the commission nor any place in this navy but I am pleased to be rid of you. At last I can have proper officers round me. Men of honour and good taste. Men who do their duty without the need to drink and womanise at every port. Men who know their station. You have been a constant thorn in my side, Ardalrion, and the faster you get yourself killed the better. Now get off my ship!"

I was close to striking the swine. Crops drank. Crops womanised. Crops just did it more discreetly. Why hide it? Only a coward would hide it, and although at heart I knew I was a coward too, I fought it, and did not let it control me. People saw my true self and I did not care. Frea and cowardice were my ever present companions, but I rebelled against it.

"Then let us hope our paths don't cross too often," I said biting back the anger. "Good day." I left without a backwards glance.

A pair of seagulls squabbled upon the Lady Ocean's crow's-nest. I realised that I had not answered Willan's question. "The man was pleased."

"Pleased, sir?"

"Pleased to be rid of me. Not too happy to lose you though, you'll be glad to hear." I had taken Willan with me as was my right as an officer for Willan was now my steward.

"Rather be at your side, Captain."

"Well, Mister Willan, I might say the same of you, but let's not dwell on it aye? But are you sure? So far I am only a captain of a half sunk frigate and a single crewman."

Willan chuckled and shrugged his shoulders.

Rats ran along the Lady Ocean's deck. Seagulls sat on her railings, fouling the woodwork. She needed cleaning and pumping and probably a lot of new timber. How quickly a ship succumbs to the elements when not used and looked after. It had only been a little over a year since capturing her. The renamed Lady Ocean was not a large frigate and would only hold twenty main guns on a single deck requiring a crew of ninety or one hundred souls to go into battle, not including marines.

Assuming Ajator was now made a captain too, I wondered what ship my brother had been given. My father would have seen to it that Ajator got a well prepared vessel with crew and officers, I was sure, and glad for him.

"Speaking of crew," I said, and looked around. Apparently there was a skeleton crew assigned to the ship, but where were they?

There was nobody about the ship, but close by was a tavern called the Dragon's Tooth and now as the evening drew in, sailors were gathering. I wandered over and entered the tavern and was met by a large, smoke filled square room with a bar running along one side, and a simple stone fireplace on the other. Long, gnarled wooden beams held up by four stout oak pillars ran the length of the place in turn holding up a buckling ceiling and lanterns. In between the well-worn bar and soot stained fireplace were wooden tables and chairs and thirty or so sailors and marines having a fine time with drink and barmaids. A cat was sitting on the bar enjoying the attention of a younger sailor boy. Over in one corner a game of cards was being played, and in another, men were arm wrestling. The tavern smelt of pies, ale, wine and pipe smoke.

"Take some leave, Mister Willan," I said. "Be back at the ship by morning."

"Right you are, Captain," he said with a grin, enjoying the new title, then left.

I liked the place. It was a little off the beaten track, but it had a simple charm to it with no attempt at finery or any other complication. It was reasonably clean and seemed to be well run. Nobody stopped as I entered. A few looked round, and either they didn't notice I was an officer or didn't care for they carried on as before. Taking off my hat, I sat down at a well carved and initialled table by a wall and took out my long, curved pipe. Most of the table carvings were names or simple pictures while others were quite remarkable works of skill depicting ships and half naked ladies. I stuffed my pipe with tobacco from a leather pouch. Lighting it, I then summoned a plump barmaid who as tradition dictated was revealing a lot of heaving breast, straining at the seams.

"Evenin', sailor. What'll it be?"

"The men here - are they regular customers?"

"Some are, some ain't. You an officer?"

"I'm a captain."

“Don’t look like a captain. Of course it don't matter to me. You can be a lord admiral if you want.”

Could I? If only she knew. “What does a captain look like?” I inquired.

“Taller I suppose. Cleaner cut too. You're too scruffy, and bent,” was the honest answer.

“That would be my brother. He's an officer. Probably a captain by now, but I haven't seen him in a while. He's the perfect officer and looks like one too.” It was true. “You'd like him.”

“Would he order a drink?” she asked tapping her foot impatiently. I got the hint.

“I’ll have a bottle of your house wine. Do you have rooms here?”

“Yes. Nine coppers a night with breakfast from five.”

“And, are the beds warm?” I then asked placing a silver head on the table. “For the wine and a warm bed.” She was a big girl, bigger than I, but she was probably the warmer for it.

She sighed, taking the coin. “I’ll warm the bed for you, Admiral, but you’ll have to wait for closing time, and that can be late.” I nodded my agreement.

The wine was awful but I liked it. It made me feel alive to drink such vinegar. It was honest drink. Cheap, strong and nasty, but it did the trick. As the night wore on, the place filled up and spilled out into the cobbled, lantern lit street outside. It was noisy with boisterous talk, bragging and a fiddle playing, raucous with drink and song. I noticed the flag of Calandia with the added Imperial badge on the wall.

The Empire had ruled these lands for centuries and originally filled it with the settlers who had tamed its eastern shores and forced the barbarians and beasts westwards into the wild plains. They had been hardy, brave people, poor but proud, carving a new slice of civilisation out of the wilderness. The flag was also popular with the rebels, but without the badge of course. Although sitting at a table, others came and went, using my table without leave. I did not mind. Space was at a premium, and I enjoyed listening to the sailors and their simple chatter. As it got later, three sailors sat down and began to talk amongst themselves. One of them mentioned the Lady Ocean so I listened keenly.

“I heard the captain’s a right nasty bastard,” said one.

“Son of the Lord Admiral! We're in for it, recons I. He's going to be lookin' for glory,” said another.

“Gods of the sea, I hope he ain't mad like some of them lords.”

“Well if he is, we put him in the drink, yeah?” The man grinned hopefully, looking for support.

The others sighed and shook their heads at this. “Don’t be daft Banton. You always say things of the like, but as soon as'n officer shows up, you’re as a wet puppy, all jumpin' and yes sir, no sir,” said the first who then belched.

“Are you crew of the Lady Ocean?” I then asked, and they looked round in surprise as though I had miraculously materialised.

“Yeah,” said the first eyeing my clothing, realisation slowly dawning on his simple face.

“Good. My name is Ardalrion... Your new captain,” I growled.

The men jumped up and stood as straight as pins.

“Sit down you miserable sons of whores.”

They looked at each other, and one by one sat down. Banton still sat as straight as a pin, and the first man had hit him for the man to relax a bit.

“Names?”

“Horis, sir,” said the first, then introduced Owman and Banton.

“Well lads. I am the son of the Lord Admiral, and I am mad. That means that when we're on my ship, you will look lively, and you will do your duty. You will not put me in the drink, and if I go looking for glory, you'll bloody well line up ready for me to sacrifice your sorry souls to whatever sea god I dream up and you'll thank me for the opportunity to do your duty.”

They looked worried. Banton looked pale.

“Right now however, I want to drink. I want to play some cards, and I want some food so tell that fat barmaid over there to bring us a round of ale, and some pies.”

Nobody moved. “Well, jump to it. Look lively!” I barked, and they did so.

The men soon relaxed and other crewmen joined us. There were a dozen or so men of the Lady Ocean, a motley crew. No marines or officers yet but I would make my way to the Naval Office in the morning and find out where they were. Now I drank and enjoyed the company of simple sailors. I was as always morose and sullen, but the men seemed happy to take my drink, and spoke of adventures past and those to come. With grins, they showed off tattoos. Horis had one on his belly of a naked lady that he could make dance. I liked them already. I did not say so or join in the merriment, but they seemed honest enough, and would make a fine start at a crew. Then I thought of Harl and Jodlin. They were two men I could use, but Captain Crops would never let them go. It was hard enough keeping crew, let alone finding new men, and good men to boot. It was a problem for the morning however. There were many problems to be solved in the morning.

The next day I was feeling the worse for wear. I had slept well though. The barmaid had kept her word, showing up in my room after the last man had left or fallen asleep under a table. After eating breakfast at the inn, I found Horis and some of the other men on the ship.

"Mister Horis!"

"Sir?"

"Organise the men. Get the hand pumps going, start cleaning up the ship and sort out my cabin. I have business in town and so you are in charge."

"Me, sir?" Horis was obviously not used to such responsibility.

"Yes you, Mister Horis. I'm promoting you to king of the bastards. Now go and kick the other bastards about and get this ship into some kind of order!"

"Yes, sir. Will do, sir," Horis said, knuckling his forehead.

"Willan!"

"Captain?" Willan had appeared on deck when he had heard his captain.

"Come with me."

"Majesty," said the boy by way of a farewell to Horis as Willan passed the man.

My first stop was at the tailors. I wanted a naval captain's jacket and so they took my measurements, and then told me to return in a couple of days. I also went to the cobblers and asked for a new pair of boots. They fitted me with a solid pair that should last a couple of years at sea. I gave my old pair to Willan. When all this was done, I went to the Umuron Naval Office which was a three floor stone built building overlooking the harbour. There I saw the supply master who went through some papers, and found orders for food for the ship, had me sign other papers and then told me the supplies would be on the way. My next stop was the personnel master. He was a fat, desk bound naval officer who obviously took an instant disliking to me. He was stuck in a small office behind a small desk surrounded by shelves and stacks of paper. There was a narrow window behind him through which I could see low clouds and seagulls. The man's belly strained at his jacket buttons. The papers were in disorder, and it was obvious that he did

not get out much. Pies and wine came to mind. His name and title was Personell Master Smuddagon – an antagonistic bastard.

“You have one officer, seventeen seamen and an engineer.”

“What? Where are the rest? Officers, men and marines?” I said, already knowing there were no more, but I wanted to squeeze the man.

The portly officer leaned back from his papers making his thin chair creak. “That’s all we've got. War on you know.”

"I know there's a bloody war on. I've been fighting it. I need more men!"

"Can't help you there, Captain Ardalrion." He made the word captain sound like a sneer. "No men to spare. No new officers arrived yet."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Not for me to say. Perhaps send a letter to the city Naval Office?"

That would take weeks, even months. I needed men now. "Do you know who my father is?" I hated using his name but what choice did he have?

"Lord Admiral Lord Ardalrion. We are well are of you and your family here at the office." Smuddagon said like he didn't care.

"That's right. Do you know how much trouble I would get into if I leaned over that desk, pulled you out of this office and kicked every tooth out of that smug face of yours?" I had no intention of trying. For a start, he doubted I could have budged the fat swine, but Smuddagon got the idea. "That's right. I wouldn't be in much trouble at all, whereas you would have to get used to drinking your dinner through a reed straw."

"Listen," the officer said, sitting up now, nervous of the cold fury in my tone. "I can't do anything about it. There just aren't the men available."

I said nothing. Let the man fill the silence.

"Perhaps press gang them. Go to the taverns and inns, and take the men." He was gesticulating now, trying to be friendlier. "Just try not to rob the other naval ships of their crew."

"What is my officer's name?"

"Erm." He rummaged through more papers. "Kristan Olvan, fresh out of the Academy."

"I see. I need more crew. Take some men from the Sea Huntress. She has a full complement, and wouldn't miss a few. I only need two men: Mister Harl and Mister Jodlin"

"I can't do that, Captain Ardalrion."

"Can't or won't," I demanded.

"Can't! There is no order I can give. No paper I can sign. It has to come from the city." He was pleading now.

"I need men. I need officers!" I slammed the table with my fist making Smuddagon jump in his chair. "A surgeon, for the sake of the gods." I then looked him up and down. "You're an officer. You look like you could do with some time on a ship. Must get stuffy in here. Yes?" I stood up to grab Smuddagon. It was only a threat. I didn't want the bloated idiot on my ship but it had the desired effect.

Smuddagon raised his pudgy hands. "Wait, wait! There is a doctor. He's experienced, but he has just been discharged, kicked out of the Navy and told to make his own way back to Norlan."

"Why was he kicked out?"

"Well, he's a drunk. Always swimming with the fish apparently. Took the wrong tooth out of Captain Rantor of The Merciless."

"I like him already. Where is he?"

He told me so I had Willan, who was waiting outside, proudly polishing his new boots, go and find the doctor. I also had the personnel master sign the paperwork reinstating the doctor into the Navy and my crew.

"As for Mister Harl and Mister Jodlin," said the officer. "There just is nothing I can do about it, other than send a request to the Imperial Naval Office of Norlan."

A plan then came to mind, so I filled in the papers together with Smuddagon, and used my family signet ring to make sure the request did not fail. It would take weeks or months, but that was fine. I would have the two men in my crew within days.

"Send any men you can. I need crew!" At that I stood up and stormed out of the office. Pompous swine idiot fat moronic clerk, was all I could think. I returned to the ship and saw a line of men hauling buckets of water from below deck. "Carry on," I called as they stopped when they saw their new captain. "What's going on, Mister Horis?"

"Pumps are all broke, Captain. We're getting the water out of the bilges."

"Where's the engineer? I was told we've got one."

"Down below, me' lord. Having a look at the engine."

"Don't call me lord." I hated it when they did that. I was entitled to it but it made me uncomfortable. "Sir or Captain will suffice, Mister Horis."

Going below, down to the engine room, I saw the engine was being disassembled by a short fellow, covered in black oil. I assumed the man was getting on in years, and had grey or white hair, but even his hair was black with the stuff. He wore blackened overalls and eye protecting goggles. When he saw me, he did not seem to recognise my rank or did not care.

"Hand me that jug of spirits there, lad," said the man with a crackling, aged voice.

Looking round at the workbench, I saw the jug which had a large skull painted on the side. I handed it to him and the engineer grunted his thanks, then poured some on the rag, after which he took a swig of the stuff himself which was followed by an awkward dance and cackle.

"Not bad," he then wheezed holding it out to me. "Have some, lad. Put wind in your sails and fire in your arse. Made it me'self."

Tentatively, I took the jug and sniffed at it. My eyes watered so I put it down. "My name is Captain Ardalrion. I presume you are my engineer?"

"Captain?" He looked me up and down, but still didn't seem too concerned. Stepping forwards, the little man took off his goggles to reveal two circles of white skin with clear grey eyes. He knuckled his head. "Larrans Perti, Captain, at your service. Engineer? Aye, that'll be me."

"Good. How's the engine looking?"

"Well," he scratched his head. "Most of the bits are there, but rust is a problem. We need copper piping too. Someone's pinched a load of it. Brewing spirits on our piping a dare say."

"I see. Where do we get the piping?"

"Where? Only the Black Folk make the proper kind, the kind that'll last. But they'll have some Empire stuff down at the supply yard." He was referring to the Calionvar, the enigmatic black skinned people who originally introduced technomancy to the peoples. I had never met one but I had seen them at port both in the city and Umuron. Mostly they kept to themselves. The most unnerving thing about them, I found, were their eyes: Jet black as was their skin. Not just the pupil but the entire eye, so one never knew where they were looking.

"I'll write a requisition order for you. What else do you need?"

Together we created a list of items required to get the engine running and pumps working. It was a long list and there was a lot of work to do.

"Enter," I said.

In stepped a timid looking young man, clumsy in his pristine new uniform and long rapier. He stepped up to the desk, stumbling on the clumsy blade as he did so. Regaining his composure, the young man saluted smartly and introduced himself, "Junior Officer Kristan Olvan, reporting for duty, Captain."

I had spent the rest of the day working out what was missing and what was needed. With my cabin and desk set up, I sent runners with papers and orders for supplies and equipment. I had to spend a lot of my own money to grease the works but at least things were moving. Just as I was wondering where the hells my new officer was, there was a knock at my cabin door.

"About bloody time, Olvan!" I barked.

"Sorry, sir. I got lost..."

"Lost!" I got up and stormed round the desk. Looking him up and down, I was not impressed. The junior officer was very young and very nervous, very green.

"What do you know about ships, Olvan? What do you know about navigation?" I poked him in the chest with my pipe.

"Well, I went to the Ardalrion Academy, sir. We learnt..."

"I know what you learn at the Academy, Olvan. What do you know? Not, what did they tell you!"

"I... I..."

"Alright." I sat back down. "You're an officer. In fact you're my only bloody officer and so you're currently acting First Officer until I can find a man who's actually been to sea."

"I have been to sea, sir."

"Shut up. You will listen and learn, Mister Olvan." I tempered my voice now. The lad was shaking. "The men know the seas, and they'll teach you if you give them a chance. I know bugger all, but my father is important and so I'm the master. No other merit, mind you. I like drinking, gambling, women and fighting the enemies of the Empire."

"Captain," was all Olvan could say by way of acknowledgement.

"Now pick a cabin, stow your kit, and then report back to me. We've got crew to find."

I, Captain Ardalrion, spent the next days with Olvan at my side drumming up interest in the Lady Ocean. We managed to pick up another seven sailors with the promise of prize money, and glory. The glory was Olvan's argument, but prize money had a better effect on them. At low tide the ship was careened so the copper sheeting for the hull could be cleaned by an all hands effort which only took a couple of days chipping and scrubbing. A few planks needed replacing and again, I had to fork out copper and silver for the wood and tools. Perti got the engine running, but had to make do with Empire parts, not Calionvar as he would have preferred and warned me that the parts were unreliable.

It was time to get Harl and Jodlin so I went in search of the surgeon who I had yet to meet. Willan had fetched him, but the man had stayed in his cabin all the while. I found our new surgeon, Doctor Eebel, snoring in the medico's cabin. He was a tall and thin man. His hair was dark with white streaks. His clothes were of a fine make and cloth but they had seen better days. He stank of spirits and an empty jug lay on its side on deck next to an overflowing piss pot.

"Wake up."

The doctor groaned.

"Wake up!"

The man grudgingly opened his red rimmed eyes and looked round.

"Where am I?" He held his head and tried to sit up.

"On board the Lady Ocean. You've re-joined the Navy, and you're now my ship's surgeon."

"What? Oh, yes. Now I remember. Why?"

"I need you. I need a surgeon. You're the only one available."

"Oh, and I thought it was my exemplary record. I don't want to."

"Pardon?"

"I'm a civilian now. I want to go home in shame and spend the rest of my days as a country doctor where nobody knows me, and I can drink until I pickle in my own piss. Gods I'm hungry. How long have I been here?"

"You're a naval officer," I shouted. "You're a bloody disgrace, but you're an Imperial and Ardalrion Navy officer, and I have the paperwork to prove it, and I have a boot ready to kick you with and I have crewmen who would like nothing more than to give you twenty lashes and," The doctor was cringing from the tirade. His head was obviously hurting him, my voice just making it worse. "And," I went on, "drunk on duty is against naval regulations, but rules are meant to be broken, Doctor Eebel. I don't give a damn how drunk you are. As long as you get the job done, you can drink the bloody oceans dry for all I care."

Doctor Eebel scratched his unshaven chin in thought, looked again at me, and then shrugged his shoulders.

The truth was that I did not want a drunk doctor, but it was marginally better than no doctor, so I had Olvan hide away any wine and spirits. There would still be plenty about, but I wanted to make it harder for the drunk.

The first thing I did, after the surgeon had cleaned himself up was have Doctor Eebel do some paperwork. Two documents he signed and handed to me. He complained that this was breaking naval regulations, but I just told him to shut up and sign the damned things. Hung over and in dire need of a drink, the doctor relented.

That night I headed over to the Sea Huntress. Wanting to avoid Captain Crops, I went to the closest tavern where I expected many of the crew would be found. Luckily both Harl and Jodlin were there. I was given a warm reception by the crewmen and half-heartedly snarled back at them, although I had to admit that I was touched by the greeting.

"Captain Ardalrion, sir," said Harl. "Pleased to see you, we are."

"Thank you, Mister Harl. How are the men?"

"Doing well. Shore leave has raised spirits, but we'll be off soon again. How's that ship of yours?"

"Fine. She needed work, but we seem to have her running and just about ready for trials. Two months we have to get her ready for duty. Two months to train the men and trim the ship," I said.

"Good, sir. The men have missed your presence at the card games."

"I'm sure they have. Running short on coin are they?"

Harl grunted a laugh. "Captain Crops's been in a sour mood. We ain't allowed to mention your name in his presence."

"Oh, he just can't take it when a high born bugger like me walks in and steals the show. Thinks I'm a worthless inbred mongrel, or so he has told me on many an occasion, and he's probably right." I surreptitiously looked round. I did not want any of the Sea Huntress's officers

to see me talking to Harl and Jodlin. "Let me buy you and Jod some food and drink. I have a proposition to make."

The three of us took a back table with the food and wine, and I proposed my plan. On me I had the two surgeon's notes. They told of how both Seaman Harl and Seaman Jodlin had come down with Grotting Worms and how infectious the illness was. It told of how one can lose limbs and eyesight to the worms and how it passes by mere touch. The sick must be kept in quarantine for weeks.

"It's simple really," I explained to them. "Tell Captain Crops, or his first officer that you felt ill and went to the Naval Offices for help. Tell them that they referred you to Doctor Eebel, who gave you these and then told you to get out of his sight."

Jodlin leered his toothless grin. Harl on the other hand was thinking it through.

"What about Doctor Feasler?" asked Harl. "We would have gone to him first. He might not fall for it."

"That snivelling puppet? He's a coward and a fool. He won't risk his life if there's the off chance that you're truly sick. If he reads the notes, get close to him. Make as though you're going to touch him. Intimidate the fool. Jodlin's good at that. Jodlin?"

"Yes?"

"Convince the doctor that you've got Grotting Worms."

"I'm good at convincing," Jodlin said, cracking his knuckles.

"Fine, Captain. We'll do it. In three days time," Harl said. "That's when the ship leaves. I reckon it's better so they don't send anyone looking for us or snooping."

"I agree, Mister Harl. In three days then."

Pleased with my work, I left them with more food and wine, and then made my way back to the Lady Ocean.

Chapter Six

The Dragon's Tooth was full, yet around me was an ominously empty space. I snarled at any who came close, letting only the barmaid near when she took me more wine. Still in my hand was the crumpled letter, wanting to throw it away, but unable to. Ajator had married Veinara. I was getting drunk.

I was happy for him and at the same time cast into a black mood brought on by the loss of a woman I had once dared to dream of a life with. It was only on reading the letter that I realised that the hope still lingered. The letter told of how Ajator could not bear the thought of leaving her for the seas again without knowing she would be waiting for him. I could not rid myself of the image of Veinara's face when she had smiled at me over dinner, and the kiss she had left me with. I wanted Ajator to have his fling, and then move on, opening up the possibility that Veinara might turn to me. It was pathetic, I knew, but I could not help it; I was young and foolish. She was Ajator's now. She was just a fantasy, and I had to let it go and wine was good for that, at least, that is what I was telling myself.

I had originally gone to the Naval Office to see if there were any orders, and there was one, a standing order. The message was from High Admiral Lord Villor and it commanded all captains and commanders to attempt the capture of a rebel code book without the enemy's knowledge. Rumour was that a rebel fleet were finally amassing for an attack on Umuron, and should the Empire get hold of such a book we would be able to confirm this and counter it. It was funny that this news came from the men at the Dragon's Tooth and not the Naval Office. Although a captain now, I still needed to prove myself worthy of any sensitive intelligence. The rumour further went that calls for reinforcements from the city were going unheard. These were troubling times and the sooner we could get to sea, the better. As for the book, "The enemy must not suspect that we have captured one!" read the order. The letter was handed to me by the clerk together with the standing order.

I filled my cup again with the new bottle of wine. They had married in secret. Father was angry. Of course the old duke would forgive Ajator in time but he will be disappointed at the poor match. In the old days such a marriage would never have been allowed, but in these enlightened times, the blood of the aristocracy was being watered down by ideas of love. Probably a good thing, I thought morosely. It needs a good cleaning. Draining the cup in one go, I looked at the dregs of dark wine at the bottom of my cup. Blood. Those born high fought so hard to hold onto it, even at the expense of the blood of those born low. I was stuck somewhere in between. Born high, yet only one look at me would tell you that I was blood of the low. Father did not understand it. Nobody did. A freak, a prank of the gods, touched and cursed.

A flute was playing on the other side of the room, a young seaman with a good voice singing along. My crew warily eyed me but I did not care. I should have stayed in my cabin, but could not face being alone, yet I did not want to talk to anyone. Then, just as I was filling my cup again, resigned to losing myself completely in the drink, the crowd parted to let Harl and Jodlin through, both carrying sea sacks, Jodlin grinning for ear to ear.

"Feasler couldn't get rid of us fast enough!" said Harl throwing down his sack.

The choice was to growl and grumble, drink and brood, or, pull myself up and be a man. At first the former option held sway and I just wanted to forget the men, the ship and my duties, but where would that lead? Drink more, drink and drown. Who cares? Not the world, nor its people. When I thought this, inwardly I screamed at myself, pathetic worm. I scolded and chastised

myself for the weakling that I was and a sober hand reached down to the depths where I dwelt and pulled me up. Move on, said I. Move up. Be a man.

I looked at the two. "Take a chair. Tell me what happened." I forced back my misery, and tried to clear my head.

"Captain Cropsaw saw the notes, and asked the doctor to have a look," said Jodlin. "I coughed a lot." They both sat down.

I could not help but smile a little. The plan had worked. "Tell me, what did Feasler say?"

"The doctor went as white as a ghost and covered his mouth with a cloth, then shouted at us to be gone," said Harl. "Shrieking, he was, like a little girl. Grotting Worms! He wailed. Off the ship! He shouted, and tripped over his own feet to get away from us!" Harl had obviously found it amusing. "They set sail at once, sir, fearing plague. We're yours to command."

"Excellent!" I said, rising. "Stow your kit and report to Mister Olvan, the greenest officer you ever met. He's trying though, so no tricks, but don't tell him I said so. He's aboard the girl now, eager as a puppy."

With that I returned to the ship, the fresh air clearing my head. Veinara was gone. My brother had found a wife. At least I now had Harl and Jodlin as well as some marines. There was a bit of good fortune in that a Sergeant Lamtak and ten marines were assigned to the Lady Ocean that morning. They were newly arrived and had spent the last couple of years in the cold north, protecting the river ways until their ship was decommissioned with a damaged hull after running aground. A new one was not expected for the foreseeable future. This was the Empire's problem. The larger it got, the more it cost to maintain, and the Navy was not cheap. In places it gave, and in such places the enemies of the Empire moved in. Now though, I counted myself lucky. I had a small crew, an officer, a doctor, an engineer and some marines all sworn in to the Ardalrion Fleet as was the tradition. Now I could get to work. Of course I needed more officers including a navigator, but could make do without them, whereas I couldn't without sailors. Now was not the time to dwell on my loss, now was the chance to take action. I threw the letter into the waters, consigning it to the depths. The choice was made; I would be a man.

"How is Mister Olvan doing, Sergeant?" I asked of Harl when I found the man in the galley being served by Mister Horis who as it turned out was the cook. It was necessary to make Harl a sergeant; not a common practice but with only a single officer, I needed to give the man more authority. Not only that but Harl was now quartermaster and headman too, a lot to ask of one man, but Harl seemed to take it in his stride.

"Doing well for a green lad I would say, Captain. Learnin' the seas already. He listens and watches."

"Good." I was feeling rough after the drink the previous night, but was eager to be away and wanted no delay in preparing the ship for the high seas. "I need you to keep an eye on him. He's my only officer, not counting the surgeon, and I will need him, Mister Harl."

"Will do, sir. If I may, I was wondering. What do you suppose the High Admiral will make of us?"

I had been considering this. "Without a lectrocoder and more arms, I suppose we will start as a runner. Not heroic work, but we can build on it."

"That's not so bad, sir. Get to see a lot more ports that way."

I had to admit that it was tedious work hunting the waters round Umuron, and as a runner we would be obliged to travel further afield. The problem was that there was little chance of engaging the enemy as a runner and I wanted action. Perhaps there was a way to prove my ship and crew? Perhaps we would get lucky and find an enemy with a rebel code book? There was little chance of that but I still liked the idea.

The Imperial Navies used code books to hide their signals. If the enemy was thought to be in possession of one of ours, they had to be discarded and new ones printed. The enemy would have the same rule in force. It happened often enough. If a captain thought he was going to be captured, the first thing he would do is burn the book or cast it overboard.

When I finished my round, I saw that there really was nothing urgent left to be done, and with a need to keep myself and my men busy, had a runner take a message to the Naval Office stating my intent to put to sea for trials.

The next morning, I took my place on the aftcastle and with some trepidation and excitement, I gave the order to cast off. The engine rumbled, and the paddle wheel under me began to churn the water. Steam and smoke shot up in blasts from the funnel and men ran about, hauling in ropes, and waving goodbye to a few women on land. Owman, one of the first of the new crew I had met was at the wheel. Banton, the lad who threatened to put me in the drink was now an apprentice engineer and would be down below in the heat, watching and learning and taking orders from Larrans Perti.

As the ship began to move there was a sudden activity from the pier. Looking down, I saw a man throw his sea sack aboard and then leapt, taking the railing and hauling himself onto the ship. When the man got to his feet, he turned and saluted the castle and myself.

"Permission to come aboard, sir?" said Sudlas. The man must have abandoned the Sea Huntress. I would have tried the Grotting Worms trick with him too but had originally thought it too bold.

"Captain Crops had enough of you, Mister Sudlas?"

"He'll be wanting my neck, sir. When I heard about Jodlin's sickness I knew something was amiss, Captain. That great lump don't get sick. I am loyal to Ardalrion, sir, not Crops. I seen you in danger before, and I recon it's my job now to look after you, if you'll have me."

"I cannot condone your actions, Mister Sudlas, but seeing as we are on our maiden voyage, I will let this one be the first of what will be very rare pardons. Stow your kit and report to Mister Harl."

Sudlas nodded and darted away.

Although I did not want the men to see such lenience so early in my command, I was pleased to have the man who had once saved my life aboard. The extra man was worth the price.

I kept a weather eye on the harbour. There were many ships coming and going and I did not want my first voyage as captain to end in a collision with another vessel. It was plain sailing however as we cut a path through the traffic at harbour speed - a slow crawl. Soon we made it into open waters.

"Cruising speed, Mister Owman."

"Aye aye, Captain." Owman turned a wheel next to him, which in turn told Mister Perti down below to speed up. It was soon followed by the quickening of the engine.

All seemed well so far and my ship surged forwards, slicing through the morning waves, defying the brisk breeze that met us head on. Suddenly struck by a sudden sense of freedom, I realised that I was now truly a captain of my own ship and commander of my own destiny. I

could go wherever I pleased, and looking at the endless vista of the open ocean, I smiled to myself, feeling better.

We headed north into the Quarvor Sea, the north-western reaches of the inner ocean, and for the next few days we trained as a crew. I was learning to be a captain, which mostly involved letting the men get on with things. Olvan grew in confidence and soon we were practicing with the heavy guns. The surgeon deigned to join us on the castle every so often. He had found a supply of spirits, but it did not seem to affect his judgement too badly.

We had to shut the engine down a few times as Mister Perti fixed a broken joint or replaced a burst pipe. At first this irritated me. Why was this device of the machanomancer not reliable? Why did it behave so badly? On the Sea Huntress, I never took much interest in the engine. It was a mystery to me and I was happy to let others worry about it. Now though, I was captain of my own ship and I wanted to know more, so on the second week of trials I went below deck to the stuffy engine room. This room took up the better part of half the lower deck, and many of the crew worked down there simply feeding the furnace with coal or wood. The store of fuel took as much space again, all below the waterline. The engine was running again and the noise was quite deafening. I asked Mister Perti to explain the device.

"It's a steam engine," he shouted over the noise of the hissing and pounding machine.

"I know what it's called, Mister Perti. How does it work?" I had a crude idea about steam pushing pistons and rods, but that was the extent of my knowledge.

Perti wiped his hands on a blackened cloth, and guided me to the furnace. It was stiflingly hot, but there were a couple of wooden shafts on either side of the space where large wooden fan blades turned slowly drawing air in from above. I could feel the air like a breeze being sucked towards the furnace.

Perti was wearing his goggles which reflected the orange flame. "Those men there." The engineer pointed at four crewmen, sweating and stripped to the waist, blackened by soot. "They feed the cooker with fuel. We have coal but it could be wood, or anything that burns. Coal is good though."

"I see."

"That cooker, then heats up the air that we pump into the fire."

I looked at the large fans above us.

"No, not them. Those are for us. Couldn't work down here without fresh air. Not for long. Other pumps force air into the furnace. It makes it burn hotter." He waited to see if I understood.

"Carry on."

"The heated gasses then go through a heat exchanger - lots of pipes running through the boiler there." He waved to indicate the massive cylindrical construction lying on its side behind the furnace. It was a black and heaving monster of riveted plates of black metal with a few of the mysterious runes of the Calionvar engraved into the copper banding.

"The hot air heats up the water in that chamber so much that it wants to boil, but it can't you see, because there's nowhere for the steam to go, so it stays water and steam but gets very hot. The chamber's sealed. There's a bit of room for steam but not much. The pressure in that chamber builds up and wants to get out."

Perti was losing me a bit there. I understood that water turns to steam when boiled but I did not know why it would not boil if kept in a chamber. I nodded anyway and the engineer continued.

Perti then took me further back to where two large pistons were attached to a massive metal wheel which stood deck to deck in diameter. The pistons, standing either side of the wheel

pushed and pulled at two bars using joints that turned the large wheel. They hissed and sighed as some steam escaped with each rotation.

"The steam is let out a bit at a time into one piston, pushing the piston forwards and making the flywheel turn." Perti shouted and pointed at the large wheel. "When one piston is done pushing, it lets out the steam into the stack. The other piston then pushes and so it goes round and round. Of course the pistons pull too."

I was getting the idea, and marvelled at the technology. "I see. And that wheel then turns the paddles?"

"That's right, Captain, and powers the pumps. The gears turn the shaft there, and the paddles go round." He pointed to a complex array of cogs and levers all turning and grinding.

"And how much pressure is there in this chamber?" I stepped over to it, examining the rivets and joints. Perti took out a spanner and gave it a couple of knocks.

"Hard to say. She's holding well. Not half done yet. We're running at cruising speed, and she's cooking nicely."

"I see. Do they leak? Can they break?"

"Push her too hard, and she'll explode!" The engineer seemed oddly pleased about this.

"What? Does that happen?"

"Oh yes," he said with a grin. "Push the boiler too hard and the whole ship'll go up!"

I was shocked by this announcement, and it must have shown as I instinctively stepped away from it. Perti quickly pointed to a block and some piping above the chamber that lead down to another smaller block with a wheel and cogs, then more piping that lead away.

"Don't worry, Captain. This valve," he knocked it with his spanner, "will open before she blows and vent the steam. It holds the pressure in until the chamber just can't take no more, then lets it out. So, in theory, the boiler shouldn't blow before the valve gives."

"In theory?"

"Well... Who's to say how much pressure the boiler can take? I've a good feel for it and set the valve accordingly, but you never know with age and wear. Don't worry, I just give it a knock and I know how tight she is."

"I see. And how fast can we push her would you say?"

"Hard to say, Captain. A boat this size with this engine. The copper's been scraped. I recon 13 knots in good water and the clean hull. If you want to go faster, I have to tighten that valve, see? I can tighten her and we go faster, but go too fast and boom!"

Thanking the engineer, I snarled at Mister Banton who was hovering. Banton gave a knuckle salute and darted back into the shadows.

I was indeed impressed by the ingenuity of the machine, and had a new found respect for engineers and the black eyed folk who designed them - those strange and mysterious people. I was impressed but deeply unsettled by the boiler and Perti's dismissive attitude towards its propensity to explode if not properly managed. I left Mister Perti and the sweat streaked crew of the engine room to their work and made my way back up to the blessed fresh air of the open seas.

We saw nothing of the enemy, and only encountered fishing vessels and merchants which gave us a few good opportunities to practice our boarding. As a ship of an Imperial Navy, we had the right to stop and search just about any vessel upon the ocean. Things were going so well that I found I was secretly hoping for a little trouble. Remembering the highly secret order, I imagined capturing such a code book. Not for the glory, of course, but out of a sense of duty, or at least that is what I told myself. If we could return with such a prize, it would further the cause

of the Empire and the Ardalrion name. The problem was that we were not a large ship and crew, and any vessels carrying a code book would probably be a larger fighting vessel. We could head west and would undoubtedly come across them, but we would not be able to fight them. It was Harl who sparked the idea when he mentioned this ship's former captain, the privateer, Captain Yorlwig.

We were standing under the stars on the aftcastle. Harl was at the helm, and I was enjoying my pipe. It was a pleasant, crisp evening and the day had been spent loading, running out, and firing the ten guns. The men were getting better, and I only put a stop to it in order to save shot and powder. The engine was running at half speed. It throbbed like a beating heart and the wheel splashed, but it was a comforting noise in the dead of night. It sent sailors to sleep, and reminded those awake that the Lady Ocean lived. She purred like a cat as she rode the calm, night time waters.

"Captain Yorlwig nearly had me."

"I saw," said Harl. "I thought for sure you would break his blade, but he kept turning your cutlass away."

"I got lucky."

"Aye. You did, but luck is made, Captain. Luck is made."

"Is it? The gods play games I think. They play them at our expense." I had always felt a little cheated by the gods. My childhood was a miserable chapter that I wanted to forget but could not. Of course I had largely grown out of it now, but still I saw the scorn in other's eyes and although I told myself that I did not care, sometimes it hurt. Sometimes.

"I found his letter of marque you know? In the cabin. I still have it."

"A trophy? You should hang it on the wall, Captain," Harl chuckled. "You have his ship and his marquee."

"Yes. Yes I do." It was then that the idea came to me. It was so simple. Yorlwig was a privateer. Not an important figure in any navy, but an extra feature on the side. A privateer was tasked with raiding enemy shipping and then left to it. The rebels would probably have some record that he was dead, the Wraith Deep captured, but it wouldn't be common knowledge. The crew were doing well as was Olvan, my only officer. They needed testing and I wanted to see what could be accomplished now that I had a ship. It was foolhardy to seek trouble with so little experience as a captain and a ship hardly equipped for a fight, but I wanted to make a difference. I was also bored.

"Mister Harl?"

"Captain?"

"A westerly heading if you please."

Looking back now, the folly of my choice is obvious, but I was young, reckless and eager. The years bring wisdom and the recklessness fades; the fear grows stronger and the will to fight it weaker. Why is that? Why did I seek danger then, when I could have been safe running errands and searching merchants? Back then, I had a whole life to look forwards to, but wanted to risk it all. Now I have little life left and fear even the creaking doors. Boredom, I know now, is my friend and ally, but as a young man, it was my worst enemy.

A brisk easterly wind met the Lady Ocean head on, making her rise and then fall to crash on the waves, sending spray high into the sky. It made the job of Seaman Gogloy, one of the youngest

lads on board, quite terrifying and near impossible as he dangled over the stern by a rope and tried to paint over the name of the Lady Ocean with black ship's paint.

"Damn this weather, Mister Olvan," I said. The ship was making headway but it was slow progress.

The paint was being applied to a wet surface. It was the proper paint, but it would be better if the surface were dry. Although sitting in a crude harness, Gogloy was hard pressed to hang on to the rope as he did with white knuckles, let alone paint. Below him was the rear of the wheel housing. Should he fall, he would in all likelihood be dragged into the churning wheel before being spat out, a rag doll.

"Perhaps we should find a cove, Captain? A place where the land can protect us from the wind and waves," said Olvan.

"No. We're in enemy waters. I don't want anyone on land to see us painting over the name. They could pass on a message, and then the enemy would be on the lookout for us."

Olvan looked as though he wanted to say more, but I did not want to hear it, knowing the young officer wanted to suggest turning back, and so I turned away from him and saw Doctor Eebel coming up the castle steps.

"To what do we owe this pleasure, doctor?" This was the first time I had seen the surgeon on the officer's deck in a while.

"Needed some air. Still heading west?"

"That we are."

Eebel shook his head. He had made it clear the previous morning when I had presented my plan to the senior crew, that he thought it was madness.

"Gentlemen," I had said to the gathering, "I have invited you to breakfast with me so that I can tell you of my plans for the coming weeks. I have it in mind to set a course for the port of Sulenfir. We will masquerade a privateer in the rebel navy, drop anchor at port, find ourselves a lectrocoder code book and it return it to the Imperial Navy. I think that would make a good sea trial. After which we can report for duty."

To my satisfaction, the men around the table had sat open mouthed and dumbfounded by the statement. Even the reserved Harl had looked surprised.

"But, Sulenfir is a rebel port," Olvan had felt the need to point out.

"Yes," I said. "Which is where we will find rebel lectrocoders and code books."

"If I may, what's the plan, sir?" Harl then asked.

"We have the ship of a privateer and the letter of marque to go with it. I just have to change my name to Yorlwig. It's simple. We sail in, find a lectrocoder officer, copy his book and then sail away again. What do you think, Sergeant Lamtak?"

"What do I think? Sounds risky, sir. What if this Captain Yorlwig is known to be dead and his ship taken as prize?"

"It's a risk, I admit. Their naval office will probably know. They must have spies in Umuron, but I'm betting that Captain Yorlwig was not a well-known figure. I'm betting that privateers are not in the books."

"Hm," Lamtak had said, twirling his moustache. "I suppose it could work, sir." He did not look convinced.

Now, a wave shook the frigate and I heard Gogloy yelp. "How is the medico cabin for supplies and tools? I paid a pretty penny for the items."

"Satisfactory," said Eebel looking down over the rear at poor Gogloy who was being held in place by Harl and a few men.

"Good. How about the health of the men?"

"Good gods man. The health of a seaman in this navy? That's like asking me to judge the quality of Hobster's Cave Cheese. It stinks, it's rotten, tastes like vomit, and yet the toffs fight to get their hands on it." He rubbed his temples. "They're fine. Diseased, pox ridden, worm infested, lice covered, flea bitten the ugly lot of them, but they don't complain which in my book is as good as you're going to get out of a sailor."

"And morale?" I pushed, ignoring the doctor's tone.

"They seem happy enough. Is that my job now? Morale officer?"

"It's the job of any officer to see to it that the men are in good mind and good health, and you are technically an officer, Doctor Eebel."

"Then I prescribe a few more barrels of wine, and perhaps some spirits," said the doctor with a knowing glance at his captain. Harl who had overheard grunted a laugh at this.

Olvan was looking up at the crow's-nest. "The men want to leave the crow's-nest, sir. They're being thrown about up there."

Stepping forwards, I squinted up at the crow's-nest where I saw two men waving. "Why the bloody hells are you looking down at us? Watch the seas you miserable bastards!"

"But, sir..." The men fell into the crow's-nest as the ship hit hard on yet another wave. Gogloy yelped again. "Too rough, Captain," called one of the lookouts as his head reappeared.

"I don't care," I shouted. "These are enemy waters. This is a fighting ship, not some dandy yacht on a summer cruise. Tie yourselves to the mast, and watch the damned seas!"

Seaman Gogloy was hauled back onto the deck. He was soaked and covered in paint and Harl shook his head as to say that it was impossible. The ship's former name was the Wraith Deep, and to paint it back over the new Lady Ocean now we would have to have calmer waters. I could only hope we did not meet the enemy before the disguise was complete, but there was no sign of the rough weather letting up for a while yet.

"We need a figurehead Mister Olvan. Remind me when this mission is over," I said, the thought suddenly striking me. No point in brooding over the enemy when there was nothing to be done, although I could not help turn an eye to the smudged horizon.

"Like the grander ships, sir?"

"Yes. Something fitting. Something sticking."

"Sticking?"

"Like a thorn, Mister Olvan. A thorn in the side of every pomp, dandy and aristocrat that cares to care what I put on my ship."

Doctor Eebel gave me a sideways glance.

"I see, Captain." Olvan sounded like he was not sure he did see at all.

"Come up with something. Give me ideas if you can."

"Perhaps a naked mermaid?"

"No! Something others wouldn't expect. She would have to have three breasts, a beard, and a horn for me to even consider it. Think about it for a while."

Another day passed and still the seas had not calmed enough to allow the painting of the ship's name. There had been no sight of enemy shipping and only larger fishing vessels and merchant ships ventured this far from the coast. We had seen a few but steered clear of them. I did not want to be caught without a ship's name, and I did not want the watch towers to see us. It would be far too suspicious, and any naval captain would want to investigate it further.

"Mister Olvan?"

"Captain?"

I was now in my cabin consulting my charts and notes taken with a sextant. They were all copied from standard navy charts and notoriously out of date. "Is there no way of painting the name in this weather?"

"None, Captain. Mister Harl assures me that it's just not possible. We have to pray for better weather or find calm waters."

Expecting this answer, I was already studying the coastline. I knew we should have returned to Umuron to prepare for such an endeavour but I also knew that if we had returned, I would have lost the courage for this madness. I would have seen reason, but did not want reason. I wanted adventure.

"Then there's nothing for it. We must make for land and find a cove or natural harbour. Do you know much about these waters?"

"No, sir. Sorry."

I sneered at the young officer, not that I knew much about them myself. "Well. As far as I can tell, Mister Olvan, we're not close to any major ports. We need to see some land for confirmation of our location anyway. Head south. Call me when land is spotted."

"Aye, Captain."

With that, I tugged off my boots, went to my cot and lay down on my back for a short sleep. On deck I could hear Olvan shouting orders. The ship was being buffeted by waves. I had found sleeping when at sea much preferable to land. In fact when at port I often found it hard to get a good night's sleep being so used to the noise of the engine, the thrashing of the wheel, the heaving waters. I liked the sea. I liked the raw elements and their mischievous ways and being close to the edge were all that stood between me and the abyss was some cleverly crafted woodwork and skilled men. Just as I closed my eyes, there was a knock at my cabin door. I groaned, but did not rise or even open my eyes. "Enter!"

The door opened and closed. There were some footsteps. I looked to see Doctor Eebel with his red rimmed eyes, holding onto a post, looking madly at me.

"As you can see, I'm trying to get some rest. What is it you want and be quick about it?"

"What the hells am I doing here?" The boat heaved and the doctor had to hold on with both hands.

"You're a ship's surgeon. You go where the ship goes," I said, closing my eyes again, perhaps a little unnerved by the look on the doctor, but wanted to show an indifference to the doctor's personal problems as a captain should. Also, I wanted a rest and the drunk could wait.

"There's booze on this ship. I know it. I can smell it. The men are hiding it from me!"

"I recon the men have taken it upon themselves to save you from the dark spirits, but money is often a fine argument in such a predicament."

"I'm broke! I was kicked out of this damned navy and left penniless. I need a drink!"

"None to be had here," I growled. It was a lie, but I preferred a sober surgeon as did the crew. I was also not sure I liked the man or not. At least, I did not respect him yet.

"I didn't ask to be here. I just wanted to go home. I wanted to drink. I wanted to drown in the stuff, and now I'm caught somewhere between life and death and it's all thanks to you!"

I should have been angry but instead I was roused by the anguish in the man's voice and relenting, sat up. "Sit down, Doctor Eebel."

The doctor watched me for a moment then, turned the captain's chair round and sat in it. It was contrary to protocol for anyone else to sit in the captain's chair but I was now getting used to the doctor's disregard for such conventions.

"What's your given name?" I asked.

"Nalistor."

"May I call you Nalistor?"

The doctor shrugged.

"You are here, Nalistor because we need a doctor and you were the only one available."

Nalistor was silent. His hands were shaking.

"The Navy is the Emperor's arm. We are his tools. We are all duty bound to serve him and the Empire. Are you a loyal servant of the Emperor, Nalistor?"

"Never met the man."

I looked up sharply. I was about to chastise the doctor for his lack of respect for the Empire's father, the great leader of the Emben Empire, but before I did, it struck me that I had never met the man either. What did I really care for the Emperor? I had a certain concept of duty to the Empire and Duchy, but the Emperor was just a man; a figure head. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that the doctor had a point.

"If death is what you want, then I don't see why you're complaining. We're in enemy waters, about to enter an enemy port. If captured, we'll be treated as spies, and probably tortured, then executed."

After a further silence, the doctor leaned forwards and said, "You certainly have a way of putting one's mind at ease, Captain. I'm so pleased we had this talk." The mood eased and the doctor visibly relaxed a little.

"It's my fault, doctor. I was keen to be about our business and at sea. You were the only doctor available."

"I know why you did it. I don't see how I'm much good to you as I can just as easily take your leg off when the wound is in the arm, but I know why. You want to impress someone," Nalistor stated. "Not the navy, nor the men either. You don't think much of the high and mighty, but someone."

I was puzzled, even annoyed by this statement, but I knew I was angry because Nalistor had hit a nerve. I was trying to prove something to someone, but I didn't require or want the respect of others. At least that was what I told myself. Was it my father? Was it my brother? My brother loved and respected me whatever. I had no need to prove anything to Ajator.

The doctor noticed my struggle. "Yourself. It's you that you're testing and pushing. You may be the grim and moody captain son of a lord admiral, but I know you. I see right through you, Captain Malspire."

"You presume a lot Doctor Eebel."

"Not Nalistor anymore? I tell the truth as I see it and you get prickly?"

"The truth? We hardly know one another. You spend your time hidden away, drinking whatever spirits you can find, and you presume to know me?"

"I've been watching you. Even when I'm drunk as a fish I see people. It's a way I have. You have a dark soul, and you're rough cut, but you're not an evil man. You've a sense of right and wrong better than most, but you're cursed."

"Cursed?"

"Aye, cursed by insecurity. Cursed by a rot in the soul. You think little of yourself and little of humanity, and feel the need to prove yourself better in your own eyes," the doctor hissed. "It will be the death of you. Probably the death of us all!"

I considered this. It annoyed me, but maybe that was because it was true.

"I'm still young and inexperienced, doctor, I know this. I'm also wrong to get angry with another officer for telling the truth as he sees it. I'll admit that there might be some truth to what

you say." I forced myself to say these words. I wanted truth and respected honesty, wanting to be open to it even when it grated. A fire in me was bursting to lash out and hurt the doctor, but I forced it back. Like the fear I had learned to fight, the anger too was to be controlled.

"Well, I'm old before my time and tired. Truth or not, I'm still stuck on this rotting boat without a drink and a long way from home."

"Where is your home?"

"The valleys of Brimalod, a long way from the sea. I'm a mountain man." Nalistor reflected on his homeland for a moment. "I had land once. Not much. Not fertile, but plenty of wood."

"A squire?"

"Yes. Not aristocracy, but new money. I had land, a wife and a son on the way. I should have stuck to that, but I wanted more."

I nodded. "Why did you become a doctor if you had land and resources?"

"I met my wife, Astinan in Norlan where I was studying medicine. I went to Norlan to study because I hated the country. I was young and wanted to see the world, but I fell in love, so I married her and returned home a doctor but with the intention of making it big instead." Nalistor wrung his hands and rocked gently as he spoke. "I wanted to put her in the finest manor, with the finest clothes, food and wine. I wanted to make her a princess. She was everything to me, and I wanted the world for her." He fell silent.

"Go on," I said.

"I was a fine doctor. I did well in my studies, and was sought after, but I let it go. I borrowed money and built a large saw mill. I borrowed more money and purchased barges, horses, carts, tools and men. Then the Emperor in his wisdom decided that the Empire's insatiable hunger for timber would come from the northern realms, and ruled that the woodlands of the homelands were protected," said the doctor bitterly.

"I see." I knew of this ruling as it affected my own home. Timber was always in great demand and the homelands were in danger of losing all its forests and woodlands to the Navy and its ships. A single battle ship could take six thousand oaks to build. Lords of the skies knew how many a grand battleship would take to build. An entire forest! Of course, the Guild of Sea Merchants was making a fortune, having sole rights to the shipping of the timber and also happened to own vast swathes of northern forests.

"I had borrowed far more than I could pay off as a doctor, so I was bankrupted. The bankers took my lands, my goods, and every penny I had and left us to starvation. As a doctor in disgrace I could get little work, so we were forced to Norlan again where I was taken in by the Navy who cared nothing for reputation, but for skill as a surgeon."

"The ship needs a surgeon."

"It does that, but a wife doesn't. The very first letter I got from her told me that she had divorced me and was moving on. Ever been bankrupted, Captain Ardalrion?"

"No. I never had to borrow money."

"Of course not. You're an aristocrat with a rich father. When you're bankrupted, you lose everything. Even the right to a wife. She just had to sign a single document and that was that. It was three years before I got a chance to visit her. She was remarried to a banker in the city and had a child. It was my child. A boy who hid behind his new father when I stood at their door, drenched and freezing in the cold rain, begging for another chance, begging for justice." The doctor clenched his fists. "There was no justice to be found there. The banker swine had me carried off and beaten black and blue. No justice! But I found it elsewhere, Captain Ardalrion. I found it in a bottle, and the bottle has never let me down."

I felt awkward. What could I say? I said nothing.

"You're still young. You wouldn't know about these things."

"I know about rejection," I said, understanding the need to find a common thread. "I know what it is like to be alone."

"Yes," said Nalistor. "You do." It was unnerving how the doctor was so confident in his judgement of me. "I know about your brother. I've seen him. Like night and day you two. Twins, are you?"

"Yes. How do you know about my brother?"

"You're both the sons of Lord Admiral Lord Ardalrion whom I serve. Everyone knows about you two. Your brother is a shining star in the Navy. A born hero of the Empire. He's cursed too."

"What?" I was shocked by this statement. "How can he be cursed?" How could anyone think this of Ajator?

"I don't know. Something's not right though. Something's eating at him."

The day was drawing to a close by the time the call came.

"Land ho!"

The ship must have been off course as I had expected to see land sooner, understanding now the need for a proper navigation officer. It would be dark by the time we reached the coast. There was a good chance that it would be too risky to take her in and we would have to wait for the morning. Doctor Eebel had left me in a contemplative mood and I never managed to fall asleep, but now I concentrated on the distant coast. It was cold but not the biting chill of winter. The sky was a glorious blaze of gold and scarlet, broken by dark, ragged clouds. Standing on the castle, I scanned the landscape through my glass. Above us, seagulls gathered and circled, floating on the strong winds. The sea was rough but not too rough to move in closer.

"The land looks rocky, Mister Harl. Cracked bluffs and fingers of stone in the waters."

"It's getting late, Captain."

"What do you think? Should we try to find a cove now or wait until tomorrow?"

"We can get closer, sir."

So we did, and as the sun touched the horizon, I saw what looked like a fjord or perhaps the mouth of a river that had cut a deep gorge in the rocky face of the land.

I hesitated. All of a sudden, something felt chilling beyond the wind, as though a shadow reached out to us from that gorge, as though a malevolent presence looked upon us and beckoned us in. I hesitated, but I did not baulk. "Take us in, Mister Harl. Keep a distance from the rocks." It was nerves, nothing more, I told myself. In time I would learn to better trust my instincts, but not yet, not then.

I could hear the breakers and see where they foamed white as they hissed and crashed on the black rocks sending up plumes of spray. Birds sat in the nooks and cuts in the higher reaches, watching the Lady Ocean as she slowly entered the waterway. It quickly got dark in that rent in the coastline, but the waters calmed, and the ship surged on into the eerie quietness of the channel.

Everyone not needed below was on deck looking up at the steep walls of rock on either side. Even the doctor was on deck, wrapped up in a thick overcoat, his hands still visibly shaking. There was no sign of human life but on the cliff tops were a few trees and long grasses drooping over the edges. The screech of pair of fighting birds echoed down the gorge.

"Water's calming, Captain. We could weigh anchor here. Do the painting by lamp light or wait till morning," said Harl.

"Let's keep going for a bit," I said. The gorge was thinning and the land falling the further in we went. "There is still some light. I want to see what's up ahead."

"Aye, sir."

The channel began to turn and twist. It was thinning but there was still plenty of room for the ship. A man had fixed a long pole to the front side of the vessel. This pole had a small yellow flag at the top, and plunged deep into the water below. Another man was sounding the depths with a lead. I kept a weather eye on the flag, knowing that if it dipped forwards, it had hit something. It was a simple way to tell if the waters were getting too shallow for the ship and faster than casting a lead weight. The last thing any of us wanted was to run aground on these rocks, in this enemy land.

It got dark. Slowly the ship kept going until finally Harl had to say something. "Captain?"

"I know. Mister Harl."

"We've lost the light, sir."

"Look!" I said, pointing into the gloom.

In the dim light cast by the large lantern held at the bow by a crewman, I saw something.

"Over there." I pointed ahead and from the shadows emerged what looked like a pebble beach. The flag dipped.

"All stop!"

"All stop!" repeated Mister Harl. The engine noise died and the paddle wheel slowed to a halt, then reversed until we had stopped.

"There. The end of the fjord. It's a beach, and look, a wall." I could just make out the wall that ran from one edge of the gorge to the other, built roughly fifty feet up from the waterline. It was more a palisade than a proper defensive wall, made of weathered wooden poles driven into the ground.

"Can't see anyone," said Harl. "No lights."

It was silent, the only sound, the lapping of water on the hull, hiss of gentle waves upon the pebble shore, and venting steam. Even the gulls were silent now.

"Drop anchor. Run out the launch. I want to have a closer look," I said to Mister Olvan.

In the darkness, we lifted the launch which was kept covered at the centre of the ship. Using the crow's-nest mast and a boom as a crane, the boat was lowered into the calm inky waters by men manning the capstan. There was an odd smell to the place. It was fish and crab and rotting seaweed, but combined with something sweeter. I wanted to see more. There was still no sign of activity from the shore or the wall. Perhaps we had scared off the inhabitants? But why would they not guard their wall?

"You're in command, Mister Olvan," I said as Harl, Jodlin, Sergeant Lamtak, Willan, ten other crew and marines and I slid down a rope net into the launch. I left Sudlas behind just in case there was any trouble Olvan could not handle.

All the marines had taken to wearing sailor's clothing as part of the ship's disguise. In fact the marine sergeant looked quite the pirate with a cutlass, rings and pistols fitted to a bandolier.

"May I join you, Captain?" This was Doctor Eebel, who, standing over the ship's gunwale peered down at the men in the boat.

"I would prefer it if you stayed aboard, doctor. Is there any particular need to join us?"

"The smell, Captain."

"What do you mean?" I said. It was an odd smell.

"Do you not recognise it? It's rotting meat. Rotting flesh. There's death here, Captain. I'm a doctor, and I should go ashore to see if I can help."

I suddenly recognised the smell of rotting flesh, and it turned my gut. Death did hang heavy over this knife's tip of water, where it had stabbed deep into the lands.

"Come aboard, doctor," I said, and shivered at the prospect of what we might find.

Chapter Seven

I was nervously gripping the hilt of my cutlass just as those that were not rowing were hugging their muskets. There was a spine tingling coldness to the place, a dread and gut fear now setting in. The men rowed the craft to the beach and at once we could see by the lamp light that something was amiss.

It was dark and eerily quiet with a thin layer of mist flowing like a river from the higher ground. There was the crunch as the launch hit the pebble beach, and men jumped out to pull the boat ashore, stumbling on the loose stones, trying to find footing enough to haul the heavy craft up. The wooden wall, made white as bone by the salt, wind and water was perhaps twelve feet high and looked solid enough, but a single large gate at its centre was wide open. The pebbles carried on up behind the gate and as we got closer, I could make out the line of beach where it met tufts of rugged grass and wooden walkways made of crude planking. Behind the palisade was a small settlement that climbed the end of the gorge. It was a fishing village. The boats were laid up on the beach inside the simple defences. Nets hung from poles, and baskets lay scattered about. Crab shells, and fish bones littered the beach line.

"It stinks," grunted Jodlin.

"Nobody here," I said in a hushed tone, unsure of how to proceed. Something felt instinctively wrong. Was it a trap? I now noticed how the gate had been smashed and broken.

Sergeant Lamtak stepped forwards. "Let me take some men in, sir," he said.

"Do that. A reconnaissance, Sergeant. Remember that we're on their side now, so down with the Empire, and glory to the Calandian rebellion."

"Aye, sir." The sergeant took five men and moved off into the gloom. The others and I waited by the gate.

Some minutes passed before Harl hissed in alarm. "Up there!" He pointed up to the right where a lantern appeared on the cliff top. "Someone's up there."

"Lamtak couldn't have reached that far so quickly," I said.

In the darkness, all we could see was the single lamp. Down here on the beach, we would be easily spotted with our many lamps. The light on the cliff vanished.

"Probably saw us, sir, panicked and hid his lamp."

Damn. What was going on here? I was about to call for the sergeant to return. There seemed no point in whispering or hiding anymore, when suddenly there was a scream followed by running footsteps. One of the seamen clad marines appeared, white faced and crying. "They're dead! They're all dead. Guttled. Guttled like fish!"

"What did you see man?" I growled. "Calm down! What did you see?" The others soon followed him. They too were pale and shaken.

"Sergeant!"

"Captain! The place is full of dead people, sir. It's a massacre! Blood, guts... The flies!"

"Where? Show me!"

We all made our way into the small fishing village. The single roomed houses were all weathered wooden constructions built on poles with steps leading down to steep, slippery wooden paths.

The stink was rich with the sweet smell of decay, and now there was the deep droning of vulture flies, which, disturbed by the movement and light took to the air in swarms. Some of the men wrapped scarves and cloths around their faces to block the smell and bites. Doctor Eebel, grim faced, seemed unaffected by the stench. Sergeant Lamtak went to one of the first doors and

kicked it in. Shining a light into the gloom, a new flurry of flies emerged from the darkness where I saw to my horror, the rotting remains of what looked like a family of three, gutted and dead upon the floor, their bodies, now melting, lying in a sickly pool of blood and putrid liquids where maggots swam. Men turned away to vomit. The sergeant grimaced. Harl whispered a silent prayer. I was speechless.

"It's the same all over, Captain," said Lamtak. "All dead, all gutted."

"What the hells happened here?" I muttered. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Evil!" said the doctor. "Only evil could gut women and children, then leave them to rot. The dark gods have been at work here. Vulture flies!" He shivered.

"You're too late!"

We all span round, drawing swords and levelling muskets, held in shaking hands.

"Too late!" screamed a wild haired woman. She was holding a lantern and standing further up the wooden road. She was dressed in ripped and faded clothing and covered in mud, cuts and grazes. "We called for you weeks ago. We begged for help, and now you come. Now when they're all dead!" She was obviously mad. She was screeching her words and tears fell to clear clean paths down her grubby cheeks.

"What happened here?" I demanded.

"They came," she said, pointing out to sea. "They climbed the walls. They climbed the cliff face. They came from behind." The woman turned to point inland.

"Who came," asked the doctor.

"Sealorns!" she screeched and dropped her lantern. She began to pull at her hair. "Sealorn demons!" She fell to her knees sobbing. The doctor moved to her side, mumbling words of comfort as he went. Finally he placed his large coat round her shivering body.

"Who are Sealorns?" I asked.

"Creatures," said Harl. "From the sea. Ain't seen one myself, but tales tell of men with the heads of fish, hundreds of teeth and claws."

"Creatures? Demons?" I shivered at the thought. "Surely she is mistaken. Pirates must have dressed in fish cloaks. She's mad."

"No, Captain. They exist." This was Sergeant Lamtak. "They don't like the land but they have been known to come ashore when they have good reason. I met a few lads who fought them up on the northern shores. Swore they did, sir. Terrible things, nasty things."

I considered this for a moment. If this was true then perhaps we were all in danger. Perhaps the ship was in danger. "Why did they attack you?" I asked the woman. "Did they have reason?"

She was now hidden in the coat, but her bright, crazed eyes looked up sharply. "Oh, they had reason. They had reason, and I warned the folk. I told them we would be cursed, but they didn't listen to me."

"Well?"

"A sea hag was caught in the nets. Ugly foul beast! I told them to throw it back but did they listen? Greed got the better of them. Oh yes. Greed killed us all."

I had heard of sea hags but knew little about them. Yet another tale to scare the young and gullible.

"Cut its head off they did," she continued. "So she couldn't escape, then put it in the cave." She pointed back down to the darkness of the beach. "The sea hag was forced to bring fish to the waters, and we had plenty. We ate like kings and queens. It brought crab and lobster. The sea is its to control and we controlled it, but then it brought the sea demons too. Oh yes. It summoned

the Sealorns, and that was the end of us. I begged them to kill it, but the men wouldn't give up such a prize. I begged them to throw it back to the waves, but they were too greedy."

"Is it still here?"

"Oh yes. Oh yesss!" she hissed and looked wild eyed round her. "They will be here soon. They will have seen you."

"Why is the sea hag still here if the village was overrun?"

"I saw it. I saw it. It laughed at me when I went to kill it once and for all. They cut the head. She's cursed this place and all men. She stays for revenge on any and all men. You and your men are doomed! They come at night. Doomed, all of us!"

Suddenly there was the crack of musket fire from the bay followed by the distant shouts of alarm.

"To the ship!" I cried as I set off down the road.

There was more gun fire, and distant shouting. I had to be careful not to lose footing on the treacherous planking with my bad foot. I heard a man go down behind me with a shout and a curse. When we reached the gate, we all stopped in terror as we saw the shadowy figures emerging from the depths. There was the crunch of pebble under foot, and the glint of moonlight reflected off bulbous sickly eyes.

"Dark gods dominion!" I cursed when we saw the awkward shapes of the creatures. Truly half man and half fish. I could just make out the silhouette of a fight on the ship, and saw that there was no way to reach them now.

"Defend the gate!"

At once, Sergeant Lamtak began to issue orders. He posted two men above the gate with muskets, and had the rest fetch baskets, wood and anything else they could find to barricade the entrance. The men on the palisade opened fire, then reloaded and fired again. The shots hit home and Sealorns fell to the rounds. I was pleased to note the Marine's professionalism under pressure. The Sealorns were not fast creatures, but it only took a minute for them to reach the hastily built barricade. I was horrified by the shape of these beasts. They had the bulbous heads of fish with row upon row of tiny, sharp teeth in wide gaping mouths, yet they had the arms and legs of pale, bent men or apes but with large webbed claws and webbed feet and scales. Each of them carried what looked like a long blade made of bone with a wickedly serrated edge, perfect for gutting people. They stank of rotting fish and screamed rancid screeches over the defences which they began to pull apart as my men and I started to hack and stab at them. A marine fired point blank into the mouth of one then stabbed with the bayonet at another. Jodlin roared as he leant over the barricade and crushed the head of a Sealorn. I slashed my cutlass to try to force them away from the defences, but I saw that it was only a matter of time before the Sealorns took it apart and swamped our small party.

"Kill them!" I called desperately. "Kill the bloody lot of them. Don't let them through!"

It was tiring work. The men fought like banshees and the marines up top kept up a good rate of fire, now shooting straight down upon the bulbous heads of the sea creatures. The doctor at the back fired a pistol. Harl spat and slashed at them, cutting a webbed hand clean off at the wrist, pallid blood spraying him. The other men fought hard with a combination of determination and fear plastered on their faces. Perhaps we could hold? But for how long? I turned as I heard a distant scream from behind me. It was the mad woman, and my heart froze at the sound and implication. As I feared, I saw shadows moving down the wooden paths of the village. The Sealorns had before learnt to take this place by outflanking the wall, and now they were doing it again.

I was near panic. We were about to be surrounded, hope was fading, and in desperation I sought an answer. The cave! The woman had pointed in the direction of the beach wall. It was too dark to see, but if there was a cave there, we could defend that without being outflanked. Without knowing where it was but seeing no other option I stepped back from the fight.

"To me! Fall back and follow me! To me!" I half ran, half stumbled along the inside of the wall towards the eastern side of the gorge. It was hard going on the pebble beach. "Follow me!" I called again, and heard the others hot on my heels panting and cursing. "Find the cave. It must be here somewhere!"

As we got closer to the cliff face, a yawning black hole emerged in the shadows and although too large to defend the entrance, it must surely narrow further in. I turned to one of the men and grabbed the lantern he was holding, and then dived straight into the blackness. It was a natural cave with a pebble floor, and after only a few yards it narrowed enough for four men to defend the width.

"Here! Sergeant Lamtak, make your defence!"

Lamtak ordered four men with muskets and bayonets to form a wall. The others stood behind them and reloaded pistols and muskets, and gathered their strength.

"There are too many!" said the doctor. "We can't hold long."

"I know! Did anyone see how the Lady Ocean was fairing?"

"Still fighting when we ran, Captain," said Harl. We could hear the distant sound of shot and ring of metal.

I looked round, desperate for a solution. This part of the cave was used as storage, and pulling crates and nets aside I soon found some fishing harpoons. "Take them!" I called out. "Use them as pikes. Hold the abominations off. Use the crates." I started to throw the crates forward to be used as a new barricade. Others took over. Harl gathered up the Harpoons and handed them out.

"I'll be back." I turned to the darkness. Again that cold chill, and I hesitated. This was our only chance so I began to make my way further into the cave.

"I'm coming with you," said Doctor Eebel, joining me.

I did not have the time to argue, and just held out the lantern before me and carried on. A volley of musket fire deafened us, marking the arrival of the Sealorns to the cave's entrance. The cave quickly narrowed into a tunnel that would only allow one man at a time to pass through. The screams and shouting of the men began again as the enemy fell upon the human wall of spikes and blades. They would not hold long. I had seen how many Sealorns there were and they did not seem to fear the blade nor shot. Soon the sounds dimmed as I went further and further into the belly of this cursed land. The doctor was just behind me, but before me was a tunnel that ended in utter darkness. The darkness suddenly enveloped us as we entered what must have been a large cavern. Continuing through the darkness, we could just make out the hint of walls and as my eyes grew accustomed to the dim room after holding the lantern before me for too long I saw that the space was empty but for a stone pillar at the far end, and upon this pillar was a head.

We crept closer. My breath misted in the unnatural cold. The lantern did not shine in all directions but was shuttered to shine only ahead, so our weak cone of fire light fell upon the stand and its gruesome fisherman's trophy. We both edged closer still. It was the head of an old woman, seemingly dead with pale blue-green skin and long green and grey hair that fell down around the skull like matted string.

"It's dead. It must be," whispered the doctor, more in hope than anything.

I was not so sure. I had a dread feeling. It was pitch-black all round us and silent. Even the battle was unnaturally muted by this place. I could hear my own breathing and felt my heart hammer in my chest. Looking closer, I noticed a trickle of water coming from the head's mouth. I got even closer.

The eyes opened.

Both myself, and Doctor Eebel fell back on the pebble floor, kicking to get away from the head that now stared at the two of us with a malice and hatred that I could physically feel. It opened its mouth and out gushed foetid seawater and seaweed. The stench was horrendous. It laughed. It was not a pretty sound but a cold and merciless, bubbling cackle, that chilled the bone. "Run away. Go and play with my children!" Its voice was that of an old lady but mixed with the water to come out as bubbling and croaking and mocking.

I got to my feet, and gritted my chattering teeth. I had never known fear like this. It emanated from the hateful creature and infected my very soul. I shivered. The doctor too got up and back away.

"Malspire!" it hissed. How did it know my name? "Lord Malspire Ardalrion, the cripple," it leered at me. "Come to die in a cave, far from home."

"How do you know my name?" I finally found my voice but discovered that I could not move.

"I know many things," it cackled. "You have come to play games with the rebels. You are in here to beg for mercy, to ask me to call off my children. You had thought perhaps you could destroy me if I did not agree but now you are frozen with fear. So sad, so pathetic."

"No. You will die. How can I abide such an abomination?" I said defiantly but still could not find the willpower to make my muscles move.

She smiled. It was nearly a friendly smile, a sympathetic smile, but it was somehow worse than the leer. I could hear the distant, desperate fighting and did not know how long my men could hold the creatures at bay. I knew I was under some kind of spell. The terror was very real, but it came as an infectious wave from the sea hag. She was truly horrifying but the terror was her making, like being trapped in a nightmare. The villagers must have somehow overcome this, but I could not. I tried again and again to move. I wanted to raise my cutlass and bring it down upon her. Simple, yet impossible; a nightmare indeed. I shook and sweated with the effort, a cold sweat, but instead cried out in desperate frustration.

The sea hag laughed again. "You so want to kill me. It thrills me to feel such anger and terror. You are a treat for an old lady, cripple, but sadly it must end soon. My children are hungry and I have promised them more man flesh. They will be here soon and you will be but food for the fish. The Cripple will fall, the Thirteen Emperors will shine, the Ruin will rise and I shall be a witness to the event."

"Release me, damn you!" I said. "Release me and I will spare your life."

"Spare my life? I am five hundred and eighty six years old, cripple. I have been swimming the seas most of that time and I have seen nations come and go. I have seen the great rise and fall and you, young mortal, think you have the right to take my life? I squash men like you like shrimp."

"It was simple fishermen who trapped you," I pointed out to which she looked annoyed and sneered. "Release me. Release us all and I will throw you back to the depths to be with your children."

"Why should I? I have you all where I want you. I hate men and I enjoy seeing you suffer. It pleases me. It feeds me and my children and our hunger has yet to be sated. Once we have

finished playing with you, we shall add you to our village larder to mature before sucking out your sweet fluids. The gods are watching, young Malspire. They see the cripple is done for."

"Cursed sea bitch!" I growled. "You're just another one of the maggots that feed on humanity. Servant of the dark gods! Were you not human once? Do you have no sense of the crime you have committed here?"

The sea hag looked serious for a moment then said, "I was human once. I was pretty and gay and young. My name was... Belvire, I think. I loved a man don't you know? I even thought I would be married and live in a fine house by the sea with children and cats and dogs, but things change. Things don't work out as we plan them, cripple. I was thrown into the cold waters and drowned, but before I could leave this world, I was given a choice and I took it. I do not regret it. I had my revenge and found that it was wonderful. Playing with men and feeding on them is what I do. I crave it. It fills me and we all have to eat."

"Dark gods be cursed for your appetite. Damn your life and bugger your needs!"

"Gods? What gods? There are no gods Malspire, only scared children, hiding from the darkness. Ha! I could do this all night long. I love to watch you squirm, but alas our time is running out. All our time is running out," she added. "But yours a lot sooner than mine. Now where are my children? Feasting on your men no doubt. Perhaps I should kill you now?"

The doctor groaned. The muted battle went on. My mind raced for a solution but found none when all of a sudden the doctor gasped with disgust or effort and managed to cast the contents of his hip flask away. I saw the liquid fly past me. Only a drop managed to reach her face but it was enough. Enough to make her scream. The grip on me faltered. I saw the drop of liquid burn and bubble on her cheek. Haltingly, I managed to move my foot. The sea hag looked back at us, but her mind trick was spent as I now reared up above her, my body no longer shackled in fear. A flicker of fear passed her eyes where I saw my grim smile in the reflection, a smile that even shocked me.

"You wouldn't harm an old lady would you, Malspire?" she croaked. "A feeble old woman who was cast aside in life?"

I thought of the dead villagers. She was no woman but a savage monster.

She instantly tried another tack. "All your life, you have been scorned. All your life others have looked down upon you. I can change that. I can make you great and tall in the eyes of your Empire."

"How do you know so much about me?" I was buzzing with the lingering fear mixed with rage. Every time I saw the now pitiful eyes I had to remind myself of the dead outside.

"Oh, I know about you and your brother, poor soul," she leered again.

"Poor me?"

"No. Your brother!"

"What are you talking about? He's perfect. He does no wrong!" My ire was rising again. First the doctor and now a sea hag was telling me that Ajator's future was somehow troubled.

"He is doomed, Malspire. He is doomed, for the cripple is abroad!"

I raised the blade. I would not hear any more lies and treachery from this witch of the oceans. I was briefly tempted by the idea of letting her go, but then remembered again how things had gone for the villagers. She was reading my mind, and it offended me. It was time to force an end to this.

"Call off your creatures, hag! Call them off now or Creators witness I will destroy you!" With a sudden moment of lucidity I realised that I felt pity for such a creature as this. The sea hag was a vile and vicious thing, but she had been trapped and forced here against her will. She

was a predator, but so were sharks and yet sharks were seen as a necessary part of nature. I now saw the hag as an unfortunate part of creation's work. I no longer felt that I had the right to judge her and so offered the hag this opportunity to live. Suddenly I was the one in power. I held the blade and as captain I was both judge and jury.

She looked angrily at me. "No!" she screamed and with that scream came a fresh wave of terror that simply rebounded or flowed around me like water. Her eyes widened with shock at the impotence of her assault. I saw that she had thought to break this new strength of will of mine with a full blast of her willpower, but it was like throwing pebbles at a castle wall. She had miscalculated and now she saw her end in the dull gleam of a cutlass reflected in her watery eyes.

I brought the blade down with all my strength upon the hag's head. I saw sadness and fear in its eyes just before I struck. Death was obviously not to the hag's liking. However, I did not manage to cleave it. It went deep into her skull and lodged fast. The hag screamed in agony and putrid water gushed from her mouth, nose, ears and eyes. The strike had left it with a dead, glazed eye staring at an odd angle, while the other was fixed on me. I raised the blade again, but the head came with it, still screaming and now spewing stinking water all over me. I flicked the blade hard and the head flew across the room to hit the cave wall with a thud. Still it screamed and, pointing the lantern at it, I could see the gory mass of rotting brain and matted hair where the blade had struck it. Stepping over to the head, I brought my boot down on her skull. Still it gurgled and screamed. I was about to do so again when I stopped.

She cried now. Not loudly, but quietly like a child hiding under covers, afraid of the unseen things in the dark. It instantly spoke to my heart which suddenly ached at the sad sound. In a second I had gone from anger to sympathy and found myself again trapped by some force I could not overcome. The force this time however was not of the Other however, but a more natural source. I told myself again and again to kill the unnatural creature, but could not bring my boot down.

Doctor Eebel heard it too and edged closer to my shoulder. Shivering with mixed emotions, I was near to tears from my exertions. Was this another trick? I did not think so, so put my boot down. All I could see of the hag was a quivering mass of bone, flesh and pallid blood, no face.

The crying died and she whispered something.

"What?" I said, fearing some spoken charm.

"Let me go, Malspire, son of Ajourion. I shall no longer call to my children. I shall leave this place." Her voice was pitiful and cracked. There was no strength nor defiance, but a resignation and sadness.

"Why? You are not natural. You have killed a village."

For a moment she sobbed again, and then said, "They wronged me. I have done wrong in turn. Let me go and I will hide myself away until the Ruin finds me. I want to care for my children, and all I have done is brought them here to die on your blades and shot. Let me go."

The noise of battle flooded back to us. Whatever spell that made the witch's cavern silent was now broken. Still, I hesitated.

"She's done for, Captain," said Eebel as she began to cry again.

"So be it, hag. Call them off."

"They will go soon. They can no longer hear me."

"If you lie, I will return and no amount of pleading will save you."

"I am broken, Malspire. You have bested me. There is a strength in you that I did not see and you have won," she croaked. "Go now and leave me. Leave us to our fates and we will leave you and your kind alone."

I still hesitated.

"Please, Malspire. Now I beg. I have not begged for my life in a long, long time, but I do so now. Leave me and I will grant you a request."

"A request?"

"I have powers over the seas. Should you require it, you can come to these waters and I will answer your call."

The fight was gone from me now. I could not kill this sad creature. I backed away as far as the entrance with Eebel by my side, and then turned and we both headed back to the exit, shaken by what we had seen and done.

"How did you know to break the spell?" I asked.

"I didn't. I panicked. I found the strength to take a drink before we died, but I forgot that I had filled the flask with water. It was water when I needed spirits, and I threw it in shock. Fresh water. That was all."

"Thank the creators that fresh water is anathema to her dirty soul. We were lucky and I owe you Mister Eebel."

We could only hope that she would keep her word and the creatures would leave. As we reached the rest of the men, Jodlin gave a great battle cry and charged out of the cave into the darkness. The others followed him apart from Willan and Harl. Willan was sitting against the wall nursing an injured arm, and Harl came to me. I was relieved to see that Willan's injury was not serious. The lad grinned sheepishly.

"They broke, Captain! One minute they were about to overwhelm us and the next they just fled."

There was a line of dead Sealorns marking where the defenders had held them off.

"We found the sea hag, Harl. We broke the head from the beast and now they flee! Come on!" I said.

The doctor, pale and shivering from his experience stayed with Willan, while Harl and I charged after the fleeing enemy. The Sealorns were slow and had lost the will to fight. I used both my cutlass and gutting knife to hack and stab as we caught up with them.

"Kill them all!" I was calling. The hag had probably released them but I was taking no chances. It was hard to see where everyone went but I made my way towards the gate, and found the others had done the same.

The killing continued beyond the gate, and only stopped when we reached the waterline. None dared set foot in the water, but there was a cry of joy and relief when it was over. The scarred moon was now high in the sky. Crabs were already feasting on the dead creatures. The Sealorns were gone. The men were alive and as far as I could tell, none of my away party had perished although most had taken wounds. I only hoped the same could be said of the crew on the Lady Ocean.

It was a risky choice to return to the ship. Nobody wanted to get into the launch and be at the mercy of the Sealorns in their own element should they return, but nobody wanted to stay either, so we took the chance and hoped the creatures had gone for good. To our great relief, we made it back to the ship unmolested, and I found Mister Olvan with a cut to his head, but otherwise unhurt together with a grim faced Sudlas.

"They came out of the depths, Captain. Hundreds of them!" said Olvan.

"I know. How many wounded?"

"Two crewmen dead," he said sadly. "Others with cuts and bites that the doctor will need to see to."

"Who are the dead?"

"Potlan and Ogelo. They were dragged down to the depths, sir. Gone."

"I see." I did not know the men well, but remembered their faces.

"What are your orders?"

"The Sealorns seem to have lost the will to fight. We still need to paint the ship, so we stay."

I desperately wanted to weigh anchor and be off as did Olvan by the look on his face, but I equally did not want to risk being caught without a full disguise. We had been lucky so far, and that luck was sure to run out soon enough. I knew that an enemy force may be on the way to this location to answer the villager's call for help, but it was a slim risk to take. The enemy navy had probably ignored the request as this was just an insignificant hamlet.

"I want a skeleton crew and the injured to get rest now. The rest of the crew will stand guard throughout the night. If they come again, we will be ready."

There were no more attacks that night and as soon as the sun broke, I ordered the painting to begin. In the calmer waters it did not take long to paint the old name of the ship back onto her hull. The rest of the day was spent resting the men, seeing to the injured and preparing the ship for her on-going mission.

Harl was a clever man and I was impressed to see how he had dried the paint with a burning stick which caused it to bubble and crack. Harl then took a wire brush, borrowed from the engine room and scrubbed it down. The effect was to age the paint, and it looked very authentic from my view from the launch. I nodded at the old sailor in approval of his good work. By late afternoon we were ready to go again. Nobody wanted to spend another night in the gorge, and although I was acutely aware of the fact that we were probably entering even more dangerous waters the further west we steamed, we had come too far to turn back now.

Chapter Eight

"That'd be the third rebel we've seen, Captain," said Harl as he spied north to a distant rebel frigate.

"As long as they ignore us," I said.

Nerves on the ship were running high. Nobody said as much, but I could feel it. The Wraith Deep as the Lady Ocean was now called, cut through the choppy waves. Shipping intensified the deeper we went into enemy waters, and we began to spy the enemy navy. We were entering the Calandia Sea, a large region of water surrounded by the lands of Calandia - the rebel held lands, as well as wild barbarian lands backing onto the western Outer Oceans, a region the Empire was never able to tame. We flew the flag of the rebels.

"Should we change course, sir?" said Olvan.

"No. Be bold. We must stick to the lanes. Invite them to investigate and they will ignore us. Run, and they will pounce like a spider on a trapped fly." At least that is what I presumed would happen.

The charts covering this region had precious little information on such things as shipping lanes so we just followed other ships. I hoped this casual approach would bring us through uninspected and it worked until we were within sight of the port of Sulenfir.

Sulenfir was a major trading point and naval base situated a mile or so out to sea on a small island dedicated to the town and its harbour. The buildings were mostly timber structures with exposed framework and domed roofs painted in greens and yellows. Apparently the style of architecture in this region was a mixture of Imperial Emben and native folk who lived in domed huts in the eastern wildernesses. The only building to be classically Imperial was the harbour fort, a massive stone and mortar thing that boorishly squatted like a dark boil amongst the prettier timber buildings. Beyond the island was a network of bridges that jumped from rock to rock, leading all the way to the mainland.

Above us flew three black gulls, a bad sign and some of the sailors surreptitiously made small offerings to the sea spirits. I had seen this before whenever the black gulls had been sighted, and Harl told me it was an old tradition, so I let the men throw their copper away if it made them feel any better. When I saw Willan looking nervously up at them, I gave him a silver coin which he happily cast to the depths. Better safe than sorry.

As we neared the entrance to the harbour, we saw navy boats patrolling the waters, inspecting shipping as it both came and went. It seemed security was tight here and I could see why. A grand battleship was in port along with its escort of battleships and frigates and cargo ships. It was a large fleet. A senior admiral must be visiting, and I cursed my luck, having hoped for less enemy navy. At least there would be plenty of lectrocoders and the code books that came with them. Now the place was probably full of the strange devices, but gaining entrance would be all the harder.

"They're turning ships away," said Harl who was again at the wheel.

"I know. What reason do we have to make port here?"

"Perhaps we should find another port," Olvan suggested

"Perhaps," I admitted, but was acutely aware of the fact that we had been lucky to get this far unquestioned. The longer we were in these waters, the greater the chance that we would be discovered. "We're here now. We might as well test our disguise. Anyway, if we're seen to turn away now, they'll surely get suspicious and inspect us anyway." To get in we will undoubtedly be questioned, but better to get it done once now. Get it done and over with.

“Aye,” agreed Harl.

“Be bold, Mister Olvan. We're pirates, brigands, privateers! Go in at a good speed as though we have every right in the world to dock here. Go like we have business.”

“But how do we get through? We have no good reason to dock here.”

“Let me worry about that, Mister Olvan,” I said as a plan came to mind.

The first thing I did was visit Doctor Eebel. The doctor was sober and still looking after the injured from the Sealorn attack. I had earlier seen that the doctor had a human skull on a small bookshelf, and took it without explanation. I then went to my cabin which was already clear of anything to do with the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy, and cleared one of the smaller side tables. Then I went below decks to the engine room and had the men retrieve a couple of the boxes hidden in the coal pile. From these boxes, I took the Imperial Navy flag, my family signet ring, my naval uniform and my naval papers. Returning to my cabin, I arranged them all on the table with the skull in the middle and the ring in front of it. The skull was relatively new, and could still pass as a recent kill.

Ten minutes later, I was back on the castle and watched as a frigate made to intercept us. Making one last quick round of the ship, I reminded all the men that they were privateers, and also checked that nothing would give us away, then returned to the deck just in time to give a casual salute to the rebel captain. The enemy frigate was called The Dragonfly, and she looked to be in good order. Her guns were run out but probably only as a precaution.

“Turn you ship away and make for an alternative port,” called a junior officer over the short span of water.

I stepped up to the gunwale. Cupping my hands, I answered: “We have business with the Admiral, and will make port here!”

“What is your name and purpose here?”

I now whispered a silent prayer to any gods that might be listening. “I am Captain Yorlwig, a privateer in the service of your illustrious navy with a letter of marque that gives me the right to hunt down and destroy enemy shipping be it navy or merchant.”

The officer had a word with his captain, who shook his head. “The port is only open to naval shipping. You are a privateer and so you must find another port.”

“I will not.”

At this, the captain of the frigate turned to face me having acted above such trivial concerns until now.

“Admiral Darcentos has given explicit orders that all none naval vessels are to be turned away. You will take your ragtag crew and turn that rotting hull around,” he said indicated the Wraith Deep. “And leave before we make you run before the barrels of our heavy guns!”

“I have a gift for the Admiral. It has taken me months of hard seas and battle, but I have returned with a prize and I will present it to him!”

“And what would this prize be?”

“The head and signet ring of Captain Lord Malspire Ardalrion, son of Lord Admiral Ardalrion of the Imperial Emben and Ardalrion Navy.” When I said it, I felt a chill run down my spine at the lie as though I had somehow determined my own future death.

The captain had another word with his officer, and then called up a marine sergeant who he sent running with orders. Then the enemy captain had another word with the officer who returned his attention to me.

“Prepare to be boarded.” He called. “Captain Raxoen will see this prize.”

She came alongside and ropes were thrown over, and then pulled tight so the two ships soon met with a thud. Steps were placed on both sides of the ship's two gunwales and a party of green clad rebel marines quick marched over the bridge to The Wraith Deep. Then Captain Raxoen came across and I met him on the main deck with an extended hand. The enemy captain turned his nose up at the offer and the look of my back.

"Show me," he demanded with open disgust.

I went to my cabin door and opened it, letting the other captain in first, but before he could, two marines ran in to check that all was clear. On their signal the captain, ducking and removing his hat, entered. He was a tall man, young and quite thin, with an unfortunate bald patch. He had a thin moustache and dark rings under his deep set eyes. I followed him in and then directed him to the table with the flag, skull and signet ring as well as a few other trinkets that might have belonged to an enemy captain of such high birth. The captain took up the ring in his gloved hand and studied it. Then he picked up the skull and frowned at the tastelessness of keeping such a prize.

"The letter of marque," he demanded, returning the skull.

I went to my desk and took it from a draw, then handed it to the captain who opened it up and studied it.

"Yorlwig?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I have heard this name before."

I froze, but quickly forced myself to smile. "Of course! I am Captain Yorlwig of the Wraith Deep. Few have not heard of me!"

"Indeed," said the captain handing back the letter. As he did so I saw him shiver at the site of me and my bent back. "I will take the prize and present it to the Admiral," Raxoen then declared as though I would be an affront to his admiral's eyes.

"No!" I spoke too harshly and had to backtrack. "I mean, it is a thing of honour. I must be allowed to present it myself. I am duty bound to fulfil my mission from beginning to end. What end would it be if I do not present the prize myself?"

"That is not possible...."

"That is the head of Lord Admiral Ardalrion's son! I have struck a blow to the very heart of the Empire's leadership, and I demand that I present the gift myself!" I interrupted.

"Malspire you say? I have heard he had a son, but I thought he was named Ajator."

"He has or had two sons. Malspire was the second and now he is dead."

"Hmm. Is this all you took? You have the flag. What about the ship?"

"Alas it sank shortly after we took her. We gave her a full broadside before boarding and with a freak wave, the shot went below the waterline."

I realised that The Wraith Deep was not damaged and quickly embellished the tale. "We surprised her and her crew, and managed to avoid a major gun battle, but the enemy was not so fortunate."

A thought struck me so I led the captain to my desk and then opened my drinks cabinet from which I produced a bottle of unopened Nar-Dom spiced wine and two glasses. Captain Raxoen frowned when he saw the bottle.

"Is something wrong, Captain Raxoen?" I said, feigning ignorance.

"Is that Nar-Dom?"

"It says so."

Nar-Dom spiced wine was one of the finest wines available and a bottle cost a fortune by anyone's standards, but I was playing the gutter fool.

"I found it in Captain Malspire's cabinet before the ship sank. Would you like some?"

The captain was obviously torn between wasting the wine with some low life privateer, or not having any at all.

"Perhaps you are not supposed to drink when on duty," I added smoothly, seeing Raxoen's anguish.

"Please, take this bottle and enjoy it in your own time."

With a genuine look of surprise, the captain took the bottle and held it reverentially.

"I have another."

The rebel captain looked up and saw it in the cabinet.

"Now I can see that you are a man who knows his wine, and to be honest, I would not know the difference between a bottle of cat spit and a bottle of angel's tears. Perhaps we could come to some arrangement?"

The captain saw the game I was playing, but did not seem to suspect me of anything worse than trying to bribe him so I could fulfil my mission and personally gain the glory.

"How long do you intend to stay?"

"Just until I get an audience. Just until I can present the prize."

I took the second bottle from the cabinet and held it out to the captain who gave it a longing look. It was not hard to see him imagining himself showing off the bottle to his fellow officers and captains. I had purchased them on a whim from a dealer in Umuron, thinking I would open them if ever I was to play host to an admiral or another captain I might like.

"If I see you in port more than three days, I will hunt you down," he said taking the bottle, and hiding the two of them inside his coat.

With that, The Wraith Deep made her way into the harbour. There was precious little space for her, but I spotted a jetty not too close to the rebel naval ships and made for it. We had to pass the grand battleship and felt quite dwarfed by her scale, having to look far up the cliff like, curved hull to see the crew running about their business on deck. She was called The Formidable Awe and looked it with countless guns, buttresses, towers, and vast great paddle wheels at her stern that rose to the height of The Wraith Deep's funnel. I wondered at the size of its engines.

Another ship was tied up alongside her. A small transport that at first held no interest, but then I looked again. I knew that ship. She was called the Water Horse. I could not be sure, but had I not seen just such a transport in Umuron not long ago?

"Are you alright, sir?" said Olvan. The man had to be calmed down once the rebel had let us pass. He admitted that he had been sure that when the two captains had entered the cabin, only one would come out and when the rebel captain came out first, Olvan had nearly drawn his sword.

"What?"

"Is something wrong, sir?"

"That ship."

"Yes?"

"While we are here, I want you to make sure we have a man watching it at all times. I want to know who leaves it and who boards it. Have Mister Sudlas watch it. He has a keen eye."

"Yes, sir. May I ask why?"

"No. Just see to it."

"Yes, sir."

We reached the dock, and I gave the order for all the crew to stay aboard. It was far too risky to let them go ashore, and even had Sergeant Lamtak post men on guard to stop any of them from sneaking off. I then went into town together with Harl to reconnoitre the place. Before leaving, I turned to look at the Water Horse and saw then Mister Sudlas was even now watching it through a spy glass, after which I then turned my attention back to the task at hand.

“Looks like any other Imperial port to me,” I said.

“It was Imperial, not so long ago, Captain” said Harl.

There were the subtle differences in architecture and clothing but otherwise it was unmistakably Imperial Emben. The charismatic leader of the rebels, Krist Jarahn Valthorn had managed to convince the lords of this region to join his cause and fight a fight that would end the rule of blood. Of course this was not good for those lords but they probably had guarantees such as the one made to Ajator, or perhaps they were a more enlightened people in the west. No longer would they pay tribute to the Emperor who lived a world away in the east. The west was to be free and so they rebelled. Valthorn was a criminal traitor, often depicted as an evil vulture in the Gazette whereas in the non-Imperial publications, he was seen as a hero, tall and handsome. He was undoubtedly somewhere in between like everyone else but probably possessed of a keener mind than most. I would have liked to meet the man, but that would never happen.

The rebel navy had obviously taken over most of the town, but I was not worried about this. Every town has its fair share of brothels, and I was on the lookout for a finer establishment.

It was an odd feeling walking amongst the enemy, acting as though we were meant to be there. At times I felt like everyone was watching me, but when I looked round, nobody seemed to be taking any notice at all. At the same time I felt quite excited to be in the lion’s den, right under the nose of the enemy, and about to commit a terrible crime in their eyes and a heroic deed in the Emperor's. So far we had outwitted them, and with any luck, we would pull off the crime and the rebels would be none the wiser.

Turning a corner off the main street up from the harbour, we found what we was looking for. Officers and gentlemen were coming and going from a building that was in fine repair, with doors wide open and welcoming at the top of a short flight of stone steps. Outside the three storey building stood a pair of fine looking ladies as advertisements for what lay within.

“This looks about right, Mister Harl. What do you think?”

“Over my deck, Captain, but if it’s officers you want, then that’s probably the best place to look.”

There was a side road leading down behind the building and I left Harl as a lookout while I went to investigate. It was just an alley and had empty barrels stacked along the walls as well as the odd man sleeping under rags. A small mongrel growled at me. Behind the building, the alley ended when it met the wall of yet another house. There was a back entrance which was closed. Looking up, I saw row upon row of shuttered windows all closed to the prying eyes of neighbouring buildings. I returned to Harl who was winking at one of the girls on the steps.

“Perfect. Let’s get back to the ship and get ready. I want to be back here by sundown, and I need to look respectable.”

Some hours later, my long coat was beaten, brushed and pressed, my boots polished and I even managed to find a respectable pair of breeches, frilly shirt, waistcoat and a bicorn hat, courtesy of Mister Olvan. Using the long mirror the previous captain had installed in the cabin, I looked quite respectable although I could never make clothing look good the same way my

brother did. My clothing at least made me look a little more presentable. I would never be able to totally hide the lump on my back however.

Mister Olvan sighed. "I suppose it will have to do, Captain."

Frowning at the comment, I thought I looked better than that.

"I look like a frilly city boy! Don't the women fall over themselves for men dressed like this?"

"Well... It's not that simple, sir."

"Are you saying I'm just an ugly mongrel dressed like a groomed stallion, Mister Olvan?"

"No!" said Olvan, Willan who dressed me could not suppress a smile.

"Yes you are. And you're right too, but it doesn't matter. I'm not chasing fancy ladies today. I need to look respectable, that's all."

"You look a lot more respectable, Captain."

I grunted, and felt uncomfortable in these clothes, uncomfortable and worried. Obein Klarans had been spotted, the man who had invited Ajator into the Ship of Mariners. At least I was sure it was him. Sudlas had reported a man with red hair, a missing ear and two missing fingers moving from the grand battleship to the transport and back. I did not know the ways of the Secret Servants, but was sure there was foul play at work. Klarans was either a rebel spy or working both sides. What did this mean for Ajator? I did not have time to ponder this now, but I was determined to get to the bottom of it when we returned to Umuron.

Worryingly more rebel navy had arrived too. What were the rebels up to? Already there was a force large enough to strike at Umuron. This must have something to do with Klarans' presence in Sulenfir. Was my duty to head back at once and warn High Admiral Villor? No. The rebel fleet was large enough to wipe out the depleted Western Fleet. If we could get a code book first it would give the Imperial Navy a better chance. A chance at surprising the enemy fleet. I would go ahead with the plan.

"I need your sword."

Olvan undid his belt and handed the sword and scabbard to me, fitting it where I normally kept my heavy cutlass. Taking a last look in the mirror, I sighed and left the cabin to find Harl and Jodlin.

The establishment had no visible name but the ladies at the front door welcomed me to "Lillan's Palace". The door was now closed as night drew in, but was opened from the inside by a burly door guard. In the reception room, my coat and hat were taken by a woman who then pointed out that she had not seen me before.

"My name is Captain Karn," I answered playing with my bulging money purse which had the desired effect. She smiled brightly. I did not want to use my assumed name here as there was a very good chance that Captain Yorlwig was a known customer and so plucked a new name from the air.

"Welcome, Captain Karn. When leaving please be sure to pick up your coat and hat and then you will also be given the chance to settle the bill."

"Very good. Would you be so kind as to show me the way?"

She ushered me into a large room that was full of people talking, drinking and laughing. It was a fine house with fine furnishing, rich tastes and lavish carpets. Chandeliers lit the place and a large fire burned in one wall with padded chairs facing it. The ladies wandered round the room, serving the officers and gentlemen who sat at tables and at a bar, who played cards and smoked pipes and cigars. I was immediately set upon by two beautiful girls who asked what my pleasure was?

“Cards. I am in need of a game of cards and a bottle of wine.”

“Of course, sir.”

They took me to one of the gaming tables and I began to spend money. Drinking little, I played with the girls and I talked to men, mingling, as high society did. I forced myself to smile more, and forced a joviality that was painful but required. Customers came and went, girls played the perfect hostesses, and I felt for them. The type of place I would normally frequent had a cockier, more independent type of woman who had no qualms about complaining and grumbling, but were always happy enough to take your money. Here the girls just smiled and giggled on cue. They put on perfectly innocent faces and were probably called upon to perform the most perverted acts without the slightest complaint. This type of harlot wore out quickly and what happened to them after was anyone’s guess; perhaps the mad house?

Inevitably it started getting late. I was still at the table and was pleased to note that I had not lost too much money, but was frustrated at not finding the chance I had been waiting for. The House was a small man with spectacles and a quick card hand. We played Crows Heads, a simple gambler’s game that was currently the fashion although it had been a peasant’s game originally. At the table was myself, a naval officer, a young gentleman who was probably also an officer but in civilian clothing and a rather portly middle-aged lady who looked completely out of place, yet at the same time, completely at home.

The game was played with an odd deck that was comprised of numbers and mythical creatures. The most valuable card was the crow’s head, hence the name. The idea was to build a Gathering of creatures during a round. At the end of the round, the player with the strongest army won the pot. The house could also win but never lose money. He always had a card less than the players but seeing as he never entered money into the pot, the house always won in the end.

The portly lady had been at the table a long time and seemed to love the game. “I do love spending my husband’s money,” she remarked when she had lost a hand to me.

I could not help raise an eyebrow.

“He’s upstairs now with Enibba. He thinks the world of her and I am sure he pays her well in tips and gifts. She has him wrapped round her little finger!”

“So you spend his money?”

“Of course! She thinks she has it good. I’ve lost over four golden heads tonight haven’t I Sinders?” This was to the House who nodded.

“Are you married?” she asked.

“Oh no,” I said. “I’m in no hurry to do so either.”

“Hm. Are you a merchant?”

“No. I serve the duke as a private contractor.”

“A pirate?”

“No, no. A privateer.”

“A pirate,” she said as though that was that.

“Only to the Empire.”

At that, there was a call from the large steps at the end of the room, where a stunningly attractive and very young lady was helping an ancient man down the stairs. I realised that this was the lady’s husband as she got up and took his arm from the girl. The man must have been twice the age of the portly lady. I did not miss the curt smile the girl gave her and realised that perhaps the lady had once stolen this man herself from another older lady in just such a place as this.

I was now left with the young gentleman and the officer, who I decided was my last and only bet. "Drinks!" I called and gestured to the table as a whole. The two other guests nodded their thanks, and drinks were brought round for all. The game continued and I began to talk about the recent weather. It was a tedious subject but always on the lips of sailors and officers alike. Hopefully the subject that might bore the younger gentleman into leaving, but it didn't work. "Senior Officer?" I then asked, trying to decipher the officer's rank.

The officer looked up from his cards. He had dark eyes and a strong jaw but he was slim, and looked like he had recently recovered from an illness. The man was perhaps in his mid-thirties.

"Senior Officer Darl Obringer of the Battleship War Lion." He introduced himself. "You are a privateer? I overheard."

"Captain Hostom Karn, at your service."

"An adventurous life I should imagine?"

"I would say so. Dangerous, but it has its rewards," I said, patting my purse.

"Indeed," Darl said looking round, and then indicated that a girl should join him. There were plenty of seats available now.

This was my chance and I ordered more wine, the best wine, and we all drank. I even insisted that the women join in.

The mood relaxed a great deal, and the talking continued. The girls giggled more, and the men got louder. I saw to it to lose more money. It got very late, but I kept the wine coming, and soon the young gentleman had had enough. He slurred his thanks. Then, with an arm around a woman ten years his senior, but as kindly and attractive as any wench there was, he left the table for a room. Darl and I continued the game, drinking and fondling the young things until I noticed that Senior Officer Obringer's eyes began to close.

"Take the poor man to a room," I slurred. The girl he was with was quite drunk herself but managed to get him to his feet.

I assisted them both and half carried the fool up the grand staircase, and then into a room as indicated by the woman. On placing the officer on the bed, I kicked hard as though trying to regain my balance and smashed the chamber pot that was tucked just under the bed. In the drunken bustle to get the man to bed nobody took much notice of the damage done. Then I turned to the woman and bowed. She gave me an unexpected drunken kiss before closing the door on me. I smiled. The room was perfect. No washroom and situated at the back of the building.

Returning back downstairs, I picked a girl who had been drinking heavily of my wine. Snapping my fingers, the girl took me to a room, where she began to get undressed, but I told her to go to sleep. She looked upset.

"You're a pretty thing," said I. "And I will find the strength soon enough but right now I want sleep."

She looked like she was going to complain but then gave in to the spirits and fell fast asleep on her side. I sighed for she truly was pretty in the dull light. What a waste, but I had no time, and instead stood listening at the door. When things quietened down I carefully opened it and stepped out into the now dark corridor. There was still light coming from downstairs, but I found a shadowy corner and waited.

People came and went as the hours passed, but nobody saw me there. Sounds came from various rooms, but slowly things quietened as the house fell asleep. Finally the door of the room

I had taken Darl Obringer to opened and an unsteady woman stepped out, who, with her chamber pot broken, made for the ladies room on the other side of the corridor.

I moved quickly. There were minutes at best and I desperately wanted to avoid hurting any of the girls. This was war but they were innocent. Opening the door I went in without hesitation and saw the officer lying naked on the bed.

The rebel stirred from his drunken sleep and I cursed under my breath as all I wanted was to slip in and riffle through the officer's pockets. It was a long shot but there was always a chance that he had a code book with him. Now I was forced to do it the hard way. Darl saw me moving towards him with a bludgeon in my hand. Harl had provided the club, which I had kept inside my breaches. The officer was alarmed and about to shout out when I struck him hard on the head with a nasty crack.

"For the Empire," I whispered through gritted teeth as the club knocked the naked man out cold, and probably dead by the sound of the blow.

Without pause, I stepped to the window and opened it. Leaning out and looking down into the back alley, I saw Harl and Jodlin appear from the shadows. I took the officer under the arms and manhandled him to the window, then using all my strength, heaved him over the edge to fall to the men below. Where was the girl? She would be back at any moment. Then I gathered up the clothing on the floor and threw them out as well. I took one last glance around the room for anything else that might belong to the officer. Finding nothing, I closed the shutters and window again, put a golden head on the side table and left. Just then the whore returned from the lady's room. She saw me in the hall and smiled a drunken but seductive smile. I bowed drunkenly again and bade her a good night.

Casually making my way down the stairs, I went to the reception room where a night guard consulted a book. He then took payment and returned my clothing. With a racing heart I left the house, playing the drunk as I negotiated the steps. On reaching the corner of the building, I looked round, and then waved to the darkness of the alley. Harl and Jodlin appeared carrying a large barrel.

"Let's go," I whispered.

They followed me back to the main road, and then down to the harbour. There where guards wandering the walks and I was forced to continue my drunken act to distract them while the two seamen shuffled past with the conspicuous barrel. At one point I was threatened with a cell for being so drunk, but I quickly wriggled my way out of it by dropping some copper heads on the ground.

"Clumsy me!" I slurred picking one up again and forgetting the rest. The guards certainly noticed the coins and let me wonder off in my drunken zigzag walk while they gathered them up.

Eventually we made it back to the ship. The barrel was taken into the captain's cabin where I opened it up to extract the clothing. The officer was dead from the blow or the fall, but he would have had to die anyway for the plan to work now. No time to waste on regrets. Instead I put the officer's clothing on. Now I was a rebel officer with the final and most dangerous part of the plan ahead.

Chapter Nine

“Mister Olvan!”

“Captain?”

“The ship we want is a battleship called The War Lion.”

Olvan had spent time during the day making notes of the ships in the harbour and their positions. Consulting the sheet of paper, running his finger down the list, he said, “Pier three, sir. The War Lion. One of those big piers on the other side of the harbour, Captain. The bigger ships are at anchor over that side. I presume the water is deeper.”

“At anchor?”

“Yes, Captain. The piers obviously can’t take the big ships, but I noted where the launches landed, and for The War Lion, it’s pier three.”

“The ladies, Harl?”

“Ready and waiting. I paid them well. They should still be there, Captain,” said Harl.

“Go and take them to the inn we saw on the corner of the road. Tell them to wait for a senior officer by the name of Obringer.”

“Aye, Sir.”

“Wait! Is the sailing boat ready?”

“Ready to go, Captain,” said Harl.

Everything was ready, with blank sheets of paper on my desk and a quill made ready to copy the code book. Nothing more to prepare.

“You know you’re going to get yourself killed?” This was the doctor who was sitting in the corner.

“Might do, doctor, but that’s my choice. You lot have your orders.” I now spoke to the rest of the men in the cabin which included the engineer, the marine sergeant, Olvan, Jodlin, Willan and Harl who was about to leave.

“If I’m caught, you get the hells out of here. Run this ship like you’ve got the Tempest of Depths at your heels!” referring to a well-known fable about a sea monster. “Mister Olvan, you are to report the fact that the Water Horse was here to the Secret Servants.” I then took the signet ring from the dead officer and placed it on my finger. With that they wished me luck.

A few lamps lit the harbour. Flies buzzed and moths fluttered in the dim pools of light. A dog sniffed around the wooden planking at the waterfront looking for scraps of food and rats amongst the crates, rubbish and piled ropes. There was a certain quality to the air that hinted of morning, but it was still dark and there should be enough time.

The great ships lit up the waters and in the distance. I could see more ships at anchor outside the harbour. A panicked flight would never work. The plan had to succeed or not only my life would be forfeit, but the life of my crew too. Perhaps I was taking too much risk with them? Perhaps this was a vain attempt at glory. The doctor's words came to mind. Was I trying to prove something to myself? Too late now. I had to go through with this. We had come too far and faced too many dangers to stop now. Every step had led to more danger, and every step made retreat the harder. The goal was so close, and with luck we would all be back at sea by daybreak. With luck.

I made my way by a back road to the main street again, and came down it with a drunken stagger, singing a song about a mermaid who had a hairy chest. It was one of the favourites amongst seamen but he I never understood the words. It had stuck in my head though, and now I

was putting it to good use. When reaching the inn on the corner, I found the two ladies waiting for me in the shadows.

“Ah!” I said, with a drunken leer. “Come my pretties.”

“We was told to wait here for an officer,” said the smaller one.

“That’s me! Senior Officer Darl Obringer at your service.” Bowing far too low, I nearly fell. The girls took me by the arms and giggled. They relaxed now that their client was here and seemed relatively harmless.

“I promised the lads a gift!” I blurted. I was loud and made a pair of guards stare, but they saw nothing suspicious in a drunk officer with two ladies of the night.

“Come. Pier two. No! three! Pier three.”

The women led the way with me in hand. I started complimenting the girls, and fumbled for some coins which I pressed into their hands. We laughed. This was turning into a profitable evening for the two women Harl had found earlier in the evening in one of the cheaper houses. On reaching the pier, we made our way over to a smaller launch where two sailors got ready to take the officer back to his ship. I had my hat low over my face, and sank my head into my coat, singing and slurring.

“The War Lion!”

“Sir!” said one of the sailors as the ladies stepped aboard, and I clumsily fell onto one of the benches.

As expected the seamen had their eyes on the ladies and took no notice at all of myself. I fell silent, and allowed the ladies to flirt and giggle with the men who pulled on the oars. After five minutes we reached the wall of timber that was The War Lion.

“Wait here,” I slurred to the two seamen in the launch as the ladies and I stepped onto the steps that led up the side of the ship. “Up you go pretties. Get up there and tell them a senior officer is coming up. Show them how friendly you can be!” I winked at them, pressing more coin into their hands. They made their way up the steps with me following a little way behind. At the top I saw from the shadows of my hat that the girls had taken a sentry each. As I had expected, two marines were on guard at the steps, and when they saw me coming up they stood to attention with the girls clinging onto them.

“Sir!” said one of them.

“As’y were lads,” I reached the top and wobbled, slurred every word and made them as lazy as possible. “Toll’you I’d bring a gift!” I was betting the officers were not too familiar with the crew, and it seemed to be working. Either the men could not see me in the darkness or they did not know their officer’s faces too well. Either way, the sailors were more interested in the ladies than a drunk officer.

“Sir?”

“Girls! Girls. You deserve’em. Stuck here on this’ol tub.”

The two guards looked at one-another, then looked at the ladies.

“Go on!” I encouraged them. “Don’worry. I’ll stand guard for a bit. Oh yes. Use a cabin. Our secret.”

“Which cabin?”

“That man Obringer’s still in town. Use his.”

“What?” said one of the girls and I realised my mistake. Before she could point out that I was meant to be Obringer, I quickly push more coin into their hands and said, “Show them a good time ladies. They deserve it. Hurry now.”

There was doubt in the marine's eyes. They could be hanged for deserting their post. "It's a bloody order! Get your man sausages out and giv' em some air. An order!"

The girls giggled and the guards relented, hardly believing their luck. They took the women over to a door in the aft super structure, and then went down a passageway, and I followed them to the door and saw which cabin they entered. Once they were gone, I went into the same passageway and began looking around. It was dark with only a single lantern so I took it off the wall, and began to check the doors. Some of them were blank, while others had names on them. Making my way to some steps, I wondered if a lectrocoder would be on an upper deck. I reasoned that the captain would want to be close to the lectrocode officer as he was on the Sea Huntress and so I climbed them and sure enough, after another few doors, found one which had the words, Lectrocoder carved into a wooden panel.

Easing the door open, the room inside was pitch black, but the lantern revealed a cabin with a desk, a cot and the mysterious lectrocoder device on a substantial table, fixed to the wood by clamps and bolts. It had copper piping, and was humming and slightly glowing from its complex innards. In the bed was a young man, sleeping soundly. The desk had draws which I now hoped contained the book. It wasn't on the desk, and there seemed no other place for it. Putting the lantern on the desk, I tried to open the drawer. It was locked!

"Damn turd in hells," I muttered, and tugged again.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Spinning around, I saw the bleary eyed Lectrocode Officer looking up from his pillow.

"Where is the code book?"

"Book, sir? Who are you?"

The man got up. He slept in a long pair of white cottons. He rubbed his eyes. Round his neck, on a silver chain was a small key.

"The book. That's an order!" I growled.

"I don't know you, sir. I would have to ask..."

There was a commotion on deck. Someone was shouting: "Guards! Where are you?"

I leaped on the young officer, drawing the gutting knife I had concealed inside Obringer's coat. Grabbing the man by the neck, I forced him down onto the bed then held the knife to the man's groin.

"The book!" My voice sounded like a malevolent hiss in my ears, but it was born of panic.

The officer was young, hardly a man, probably no older than sixteen or seventeen. His eyes were wide with terror, and seemed petrified into silence by the blade pressing against his balls.

"The book!" I repeated, very conscious of the commotion going on down on deck. Men were running and shouting. The girls were protesting loudly now.

I did not want it to be like this, but I had planned for it. I had hoped to copy the book there on the ship without being found out, and then simply vanish, but it was not to be.

Slowly the Lectrocode Officer raised a hand to point at the draw in the desk. Looking at the terrified boy, I wished I did not have to do this. I hesitated. There were tears in the boy's eyes. There was more movement on the ship. Men were waking to investigate the noise. I had to get off the ship, and fast.

"Sorry." I quickly brought the knife up and thrust it deep and hard into the boy's heart. Forcing my other hand over the young officer's mouth, the boy struggled for mere seconds before the life left his eyes. Wiping the blade on the bedclothes, I then ripped the key from the dead officer's neck and opened the draw. There I found the small black book. It was surprisingly heavy with lead weights sewn into the spine, designed to sink it should it be thrown overboard.

Now for the final act, and then get the hells of this ship. I did not look back at the boy. I couldn't, feeling awful for killing such an innocent, but it had to be done.

The passageway was empty. I had to be quick. Soon an officer or guard would probably go to Obringer's cabin. I made my way down the steps and could clearly hear another officer berating the two marines outside. Somewhere a door slammed. Quick as a marlin, I darted into The Senior Officer's cabin. It was a good size with a trunk, cot, desk and some chairs. A small porthole looked out over the night time harbour. On the desk was a writing box, a lantern and some papers. Putting my own lantern down, I quickly looked through the papers and found a letter home which was yet to be sealed. It had Darl Obringer's signature at the bottom. Opening the writing box, I took a blank sheet of paper and a pen, then, dipping the pen in the box's inkwell wrote:

"No longer can I live with this treachery! No longer will I suffer the dishonour. Long live the Emperor!" This was all there was time for. It would have to do. I signed it as best I could, "Senior Officer Darl Obringer." Then, taking a stick of red wax I opened the lantern and melted the end which I placed on the note to leave a hot lump into which I plunged the signet ring I had taken from the officer.

Now to get off this ship. Originally I had hoped to be in and out before the guards were done with the ladies and just take the launch back, but that would never work now. It was nearing morning, and the sun was probably no more than half an hour away. I had to hurry.

It was too far to swim with the clothes that had to be returned as part of the plan. I could probably get a hundred yards or so, but they would surely drag me down after that. It had to be a boat. Harl had offered to stand ready with a boat if needed but it would have looked too suspicious to have a launch hovering around the naval ship, so I rejected that idea, but regretted that now. Harl could have hidden in some shadows further off. It would have been a risk worth taking. Perhaps the seamen in the launch were still being questioned? They would head back at some point to await others who wished to return to the ship. It was my best and probably only chance.

I headed back into the ship to find another way out. Climbing the steps again, I had to duck back into a door-well as a guard passed on his nightly rounds further down the passage. When it was clear I continued. I found more steps leading up and came to another door. Opening it, I found myself on the deck of the aftcastle, but two men stood at one end looking down at the officer who was still berating the poor guards. I thanked my lucky stars when I heard the officer tell the boat men to get back to their duties, and the two guards to expect an enquiry in the morning. The boatmen were still there.

Creeping away from the men towards the back of the vessel, I looked down at the massive paddle wheel housing and black waters of the harbour. It was a long drop, and I was sure I would never survive it should I jump. Also they were sure to hear me hit the water and come to investigate. Climbing over the taffrail, I started my descent. I was aiming for a chain that emerged from further down the hull to the side of the wheels. If I could reach that, I could then use it to reach the water. The chain was a rear anchor chain, thick and it angled down into the black waters.

Must hurry. The launch would soon be gone and I would be left in the cold and dark waters where I would soon tire and sink to the bottom and a watery grave. Thankfully, there were plenty of hand holds in the fine carvings that adorned such a grand ship which helped me descend the wall of wood. As I climbed, I also edged my way over to the chain and was now above it. It was all taking too long! Then, in my hurry to get down, I lost my grip on a ledge, and fell. Panicking,

I scramble to find a hold, but none came to hand so I tumbled. With a bone crunching jar, I fell, back first onto the massive chain. Like a cat, I span round and again scrambled for a grip, finding one and hung for a second from the chain with one hand. The drop had both hurt and winded me. I hoped I had not been heard. My grip was already tiring and slipping. I was not a strong man, but with a grunt of effort, managed to reach up and take the chain with both hands.

It was still quite a drop, so I began to edge my way, hand over hand down towards the water that I could now hear lapping on the silent paddle wheels. Finally, reaching the water, I eased myself into it. It was far colder than I had expected, and the chill took my breath away. It may have been spring but this far north, the waters never truly warmed and to me it felt like ice. Letting go of the chain, I sank at once. My boots, jacket, breaches, book and knife all conspired to sink me. I kicked and waved my arms in desperation. It was exhausting and took every bit of strength I had left in my tired body to break the surface. I coughed and spluttered, half swam and half kicked just to stay above the waterline and made my way around the ship. The launch was still there, tied to the ship's steps. The two ladies sat sullen and cold in the bow. The two seamen where just getting in. I made for it, but now my body was going numb with the cold and effort. My muscles where already giving way. I got closer and forced myself to be silent. It was near impossible, but I had to try. The two seamen undid the rope, and sat at their oars. They were grumbling and cursing as they did so.

"Don't blame us," I heard one of the girls say.

If they set off now, I would never make it. It was so dark that they probably would not see me but I had to swim silently for any sound would alert them to my presence. The damned clothes dragged at me. Obring'er's clothes. They were lead weights and I was not strong enough to fight them, but I kept trying. I kept going. My shoulders now burned with the effort. Swallowing water, I had to force myself not to cough and splutter. Keep fighting, keep going, but I was too late. The seamen put the oars in the water and pulled on them. I despaired, only yards away now but it was just no longer possible to reach them.

"You there!"

The men stopped rowing and looked up. I kept going as quietly as I could. I was sinking, but reached out.

"If any more officers try to bring a lady on board, you are to inform me at once. You know the regulations!"

This was the last thing I heard as he went under. My fingers brushed against the boat, and I grabbed the rear keel, holding it as hard as I could knowing it would be slippery, but I had it, and then was pulled forwards. Surfacing again, I gasped for air. The noise of the oars now covered my gasping breathes of sweet air. The grip was tenuous and slipping so I reached up with my spare hand for a ring that hung from the keel which held a rope. I hooked my finger into it and finally relaxed, spent, frozen, but alive, and I allowed the seamen to drag me through the waters, back to land.

It was only a short trip, and the men grumbled at the labour, commenting that the ladies should lose weight to which they received very indignant and un-lady like responses. The men were obviously in no mood to flatter the ladies having recently been chastised for their part in events.

As the boat neared the pier, I had to steel myself again for more swimming. I wanted to leave it as late as possible, but didn't want to be too close to the seamen when they reached the pier for fear of being spotted leaving the boat. At was dark, but I soon saw some harbour detritus in the light of the few lamps on the piers. Amongst the rubbish was a bobbing barrel. Without a

second thought I let go of the boat and swam for it. I sank at once, but swam as hard as I could. At least they would not see or hear me, and kept going as far as my breath would hold. The question was whether or not I would have the strength to drag myself back to the surface again. My body was exhausted and my arms and legs moved more slowly than I willed them. I fought hard, finally letting out the precious air in a cry of desperation, but made it, just breaking the surface again.

When I came up, I did not look back. I did not have the strength. Either they would see me or they would not. I could hear the launch not far off, but I swam for the barrel, and just hoped I was not seen or heard. So weak now. I was losing any ability to fight the sucking depths, but with a final desperate effort of will, I manage to reach the barrel, and hugged it for the dear life saver it was, gasping for breath. Now I dared look round and saw as the launch knocked against the pier. The grumbling seamen sent the ladies on their way, and went back to playing cards on a crate. I was near spent.

Kicking, hugging the barrel, I began the long swim back to my ship and crew. I kept looking east and feared the rising sun. It would both make me visible in the waters and ruin the final part of our plan. Time passed. I kicked and kicked. It was slow going. I just wanted to rest, wanted a soft cot, and a bottle of fiery wine and a big woman to warm me. I kicked and just kept going. Eventually I rounded a cargo ship, and there, saw the black silhouette of The Wraith Deep. Looking up, there was a thin line of grey on the horizon. Dawn was coming. With renewed purpose, I forced myself to kick harder, and finally I was spotted as I came up alongside the ship. The men were all awake and keeping a weather eye. They sent rope ladders down, and men came down to fetch me and drag my spent body to the deck where I lay coughing up seawater.

“Captain?”

“Give him room, lads.”

I heard the voices but did not know who was talking.

“Captain?”

Drifting off.

“The dawn, Captain.”

Dawn. Dawn!

I looked up at Harl who was holding me.

“Hurry,” I coughed. “Hurry! Take the book.”

Harl looked through my inside pockets and found the book. Dr. Eebel then arrived and told the men to stand back.

“Copy the book!” I croaked. My vision was blurring. The last thing I saw before passing out were the doctor’s dark eyes.

Alone in my cabin, I was weak but rested. The engine was running. The paddle wheels churned the water. I heard seagulls, and stared at the deck above me. It was all slowly coming back to me. The brothel, the rebel officer, the blood. I had killed two men. The cold water and desperate fight not to drown. I had fought. It was all coming back to me now. The plan was to take a lectrocode book, copy it and then what?

I sat up in the cot. My body shook from fatigue and hunger. I was dressed in a white cotton overall. We were at sea. The plan was to return the book to the dead officer together with his uniform and signet ring. My finger had no ring. The signet ring was gone. Then the men were to

take the body and a sailing boat out to the harbour rocks where they would shipwreck the boat with the dead officer, and leave him for the rebel navy to find. They would think that he had tried to make his way to an Imperial port where he was going to hand over the code book and become an Imperial hero. Thinking about it now, it was a weak plan. What if the rebel officer was beyond reproach? Then the rebels would know that something was amiss. What if they changed the code just to be on the safe side? The door opened and doctor Eebel stepped in.

“You’re alive,” the doctor remarked. He did not seem too thrilled about the fact

“I am.”

Mister Harl followed him in and smiled at me. “Captain.” He knuckled his forehead.

“Mister Harl. Tell me. What happened?” I gestured to one of the chairs.

“We did it as we planned it, sir,” Harl said, taking a seat. “We put the rebel in the sailing boat with the book in his pocket. I took it over to the rocks and smashed her there and left him on the rocks. Then I swam back.”

“And you weren’t seen?”

“No, Captain. I’m sure I wasn’t. It was getting light but I think we got away with it.”

“And the copy?”

“All copied, sir. Mister Olvan did it. Had to write quick, but you can make it out.”

I nodded and sighed with relief.

“So,” said the doctor. “They find this officer with the code book and reckon all is said and done and that’s an end to it?”

“Yes. At least that’s what I’m hoping.”

“You do realise they aren’t stupid. They’ll suspect foul play.”

“They might,” I admitted. “But will they consider it enough cause to re-write their codebook?”

“Quite a gamble.”

“War is a gambling man’s game, doctor.” I noticed a change in the doctor. He seemed less agitated. He wasn’t drunk and his hands weren’t shaking.

Mister Olvan now entered the cabin, and saluted. “Good to see you awake again, sir.”

“Thank you Mister Olvan.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’ll live...”

“There’s more, Captain,” interrupted Harl.

“Go on.”

“I know you would have wanted to wait for the right time to leave and we should have asked you, but the doctor insisted that we let you rest, so Mister Olvan suggested we give it a couple of hours so as to not arouse any suspicion.”

“I see. We seem to be on our way, so I presume all went well?”

“It did,” said Olvan. “But we did hurry in the end. The whole harbour began to move, sir. There was a lot of commotion, and ships manoeuvring. We saw that the battleships were making ready to leave port and we wanted to be out of there before they clogged up the entrance.”

“Did anyone try to stop us?”

“No. All the rebel naval vessels were heading out. Nobody bothered with us, but that’s not the half of it. When we made the open seas, we saw a fleet, sir.”

“A fleet?”

“Yes, sir. A second rebel fleet. A grand thing in the morning light. You did say they were gathering, and they were to the south, closer to the mainland. I recon the rebel fleet is on the move, sir. So many ships! Umuron will be overrun!”

“I see.” I stood on shaking legs. “Did you take notes? Did you see what ships they had? Numbers and sizes?”

“Yes, Captain,” beamed the young officer. “I have it all noted down for you.”

“Well done Mister Olvan!”

This was important. We were now ahead of the rebel fleet that might now be on its way to attack the Empire. We had to get back quickly and warn Umuron.

“What time is it?”

“Late of the noon, sir,” said Harl. “It being six of the clock.”

“And what speed are we making?”

“Cruising, Captain. Mister Perti said we would get nowhere if the engine breaks, so don’t push it - his words.”

“What! This is urgent! Full speed, Harl. That’s an order, and tell Mister Perti that his job is to keep the engine running whatever the cost.”

Minutes later, I was on the castle and spying the seas with my glass. I had only bothered to put on my boots and wrap myself in my long-coat. There were no ships but far to the west I could just make out the grubby haze of a lot of steam engines belching black smoke into the sky. I wished I knew where the enemy were off to. Perhaps we should have stayed in port to see if we could have discovered the fleet’s destination? But then we might have been too late to warn the Empire. No, it was best to get back as soon as possible and warn the High Admiral of a probable attack. The Empire needed time to gather its warships, and it might only have a few days to do so.

The Wraith Deep/Lady Ocean was running at full speed. The hull shuddered to an intense beat from the engine. The paddles wheels thrashed the waters. I went to the engine room tube and lifted the brass cone to my face. It was attached to a leather tube which led down to the engine room where hopefully Mister Perti would hear me over the din of the roaring machine.

“Mister Perti?” There was no answer. “Engine room!” I shouted down the tube.

“Captain?” It was Perti.

“Can we go any faster?”

“Faster? Not possible. The kettle’s straining as it is. The emergency release valve is popping away. She’s running at full speed.”

“I thought you could tighten the valve?”

“Of course, but I told you how that could end.”

“It is vital that we get back as soon as possible, Mister Perti. If there is any way of getting more speed without blowing us up then make it happen.”

“Will do, sir. I’ll give the valve a half turn.”

“Do that. What’s that noise?” There was a loud knocking coming through the pipe. I could also now feel it through my boots.

“Soft metal used on a joint and bearings. Hard to get it right, Captain. The joint needs a combination of hard and soft but Empire metallurgists just don’t do it right. It’ll hold... I think, but we need to get Calionvar parts when we get back. I can’t promise anything though. That joint could give at any time. I’ll say a prayer.”

“I see. Keep her running. Find more speed and say your prayers.”

I knew about bearings - small metal balls that were so damned hard to produce. One way was to drop molten metal into water but it was very much hit and miss to get them round and the right size.

“Should we keep this course, Captain?” asked Olvan.

I turned to him and grunted. “We keep close to land now. It’s the fastest route.”

“Aye, sir.”

A flock of gulls followed us. I noticed a pair of Fawl Whales further north, also heading east but at a much more leisurely pace, their white backs rising and falling.

I got little sleep. None of the crew got much. After one and a half days at full speed, the bearings finally gave with a loud crack and almighty hammering from the engine. Perti shut down the engine and I hurled myself down the steep ladders to the engine room. It was the middle of the night. I saw a circle of broken metal on the deck and the metal balls scattered round.

"The ring cracked." said Perti.

"Can you fix it?" I demanded.

"Given time. A day or two, but it would only be temporary."

"You have one hour, Mister Perti. Whatever it takes. Get that engine running within the hour!"

After a lot of head scratching, repeated demands and threats, Mister Perti relented to my order. The engineer complained that the engine would take damage if run without the bearings, but I did not care, just as long as we got back to Umuron without further delay.

From then on the engine hammered mightily and the noise was deafening. Those poor souls that had to work below took to wearing padding over the ears, and even then they had trouble hearing after coming off a shift. I reduced shifts to three hours on and three hours off. Mister Perti had wrapped a large amount of cloth steeped in swine fat around the offending axle where the bearings would have smoothed the motion, but the cloth was soon pummelled to a fibrous mush and had to be constantly replaced. Our speed had slowed.

Something had to be done. We had to get back as fast as possible, much faster than our current speed and I was desperate for a solution. All I could do was pace and fret, but I was getting tired. Finally exhaustion took me to my cot where I gave in to sleep, a sleep of dark dreams punctuated by the mad hammering of the engine. In my dream I called and the call was answered with teeth, a knife and two bulbous eyes that glowed in the darkness of my cabin.

This was no dream! I threw myself from the cot and stumbled to my cutlass which hung from my chair. Drawing it, I raised myself up and faced the Sealorn.

It hissed, then said, “You summoned my queen. She answers your call.”

“What? What call?”

“You call and we come.” Its teeth glinted razor sharp. Its voice was like the last breath of a dying man. “My queen says that you have made your request. The debt is paid.”

Hammering.

“The sea hag?”

Hammering.

I awoke in a cold sweat. The cabin was empty. The hammering engine beat to a new stroke. Something was going on, so I hurriedly dressed and went out.

There was a bustle on deck. Dawn was upon us and men craned their necks to look overboard. We were moving briskly through the waters. I went to the aftcastle where Mister Olvan waved his hands in incomprehension.

“Our speed, Captain. We’re moving faster than ever.”

I too went to look overboard and what I saw were mere shapes. Fast moving, pale shapes that thronged below the hull. They were pushing us through the water, speeding us along. I had no answer, but a guess. Had I summoned the help of the hag? Shuddering at the thought, I did not want to know. Had I been so desperate that in my dreams I had called in the debt? It never occurred to me to ever call upon her, but in my dreams, perhaps I dared such a thing. Whatever the answer, I stopped questioning it. We were moving fast now and that was answer enough.

It took six days to reach Umuron. It was morning and there was a light drizzle in the air. The engine was in a bad state with the boiler leaking steam and a piston in need of replacement. I still congratulated the engineer who was most upset at having treated the engine so badly. Grumbling and muttering, Perti patted the boiler and told her it was over now. Now he would fix her up nice and good again.

"You do that Mister Perti. You are a hero, and I will personally see to it that you get all the parts you need."

We had made it back, thanks to a fine engineer, crew, and, more troublingly, the help of the Other. That help had vanished hours ago, but the job was done and I did not have time to dwell on it now.

To my surprise a sizable Imperial fleet had already gathered in and around the harbour. It was not a huge fleet, made up of the grand battleship, War Tempest, three other battleships and a dozen frigates as well as a score of supply vessels, but it was impressive all the same.

“A magnificent ship, sir,” said Olvan when he saw the War Tempest. “I was worried by the rebel fleet but now that I see her...”

“A brutal ship, Mister Olvan, built for war,” I said. “She is the flagship and made to lead, inspire and most of all crush anything in her path.”

“Is your father here then, the Lord Admiral?”

“No. It will be Lord Admiral Baron Villor, his second. My father rarely commands these days and trusts Villor with the fleet.”

“Have you met the man, sir?”

“No. I have seen him though. My father speaks very highly of him, and I must say, he certainly looks as formidable as his ship.”

It took quite a while to reach a dock. The name of the ship was not recognised, and the prowling frigates of the Imperial Navy quickly moved in to stop us. Only flying the Imperial and Ardalrion Flag proudly, and my throwing my name about eventually got us through.

“Are we to take the copied book directly to the Admiral, Captain?” asked Olvan as we manoeuvred the Wraith Deep/Lady Ocean through the harbour at a snail’s pace.

“Shortly Mister Olvan. We must dock first.” I was holding my pipe and looking at the many ships as they passed. I was looking for Ajator, hoping that my brother had returned as captain of one of the ships. Mister Owman was again at the helm. Harl was on deck making ready to land.

“As soon as we’re tied up. I want the name repainted back to the Lady Ocean.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” said Olvan

“I also want the engine fixed by tomorrow morning.”

Olvan looked doubtful.

“Tell Mister Perti that our services might be needed very soon. It is vital to get the ship made ready by morning. Spend money if you have to. Just get it done.”

I had given the engineer the impression that he would now have time to fix the engine properly, but seeing the gathering Imperial and Ardalrion Navy, I suspected that we would be

required to move soon and fast. Not only that, I did not want to miss events. It would be days before the rebels could reach us, but what if the fleet moved before then? We would be ready.

“I will, sir. Any idea where we’re going, Captain?”

“To war, Mister Olvan. To war.”

Chapter Ten

A message arrived by naval courier ordering the captain of the Lady Ocean to attend the High Admiral aboard his ship, the War Tempest. We had only been docked for half an hour and I was in the middle of gathering my report on recent events. My mind was spinning at the enormity of our undertaking and news. Was I mad? Did we truly just sail into enemy waters and pluck a copy of the rebel codebook from under the enemy's very noses? We had, I told myself, and we got away with it. We had been lucky, I knew that, but also foolish, and the men probably knew this. It was me that had led them into danger and it was me who had been foolish. Stop it, I chastised myself. It worked didn't it? Now we had the codebook. That was surely worth a little danger.

"Mister Olvan!" I shouted from the cabin.

A wet Olvan entered the cabin. It had started raining properly. "Captain?"

"Are your notes ready?"

"I have them here, sir," he said producing a couple of sheets of paper from his pocket. I noticed very neat handwriting on a long list of ships with names and sizes. I had made the officer re-write his original notes as they were hurriedly made and hardly presentable.

"Very good. I want the launch made ready. I will see the High Admiral now." I placed all the papers in a leather folder including the copy of the code book and tied it up neatly.

"Aye aye, Captain."

I did my best to smooth out my uniform and brush of the salt and grime that had built up over the last few weeks. I looked unkempt, I knew, but I would have done so in a brand new, tailor made, suit of gold. It was just the way I was. Grunting, I made my way to the launch which had been lowered into the water. The rain was coming down heavily now and already seeping through my layers of clothing, waxed or no.

"Mister Harl!"

"Sir?" called Harl leaning over the ship's side.

"I want this ship ready to go as soon as humanly possible. Mister Olvan is in charge, but you make it happen."

"Will do, sir."

I looked at the crew, a crew that had followed me on a mad quest. Where they standing taller now? Did they look proud of their work? I thought so. I hoped so.

The War Tempest was at anchor in the heart of the harbour's wide cradle of calm waters, speckled by the fall of a million drops of rain. She was surrounded by a fleet of boats coming and going with crew and supplies. Cranes were used to haul up nets, packed with goods needed to feed a crew of nineteen hundred or so souls. A cow was bellowing as it was dragged up the side in a net. The ship was vast and easily the largest ship in the Ardalrion fleet. The War Tempest was old, with a basic galley shape that had been added to over the years. She would have had sails at one point in time, but they were long ago removed and replaced by three funnels that even now released a little of the black smoke from a boiler room that never slept. I could only wonder at the size of her engines, the massive pistons, the cooker and fly wheels.

Six crewmen were rowing the boat who pushed then hauled on the oars, all hunkered down against the rain. We had to take a circuitous route around the many ships and it took a long time before we finally came alongside the towering flagship.

Looking up, I admired the strength of the vessel. Not only its iron banded timber hull, and row upon row of gruesomely decorated gun ports, but also the strength it represented. It was the final word of the Imperial and Ardalrion Fleet in these waters and I felt an uncommon pang of

pride for this monstrous killing machine. I guessed she could give a broadside of one hundred heavy guns. That combined firepower was an awesome thought, but the scale of the ship was even more awe inspiring with true castles at both aft and bow including towers and spires and crenulations. The ship was a small city with its own forges, a gym, a gallery, a library, barracks, boot menders, theatre, temple and anything else a small community might require. I knew all this from a previous visit together with my former captain, Cresp. I had been especially impressed by the squat array of the fire belching mortars used to bombard land targets. They looked like fat mouthed demons where massive, crushing round shot or fused grenades were simply placed upon a charge which threw the shot high into the air to fall like death from the heavens upon an enemy's head.

Climbing a seemingly endless flight of steps to reach the main deck, I was welcomed aboard by a junior officer who politely led me through a large and ornate set of double doors into a wide gallery lined with portraits of previous admirals. The floor was polished to a mirror's shine but we walked along a thick carpet that ran the length of the hall and was probably placed there to protect the floor from nailed boots. The ceiling high above me was covered with ornate scroll work. The lighting came from a long row of lanterns hanging from above which were lit even though it was only just after midday.

The gallery led deep into the aftcastle of the ship and had many doors running off it on either side, but the officer walked me in silence to the far end where another set of large double doors were opened. Above me was basically a compact fortress made of oak and iron. Above me and below me was a miracle of ship building and design. That it did not sink or collapse under its own weight was a miracle. Somewhere I had read that it took six thousand trees to build a battleship. The War Tempest must have been three or four times the size of a battleship.

"Captain Lord Ardalrion," announced the junior officer stepping aside to let me into a vast near cathedral like hall with a long row of windows running along the far end. In the middle of this hall was a long, oval shaped dining table surrounded by finely crafted, tall back chairs. It could probably seat forty or so people and would have been used for dinners and also laying out large charts and maps as was now the case. I also noticed a copy of the Imperial Gazette.

To one side of the room was an open door, leading to what looked like a study. On the other was a large fireplace, unlit now. Behind me I knew would be the portraits of the Emperor as a young man and the Duke, both given equal precedence as the fleet served the Duke, and the Duke served the Emperor.

At the far end of the room stood five people in conversation. They stood silhouetted against one of the large windows looking down upon the harbour and its many ships. The tallest was High Admiral Barron Villor. I recognised him by his strong chin and short cut hair. The Admiral was dressed in a midnight blue uniform with a high collar and golden epaulets. His clothing was smart but functional with little other than the epaulets and obvious quality of make to say that he was a high admiral.

Villor turned to look at me. The Admiral said something to his guests, and then strode over to the table with his hands held behind his rigid back. The man did not smile, but looked me up and down as I reached the table and stood to attention.

"My lord," I said.

"Captain Lord Ardalrion," the Admiral returned the greeting and to my surprise, bowed his head respectfully. His voice was deep and aged. In fact the man's hair had gone white since last I had seen him. "I do not remember if we have met. I know your father and your brother of course."

“We have not been introduced, sir. My father preferred to present my brother’s face to the world. I am the reserve as it were.” I realised how petty that sounded but it was too late. The Admiral did not seem to care.

“The Emperor has requested that your father crush the rebellion. Your father has placed the fleet in my hands in order to execute the Emperor’s wish. You have a ship now?” The Admiral got straight to the point.

“I do, Admiral. She is a steam frigate, not much larger than a gunboat, undermanned and under gunned but ready for service. I have just returned from her trials. She’s a good ship and she is yours to command.”

“Excellent.”

I leaned forwards and placed on the table the leather folder I was holding. “In fact, we sailed to the port of Sulenfir, sir.” I let this sink in.

The other guests in the room now took an interest and as they came forwards, I recognised one of them as the stranger who was talking privately that day with Ajator, hidden behind ship's supplies. The stranger was in a long black, fur coat. His face was gaunt and pale. His black hair was thin and fashioned in a simple round pot cut. He was a little shorter than myself, but if I had a reputation for looking like an undertaker, this man looked like death’s doorkeeper. The stranger gave me a long and cold look as he approached. I could not help but shiver under the icy scrutiny.

The other two stood a little behind him. One was a pretty woman, petit, dressed in a simple yellow dress. The other was a bulldog faced man nearly as tall as the Admiral, but much broader and carried the scars of many fights. His nose was broken and his right eye was a milky white. The man emanated an aura of violence and pent up rage. I felt as though the man was about to explode into a murderous rampage at any minute. He watched me with a furious hatred, and I wondered what if anything he had done to anger this man so much.

The stranger obviously noticed my discomfort and said, “Mister Crurt is angry with the world, Malspire. Don’t take it personally.”

The stranger’s voice was oddly high pitched and smooth like polished marble. “He is my body guard and he suspects all. Ignore him.”

I noted the use of my first name. Who was this man? The woman just smiled at me. It was not a friendly smile. She was golden haired and looked quite innocent yet I suspected that she was anything but. She wore simple slippers with her simple dress.

“May I introduce, Lord Pavantu,” said the Admiral. “He is... an advisor.”

I nodded towards Lord Pavantu. Had I heard the name before? Perhaps my father had mentioned it at some point.

“Sulenfir?” asked the Admiral.

I returned my attention to the Admiral. “Yes, Admiral. The trials were going well and we had already headed far west in search of shipping and thought we might test the enemy's guard. We found it lacking.”

“Lacking?” The Admiral raised an eyebrow at this.

Lord Pavantu had taken the folder and opened it up, placing the contents on the table. I was about to stop him, when the Admiral waved a hand so as to say it was alright for this Lord Pavantu to share in the folder’s secret contents.

“It is my report, my lords.”

“And a copy of the rebel code book,” Lord Pavantu noted with interest.

“Indeed. As requested, we managed to obtain a rebel code book.”

“Do they know about this?” asked Pavantu, leafing through the document.

“I think not. Perhaps if you read my report, all will become clear.”

We all sat. The Lords Villor and Pavantu went through the report. The lady and body guard sat further away at the end of the table. Some drink and fruit was brought in and I spent the next hour answering questions as they arose while the papers were studied.

The Admiral was quite serious, and frowned at the words as he read while Pavantu chuckled here and there. He seemed to be enjoying my account of my espionage.

“You’re a born spy, Malspire,” Lord Pavantu eventually said. “You’re also lucky.” I nodded in agreement. I had been lucky.

“It would seem the rebel fleet are on the move,” said Villor, studying the list of enemy ships. “They could be here within days, and I have not gathered enough ships yet. Why have your people not told us the rebel fleet was on the move?”

Pavantu ignored the question. “They will not be making full speed and a large force is as slow as its slowest ship I suspect they will reach us in another four or five days.” said Lord Pavantu.

“We are not ready. Half my ships patrol waters on the other side of the continent. Others bolster pointless blockades or run petty errands. All the same, I must send word at once and call any and all who can hear us. I must destroy them or at least send them back to their treacherous ports. But how? I warned the city of this, as did you, Mornight.”

“Hm.” Lord Mornight Pavantu was tapping the copy of the code book as he thought. “The Emperor has a greater plan, or so I am told. You’ve done well, Malspire. Well indeed. Perhaps a surprise attack?” This last question was to the Admiral.

“If we could surprise them, then it would even the odds,” agreed the Admiral. “Did you have something in mind?”

Lord Pavantu pulled one of the large maps over and studied the coast line, running a long finger along it in contemplation. “A large force will follow the coast as long as they think it is safe. Then they will probably head north to try and avoid our scouts and then come at us from the north.”

I saw the Admiral’s eye follow Pavantu’s finger and nodded in understanding.

“If we come at them from behind in the dark and in their own waters, we will most certainly give them quite a surprise. The trick of course is getting our fleet so far into rebel waters and then hidden, all undetected,” said Villor, the previous frustration written on his face now washing away as a plan formed.

I now understood what the two men had in mind. The plan was simply to place the Imperial fleet in hiding, deep in rebel waters. When the enemy pass, the fleet heads after them under cover of darkness. I also understood the importance of the code book for this plan to work. Pavantu was again looking at the copied code book.

“There is at least one enemy watch tower that I know of, my lords. If we can get the fleet beyond that tower, the enemy will not expect us.” I said. Watch towers were used to track shipping as it passed and report back using lectrocoder machines or old fashioned semaphore paddles.

“Indeed, Lord Ardalrion,” said Pavantu smiling a wicked cut of teeth. “But thanks to you we can capture it. We can take control of the tower and tell the enemy that all is well.”

“We must move quickly,” said Villor. “How do you suggest we proceed, Lord Pavantu?”

“Why, we send the hero of the hour, Admiral,” said the strange advisor, waving a hand in my direction. “He seems to be able to come and go in enemy waters. Send him. You have competent marines?” This last question was to me.

“They seem able. We’ve only been on a sea trial but they have proven willing to fight.”

“Good. I can attach the Lady Lamient to this mission.” Pavantu indicated the pretty lady sitting quietly at the end of the long table. “She is a killer, Malspire,” Pavantu said happily in response to my look. “Young and pretty, but deadly. She will help you.”

“If the Admiral wishes it.”

Admiral Baron Villor was deep in thought. It was obvious that he had his doubts about the plan. If I were in the Admiral's boots, I did not know what I would have done. The Admiral was clever enough to know that the enemy might suspect that the Imperial Navy had made a copy of the book, and they could turn it to their advantage by turning the Imperial trap into a trap of their own making. It was a risk.

“The enemy is too large to fight head on, my lord,” I said. I was now quite keen on the plan, risky though it was. If it worked, it would most certainly hurt the rebels, and allow for the further expansion of Imperial forces in the region.

The Admiral gave me a look. “Your father would not approve of this plan.”

“He is a cautious man. He wouldn’t want to make a move without detailed planning.”

“Planning we do not have time for,” said Pavantu, adding his voice.

“What would your brother do?” asked the Admiral.

“He would probably want to send the fleet into enemy waters now and meet them head on. He is no fool, but he does think highly of the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy and its capabilities.” Of course one day Ajator would probably be the Lord Admiral and so it made sense that Villor wanted to understand the young man.

“Hm. They have a capable navy... So all the Ardalrion’s have different ideas on how to wage war at sea. Interesting,” said Villor.

“You are wrong however, Malspire,” said Pavantu. “Ajator would only take such action if he was commanding the fleet. Only then would he feel that we would be assured a victory.”

I was annoyed at the idea that this man thinks he knows my own twin brother better than I. Annoyed, but I realised that Pavantu was probably right. I had to ask. “How do you know my brother?”

Pavantu smiled and leant back. “I know the both of you very well. It is my job. You are the sons of a lord admiral, and I serve the Emperor as his eyes and ears, and he of course takes a great interest in those that might one day lead his fleets.”

A Secret Servant! I realised then that Lord Pavantu was one of the Emperor’s Secret Servants, a spy masters. The Secret Servants were agents who answer directly to the Emperor himself. They are his spies and personal messengers. They seek enemies both outside and within the Empire and bring them to account. Little is known about them, even to the Navy, but they are feared, as a single word from such an agent could lead to the enmity of the Emperor, and the enmity of the Emperor means certain death.

I now felt distinctly uncomfortable in Pavantu’s presence, and wondered what my brother’s business was with such a man. Why had my brother talked in secret with Pavantu and why did my brother not share this with me?

“We’ll do it,” said the Admiral finally. “Captain Ardalrion. You will take your ship and capture...” He ran a finger along the coastline until he reached the lookout point. “Tars-hard. If memory serves, it is a lone tower ten or so miles north east of a rebel stronghold. Capture it, and

then station a lectrocoder officer there to report back that all is well to the enemy. You are to take it by surprise so they cannot send warning. Do you understand?"

"I do."

He ran his finger a little further until he reached a small indentation in the coast line. "We shall place the fleet here, and hope it provides enough cover to hide us. If not, we strike at once. We will still catch them off guard."

Returning to the Lady Ocean, I told my senior crew of the plan and ordered that the ship was to leave within the hour. With me had come ten more marines, a lectrocoder officer by the name of Mister Farnsind, a portable lectroder, which took eight men to man handle into the captain's cabin, the Lady Lamient who was yet to say a word, and a senior engineer and team who went straight to the Lady Ocean's engine room with orders to supply any parts needed to get the ship going at once. The Lady Lamient had taken a long leather bag and a ladies hand bag. Otherwise she still wore the simple dress and slippers although she had added a short coat and a square umbrella against the weather.

The name of the ship had been repainted but I had it washed off with spirits as the paint was still wet. Now she was the Wraith Deep again. In the end it took four hours for the parts to be found and fitted. The engine was not well, but she would do for the mission. The ship was ready. Just as we were about to cast off and head out to sea, there was a call from the pier. I went to investigate and saw the strange Lord Pavantu requesting to board the vessel.

"Come aboard," I reluctantly called, and went down on deck to meet my guest.

"Captain Ardalrion. I thought perhaps I could have a word in private before you leave."

"Of course," I said, ushering my unwanted guest towards the cabin. "But we must make haste."

Showing the Secret Servant to a chair, and before the man could open his mouth, I seized the initiative by saying, "How do you know my brother?"

Pavantu smiled and without even a hint of surprise answered, "He came to me. He had a problem and asked for my advice."

I sat down in my chair, watching the spy master.

"I know you saw us on the pier, Malspire. I have men watching me. I have men watching them and I have a man watching Ajator."

"Why?"

"I am interested in Ajator and yourself. This is why I am here."

"Because he will be the Lord Admiral of the Ardalrion Fleet I presume? I can only tell you that Ajator is a loyal servant of the Emperor. He is honest, brave and diligent in his duties. Does my father know you're watching him? Did he send you?"

"Your brother is the perfect subject. I don't doubt his loyalties. Your father did not send me. I do not know how much you know of the Secret Servants but I answer only to the Master of the Secret Servants and he answers only to the Emperor."

"Then is my loyalty in doubt?"

"What do you think?"

"You've trusted my advice and you advised to send out the fleet based on what I told you. Of course I might be a rebel sympathiser and I've just laid a trap for the fleet. Only time will tell," I stated.

“Indeed. In a couple of days we might lose a major part of the Ardalrion fleet all thanks to a trap you’ve laid, but I doubt it. Even so, the Lady Lamient will see to it that you are the first to die if that be the case.” He smiled.

“Is that what you came here to tell me? To threaten me?”

Pavantu did not answer, but instead said: “Do you know Lord Luthis Balegrim? He is my captain as it were, the spy master general. I am a lowly officer who runs his errands. He sits by the Emperor and takes the Emperor’s questions and any that have anything to do with the Ardalrion house and rebellion come to me. I then find the answer and pass it back to my master.”

“A candid answer for a spy.” I was somewhat taken aback by the man’s openness. He was after all admitting to spying on me and my family.

“It’s no secret that the Emperor keeps an eye on his subjects, especially those close to him, as is your father. You are no fool, Malspire, and you suffer them lightly which is why I rather like you. I don’t think I need to play games of subterfuge or smoke and mirrors with you as you are a person like myself.”

I did not like being compared to this man. He was obviously a cunning and clever bastard who would cut his own mother’s throat for a step up on the rungs of power. But then, this man probably already knew that I knew this.

“We are realists, Malspire. We see things for what they are, so if I tell you that I am spying on you and your family, you will accept it as a reasonable course of action for the Emperor to take. There is no malice. Although regrettable, it’s just the way things are.”

Pavantu looked round the simple cabin, then continued, “As for threatening you, the answer is no. The fact is that I rather trust you. You wanted to know why Ajator and I met. I’ll tell you as I am looking for answers myself. He came looking for the Secret Servants here in Umuron and didn’t find us. My office likes to remain hidden, but when I heard of this I went to him.”

“What did he want?”

“He wanted to know about a man named Obein Klarans. Do you know who he is?”

“No, but I remember Ajator mentioning that name. He asked my brother to join the Ship of Mariners.” Of course. Ajator would not have been able to let the incident with Klarans rest.

“Indeed. Ajator told me. Klarans also offered him a place in the rebellion.”

“We assumed he was testing Ajator’s loyalties. Do you know this man? I think he was seen recently. When in Sulenfir, I had a ship watched. I don’t know what it was about the ship. Perhaps I had seen it recently in Umuron. My lookout, Mister Sudlas…”

“Sudlas?”

“Yes.”

“Carry on.”

“He spied a man with red hair, a missing ear and two missing fingers. This was the description given me by Ajator.”

“I see. What was the name of the ship?”

“The Water Horse.”

Pavantu pondered this information as he fingered his cane. “What else did Ajator tell you?”

“Nothing more.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him to forget about it. I told him it was a test.”

Pavantu leant forwards. “He told you nothing more? You are brothers. You are twins. You are both very close and very fond of one another. I know this. I know a lot about the both of you. He is obviously troubled by this event, and he told you nothing more?”

I did not like being questioned like this. Who was this man to question my loyalty or my brother's? "No."

Pavantu leant back again and steepled his fingers in thought. "Your brother was here not long ago," he suddenly said.

"He was?" I had hoped my brother was with the fleet but had not had time to find out. "Is he not here anymore? Will he join the fleet?"

"He is a captain. He was made captain at the same time as yourself. He was given a frigate called the Sharpblade in Norlan. He married you know?"

"I did know."

"Good. Rather a quick affair I hear. A bit of a scandal, but nothing that won't be forgotten in a few months."

"Then where is he?"

"I don't know."

"I thought it was your job to know."

"And so it is, Malspire. So it is. I was rather hoping you could tell me."

I thought for a moment. "I should think his crew might not be ready for action yet. He may be on sea trials."

"No. Apparently the ship is in good shape as are the crew. The ship and crew have been at sea for a number of years now. Its previous captain was moved to make way for Ajator. All ready for action and eager to give the rebels a broadside. Also, he didn't report his intentions to the naval office. All I know is that he was given orders and set sail the same day."

"Isn't there a copy of the orders at the Naval Office?"

"Highly secret. He has the only copy. The Naval Office only has a receipt to show that he picked them up."

"Well, what about your spies? Don't you have a man on his ship?"

"I do. I only just placed him there though. I don't have the manpower to have spies on every ship and didn't have reason to until now. Anyway, the Sharpblade left before I had any news from my man."

This indicated that Pavantu probably did not have a spy on the Lady Ocean, although that might be just what the man wanted me to think.

"Why now?"

"This is where I start putting the pieces together and the picture it makes... unnerves me. It needs more parts. I found a need for a spy on his ship. You see, someone is already spying on him, and it isn't me. That is, not directly as it were."

"Who else would be watching my brother? How do you know?"

"That is the question. I know because the interloper is a Secret Servant who was recognised by one of my agents. It would seem that someone else in the service is also watching Ajator."

"Is that uncommon?"

"It happens, but strictly speaking, I am in charge of your family when it comes to answering the Emperor's queries and I know nothing of this agent. I am looking into it, but at the moment I know nothing about this agent at all."

"Lord Balegrim?"

"Perhaps. But why keep an eye on Ajator without my knowledge? Why not use me as I am meant to be used?"

"You've fallen out of favour would seem to be the obvious answer," I said with a certain satisfaction, I might add.

“I doubt that. I understand that it might seem obvious to you, not knowing me, but there is something else afoot and I fear for your brother’s safety.”

“Why?” I demanded. I did not think that Pavantu had fallen out of favour. He was obviously the perfect man for the job which was why this comment worried me so much. “Why?” I repeated.

“It’s a hunch. Something isn’t right. Ajator came to me asking about Obein Klarans, and then I find there is a Secret Servant spy aboard his ship without my consent. Then he vanishes on some mysterious errand.”

“You do doubt his loyalty. You think he has gone to join the rebellion. He would never do such a thing!”

“I told you, Malspire. As far as I can tell, Ajator is loyal. I have never doubted that and I don’t do so now.”

I did not believe him. Was this man so stuck in a world of shadows and secrecy that he saw enemies and traitors in everything and everyone? Ajator probably had a very good reason to set out to sea. His orders probably told him to return to Norlan. It was probably my father who wanted him to return for a proper marriage. It had to be something simple, yet I felt deep down that Pavantu might be right and something very bad was going on.

“What can I do?”

“If there is nothing more you know then there’s nothing more you can do.” Pavantu watched me. “Perhaps I am being over cautious. I very much hope so,” he eventually said.

A sudden gush of wind shook the windows.

“There’s a storm coming,” Pavantu whispered then looked back to me. “Now you must be off. I’ve held you up long enough.” Then, standing up, he added in a harsher tone, “The gods are watching, young Malspire. I hope they favour the Empire this day.”

We hastened the ship through the harbour and out to sea. The weather was getting worse and men wrapped up against the inclement winds and water. Seagulls called their complaints and seemed to be heading for cover inland. The wave tops started to show signs of breaking. I hoped the storm would not last, but it was an ominous sign. It took a concerted effort to focus on the mission at hand after the meeting with Lord Pavantu. Not only could I not shake the unreasonable fear for my brother that the man had planted, but also the notion that the Secret Servant knew much more than he was letting on.

Chapter Eleven

“Full speed Mister Owman,” I said as we made for the open seas. “Head east. Make for the shortest route.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

Time was now of the essence. If the enemy fleet was truly heading this way, then all depended on the speed we were making. If the enemy managed anything like a cruising speed then the Lady Ocean had no chance of reaching the tower before the rebels, but if the rebels had supply vessels and perhaps had to make further stops along the way, then we stood a good chance. It was yet another risk, but then so was anything in war.

I then turned to the Lady Lamient. “Perhaps you would like to rest in my cabin? We need to talk anyway.”

She nodded and smiled, then followed me down to the cabin where I found the lectrocode officer, Mister Farnsind setting up his box of magic against one wall. There was no time to organise a proper cabin for him, so my cabin would have to do for this mission.

The device was placed on a large desk and was made up of a brass and copper framework with piping, cables and glass tubes, some of which were glowing. The officer was twisting dials and adjusting slides and flicking switches. The machine gave off a slight hum, just audible over the noise of the ship’s engine. I will admit it made me nervous having such a machine in my cabin.

Offering the lady a chair at my desk, I then sat down myself.

“So, Lady Lamient. Lord Pavantu seems to hold your skill in very high regard. Perhaps you could enlighten me?”

“My lord has requested that I take the tower without offering them any chance to warn the rebellion. That is what I’ll do.” She had a sweet voice, an innocent voice. She fluttered her eyelashes and smiled. The smile was not sweet, still cruel and vicious. That smile told me that she was a cold hearted killer.

“I see. How do you expect to accomplish this task? Have you given it any thought?”

“I don’t know. You’re the captain. You tell me.” She was toying with me.

I leant back and sighed, ignoring her insolence. How indeed?

“Let me give you a hint, Captain,” she said. “I just need to get inside. Once in, I’ll open the gates.” Her accent was slipping - a bit of country slipping in.

“How persuasive are you?”

At that the smile changed. Not in shape or size but in meaning. It was a miracle to behold how she went from terrifying to fragile, dainty, and childlike in the blink of an eye. I could but admire her and respect the skill with which she could most certainly play people.

“Just get me to the tower,” she said. “I’ll open the gates. You have your men ready.”

I nodded. I did not like this woman one bit, but had to admit that I was pleased to be fighting alongside her rather than against her. Or was I? I never found out for certain, but now that I think about it, I am sure she had two agendas. One was the tower, the other was my life.

The choppy waters hampered the Lady Ocean, but by early morning of the second day, before sun rise, Olvan and I reckoned we were close to the tower. I wanted to come in close to shore

and try to find a cove before being spotted, but it was risky business travelling in the dark so close to shore in such seas.

Sun rise would be in less than an hour. The Imperial fleet would not be far behind. Perhaps as little as six hours away. The admiral was going to follow on without any support vessels or supply ships in order to move quickly. Orders were to keep all lectrocoders silent. On deck, there was no light. Even pipes were banned, not that anyone could have lit one in this wet weather. I noted how I often yearned for the weed when I was not allowed any, and could go days without when I was.

Before, I had slept some hours, drawing the curtains round my cot. It was not perfect with the lectrocode machine humming and the waves beating the ship about, but after the last few days of excitement, I was exhausted, and given the chance, had found sleep easily.

It was near pitch black. Somewhere, not too far off, were the craggy rocks of an enemy peninsula coastline just waiting for the seas to smash a frigate to wet tinder on their unforgiving edges.

“Take us in, Mister Harl,” I said. “Half speed.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

We headed south towards the coast. Twice I had the engines cut to listen for the sound of waves breaking on land. On the third attempt, we heard it. We could just make out the suck and smash of water on rocks and knew we were close to shore. Now we had to be extra vigilant. A man was taking the depths with a lead weight and passing the numbers back. I scanned the sky and could just make out the hint of grey on the blackness along the horizon, then looked to the south again and watched for the line of the coast. I expected to see cliffs as it got lighter, and hopefully the tower somewhere along the cliff tops.

We made a westerly heading at slow speed and watched for the shape of the cliffs to emerge, and so they did after another twenty minutes. It was a fight on the rough waters to keep a safe distance from land and rocks, but we persisted along the line of cliffs as the morning sun cleared the gloom of night.

As dawn broke, the waters calmed a little. It no longer rained and anyone who was on deck watched out for the tower. After some while, the call came from the crow’s-nest. “Watchtower!”

We stared hard and saw as the distant shape of a squat stone built tower emerged from the heads of the distant cliffs to the south west. Now we needed a place to land before we were spotted, but there was nothing but cliff face. We moved closer to shore as visibility grew to make it harder for the tower to spot us.

“Continue west,” I commanded. My mood was sour from the wet clothes and lack of beach or cove for us to make a landing. I wanted to hide the ship away while we took the launch for the raid, but so far there was nowhere to do this so we continued.

Rounding another head of rock, we were in sight of the tower again. If the tower’s garrison were vigilant, we would be seen and reported by lectrocode to the next watchtower and if the enemy fleet were close, they too would get the message. I scanned the sea as I realised that the enemy fleet could indeed be close, but saw nothing. No stacks of smoke from steamers, nor flocks of gulls that might follow a mass of ships at sea.

The tower would report a privateer frigate which might not be too uncommon. We had the rebel flag flying. Even so, the enemy would be on edge, and may suspect something was amiss. I did not want anything to put the enemy on alert. Also, now that the sun was up, the smoke belching from the funnel could be seen for miles. I wanted desperately to cut the engine and kill the fire.

“There!”

Bringing the frigate closer to land again, we were now hidden once more, and there we saw what might be our best hope which was a small beach in front of a jagged and steep slide of land that climbed up to the cliff tops. It would be a bummer of a climb, but it looked like the best and probably only option.

Harl looked sceptical, scratching his grey head of hair.

“It’ll have to do, Mister Harl. Put the ship over there, then cut the engine and drop anchor. Mister Olvan?”

“Sir?”

“Tell Sergeant Lamtak to ready his men. Then fetch the Lady Lamient.” Then to Harl I said, “You are in charge while we’re gone, Mister Harl.”

“Aye aye, Captain. Be sure to take Mister Sudlas and Jod with you, sir. If things go wrong, they’ll be your best bet.”

“Thank you, Harl. I will.”

Soon the launch was in the water. The sea was still rough but the anchor seemed to be holding the ship in place. Harl had orders to simply keep the ship there, out of sight. The boiler had been doused so there was now only a trickle of smoke and steam coming from the funnel. If the enemy arrived, the Wraith Deep/Lady Ocean would never be able to escape as it would take at least an hour to stoke the fires and heat the boiler again.

The men had a fight to keep the launch steady against the side of the frigate as it rose and fell with the waves. Eventually Olvan, Lady Lamient, Jodlin, Sudlas, Farnsind the lectrocode officer, Sergeant Lamtak, his twenty marines and I were packed into the launch. Mister Farnsind had the copy of the enemy lectrocode book. There was a chance that we would find a new copy in the tower should we manage to get in, but at the first hint that the enemy might be overrun, it would be destroyed.

On reaching the small, shingle beach, we hauled the boat up out of the water and looked up at the steep ascent. It looked worse from down here than it did at sea, but the Lady Lamient did not hesitate and began to scale the broken wall of rock and earth. She had changed into a simple, tight hunting suit of soft leather. At her belt was a slender but long knife. She wore leather gloves and leather shoes. She had tied her hair back and now wore a scarf about her head. Apart from her feminine figure she looked like a ship’s boy.

Ever since she had come aboard the ship, men had been staring at her, for she was truly very pretty and possibly high born, but I very much doubted she was a proper lady. She had ignored the looks and seemed quite used to it.

I went after her, and the rest followed me. We did not need rope or hooks to make the climb but it was very hard work all the same. Parts could be climbed like steps, but other harder sections needed both hand and foot. A couple of younger marines had climbed ahead and leant a helping hand to those that lagged behind. By the time I was half way, the Lady Lamient was already at the crest where she disappeared over the edge.

It took the best part of an hour to reach to top. We had to stop a few times to rest after it became apparent that fatigue could easily lead to a slip, and then a crashing fall to the rocks below. The top revealed a barren and rocky grassland of rolling hills with a few bent trees and a forest in the distant south. The wind was strong and the long grass swept back. Above us the grey skies looked low and somehow angry with fast moving clouds and a smattering of rain.

To my annoyance, the Lady Lamient was already a distant figure heading in the direction of the tower, so I quickly gathered the men and headed off after her. After a few moments she

headed inland and I saw that she wished to approach the tower from behind a low hill to its south-east.

As we got closer to the tower, we could see that it was not a large structure but certainly fit for purpose, set about fifty yards back from the cliff's edge, it looked to have a single entrance with arrow slits further up the walls. I had hoped it would be a dilapidated thing but it was obviously in good repair which meant battering down the door would take far too long.

All the men were crouching now as they neared the crest of the hill so as not to be seen. The grass was long and we would have to crawl the rest of the way before getting a closer look and figuring out how to entice the men inside to open the door. I did not relish the thought of using hooks and rope.

Cursed bitch, the lady had vanished as the sergeant, Jodlin, Olvan and I crept up to the hill's grassy ridge. Now soaked again and cold from the wet grass, we looked over the hundred yards or so at the tower and Mister Olvan pointed a finger in surprise at what he saw. At the crenulated top of the squat tower was a guard, doing a slow march round the tower's circumference. He walked in a manner that indicated that he had done this a hundred times before and expected to do it a hundred times again. He had a tall silver helmet and long musket on his back. This was not what had surprised Olvan however. We watched just as the Lady Lamient crawled in through the lower arrow slit about six feet above the doors. How she managed to climb the wall, I had no idea, but what was even more baffling was the way she somehow compressed, twisted and contorted her body in order to fit through the thin slit. Surely the slit was not even wide enough for her head, but somehow she squeezed through and vanished into the darkness.

As the guard did his rounds, he spent a good twenty seconds within sight as he rounded the southern half of the circle. Then he vanished for another thirty seconds. I looked for spots closer to the tower where men could be hidden. There were none. The region around the tower was cleared of bush and rock. The distance could be run in less than twenty seconds but men would make a noise. There would be even more wind on the tower which would hopefully disguise any. I began to pass the order round that three men at a time would run over to the tower in complete silence when the guard was not in view.

Mister Olvan and Jodlin went first as soon as the guard's head disappeared. They ran at a crouch, quickly but silently. Then on reaching the wall, put their backs to it and looked up to see if the guard had heard them. I could see that the guard had heard nothing as he casually continued his round. The rebel could not see the foot of the tower without leaning over the parapet, and we could only hope that he did not do so. Another three ran the distance, then another three until we were all across and hugging the base of the tower. Nobody spoke and all moved silently. I was now listening for noises from within. I guessed that there might be a garrison of twenty or thirty men based in the tower.

"I can smell bacon," whispered one of the marines. Sergeant Lamtak shot the man a murderous glance for making a noise. I could smell it too. They must have recently had breakfast, and the bacon smelt good, but I could not have eaten. I was worried sick, and hoped it did not show, but I had no idea what to do now. The woman had vanished into the window without a word of what she intended, and now my men and I stood vulnerable and without a plan at the foot of an enemy stronghold.

I had wanted to have a look at the tower and see it before trying to come up with a plan, but the Lady Lamient had simply rushed off, and left us to follow as best we could. Time passed, and the minutes felt like hours. All of a sudden, everyone went stiff and hugged the wall as something fell from the parapet above us. It was a little stream of water, and so I cautiously

looked and could just make out the guard far above standing on the ledge, relieving himself over the side of the tower. All the man had to do was look down. At this height the piss was dispersed by the winds and spattered me and the others. Don't look down. I hugged the wall as closely as I could. What man does not look down proudly at his own pool of piss? The water stopped and a gust of wind forced the guard to jump back onto the tower's roof. He never looked down, and I muttered a thanks to any gods or spirits for that gust of timely wind.

The men began to shuffle. There was a slight mist in the drizzly air. It would probably clear soon. It was cold and hugging the stone wall did not help as it just sucked the little heat from the men who began to shiver. I looked sideways up at the doors. They were robust wooden double doors with iron studs and iron bands to reinforce them. It would take a large battering ram to dislodge it. Perhaps we could make one in the woods to the south. Of course the enemy would hear us charging so the door would have to be destroyed with a single thrust to enable the men to enter the tower quickly enough to stop the rebels from sending a distress call to the enemy. It was a poor plan. Perhaps a man would leave the tower. Then we could overrun him and hold the doors open.

Had they captured the lady? The men looked to me. I knew they expected me to have a plan. Why were we waiting? We had ropes and hooks, but it would be a slow and hard climb. I edged all around the tower's base, looking for inspiration, but found nothing. As I returned to the doors, we heard something. The doors were set a man's height from the ground, with steps leading up to them. I motioned the men to move away and hide. I heard it again. It was a muffled voice or grunt.

Moving into the shadow of the steps, I pressed my bent back to the wall as I could just make out footsteps behind the door, and slowly drew my gutting knife and cutlass, ready to swing up onto the steps and charge anyone who opened it.

"Hello?" came a muffle voice. "Who's there?"

I was confused. Surely we had not been seen, but someone behind the doors had heard or seen something. There was silence. I held my breath, and then jumped as there was a bump on the door. I watched it intently, then glanced up and saw nobody looking down from the parapet, and then gazed back at the door. My heart was racing. My eye twitched. I held out my hand with the gutting knife to signal the men to make ready to charge. Perhaps we could jam a blade into the door to stop it from closing.

Then, with another bump and a slide followed by a small crack and creak, the doors opened and just as I was going to charge, the Lady Lamient appeared from the darkness within. She was spattered with blood and held a garrotte in one hand. The fine wire was held by a pair of small ivory handles. Her hands and handles were also covered in dark red blood. She saw me and waved us in. Turning to my men, I indicated that they should follow in silence.

On entering the tower, we found ourselves in a large and empty room with the decapitated head of a guard at the foot of the doors. I was no expert in the use of a garrotte, but was sure that it must take both great strength and skill to remove man's head with such a weapon. I looked at the lady who simply smiled back at me, then with a flick of the wire, tucked it into her suit between her breasts. The men had loaded weapons. They had all taken the time at the base of the tower to check their equipment and load weapons in silence. There were two flights of steps; the first leading down and the second leading up. The lady indicated that we should move up.

"You and three men guard those steps," I whispered to Olvan, indicating the steps leading down. "If anyone shows their heads, try to silence them quietly if possible."

"Aye aye, Captain."

I then signalled that the rest of us should start moving up the steps which wound up the inside of the outer walls. The lady went first and indicated that all was well as we reached the first floor. This was where she had entered, and I was again impressed as I saw how thin the arrow slit was. The blood was not just the enemy's but hers too. Her head and ears had been cut badly as she forced it through the stonework.

In this room were two more men, both dead by the garrotte. How did she do that? The room was an armoury with racks of spears, the odd musket and ammunition. There was also some clothing and armour, but none seemed in good repair. Along one section of the wall was a workbench with tools for fixing the guns and armour. I guessed that there were three more levels before reaching the parapets and watched the steps leading up. We could just make out voices up there.

"Above us are the sleeping quarters. Then there is the mess with a kitchen. Above that is the lectrocoder's room and some other doors, then steps leading to the top."

"How do you know all this?"

"I have been to the top."

"I see." How she had managed to reach the top without being seen was yet another mystery, but I accepted it after seeing how she entered the enemy stronghold and how she had dispatched the enemy guards. Never would anything about this woman surprise me again. She was formidable.

"How many men are there?"

"Perhaps eleven or twelve in the sleeping quarters. I saw at least eight in the kitchens. More will be above them. We cannot hope to get past the floor above us without alerting the rebels."

"Then we must charge them."

I passed the word that four men were to come up the rear and guard the sleeping quarters. If they raised the alarm, every other man was simply to keep going up. Then I picked another four men to do the same on the next floor. The others were to keep following me all the way to the lectrocoder room. The Lady Lamient drew a dagger and waited for my signal. I looked round at my men. Sergeant Lamtak, and Jodlin were with me as well as the lectrocode officer and the marines. They looked hungry for action, and I felt a pang of pride for my crew, then signalled to move on and began to climb the steps.

The lady went first again, not that I had indicated that she should do so. As we reached the next floor, I saw a room full of bunks with a table at the far end where a couple of off duty guards were playing cards. We did not stop, but kept going up. Those men would certainly see us soon, but we had to keep going and just as I was about to scale the next flight of steps one of the men look around and saw us, a long line of enemy marines moving through the tower. Bizarrely the rebel guard looked back to his cards as though it were nothing.

I screamed, "Charge!" and carried on up the steps, knowing the guard would wake up to the threat within a second.

There was gunfire behind me and the screams of a man wounded, shouts and thundering boots as the column of Imperial Navy Marines now attacked.

"Kill the buggers!" I called behind me as we reached the next level. This room had a couple of cooks, a large stove and men seated round some tables, who, startled by the sudden chaos simply sat with open mouths gawping at me and my men as we rushed past to the next flight of steps. There was more gunfire and the sound of blades hitting flesh. More screaming and now alarm calls.

"Keep going! Keep going!"

Then suddenly I was put upon by a large man in a sergeant's uniform just as I was going to climb the next flight of steps. The man had a cooking pan in one hand and a butcher's cleaver in the other. The sergeant was quick, and struck out at me forcing me to duck the blade, and then thrash with my cutlass only to be denied a cut by the ring of the pan.

"Jodlin!" I called, not wanting to stop and fight, and so jumped away from the sergeant who now saw a greater threat in the hulking form of Mister Jodlin and his hammer.

We continued up the steps after the Lady Lamient. On reaching the next floor, men were appearing at doors, confused and alarmed. A guard was coming down a flight of steps. There was the mighty crash of volley fire from far down below and I presumed that Mister Olvan and his men had met some rebels trying to come up from the dungeons.

The Lady Lamient was standing at a door, her hand trapped in the door's gap. There was obviously a man on the other side trying to force it closed. She was losing the battle of strength, a look of pain on her face, her hand being crushed. I charged towards her, passing the enemy as I did so, but one quick witted man stepped in my path.

"Drop you weapons, sir!" said the man holding a pistol. He died with a gutting knife in his neck, but not before firing the gun, which grazed my belly and hurt like hell's fire. I screamed and spun round in pain, but again lunged at the door as it was closing on the lady's fingers, her teeth gritted against the hurt. Together we pushed with all our strength. Shots were fired over our heads. The enemy had brought guns to bear at the end of the corridor and Lamtak's marines fired back with the lady and I in the middle.

With an almighty shove, the door swung open. Both myself and the lady fell into the room just as an enemy officer picked up a book from a desk and threw it into a brazier. The Lady Lamient flew up and landed on the man who was easily twice her size but reeling from the ferocity of her attack. She had dropped her knife and suddenly the wire was in her hand again. With the agility of a cat and the dexterity of master assassin, she was on his back with the wire looped about his neck.

With horror, I saw how she leaned back, with her knee to the nape of his neck, and pulled the wire tight and sawed. The man's eyes bulged and his face contorted as the wire slipped like a razor through the skin, muscle and eventually even the bone of his neck. She fell back and landed on her feet just as his head toppled from his body, and a great gush of blood fountained from his neck as he fell to the floor. In the corner of the room, the book burned fiercely with a spitting blue flame. It was the code book, and it was designed to burn well. No matter. We had our own copy.

The fighting continued for some minutes, but eventually the surviving rebels surrendered. They had been taken completely by surprise and had lost eight men with another nine injured. I had only lost two marines with a few others injured but not seriously. The commanding officer lay dead with my blade in his neck, which I retrieved and then turned to the Lady Lamient.

"I have a favour to ask of you."

This made her cock an eyebrow. She was so slight. So pretty, even under the drying blood and after the horrendous acts of violence. A cold shiver ran down my spine just to look at her now, and yet in that moment I truly wanted to kiss her. Had I tried, I know I would not have lived to tell this tale.

"I need to find out what message the rebels send up the line when all is well, and how often."

This made her smile. "Of course." She left to interrogate the surviving rebels who were being taken to the dungeons by Sergeant Lamtak and his marines.

I went to the rooftop and was followed by Mister Olvan who had made his way up from below to see if his captain had any orders for him.

"All well?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. They came to investigate the noise and tried to rush us. We were ready for them."

"Good. Any prisoners down below?"

"No, Captain. Just four empty cells and a wash room."

"A wash room?"

"Yes," said Olvan. "They seem to have a good sense of hygiene, these rebels. One of the rebels was in a towel. The others I believe were doing the laundry... Well done, sir."

"Pardon?"

"The assault on the tower. It went well I would say."

"Hm," I grumbled. "Congratulate the Lady Lamient." I said her name mockingly. She was not high born. I was not one to care overly much for a person's status but I did not like men or women assuming a higher status than they were born to. "She opened the doors, and she took care of the lectrocode officer before he could lock himself in and send warning."

Mister Olvan looked momentarily uncomfortable. "I will, sir."

"Is there a problem, Mister Olvan?"

"No, sir. Well, I suppose she frightens me. Sorry. Of course I will congratulate her."

I smiled, happy that we had taken the tower. Happy to see that I was not the only one scared of the petit woman. "She scares me too, Mister Olvan. Never seen a man's head removed with such efficiency. You should ask her to dinner! Perhaps she likes young meat."

To my surprise, Olvan seemed to consider this, and then said, "I might do that, sir. She is rather easy on the eyes."

"Don't be a bloody fool, man. The woman is a demon in disguise. She is a murderer, liar and a trickster. She is as guilty as she looks innocent. Stay well away from her!"

"Of course." Olvan was taken aback by my harsh words. "I meant only..."

I turned on my first officer. "Mister Olvan," I growled. "She is as pretty as a flower and as deadly as a viper. I suspect she is as cunning fox too. She is an agent and a spy of the Empire and I will not have my crew involved with such people."

"You mean, she's a Secret Servant?"

"That's right. While she is on my ship, she will be treated with respect, but also given a very wide berth. Now wipe that gormless look off your face, and stop thinking with your eel."

"Eel? Oh... Sorry, Sir."

"Get the wounded back to the ship. Make the ship ready to sail. I'm not sure how long we'll be, but we must be vigilant and ready to move at a moment's notice."

"Sir!" said Olvan by way of acknowledgement.

"Wait!" I had seen something out to sea.

On the northern side of the towers ramparts was a temporary open wooden structure with a sail for a roof. Under this was a simple chair, table and a long eye glass fixed to a tripod. I sat in the chair and using the eye glass focused on the object that had caught my eye.

"It's a ship."

"One of ours?" asked Olvan hopefully.

"Damn bugger in hells! It's a rebel frigate. Heading east. Moving fast."

"The enemy fleet, Sir?"

I scanned the glass westwards but saw no more ships nor smoke stacks on the distant horizon. "No. It's a scout ship. They would have sent a few ahead."

I thought for a moment. “Our fleet will not be far behind us. That frigate will see them soon enough and warn the enemy. He’ll see the Lady Ocean soon too. The enemy fleet can’t be too far off.”

“What can we do, Captain?”

“Bugged if I know. Think, man. Think!”

“The lectrocoder, Captain. Perhaps...”

“Of course! Well done Kristan!” I said using the officer’s first name, then grabbed a paper and pen from the table and began to write, speaking the words as I did so. “Enemy frigate sighted stop. Distant north stop. Advise investigation stop. Tars-hard watch tower stop.”

Handing the paper to Olvan, I asked, “What do you think?”

“We can only hope that they will investigate, sir.” Olvan took the paper.

“Get Mister Farnsind to send this at once using their code.” I knew it was obvious that it should be sent using rebel code but I did not know this man, Farnsind well, and for all I knew he might be a complete buffoon. Better safe than sorry. “Once that has been sent, send a message in our code to the fleet to move in with all haste.”

“Won't the enemy pick up our message too?”

“Probably but they will think it's the phantom frigate to the north.”

Mister Olvan nodded and left. I went back to scanning the horizon to the west with the glass, and could only hope that the enemy frigate would be drawn north to investigate the phantom frigate leaving the Imperial fleet enough room to slip past unseen.

The first message would put the enemy on alert, but they would be looking north and east when, if all goes well, the Imperial fleet will be coming from the rear; from the west.

I winced at the pain in my side. There was blood on my coat and a hole right through it. I would have to get the surgeon to have a look, but it was not life threatening and it could wait. I shivered.

“What now?”

The Lady Lamient stood behind me. She had found some water to wash her face of the blood. Her hair was wet and pushed back. Her ears and cheeks were badly scratched from her entry into the tower.

“We wait for the fleet. We signal the enemy that all is well. Did you manage to get an answer?”

“Oh yes,” she said coquettishly. That was quick. “A boy told me all we need to know. He was very cooperative. I only had to remove one of his fingers for him to talk.”

I winced at the thought. “You have the routine for signalling, all is well?”

A tabby tom cat ran up the stairs and jumped up on the wall. The lady smiled and made a purring noise to put it at ease as she reached for it. At first the cat was nervous and unsure, but soon succumbed to her soothing charms. Most fortifications and even ships had cats to fight of rodent infestations. This cat looked to be a young adult and had probably killed its fair share of rats and mice. The lady stroked its wide face for a minute then said, “I told you. He cried like a baby and when I soothed him, he told me how it is done. We should probably get on with it. A message is expected at least once an hour.”

She then looked back at the cat and frowned. “I hate cats.”

Before I could mouth a complaint, she simply pushed the cat over the edge of the wall to fall to its death far below. The woman was a psychopath. She was deadly, unfeeling and ruthless. She was also pretty and so the perfect tool for the Secret Servants. I felt for the cat. It had probably been terrified by the gun fire and battle. It was itself a killer, but only by nature, driven

by survival, not by madness. The lady was daring me to say something. Instead I turned to the eye glass again and watched the enemy frigate. It was turning north, and I smiled. "Then let's get on with it."

Chapter Twelve

The War Tempest was at the head of a line of six battleships and surrounded by a score of frigates. It was not a large fleet but it had a sting, and if they jumped the enemy they would certainly be able to inflict a terrible hurt upon them. The surprise would hopefully enable them to deal out the damage without taking too much themselves. It was hope and prayers and wishes, great risk. So much could go wrong. In the academy, I had read of so many well planned attacks that had gone wrong. Where were the enemy? Hopefully they were just making slow progress and not gathering up more ships along the way.

It had been over five hours since capturing the tower, time spent watching the waves, getting the wounded and prisoners down to the cells and signalling to the world that all was well. Mister Olvan was organising things down below while I kept an eye on the water. I was pleased with Olvan who was proving both competent and growing less timid as he grew in confidence. One day he might make a fine captain. Unlike me, Olvan would have to make the long and dangerous climb up the fleet rigging however. I was simply born the son of the Lord Admiral of the Imperial and Ardalrion Fleet. All I had to do was survive for a short time aboard the Sea Huntress to gain some experience and then I was made captain. It was ridiculous. Men with far more experience than me were still junior officers. There were boys with more sea in them than me, and yet there I was, captain of the Lady Ocean, fighting for the Empire with little or no clue of how to go about things. Still, we had taken the tower and that was something.

I shook my head in disgust. So far we had been lucky. I had been lucky with the lives of my crew and ship. Luck had to count for something though, and I would be lying if I did not admit to being proud of my captaincy, proud of my ship and proud of my men.

There was no sight of the enemy as yet, and the rebel frigate had disappeared to the north. It was now early afternoon. Jodlin was ambling about the place trying to make himself useful having taken me some bread and wine. There had been no signal from the fleet, but I had not expected any as further communication was forbidden.

When we finally saw the stacks of smoke to the east above the cliff tops, and half an hour later the first Imperial frigates appeared at full steam, we all felt a huge sense of relief. There was still no sign of the enemy and so I could now breathe more easily. "We've done our duty, Jodlin."

"Are we joining the fleet, Captain?" asked Jodlin, ever keen for a fight.

"I am considering it. We could leave the lectrocode officer here with some marines I suppose. The ship's not at full strength though," I said, annoyed at the lack of men and guns. It would be risky. We would be calling on that luck again. Will it hold?

"Let me at them. I'll make up for it."

I looked up at the man and remembered my fight with the thug. He was good in a fight, but not after a barrel of ale of course. Who was?

"We need to better hide the Lady Ocean anyway. Let's get back to the ship. We've done all we can here," I said.

The lectrocode officer complained at being left behind but I told him to shut up and do his duty. I also left four marines and told them we would return for them all within a few days. When asked what to do if the enemy showed up, I told them to lock the door and tell them to go away. I did not have a better answer. If the enemy showed up, they were doomed, but such are the choices a captain has to make. The Lady Lamient had already returned to the ship as had

most of the marines and Mister Olvan. Jodlin and I were the last to leave, and as we set off, Jodlin stopped. I heard it too.

Jodlin went to a patch of scrub and rocks and from them lifted up the tabby cat. To my amazement, the cat was alive. Its left eye was bleeding from a gash across its face, and its front right leg looked to be broken, but it was alive and cried in pain as Jodlin gently placed it in the cradle of his arms. It was too weak to fight and just lay there hurt and probably dying.

“Poor thing. Must have fallen off the tower,” said Jodlin.

“A resilient creature.”

Jodlin stroked it gently. “What should I do with it?”

“Put it out of its misery, man. A blow from your hammer will send it to whatever heavens cats go to.”

Jodlin looked shocked. “I can’t, sir. It’s just a cat. I can’t kill it.”

I was baffled by the man’s ability to kill men with a ruthless efficiency and yet was unable to put a wounded cat to sleep. “I’ll do it,” I said eventually, reaching for my gutting knife. Jodlin turned to protect the cat. I looked up at the man and shrugged my shoulders. “Do what you want with him. He’ll be dead soon enough anyway.”

Jodlin took the cat back to the ship and begged the surgeon to have a look at it. Doctor Eebel was reluctant to waste time on an animal but Jodlin’s pleading eventually convinced the doctor to have a look, but only after the men were seen to. I hoped that the cat would live. Somehow it was suddenly important. As soon as the cat was aboard the Lady Ocean, it was part of the crew, and I told Jodlin to look after it.

We set a westerly course, chasing the fleet. I had all the guns inspected, with shot and powder made ready. We flew the flag of the Empire above the Ardalrion flag again as did the rest of the fleet but even then we were interrogated by a frigate who acted as the fleet’s rear guard.

A couple of hours after leaving the tower, the entire fleet entered a large cove. I watched the great ships from the castle. Some were old, like the Battleship Frost Fang, some new, like the Frigate Seahorse. There was the War Breed, a sleek battleship behind the Wind Reaper, a tall battleship famous for surviving a blockade run early in the war. The Iron Hammer, the Brave Mission, the Widow Song. So many famous ships with long, bloody histories. I had seen them all before but now I would fight alongside them.

The fleet was not hidden entirely but the boilers were left to run on a low flame and the smoke and steam dwindled. A few stragglers caught up, the last of whom was the Sea Huntress. Crosp had probably run her hard to catch up with the fleet. I had to give him credit for making it, bastard that he was. Crosp was at least loyal to the Empire and his duties.

It was growing late in the day now and a lookout had climbed the cliffs to watch for the enemy. As it turned out, we had made it just in time for the lookout signalled that the rebel fleet was to the west. There was still a lectrocoder silence in force and so the flagship used the old fashioned, but reliable system of hoisting flags to relay its messages.

This is it! A sense of relief at finding the enemy mixed with apprehension swept the ship. I guessed that it would be dark before the enemy passed us. I looked to the grey skies and was worried by the amount of steam and smoke still rising from the fleet, but hopefully it would be hard to discern from this distance, with a murky backdrop. Soon it would be dark, and then we would be properly hidden. All lights and flames were forbidden until the first shots were fired. All flags were to be lowered until the enemy was engaged.

It was dark and eerie in the tightly packed cove. The men were silent even though their voices would never carry as far as the enemy. Harl stood at the wheel together with the surgeon, Olvan, Sergeant Lamtak, Sudlas and myself. We all listened to the distant sound of steam engines and thrashing paddle wheels as the enemy fleet passed a mile or two to the north. They too were blacked out, and in the darkness men could only imagine the size of the enemy fleet and the hundreds of guns on multiple decks that awaited us, ready to belch fire, iron and death. Were they expecting a possible ambush? Would the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy, or that depleted part of it that now hid in the shadows, be up to the challenge?

Somewhere out there was an enemy we would now hunt, but nobody was sure of the kill for in the darkness and confusion of battle, the hunter could quickly become the hunted. The trap was fragile, tenuous. The silence continued and the enemy lumbered on. It was near pitch black. I could not see the other ships of the fleet, but before darkness fell the fleet had lined the cove in ready order. The signal to move came as a distant call over the cove's waters. "For Ardalrion. For Emperor and Empire. Follow the flag!" It was an eerie sound like a lost soul that echoed from bluff to bluff. A lonely sound.

When darkness had fallen, every ship in the fleet had stoked up their boilers again, and so the fleet was ready to move. The familiar sound of release valves venting was replaced by the strained hiss then puff. Then the cove filled with the sound of paddle wheels gently turning. A distant light flashed which was the War Tempest's signal to the next battleship in line to follow her. Each ship had a small shielded light to the rear, hidden from the front and sides so that the fleet could follow the flagship in a long line of battle. The intention was to get as far into the enemy formation as possible before the rebels realised what was happening. If possible the fleet was to stay as a line and follow the flagship until told to break off and enter the melee, and that line was something I feared. The line of battle is written about in any number of volumes but none tell the story the old sea dogs tell, those men that have actually been in the line and endured the relentless crashing and thundering of iron and fire, the pounding of guns that rip holes through ships and crew alike. Those books never tell of the horror of a one ton heavy gun being thrown aside by shot only to crush the mere fleshy bodies of those men manning it. How shot can turn a man's torso to a red mist and the splinters of wood fly like harpoons. I have heard of the bleeding ears from the noise, and the choking smoke of the powder, and the horror of a shot that runs the length of the deck, decapitating man after man. It is something I fear, for those that have endured it and survived have told me to fear it.

I gave the command and the Lady Ocean came to life as a gear clanked into place followed by a heaving hiss and then a relieving chug. Her wheel turned and so we went to face the line of battle.

"I beg forgiveness," said Harl.

I nodded, recognising the first line of a well-known prayer to the gods.

"I beg mercy," responded Doctor Eebel.

"I beg that we shall see the dawn of a new day." Sergeant Lamtak finished the first verse of the prayer, then kissed his fist and touched it to his forehead as the pious often did.

It is funny how pious men would become before a battle. Of course it could not hurt to show a little respect, especially before a fight. I too had a sudden urge to call on the greater powers of the Creators but resisted, not wanting show any sign of weakness or doubt, but I did doubt. I knew very well that this may be my last night on this cold world.

“Follow that light, Mister Harl,” I said, indicating a weak illumination that swung as it moved away from us. We were the last of the line of ships to move out. We were certainly the weakest ship and it is traditionally the way of a battle line of ships. The strongest would be the head of a long snaking line of ships. The Lady Ocean was now the tip of the tail. Any smaller ships had been left behind in Umuron as a last line of defence should the main fleet fail. Gunboats did not have the calibre for fleet battles, but they could at least be used to harry the enemy and cover the evacuation of the town if it came to that.

The fleet moved at a good pace in a north-north easterly direction. This made sense as the enemy would be breaking north-eastwards after the last watch tower in order to enter the larger expanse of water so as to avoid Imperial lookouts and scouts as they neared Umuron.

Before the Lady Ocean, the light of the frigate in front blinked and bobbed. Before that was another faint light in the distance and then another even fainter. They would go on, all the way up to the mighty War Tempest at the head. I decided that if I did pray to any god now, I would pray to that mighty god machine to deliver us.

“How long would you say Mister Olvan?”

“I should think we will catch up with the stragglers in a couple of hours if we head straight after them, sir. I would have thought the War Tempest would try to manoeuvre around them, to come in from the west of their formation.”

“That’s very possible. The Admiral didn’t have a clear plan yet when I left him.”

“He would have to time it right, sir, or we lose 'em in the dark, but the High Admiral has sea water in his blood,” said Harl. I was pleased to note how Harl would offer opinion without being asked any longer. It was what I wanted and needed, and Harl probably knew this. There was still so much to learn and I cursed the wasted years at the academy, and decided there and then that as soon as Ajator was duke, I would have my brother change the Ardalrion academy to be more practical. We would not be able to affect the Imperial academy in Norlan, but at home we would breed a more hands on officer who perhaps might be sneered at in certain circles, but certainly be more respected by our enemies. The respect of an enemy is worth more than any accolade or praise of any friend when war is made.

Men stood on deck. We watched the distant light and looked out at the dark seas. We were all quiet, and the anticipation of battle was showing on those men who fidgeted and clenched fists. There was also a sense of excitement at the prospect of bloodying the rebels "good and proper" as one man put it. I was anxious too, but tried to hide it from the others. I tried to show an air of confidence, but the truth was that I did not know what was going to happen, or how we were even going to defend ourselves with only a handful of guns and not enough crew to defend against a full boarding. The very best I could hope to achieve would be to distract an enemy.

The night drew on. The waters were still rough but seemed to be calming a little. The drizzle had stopped. The engine was not running smoothly. It clanked and jarred, the hull shuddered every now and then, but it was holding. If we survived this battle, I intended to take the Lady Ocean back to Norlan where I would give it a proper refit and fill the crew whatever the cost, even if I had to sail her all the way back to Ardalrion and scour the villages for eager eyed young men.

Suddenly Veinara and my brother came to mind. Where was my brother? It did not look as though he was part of the fleet and so I assumed he had returned to Norlan to see his new wife and never heard the call to arms. Lord Pavantu's words now seemed ridiculous. How could Ajator be in any trouble? Even if he was, I knew my brother would find a way out of it.

“Coming about, Captain,” said Harl.

The dim light was moving eastwards. It had been three hours since we left the cove. Willan had made his rounds of the castle handing out warm broth and bread, it being important to keep the men well fed before battle. It looked as though Olvan was correct and we were to strike at the heart of the enemy fleet from the west.

“Mister Harl. I want you on deck. Clear the deck. Run out the guns and make ready for battle.”

“Sir,” said Harl, handing over the wheel to Mister Owman. A couple of young lads were also helping to hold the wheel as it was tiring work in troubled waters. What were their names again? One of them was the boy who had tried to repaint the name of the ship in the stormy waters. I had wanted to get to know the crew better but so far had not found the time. If we survived the night, I would find out later.

“Sergeant! Place men in the crow's-nest and up here in the aftcastle. If we are boarded, we will stand a better chance if we concentrate our defences here.”

“Yes, sir!” Sergeant Lamtak saluted, and then turned to gather his men.

“What can I do?” This was the Lady Lamient. I had not noticed her on the castle. She had been hidden in the darkness.

“What can't you do?” I asked in response.

She smiled at that, taking it as a compliment although I was referring to her probable lack of any humanity. Perhaps she understood that and still considered it a compliment.

“I have a rifle in my bag.”

“That certainly is a bag of tricks. Perhaps the lady would rather stay below while the men dispatch these rebel buggers,” I said, fulfilling my duty as an officer to offer protection to any women aboard my ship. I was however damned if I was going to pretty my language for this one.

“There is probably room in the crow's-nest where I can put my rifle to use.”

Rifles were not common. The Calionvar had developed the technology and as far as I knew it entailed adding grooves to the inside of a musket's barrel. It made the ball spin which greatly increased the accuracy. Muskets were poor weapons at a range over fifty yards, and many a ship would hold off firing such weapons until the range was closed, and even then men were not expected to hit a specific target but instead fire at an enemy crew in general and fire as often as possible and just hope the odd shot would find a target. Rifles however could be used to hit individual targets, and a captain always feared them for the captains and officers were always prime targets in any crew. In fact few Imperial captains allowed their use and even I was not happy with such a weapon aboard my ship. I knew it was a boon to my ship's small firepower however and I was not usually one for convention, but if we started using one then why would the enemy not start using them? Then I would be the first of my crew to die should an enemy pose such a weapon. Ever the craven puppy! Be thankful for the ladies contribution.

She went below and returned shortly with the rifle. It was too dark to see it as everything was just a shade of black upon another shade of black, but she slung the long barrel on her back and climbed the rigging to the crow's-nest.

“I had best prepare,” said Doctor Eebel. He was in a sullen mood and smelt of spirits. He had found some and was drunk, but not too drunk to forget his duties thankfully. Even though I wanted to, I could not blame the man.

“Have plenty of lanterns ready, doctor. When the fight begins, you will need the light to work by.”

“Good luck, Captain Ardalrion. I hope not to see you tonight at least.”

I nodded and the surgeon made his way forward.

Sergeant Lamtak then marched up and saluted.

"Sergeant?"

"The men are ready, sir."

"Good. It will probably be a while yet, but I want to be prepared to move at a moment's notice. Load and be ready, but hold fire till I give the command."

"Very well, sir. Private Ekstam requests permission to string his bow, sir."

"A bow?" It was not uncommon for men to use the bow, but marines had long ago taken to the musket.

"A longbow, sir. He is a fine shot and always has it to hand."

I looked at the marines lined up on the castle and saw one man looking expectantly back at us. He was a big man but more to the point he was broad of shoulder. It took a huge strength to draw the longbow, and years of training to acquire the combination of strength and skill to use the weapon. Most bows were shorter, of the hunting variety, but the longbow was made for war - far more accurate than the musket and in the right hands, a deadlier weapon. Years ago, I had tried one and managed to pull the string as far back as my elbow using all my strength. The owner, one of the duke's woodsmen, a barrel chested old dog had laughed, then pulled it back to his ear before releasing the arrow which went on to pierce an old iron breastplate we were using as a target.

"Granted, Sergeant."

Lamtak saluted again, then turned and marched back to his marines.

"How long, sir?" asked Olvan, taking his place by my side.

"Hard to say. If the enemy changed course or speed we might well have lost them. We might overshoot them. We might be many miles behind them. I just don't know."

"A three breasted mermaid," was Olvan's response.

I looked at the silhouette that was Olvan. Had he lost his mind? "Would you care to explain?"

"Your idea for a figurehead, Captain. The three breasted mermaid."

I remembered the discussion. I had asked Olvan to come up with an original figurehead and the three breasted mermaid was only an example.

"I have thought about it, sir. I thought long and hard and the more I thought about it, the more I realised that it's perfect. I can't come up with a better idea, sir," explained Mister Olvan. "You see - this is your ship. It was your idea and it suits you. Please forgive my presumption, sir, but anything I can think of would just be absurd or rude or tasteless."

"And a three breasted mermaid is not absurd, rude and tasteless?"

"Well, yes, but it's you. It marks the ship as yours. It reeks... erm, sings of Captain Malspire Ardalrion, sir." Olvan looked worried as though he had said too much, and he had.

I was taken aback, slightly hurt at the idea that even my first officer looked down upon me, his captain. I liked Olvan and yet he said these things that cut me.

"It's hard to explain, sir. I respect you..."

"Respect me? You have a funny way of showing it. Reeks?"

Olvan had a pleading look. He was trying to find the right words. "You are... different. I grew up with every man adhering to the rules of society. I was taught to be polite and kind to women and the needy. I was given a proper education where I was taught that I was above most men and should act as such. I thought I was above most men, at least any men not born to money or nobility. Then I met you and you introduced me to the most vulgar, dirty, rude and savage

men I have ever met. The crew,” added Olvan. “At first I hated it. I hated the language and manner and filth of these men. I hated the way they gamble and drink and swear and spit.”

I was listening.

“Then I changed. It was not fast. It took a while, but slowly I realised that I’m not as clever as I thought. At first it rankled, sir. The very thought that the low born can outwit me! But they can. I have met simple men with simple needs, but they aren’t stupid, nor basic. They’re cunning, and some probably far more intelligent than I.” He gestured towards Harl who was out of earshot.

“What I’m trying to say, Captain, is that you already knew this. You were born far above me and yet you know a man’s worth. Not by his blood and name, but by his skill and wit and character. I know I’m presuming a lot, sir, but you are different and only a three breasted mermaid would now suit your ship and only you could think of such a...”

“Reeking monstrosity?” I helped him.

Olvan smiled. “Exactly that, sir. It takes a monstrosity to tell the world that this ship belongs to Captain Ardalrion, and the captain is proud of it.” He shook his head, frustrated with his inability to put into words the subtle concept. “It needs to be a three breasted mermaid,” he concluded.

I nodded. I no longer felt hurt but rather flattered in an odd way. I did not know why, but Olvan had seen something in me that few others have, which I had long wanted the world to see, which was... So what? So what if you have money or powerful family. But what does matter then? I could only think of wine, women and gambling. That was not the full answer but it was certainly more valid than many. “I see, Mister Olvan.”

“So we shall have a three breasted mermaid?” asked the younger officer with a hopeful smile.

I considered this. “Yes. I plan to take us to Norlan for a proper refit. We shall commission it there. If we survive that is.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Absurd, rude and tasteless?”

“Not... no... just...”

“Enough, Mister Olvan. I thank you for your effort.”

There was a short silence then I added, “Just make sure not to forget the horn and beard.”

More hours passed and there had been no sign of the enemy. I was worried that the fleet had lost them. All the men had been on standby, and the fleet had even made a slight course change to a south easterly heading. Cups of warm broth had been passed around again to keep the men both warm and fit for fight. The paddle wheel endlessly thrashed the water. The engine thump thump thumped to a monotonous beat. I cradled my cup, letting the heat of the drink warm my fingers. The darkness was an endless maw of hidden threats, yet in places the sky was a subtle grade of darkest grey. There was a moon up there, and I had a feeling that the clouds were thinning. The lantern we followed was still a hundred or so yards ahead as it had been since we left the cove.

Harl, who I could just make out in the gloom, was on the main deck, standing at the starboard gunwale scanning the blackness of the surrounding night that enveloped us so utterly. He turned his head one way, then turned it the other. He was listening. Sudlas joined him.

I looked to my right and just then saw a tiny flash in the distance. It only lasted half a second, yet it was there. I knew exactly what I saw. It was the flash of a pipe being lit and I knew there was a ship a few hundred yards off to starboard. Harl had seen it too and signalled to me. I nodded. The enemy were blacked out but someone had lit a pipe. That someone had just unwittingly signalled the probable location of his fleet. I thanked the careless rebel bastard.

"Not long now lads! Rebels are off the starboard side. Pass the word." This was met by the odd muted cheer. Men still felt they should not make too much noise, funny considering the racket a steam engine and paddle wheel made.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the Tempest in action, sir," said Olvan.

"She has more firepower than a large fortress, Mister Olvan. She will light up the night like an angry god!"

"I'm pleased we joined the fleet, sir. This should make a story worth telling in the taverns or over dinner when I get old."

"It will." If we survive. "Hopefully we can be more than mere spectators though."

Conditions were clearing. The wind had been dying since we left the cove. I could see a very long chain of lights ahead of us now. Whatever ship was out there to the Lady Ocean's starboard could probably see a few of them itself which meant that it was only a matter of time now before the alarm was raised.

The fleet was accelerating. The Lady Ocean was set to full speed. She was not running as well as she could, but it was enough. I kept a weather eye on the darkness to starboard. I thought he could hear the distant thrumming of an engine and paddle wheel somewhere out there, but it was hard to make it out over the urgent pounding of the Lady Ocean's own engine. Then all of a sudden the clouds parted and as bright as a sun's ray of light it seemed, the moon pierced the heavens to cast a patch of light that illuminated the seas for miles around. I ran to the gunwale and looked out over the saturated seascape of silver speckled waves, black heavens and white edged ships.

"Gods preserve us," said Olvan who too was staring at the picture before us.

I hoped they would try, but would have preferred more ships and guns for there were at least twice our number of rebels out there. We had found the enemy, and the War Tempest was shooting like a lance for the very heart of the rebel formation.

Chapter Thirteen

“For Ardalrion. For the Empire! Death to the rebels!” I shouted.

“Death to the rebels!” returned the crew.

The rebels were travelling in a rough oval formation with the battleships and transports at its heart and frigates surrounding them. The Imperial line, now curving round was already well inside the oval and it was but minutes before the War Tempest would be able to engage the enemy.

I saw that the rebels were not ready and were completely unaware until this point of impending danger, like a hunter turning to find a lion about to leap upon his back. Another minute passed. Still the enemy did nothing. Still the fleet moved in. Then suddenly I saw one of the rebel grand battleships veer to port. There were two of them. The second now turned too but in the other direction. I could well imagine the panic taking place on the enemy ships as they realised the gravity of the situation that was now upon them - one minute all was quiet and dark, the next, the heavens opened to reveal the sickly sight of an enemy fleet in battle formation so close you could spit at them.

Then there was darkness again. The clouds hid the moon and the fleets of both the Empire and rebellion vanished. Things fell oddly calm, then after what seemed an age, into this darkness came the sudden and brilliant shock of a double broadside from the distant War Tempest which lit up the night like a god’s hammer striking a white hot iron upon the anvil. She had managed to work her way between the two enemy grand battleships. This was quickly followed by the chest pounding, rolling boom of cannon fire, like the rolling thunder of a lightning bolt ponderously crawling through the clouds.

Witnessing the awe inspiring full force of a grand battleship’s double broadside brought home to me just how devastating these ships truly are. The enemy responded with the guns they could bring to bear but having turned away, their response was pitiful next to the War Tempest’s full fury.

Again there was darkness, but this was short lived, as soon fresh cannon fire started up and this time it did not stop. The Imperial fleet stayed in a line of battle and as each ship came within range of any enemy ship, they opened fire. All I could do was follow the light, follow the frigate in front of me and soon it would be the turn of the Lady Ocean to engage the enemy. Soon we would be put through the grinding mill of the line.

With the thunder and flash of gunfire ahead, I could now see the frigate that was close to starboard. It was not closing but heading for its flagship. Eventually it would close the gap as we both reached the same spot where the War tempest was carving a path through the enemy. What worried me was that we could not match the rebels for firepower.

The Lady Ocean was not a ship of the line. Not in her current state, and the question was whether or not to pull out of the line and see if we couldn’t find other ways to hurt the rebels? The enemy were still confused. Perhaps we could add a little more by doing the unexpected. I searched ahead and saw the Imperial line moving inexorably through the heart of the rebels. Astonishingly the two enemy grand battleships seemed to be manoeuvring and none the worse for wear after the initial Imperial hammer blow. It was of course hard to tell from this distance, but it was a wonder that anything could survive such a barrage.

I saw that there was going to be a short lull in the battle as there was a gap between the two foremost Imperial battleships and the next. I waited. The cannons went silent. I made my choice.

“Hard to starboard, Mister Owman.”

“Hard to starboard!”

Owman turned the large wheel and the Lady Ocean leaned into the direction she was travelling as the ship turned away from the line and cut a new path through the waves.

“Captain?” this was Olvan who gave me a questioning look.

“Make ready to board the enemy, Mister Olvan. We’re going to board that frigate!”

“But, the line, sir?”

“Bugger the line. What difference can we make? You have your orders.”

“Starboard cannons ready to fire!” shouted Olvan as the battle lit up with renewed cannon fire. “Make ready to board the enemy!”

The whole ship came to life as those men not needed by the cannons went to fetch weapons and armour. Sergeant Lamtak readied twelve marines to go over the aftcastle.

“Send over the lot, sergeant. We don’t have enough men to prepare a retreat. All or nothing!” I said, drawing my cutlass and checking that my gutting knife was to hand.

As the flashes of light lit up the night and the crackling booms thundered over the waves, the Lady Ocean closed quickly with the enemy frigate. One such flash illuminated the enemy ship's name. The Dragonfly! It was the very same frigate that had tried to stop us from entering Sulenfir. Both vessels were probably at full speed, but the Dragonfly was the faster ship. The crew of the Lady Ocean would have to time it well as we came in fast and hard.

“Ready grappling hooks!” called Olvan who had drawn his sword, anticipation written on his face when he glanced back at me. He looked like a boy. He was a boy. I nodded.

Jodlin appeared on the aftcastle fully armed and armoured and smiled at me. It seemed that Jodlin had taken to being my personal body guard. It was not requested, but I was pleased to have him close. Harl had probably sent him again.

Then I addressed the ship. “I want this done quickly and without mercy. Once you're on that ship,” I pointed and was having to shout over the din of engine and guns. “I want you to have at them like the murdering bastards I know you are. Give them steel and lead. Make them bleed and beg for mercy. Drive them off that deck and into the sea!” The men roared with approval. “Kill the rebel turds. Gut them and hammer them. Stab them, kick them, punch them and bite'em! Make them piss their breaches and then call for their mothers. No mercy! Kill them all!” Again they cheered for their captain.

With only fifty yards now separating the two ships, I saw as the enemy realised that the Lady Ocean had left the line and how close she was. I saw men running along the deck, and others raising muskets. The damned buggers would probably manage a broadside before the Lady Ocean hit them. I toyed with the idea of turning away and delivering our own broadside when parallel with them but we would be outgunned. We would have to get lucky to hurt the enemy, while the enemy would be in a good position to deliver a full salvo. No. It was all or nothing. Take the broadside, then savage them.

As I watched the enemy, I saw an officer standing next to three enemy marines. The marines vanished in a cloud of smoke and stabbing fire as they fired at us. This was followed by a single smack as one of the shots hit the funnel instantly followed by the crackling noise of the small volley.

There was a faint snap then crack from the crow's-nest and I saw the enemy officer fall, his head thrown back in a spray of blood. Looking up, I could just make out the Lady Lamient admiring her work. It was all viewed through the flash and glare of the cannon fire. Nothing moved but just changed places from flash of light to flash of light. It was nightmarish and I felt the familiar pang of fear festering in my gut.

"Remember to aim low," commanded Sergeant Lamtak. "Aim for their balls! Fire!" He had organised his men into a line. The volley crackled deafeningly and again my view was obscured by a stinking cloud of gunpowder smoke which was soon left behind in the breeze.

"Brace yourselves!" I roared as I saw another rebel officer raise his arm. It dropped.

There was a sudden silence. The world stopped. The crew of the Lady Ocean stood motionless. I held my breath and gritted my teeth. The enemy ship erupted in a cloud of smoke and jets of fire. It was no more than five guns, the rest probably not ready yet, but the effect was brutal. The crash of thunderous noise hit us as the cannon balls ploughed into the Lady Ocean, cutting great shards of splintered wood that flew across the deck, smashing through both timber and flesh. One man had his leg ripped clean off. Another was impaled and thrown overboard. A ball went right through the aftcastle just below my feet. There were screams and shouts. The effect was demoralising, but it could have been a lot worse. The enemy had used round shot rather than grapeshot - the tins of lead balls and scrap metal that would disintegrate into a cloud of lethal particles when fired and could reduce a deck of men to a mass of broken and bloody bodies. The enemy had not expected our manoeuvre. They were not prepared, and now they would pay for that mistake. The grappling hooks were thrown across. Gunfire was now being exchanged in a constant crack and rattle, a shot hissing close by my head. Another tugged at my coat sleeve. I was a prime target and felt exposed, but forced myself to remain composed, not to duck.

"Permission to fire?" called Harl who was standing by the row of cannons.

The Lady Ocean had turned alongside the rebel and Harl wanted to put a broadside into her before we embraced.

"Send them to the deepest hell, Mister Harl!"

Again the world of vision and sounds were dulled as Harl had the five cannons of the Lady Ocean fire at point blank range. It was all I could do just to stay on my feet as the concussive blast enveloped both ships. I thanked the gods for Harl's initiative, for I was not thinking clearly. I was standing at death's door and realised that the next few minutes could be the last of my miserable life.

"Fix bayonets," called the marine sergeant.

"Now. Grappling hooks!" This was Olvan. We were upon the rebels.

Go! I thought. Go now or run away. I gritted my teeth again and thumbed my gutting knife. I had to go now or the fear would overcome me. I looked at Jodlin who was watching me. The big man was waiting to be let loose. He wanted to go. So be it!

"The Empire rules these oceans! Have at them! Kill the rebels. Kill them all!" and I ran at the gunwale between two marines. I took the side of my ship with my right boot and leapt into the air. In my eagerness, I had charged earlier than I should have as there was still a distance between the two ships, but I just about made the jump, landing just inside the enemy gunwale and fell upon the enemy with a fury and bitter brutality born of a fear that the instant I showed any timidity, I would be a dead man.

The rebels were still reeling from the cannon fire and Harl, bless the cunning bugger, had used grapeshot. The deck of the Dragonfly was a slaughterhouse of flayed bodies, blood and death. A score of men had been shredded and killed instantly. The stink of gunpowder mixed with blood and piss was what met me, but it only took a second for the rebels to regain their composure after the initial shock. A young marine charged me with his two foot long bayonet. The side of the boy's face was covered in blood and ichor. He had tears in his red eyes and a look of mixed panic and hatred. He screamed as he lunged. I turned away, parrying the bayonet, and

then barged into the young marine who, off balance, went over the side of the ship into the dwindling space between the two frigates. Another man hacked at me with a cutlass and I had to step back but managed to slash my gutting knife across the enemy's face as he did so. The sailor fell back, moaning. Then all of a sudden I was surrounded by my own men. Within seconds, Sergeant Lamtak managed to organise a single volley, then all together we charged at the rebels. Jodlin was now at my side and bellowing a fearful war cry.

All along the ship, the crew of the Lady Ocean fell upon the enemy, led further down by Sudlas. I knew I had to keep the momentum going in order to overcome the greater odds and so shouted all the while. "Kill them! Don't stop. Keep killing!" I lunged my cutlass at a scarred sailor who with some skill parried the blow then kicked me, but I just managed to twist away to take the blow on the shin. It hurt like mad but I swung again and again until the enemy was shoved by a fellow seaman and fell upon my blade. I twisted it and pulled it free from the rebel's sucking guts and at the same time drove the gutting knife into the man's eye. He died instantly with his guts on the deck and blood pouring from his mangled eye socket. Jodlin's hammer came down on another's head and crushed the man's helmet like an egg shell, sending the contents of the rebel's skull down through his neck. Sergeant Lamtak and his men thrust, then stepped forwards, thrust again and stepped forwards. Like a butchering machine, they systematically cleared the aftcastle of the Dragonfly. It was grim but effective work.

I looked up and saw the crow's-nest of the Dragonfly was silenced with a couple of bodies hanging over the sides. The Lady Lamient and the other sharp shooters must have dispatched them. We drove on, hacking and cursing. Kicking and stabbing. My men and I had managed to drive the enemy crew on the aftcastle back to the steps that lead down to the main deck.

"A volley I think, Sergeant Lamtak!" I called over the shouting, ragged crackle of gunfire and ring of steel.

With the aid of some seamen, I took the brunt of the fight as the sergeant ordered his men to stand back and reload. I half saw those men, ten or so, put their muskets before them, and perform the actions required as rehearsed time and time again. It was done quickly and efficiently. Sergeant Lamtak was to be commended.

"Present!" shouted Lamtak.

My men and I fell back and out of the way. Those that could not, threw themselves down.

"Fire!" The ear splitting volley was at such close range that not a single shot missed. Many even passed through two men. The enemy were thrown back down the stairs - some dead, many wounded.

"Kill them! Charge!" We were on them again. We had secured the aftcastle, but I wanted to keep the momentum going and so I pushed on down the steps. At the foot of the steps we formed a battle line and fought on. I was losing men though. I saw a rebel officer put a pistol shot into the chest of a seaman. The man fell back and began to cough up blood. One of my marines took a cutlass thrust in the neck. It was bloody work for both sides, but the enemy were falling back. They were disorganised and demoralised, stunned by the ferocity of our assault.

Suddenly from behind our thin line, a charge was called. I turned just in time to see the enemy captain charging from a door set into the aftcastle next to the steps. He was flanked by a group of rebels covered in soot and sweat who I presumed had just been fetched from the engine room. The captain had a crazed look of terror mixed with anger on his face and was aiming his sword straight for my neck. I froze with fear for a split second, and then tried to raise my cutlass to parry the thrust, but it was too late. A strange moment of lucidity brought everything into slow motion as I realised I was going to die. The rebel captain's blade was going to rip through my

throat. My cutlass would never parry in time. I could not move away fast enough, and grunted and gritted my teeth in anticipation of the end.

Then suddenly the side of the man's head exploded and slowly, so slowly he fell sideways, his eyes never leaving mine, even when he hit the deck and lay there motionless.

From above, I saw the Lady looking down at me from her perch. She did not smile, as though she regretted having to save my life. Then the screams of the enemy from below came back to me as they were now upon us. I was still half frozen - shocked to have been so close to death, yet still alive - confused. I managed to parry the first blow, but a pistol was raised. Then from nowhere Sudlas stepped in front of me as the gun was fired. My face and open mouth were splattered with blood from his shoulder, but the man somehow fought on with a cry of pain and anger. He cut into the rebels even as the others discharged their guns into Sudlas who was now the more imminent threat to their lives. The brave Mister Sudlas cut three of them down with his sword before he fell to the deck, motionless, dead.

Jodlin barged me aside as the big fellow hammered into the blackened enemy with a mighty roar of anger, stepping over the body of Sudlas, continuing the gruesome work of subduing these men and avenging the death of his fellow crewman and friend. Sudlas had ever teased and taunted the big man, yet Jodlin was obviously enraged at seeing him fall.

The fight ended shortly thereafter. We won. We should have lost but we captured the frigate. A senior officer surrendered his sword to Mister Olvan and the rest of the rebel crew began to drop their weapons. The crew of the Lady Ocean cheered and some patted their captain on his back. I hated anyone touching it, but was willing to overlook this now. I was however far from happy. We had lost many good men. Most hard to swallow was the loss of Mister Sudlas who had now saved my life twice. There was still some gun fire from below deck, but it soon dissipated. There had probably been a pocket of resistance below, but it did not last long.

In the short time it had taken to overcome the vessel, the seas had become an inferno of blazing ships and furious cannon fire. The enemy were in total disarray. I could see that the leading Imperial ships were still in a line and following the War Tempest in a wide arc, making ready for a second run at the rebel fleet. All the frigates and one of the rear battleships had been forced to leave the line and enter the melee.

"What now, sir?" This was Olvan. I saw a look of sheer joy on the young officer's face, and why not? He had fought and survived his first hostile boarding.

"What now indeed, Mister Olvan," I said. "We won a small victory but the battle is just begun."

"And the prize?" asked the young officer indicating the ship we had taken.

I considered this. We were desperately short of crew. I could send the ship back with a skeleton crew but wanted the men for the battle which we now had to re-join. Or did we? We were not expected to join the fleet in the first place.

Olvan seemed to sense my thoughts. "We are to re-join the fight?" he asked, eager for more.

I nodded. Of course we were. It was not an option. I was sworn to the Navy and my duty was to hit the enemies of the Empire when and wherever we found them. My breath was still heaving from the fight, my arms tired. What about the Dragonfly though? We could burn her, but she was valuable. Not only to me and my crew but to the Empire. She also had cannon that the Lady Ocean needed. There was something else too. Something told me that the Dragonfly was not ready to die yet, and she still had a role to play.

"Eight seamen and two marines are to take the prize back to Umuron. Pick a good man to command her, but I want Mister Harl with us."

“Aye aye, Captain.”

“Lock the prisoners up in the Dragonfly. Put Mister Banton in the engine room.”

It was not enough men, I knew, but we would have to risk it. They would get no sleep until they reached Umuron if they made it at all, but it was a risk we had to take. Again both ships were blacked out. I feared a rebel ship coming for us whilst so vulnerable and wanted to be as invisible as possible. The battle raged on as Olvan organised the prize party and put the prisoners below under lock and key.

The Imperial line came round again and this time got caught up in the melee. The rebels had more ships but they had taken a terrible beating so far. We could see a rebel battleship ablaze and retreating from the fight, heading back west. Fires were a ship's worst enemy but if the battleship was given some respite, they would probably be able to get it under control. Those old ships may be made of wood, but it was centuries old, hardened to rock wood and so made poor tinder and it took a long time for fire to work its way to the heartwood.

Finally we were ready to move again. Before us was a chaos that stank of the rotten black powder. There was so much smoke that the flames and blasts were hazed as though seen through a mist.

“Full speed ahead, Mister Owman.”

“Full speed, Captain!”

“Ready the guns, Mister Harl. Round shot this time!” We would board no more ships. I wanted to harass the bigger ships and avoid any boarding actions. With round shot, we would be able to sting them and perhaps distract them while the Imperial battleships did their work. The Lady Ocean moved on, leaving the Dragonfly and its minimal crew to their fate. We set a course for the centre of the battle where the big ships danced a cumbersome waltz, lashing each other with fire and iron. The fury was greatest around the Imperial flagship, the War Tempest. She was no longer firing volleys but each gun would fire, clean out the barrel, ram down a new charge and shot, run out the gun and then fire again. The War Tempest was burning in a few places, but she seemed to be under control and was fighting grimly. The grand battleship she was facing off with was in worse shape, and listing to one side. The noise was like a constant rolling thunder, the flashes and fire lighting up the night. There was an almighty blast off to the west where a frigate's magazine went up in smoke. We could not tell if it was a rebel or Imperial.

As the Lady Ocean entered the maelstrom of cannon fire, I steered her towards two rebel battleships that were taking on an Imperial battleship. I kept her at full speed knowing that we did not stand a chance against such vessels, but if we could get a few shots in, it would help the Imperial ship in a small way.

“Give me the helm,” I barked, taking the wheel from Owman. The two boys still stood ready to help. I had to manoeuvre quickly now and did not want the delay in passing on orders. We came at the enemy from the front, and then turned hard to starboard, aiming to put a broadside down the rebels bow. A lucky shot would run a good distance through the ship, hopefully doing some damage.

“Fire as we pass her, Mister Olvan. Inform Harl.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Olvan ran down the steps to Harl who nodded when told what to do. I wanted to get close, but I got too close for comfort as the bow of the enemy ship suddenly loomed over us. The rebel battleship was moving deceptively quickly and if she rammed the Lady Ocean, they would hardly notice the obstacle as the great ship ploughed through us, crushing our small ship to a woody pulp.

Some musket fire started up as men on both ships fired at one another. The marines of the Lady Ocean had to fire upwards and the rebels fired down. A forward chaser cannon on the rebel ship blasted a shot at us but it went high. The Lady Ocean was too close for the enemy cannon which were placed on higher decks. The angle was too steep and frustrated the rebel gunners.

Another musket shot hit the deck between my feet just as Harl shouted, "Fire!"

Five guns belched long jets of flame, smoke and iron in quick succession into the bow of the rebel ship. We saw the shots throw up chunks of wood and heard the iron rammed down the enemies throat. I turned hard and continued past this fight and sought a new target. The rebel fired a few shots after us, but none found their mark.

There were so many ships. We could not afford to get tangled up in a close fight, so instead, simply weaved and cut our way around the various vessels, both Imperial and rebel. I considered going after the support vessels which would not be as heavily armed, but could not see the glory in that. Glory? I had to admit that pride was playing a role now. I had never considered myself particularly proud but now that I had a ship and crew, I felt pride in them both. No, we would find worthier targets.

"You may fire at will, Mister Harl," I shouted over the din. "As soon as a target presents itself!"

"Aye aye, Captain. Fire at will!"

The Lady Ocean hovered like a stinging wasp round the enemy battleships and danced away from the nimble frigates. It was tiring work and also dangerous. I had the two young seamen help me turn the great wheel. Seaman Gogloy! That was his name, remembering one of the boys.

We had taken many cannon and musket shots and a fire was even started below which Olvan managed to put out with the help of some crewmen. A lucky shot from a rebel frigate at long range had killed two men. Others lay dead or wounded. The screaming from the surgeon's room was painful to listen to, but the battle raged on and I knew we could keep going for a while longer before pulling out. As long as the engine was running and the guns were firing, we could fight.

A particularly persistent rebel frigate was chasing the Lady Ocean when one of her forward chasers hit the rear of my ship, blasting away one of the paddle boards, then continuing into the engine room where I heard it send metal and men flying. There was a nasty clang followed by loud rattling and hissing. The paddle wheel slowed and I knew then that we were in desperate trouble. The enemy frigate was closing fast. To starboard a rebel battleship was turning towards us. To port three or even four battleships were heading in our direction including a grand battleship. It was total confusion. There was so much smoke on the water that it was hard to make things out anymore. Before us was open water but the engine was stuttering and dying. I cursed and clenched the wheel. What could we do?

"Lady Lamient!" I called up to the crow's-nest. She looked down at me. Her face was blackened by the gun powder, her hair a mess. I pointed to the frigate. "Slow them down!"

She looked at the frigate then shrugged her shoulders. It was a long shot. A musket would never manage it but I had seen how accurate her weapon was and at that distance, she stood a chance. I saw the long barrel of her gun rise to take aim. Then I turned to the enemy and put my glass to my eye. I found the helmsman and also saw a couple of rebel officers standing close by him. She did not fire. I watched them getting closer through the glass. Still she did not fire. The enemy vanished in a cloud of smoke as their forecastle chasers fired again. This was quickly followed by the loud rush of a cannon ball hurtling past my head.

Again I could make out the enemy. "Fire damn it!" I hissed. She did. As soon as I heard the crack of the riddle I saw the helmsman spin back with blood flying from his shoulder. The man, whipping round fast, fell back onto the wheel, sending the wheel spinning and the rebel frigate's bow lurched sideways, heading for the enemy battleship to the Lady Ocean's starboard.

"Now the next one!" I called up to the lady. "Keep that wheel free. Keep their heads down!"

She raised her eyebrows as though to say that she was lucky the first time, but she nodded, then proceeded to reload. Within ten seconds she had reloaded and shot an officer just as he took the wheel. Then Marine Ekstam fired his bow and hit another rebel crewman. Now I looked to port. The great ships were emerging from the smoke in heated battle. It was the War Tempest again and she was surrounded by three rebel battleships including a grand battleship. Both sides of the Tempest blasted away at the enemy but they fired back and it seemed as though the rebel ships were wearing her down. Added to this was the enemy battleship coming at her head on. The War Tempest was in trouble and about to be boxed in and fired upon from all four sides. Looking round, there was no friendly battleship able to come to her aid. The Lady Ocean was the only help to hand. Feeble as it was we had to do something and so I turned her into the oncoming ships.

Kristan Olvan ran up to the aftcastle. He was dirty from musket and cannon smoke. His fine coat was torn and there was blood at his temple. He carried a musket which he had been using between giving orders to the men. "She won't last long in that firestorm, sir," shouted the young officer.

"I know. We must help her."

"Of course. Perhaps board the enemy?"

I thought about this. It would be suicide, but if we could distract the enemy just a little, the War Tempest might be able to break free. "No," I finally said. It would be futile and pointless. How many able men could I muster for such a fight? Thirty at the most. We would have to climb a wall of solid timber, all the while being shot at and then met by a hundred enemy at least. We would hardly bother a battleship, let alone a grand battleship.

"Give that monster a broadside and hope for a lucky shot then, eh sir?" Olvan pointed at the enemy grand battleship and smiled. There was a nasty streak to the boy that I liked. It was a terrible plan but it was also the best plan so far.

"Warn, Mister Harl. Double the shots!"

High quality cannon could be loaded with double shots. It was risky as any flaw in the metal work of the barrel would cause the cannon to explode under the pressure, I knew, but we had little to lose now and probably only one chance at hurting the monstrous enemy vessel.

The rebel grand battleship was coming up fast now on the port side. The poor Lady Ocean's engine rattled and banged and hissed, but I kept my course and knew that as soon as the enemy could, they would open a withering bombardment and I could only hope that we managed to fire our five guns before being blown out of the water. Luckily, not many enemy marines were firing at the Lady Ocean. I presumed that they must be on the other side, firing upon the War Tempest. So much lead and iron being exchanged. So much blood being spilt. War is horror.

The monstrous grand battleship loomed above us. I kept the Lady Ocean as close to the enemy hull as possible, and as we came at one another the small frigate rocked and yawed in the enemy's bow wave, then hit hard on the side of the mighty vessel and began dancing down the side of the rebel sea fortress. The enemy were ready and began firing cannon at point blank range into the Lady Ocean. Most of those balls of iron passed right through the ship, ripping out her innards in a violent row of concussive blasts.

“Fire! Fire now!” I screamed down to the deck. I wanted our shots fired before the enemy whipped away my pitiful handful of guns. Perhaps we would open enough holes on the battleship to let in some water and slow her down but at this close range, most of the shots would be above the waterline.

The side of the Lady Ocean came to life as her guns fired her load of iron at the enemy. All the shots went into the bows of the battleship and also knocked out a cannon. The world vanished in thunderous smoke. What now? We could turn away but then the enemy would be feeding iron shot and grapeshot down the length of the Lady Ocean’s deck. The best and only hope we had now was to keep going and take the broadside. It would not be a full broadside as most of the rebel cannons could not angle down so low, but all the lower guns would get their turn at punishing our little boat.

There was no chance to reload the guns. Men took cover as best they could as a ton of lead and iron with fire was thrown at us. The Lady Ocean was like a leaf in a storm and all I could do was try to keep the ship straight and level as she was smashed and thrown about. I expected to die any second now and hoped our little broadside might help the War Tempest. I thought of Ajator and prayed he was well, and wished Veinara happiness and forgave her. I looked back on my life and had no regrets. Life was short but I had lived it and sometimes even enjoyed it.

A bit of splintered wood cut my cheek but I held onto the wheel. Something burned my hand and still I held the ship steady. All along the deck, cannon fire ripped both men and guns away like feathers in a storm. Young Seaman Gogloy was thrown back by a blast. Both the terrified second boy and I looked at the dead seaman with his opened rib cage. Seaman? He was just a child who would now never see manhood.

Below deck would be the same scenes of a fiery cleansing and I felt cleansed. I felt alive like never before and found it odd that such lucidity should find me now at the moment of my death. But I did think clearly, and now laughed as a cannon shot nearly took off my head. The wind of the ball sent my hat flying. The Lady Ocean kept going and I wanted more and called for Olvan. Olvan stumbled and ran hunched up to the aftcastle.

“We’re doomed!” I laughed above the din. A marine flew over the side of the deck as a shot hit him in the chest.

“Yes, Captain,” Olvan said and returned an odd smile. Was I smiling like that, doomed and insane?

“We might as well sacrifice ourselves now.”

“I thought we already had, sir!”

“We might get through this, but there won’t be much of us left. Where’s Jodlin?”

We both looked down at the deck and could just make the big man out in the smoke. He was heaving cannon balls at the enemy. It was pointless, but I laughed at the big man who had to vent his frustration somehow.

“Hold the wheel,” I said. “When we pass the bastard, come round close behind her. As close as you can!”

I then ran down the steps to the deck. There was an almighty crash as the ship’s funnel crumpled and fell down over the side having taken a direct hit. A few marines and the Lady Lamient were coming down the crow’s-nest mast. There was blood on her bare shoulder. I ran past them. Reaching Jodlin, I took him by the shoulder and then shouted in his ear, “Take that grappling hook and line then follow me.”

I continued to the wreckage that was the forecastle. It was a mess of wounded men, splinters and burning wood. The anchor chain was lying amongst the debris. I turned to take the rope from

Jodlin. Working fast, I tied it to the anchor chain as close to the anchor as I could reach, and then handed the metal hook to the big man. Finally we were reaching the end of the hellish ordeal and the stern of the grand battleship was coming up. In the bright blasts of battle, I could see the wheel churning white water in the big ship's wake.

"Take this hook, Jod. You will throw it into the rebel's paddle as we pass. Can you do that?"

He smiled as he felt the weight of the hook. Harl joined us, cradling a bloody arm.

"I can lob it as far you like, Captain," said Jodlin.

"Are you doing what I think you're doing, Captain?" asked the wounded Harl.

"Yes Harl. If we can slow that big bugger down, then the Tempest might break free of the trap."

Harl nodded and ran down the length of the ship telling men to get to the rear of the ship, and carry those that cannot walk or crawl. There was a mighty bang followed by a belch of black smoke and steam where the funnel had been. The Lady Ocean's engine finally gave and the paddle wheel stopped its churning. The cannons stopped firing. Things went deadly silent on this side of the fight. There was still the rumble of canon from the other side of the grand battleship and a constant crackling of musket fire but compared to the thunderous broadside we had been enduring, things were positively peaceful.

With the little momentum the ruined ship had left, Olvan turned the ship's wheel and the Lady Ocean came about behind the grand battleship and was faced with a torrent of turbulent water where the massive rebel paddlewheel made the sea boil. Jodlin stood at what was left of the gunwale and swung the hook round and round, picking up speed with every rotation. I saw that it would have to be a perfect throw for the paddlewheel was protected most of the way down to the waterline by thick wooden shielding with metal bands and rivets.

"I have faith in you Mister Jodlin," I said, and with a bellowing grunt, the big man let the hook fly.

It went in a low ark through the night sky, flying through stinking smoke and trailing a hemp rope which unwound as the hook flew. The hook just missed the armour and went into the white water under it. For a second I thought Jodlin had missed, but suddenly the rope was pulled violently and Jodlin and I had to dive out of the way as the rope was yanked taught. Then there was no rope left to give so the Lady Ocean's main anchor was dragged up and pulled into the sea. I laughed and ran back along the ship dodging shots and jumping obstacles. Jodlin was just behind me. I must have looked like a madman dancing with joy amongst the dead and wreckage. The Undertaker indeed. I had doomed the ship and its crew with a laugh and a dance.

"Hold tight! Hold tight!" I was calling. "Grab something to hold onto!"

I saw Olvan on the aftcastle gripping the wheel. Harl put his good arm round the crow's-nest mast. I made it to the banister of the aftcastle steps just as the Lady Ocean heaved with an almighty, sickening lurch to port as the rebel grand battleship pulled her round far too violently for the small ship which creaked and cracked under the strain, bulkheads snapping and planks popping. She was yanked around leaning over in a steep turn that at first made her bow dig deeper and deeper until water started flooding over her deck. One seaman screamed as his grip failed and he fell into the cold waters. I held on for dear life hanging from the banister.

Then just as suddenly, the bow was pulled up again by the power of the rebel paddle wheel which groaned and cracked under the sudden weight of the frigate. The Lady Ocean snapped round and bobbed up as she was forced into the same heading as the enemy. Quickly the gigantic paddlewheel reeled in the Lady Ocean and with a crashing roar of splintering wood and mangled metal; the small frigate was pulled into the armour and wheel. At first the paddle wheel ate away

at the frigate sending wood and metal flying. Men were thrown about the ship which was being lifted clear out of the water. The paddle wheel ground on but it was straining and slowing. Another crack and a drop, then an almighty crashing and groaning from deep within the enemy hulk was followed by the wheel grinding to a slow painful halt.

I looked up and through the smoke I could see how the wheel had eaten a good portion of my ship before finally the Lady Ocean had wedged itself between the wheel and hull taking a large chunk of the wheel armour with it. There was however only a moment's respite as the air then filled with the sound of crackling muskets, and lead balls thudding like deadly rain across the deck.

"Take cover!" I called and dived into the aftcastle's interior. "Sergeant Lamtak. Are you alive?"

"Sir!" said the sergeant appearing from the darkness.

"I expect those rebels will try to board us very soon. They need to cut us free, and I want to make it hard for them to do so. How many men have you got left?"

"Haven't got a clue. sir."

I gave what must have been a rueful smile. The terrible punishment of the last few minutes would have shaken any man. "Take whatever men are standing, marines and seamen and shoot anyone that tries to board this vessel."

"Aye aye, Captain."

We were drifting now. The giant battleship and the little frigate were one on the waters and helpless as the battle raged on about us. I tried to get an idea of how the fight was going but it was hard with the enemy laying down a constant barrage of musket fire, and the smoke so thick you could chew it. I went to the rear of my cabin and looked out of the broken windows and was surprised to see how close I was to the water. The stern of the Lady Ocean was slowly sinking although the bow was being held in place by the grand battleship.

The cannon fire from the rebel ceased and I knew that the War Tempest was now beyond the rebel's broadsides. I made my way back to the deck, and then half ran, half climbed and dodged my way to the port side and took cover in the shadow of a broken beam of wood. Gritting my teeth, I snarled at the enemy. Men then cheered as they saw the War Tempest come about, free of her trap, opening fire on the enemy grand battleship, sending iron, fire and death down the length of her hull. Each shot would now do twice the damage and each shot felt like a victory to me and my jubilant crew. We may have been hammered, crushed, burnt and thrashed about, but we had taken it like Ardalrion seamen should. We had taken it and struck back, beating this charging bull with a single shot. Now it was up to the War Tempest to finish the job so she came round, still firing a continuous and thunderous hail of shot at the rebel ship. The manoeuvre meant that she had lost the other, smaller rebel battleships that must now come round the grand battleship before they can attack her again. I looked to starboard and saw two Imperial battleships and three or four frigates racing to the aid of our flagship.

"Well done men," I called. "We did it. We stopped the rebel and now the Tempest is free to land the killing blow!"

There was another cheer from the men still standing. There were cries of pain and groans of misery from the wounded, but right then I could only feel the elation of winning a battle. The War Tempest came in close to the rebel ship and I saw that she meant to board her and I knew then that we had defeated the rebel fleet.

It was sad to watch, from the deck of the War Tempest, the Lady Ocean being cut away from the rebel grand battleship. How anyone had survived being on that frigate was a wonder as she was so battered and beaten and full of holes; yet survived we had. Harl had taken a shot in the arm, but it would heal. Jodlin was covered in splinter cuts, burns and bruises, yet seemed content with his cat, who had miraculously survived, in his arms. Olvan was the same, as well as being black and red on the side of his face from a blast, his fine clothing now in tatters. The doctor was unhurt but for some bruising. Mister Perti, the engineer was well although irritable and kept complaining at the way his ship had been treated and he was right - I had abused that ship from the very day I had taken command of her, but in her short service she had never let us down. She held on to the very end and I thanked her for it. She had served the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy well, and so what was left of the crew and I watched from the high deck of the War Tempest as she slowly sank and was consumed by the mighty ocean, golden under a morning sun.

I said a silent prayer for her and the dead. I said another for Mister Sudlas and thanked him again for having given his own life to save mine. The Lady Lamient had survived too but was nowhere to be seen now. Willan was in a cot recovering from concussion. I was alive. I breathed in the morning air, now clear of the stinking fog of gunpowder that had made the night's battle so treacherous.

In all it was considered a successful battle. The Imperial and Ardalrion Navy had taken a terrible beating, but the flagship had survived as had three of the other battleships. The same could not be said for the Battleship Frost Fang which after the gunfire had ended lost its battle with a fire and exploded violently when at last the flames reached the barrels of gunpowder hidden deep within her belly. The Battleship Wind Reaper sank with all hands. The Brave Mission simply vanished into the night. What had become of her was anybody's guess, but would undoubtedly become fable with tales of black sea monsters, summoned by the wicked rebel shamans, swallowing her whole. The frigates lost eight ships, burnt or buried at sea. One, the River of Fire was thought to be taken and driven west by the surviving rebels. The butcher's bill was still being counted but these many I knew of.

It took the better part of five days to make the return journey back to Umuron. We were in no hurry and many of the ships were listing and needed to go easy. Towing the prize ships was also slow work. The Admiral had personally thanked me and the crew for our sacrifice. I was even a little embarrassed when the Admiral had used the word, hero, and shook my hand, speaking of how the Lord Admiral and the Emperor himself would hear of how an Ardalrion had crippled a grand battleship. I had told him, I was no hero.

It was all glory and praise and relief, but it was short lived, for as soon as we made land, I was placed under arrest by Lord Mornight Pavantu of the Emperor's Secret Servants.

Chapter Fourteen

The door to the inn opened and six naval provosts marched in, followed by a provost sergeant. The room went silent.

“Captain Malspire Ardalrion?” called the sergeant.

I stood and the sergeant marched over to me.

“Can I help you, sergeant?”

“Are you Captain Lord Malspire Ardalrion?”

“Yes,” I growled, suspecting trouble.

“I am to escort you to the Naval Office for questioning.”

Some of the men moved to defend their captain but I stopped them with a wave of my hand. We had been celebrating the victory, but the mood had quickly turned defensive when the hated uniforms had entered the room.

The Dragonfly had made it back in one piece and I wasted no time in getting my crew on board. I would have liked to sell it for prize money but now that the Lady Ocean was gone, the Dragonfly was the obvious choice for my next command. Of course that was up to the Naval Office, but I also wanted to keep my crew together so as not to lose any to other navy vessels. Putting them up in the ship and keeping them busy seemed the best way.

Only part of the fleet had returned as the rest went west including the Sea Huntress, chasing the enemy back to their ports. As evening fell, most my crew had made their way to the Dragon's Tooth. Perti stayed behind to fuss over his new engine together with a few others as guards or men who simply wanted to rest. The seriously wounded had been taken to the naval infirmary, and the dead that could be saved from the Lady Ocean had been buried at sea.

“May I ask what this is about?”

“I wouldn't know, sir.”

“Of course, then let us make haste.”

Taking my coat and hat which Olvan had recovered, I let the naval provost sergeant escort me to the Umuron Naval Office. Willan, who was now as good as new, wanted to come along but I told him to stay.

A dog was barking outside. People turned and stared at me. I sneered at a woman who gave me a disgusted look. I had done nothing wrong as far as I knew, but people always assumed the worst when a man was escorted by the provosts. Hero one minute, reviled the next.

They guided me down a flight of steps to a cold and damp corridor where I had to relinquish my arms, doing so without fuss, and then was shown into a large cell which had a high, barred window, barren but for a desk and two chairs. The guards left me there, locking the door with a clank behind them. I wandered round the dank cell and wondered what this could all be about. Of course I was angry but resolved to keep my head until I knew exactly what was going on. After only a few minutes there came footsteps so I placed myself under the window, holding my hands behind my back, looking up at the sky, hoping to convey a relaxed aloofness.

The door was unlocked and in stepped a smartly dressed clerk, I saw as I calmly turned round. The clerk was middle aged with a pair of half-moon spectacles. He had a very round head and large bald patch framed by long greasy hair. After the clerk came two guards. One was carrying a small table and the other a chair. With a nod, the clerk had the table put into a corner where he sat down and placed some blank sheets of paper before him as well as an ink pot and pen. Then Lord Mornight Pavantu entered the room followed by his ogre, Mister Crurt, still as angry as when I first met him.

“Lord Ardalrion,” Pavantu said by way of greeting. He did not smile but gave a small bow.

“What is the meaning of this Pavantu?”

“Please be seated. We have grave matters to discuss.”

Reluctantly I sat down and glowered at the Secret Servant.

“This is Sumions.” Pavantu indicated the clerk. “He will be keeping a record of our discussion.”

“After all I have done in these last few weeks, you suspect me of treason?” I could think of no other reason for Pavantu to have me taken into custody.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, my lord.”

I leant back, took out my pipe and pouch of tobacco, and then proceeded to fill the pipe and light it. All the while Pavantu watched me in silence. I only performed the small task to calm my nerves. I was fighting the anger and a fear of something dreadful although I could not place it yet as I had done nothing that could be seen as treachery.

When finally I relaxed a little and blew out a puff of blue smoke, Lord Pavantu continued. “Where is your brother?”

“Ajator? I told you when we last met. I don’t know.”

“What would you say your brother’s feelings were towards the rebellion when you last saw him?”

“He is an Ardalrion. He is and always will be a loyal servant of the Emperor. Why are you asking?”

“Just answer the question.”

“He wants to end the rebellion and bring the west back under Imperial control.”

“Does he hate them?”

I thought about this. Did he hate them? Did I hate them?

“No. The rebels are not barbaric murderers. They’re not evil as such. They’ve simply lost their way. They’ve been seduced by a madman into acts of treason based on a flawed ideology. Ajator doesn’t hate them, but pities them as do I.” I did not think this the time to argue that the ideology perhaps had some merit.

“So you feel sympathy for the rebels?”

“Pity and sympathy are not the same. Don’t play word games with me, Pavantu, just tell me what the hells is going on. Why are you asking about Ajator?”

“His loyalty to the Empire is in question.”

“I understood that, but why? When last we spoke, you seemed sure of his loyalty and now you have me dragged to this place and questioned about him. What did he do that is so wrong? Why do you no longer trust him?”

Pavantu fell silent.

“Well?”

“He and his crew sailed recently under secret orders. I now know that he was ordered to return to Norlan where he was to perform a task for the Secret Servants or at least it was from there the order originated. I don’t know what this task was or why Ajator was being used, but it seems as though Ajator used his new position to attack an Imperial servant.”

“But... I don’t know why your club of cloaked spies would want to use an honourable Imperial Naval officer for its dirty work but I am sure that if Ajator agreed to this then it was for the good of Ardalrion, Empire and Emperor. If he attacked an Imperial servant then I have no doubt that this servant is a traitor.”

“No doubt?”

“Of course. Who the hells was it anyway?”

“Lord Luthor Balegrim.”

My heart stopped and I found that I was suddenly lost for words. The room fell silent apart from the scratching of the clerk's pen. Ajator attacked the Master of the Secret Servants, possibly the most powerful man on the Emperor's council? “You must be mistaken,” I finally said.

“No. My master was attacked by your twin brother and was badly wounded before the traitor was seen off.”

“Traitor?” I whispered. “You have the wrong man. Ajator would never betray the Emperor. He would never betray our father. You lie!” I shouted the last two words. I was about to throw myself at the agent in a rage brought on by the effrontery to my family name but stopped myself short, realising that if I attacked Pavantu I would only make things worse; far worse. Instead I slammed the table with my fist.

Lord Pavantu leant back and studied me. He looked sombre, pale, his eyes deep in shadow, very serious. “You understand now why I want to talk to you.”

“I understand that your organisation is made up of incompetent morons who seek trouble where there is none and cause trouble when not found. You can't stand the fact that Ajator is the perfect officer and gentleman and a true servant of the Empire. You lot want to bring him down. What other reasons do you have? Has my father upset a rival lord? Are you being paid? Is Balegrim being paid?”

All the while Sumions was scratching away at his papers. Pavantu looked sideways at the clerk, then at the other guards in the room.

“Are you a loyal servant?” the Secret Servant finally asked bluntly.

“You know I am, and you bastards can all go to hells.”

Pavantu shot me a quick smile, and then said to the room in general, “Then we are done. Please leave Captain Lord Ardalrion and myself.”

The room emptied and soon Lord Pavantu and I sat by ourselves, staring at one another in silence. I was going through everything I had heard and everything my brother may have said or done in the past that might explain things. Lord Pavantu just watched me.

Finally I said, “Am I under arrest?”

“What your brother has done could be seen as a direct attack on the Emperor,” said Pavantu ignoring the question. “This would mean certain death not only for Ajator but your entire family and household. Your father however is as shocked as any it would seem, and the Emperor does not doubt him. You however are not as well known to the Emperor.”

I could guess that the Emperor would not want to arrest the Duke. The risk of a second rebellion was too great. Ardalrions are loyal to the house and the house is loyal to the Emperor.

“What has the Emperor decided? Do you know?”

“A lot has happened in a short while. The Emperor is wise and has allowed your father to retreat back to Ardalrion, leaving the fleet in the capable hands of Lord Villor. Lady Ardalrion has vanished.”

“Lady?... Veinara!” I said, just realising the danger she must be in.

“I suspect that you need not fret, Malspire. My report tells me that she vanished when your father retreated. My guess would be that she will now be hidden away in Ardalrion until things blow over. Your father may not have approved of the marriage, but he knows his duty.”

“What now? What of Ajator and myself?”

"Ajator has not only insulted the Emperor, but made an enemy of a most powerful man. Balegrim is as ruthless as he is cunning. He is also unforgiving. Your brother's fate is sealed, and now the Empire will hunt him down. As for you..."

I felt sick. I fought to control myself. Ajator! Ajator, my beloved brother. Bastards and boy swivers the lot of them, the miserable turds and cock riders! How dare they accuse my perfect brother of such muck and filth. Ajator is risen above them all! Ajator is true, and here, before me sits the voice of rot who speaks an endless stream of effluence. Before I knew it a red mist rose before my eyes, and I threw myself at Pavantu who was still talking. My fist struck the side of the man's head and knocked him off the chair. The table went over and I fell on top of the Secret Servant, punching wildly and madly.

"Liar!" I bellowed and punched again. "Liar, liar, liar!"

Pavantu was hardly defending himself, but I did not care. I wanted to kill the man. Pavantu was now the face of all that I hated. He was the bearer of news that stank worse than any sea hag or ship's bilge. The cell door burst open, but not before a blade was suddenly in Pavantu's hand and thrust up under my chin. Not all the way but enough to cut the skin and make me stop. I was sobbing. The pain of the blade brought me out of my madness and I raised myself away from the man who followed. Pavantu's face was bleeding from a split lip and bloody nose. The Secret Servant pushed and I fell back. Crurt and the guards at the door waited. Pavantu pushed me back to the wall, breathing heavily with an anger and fire in his eyes.

"Do it then, worm," I said. "Cut deep and bloody end it all. My brother will come through this and he will find you. He'll cut you a new one, then swive you proper with steal!"

"Your brother..." said Pavantu, then halted. He was visibly shaking with anger, but I saw that he was trying to regain his composure. "Your brother is missing. You will remain here. You are under arrest and in time you will be transported to the city for further questioning." Pavantu leaned closer before hissing, "The Emperor did not sign a death warrant yet, Malspire, but accidents will happen."

I said nothing, the point of the blade pressed hard against me. Suddenly the blade was gone and Pavantu stormed out of the cell. The guards followed and locked the door behind them, but not before Crurt gave me a chilling smile. I fell to the floor and sobbed like I had not done since I was a small child. Ajator! What has happened?

Days passed. I heard nothing. The guards refused to talk to me. I fully expected to die here. It would probably come during the night. Alive, I was a problem, a lose end for the Emperor and the spy masters. Pavantu's words about accidents meant only one thing, and I was torn between resignation and rebellion. If my brother was doomed then I had nothing to live for. Perhaps Ajator was already dead. The Emperor wanted my father to honour his oaths, but the sons of Duke Ardalrion were now a threat. What of Veinara? I sighed as I sat against the wall. The table and chairs had been removed, and all I was left with was a pile of rotting straw for a bed and a bucket for my piss and shit. The small window was a luxury now and showed as night drew in. I scratched at a louse on my unshaven chin, a reminder that this room had been previously occupied, and I wondered if I would leave some for the next occupant.

As it got darker, I dosed off, head on knees. I do not know if I slept for minutes or hours, but by the light of the moon, I guessed it was late. Standing, I went to the bucket to relieve myself, the splash of piss hitting the floor around it and my boots, not that I cared. Damn it all. Perhaps I

could quicken the wait. Perhaps I could cut my wrists or somehow hang myself. I half-heartedly looked round in the darkness for a way to accomplish this. What of Veinara? What happened to Ajator? He must have been betrayed. Did this Lord Balegrim hate my father perhaps?

I must have dozed off again for I was awoken by the sound of a key in the cell door. It was attempted in silence but the slightest clink was enough to arouse me. This was it. Here comes the assassin to finish the job. I did not move, half welcoming the cut that would end my pain, hoping it would not hurt much, and be quick. The door opened and three men dressed in black, with black soot on their faces rushed in like shadows in the moonlight. One stayed by the door as the other two jumped on me. I said nothing and just closed my eyes. There was no fight left in me, no will to continue. Self-pity, how I hated it, and yet here it had me in its grip. The men put a foul tasting rag into my mouth, and then tied a gag tight. This was followed by a musty smelling cloth bag over the head. All went pitch black. They tied my hands behind my back.

Instead of finishing me here on the spot, I was lifted roughly to my feet by the arms and dragged from the cell. They did not say a word. I complied and began to walk with them assuming I was to be taken to a more suitable place for the crime, or perhaps Pavantu wanted to torture me in a secret place. We must have passed guards, but nothing was said. Once I thought I heard a man snoring. Pushed up a flight of steps, we finally exited the building into the night via what I presumed was a back entrance. Still without a word passing between us, the men then bundled me onto the back of a cart and I felt a canvas dragged over me. It smelled of tar. I was alone, but heard a voice and the cart began to move. The splintered wood cut and chafed as the cart bounced along the coddled road, so I rolled onto my back and waited.

After some turns and bruising bumps, the cart went onto a wooden road. We must be in the harbour, I realised. Perhaps on a pier. The cart stopped and I could just make out a muffled voice. The canvas was pulled aside and I was then dragged to my feet. There was a sea breeze on my wrists. Was I going to be bled here and thrown to the fish? Someone pushed me and my foot found no solid ground. I began to fall, hearing the sucking water below me. I groaned, but did not fall. The man held my arm and steadied me. Then hands took my legs and I found that I was being guided down some wooden steps, and then placed in a boat. Of course, better to do it out to sea where my body could be weighed down and lost forever.

Soon we were rowing out into the silent night. I guessed there were two oarsmen. They did not say a word. I also suspected a third passenger but could not be sure. They rowed for no more than ten minutes before man handling me into another boat. It rocked and felt smaller and when it set off, I felt but a single rower. Was this my executioner? My heart raced. My short life held no interest which I found odd. Surely there must be something there that I would want to cling onto. The drinking, whores, gambling and fighting? The scorn and ignorance of those around me. Then Ajator and Veinara flashed before my eyes. Of course I had a reason to live. It was my duty to find Ajator if there was any chance that he was alive, and should he not be, then his wife, Veinara must be seen to. She would now be lost and alone without Ajator. It was my duty to aid and comfort her. Did I have a hope of winning her back? Selfish to the end, but it had sparked a flame. Suddenly I did not want to die. Now at the end I wanted to fight and felt frustrated and impotent, but at least I was angry and that was a living emotion, not the apathy I had been dwelling in.

I tugged at the tight ropes holding my hands. Could the boatman see this? The rope was well tied but there was an end I could reach with my fingers. I pulled and twisted. The rope loosened a little, but not enough to get my hands free. I continued working it. Where would Ajator go? Ardalrion was the obvious answer, but there the agents of the Empire would be seeking him.

Still, there are places both Ajator and I know of that are hidden. Father would not help him though. The old duke spoke often of loyalty and oaths. His oaths to the Emperor would bind him even to the end of his own son if required. Why did he not take Veinara with him? Perhaps there was no time. Perhaps he thought father would be better able to protect her. Where would Ajator go? The ropes were loosening. It cut and hurt but perhaps I could get a hand free.

All of a sudden there was a bump as the small boat hit what I guessed was a larger boat. A hand reached out and to my surprise turned me and cut the rope. My hands were free. Cautiously I removed the hood. It was still very dark. I untied the gag.

"Where am I?" I said to the hooded figure sitting in the little rowing boat.

The man whose face I could not see simply pointed up and I now realised that we were alongside a vast curved wall of wood and iron. Looking up and along, I saw that we were hidden in the shadows of the War Tempest. The boatman was holding a rope ladder and again pointed his finger. I tentatively took hold of the ladder and began to climb. It was hard work, but soon I came to an open hatch where a naval officer was waiting with a ready hand to help me aboard.

"Welcome aboard the War Tempest, Lord Ardalrion."

I nodded, too confused to question anything.

"Please follow me, my lord."

Both the officer and I had to duck as we went into the bowels of the ship. The only light was from a small lantern the officer held. Soon we came to a ladder which led to another tunnel like corridor which led to what seemed like a dead end, but the officer pushed through what I now saw was a close fitting door into a well lit room. A secret door. I straightened up as best I could and looked around. It was not just any room but a bedroom, and there before me stood High Admiral Lord Villor who bowed as I blinked in the light of the lanterns.

"Barron Villor?"

"Please forgive the secrecy, my lord," said Villor. "We had to make certain there was no question of your being seen taken here."

I now dared to hope that I was not going to die after all. Had I been saved, but why? "You have rescued me?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

Villor seemed a little confused by this question, but finally said, "The Ardalrion fleet is sworn to the House of Ardalrion. You are the son of our duke and lord admiral. There seems to be an assumption that your servants would stand by while our own are put in prison. This is not so."

The relief nearly made my knees buckle. Of course. I was not just any captain, nor lord. I was an Ardalrion. Perhaps the least of them, but still an Ardalrion. Once, long ago, we were kings. Then more questions arose. "What of my father's wishes and the Emperor's?"

"Your father has said nothing in regards to yourself. His orders were to continue the war. As for the Emperor, I serve Ardalrion first. Without clear orders in your regards I must fall back on the oaths given to your family. It is my duty to fight for you unless your father tells me otherwise. I think your father knows this. He is in a position of conflicting loyalties."

"So you acted on what you presume my father wants. This way his loyalty cannot be questioned should the Emperor's spies intercept any communications. I see now why he often spoke so highly of you, High Admiral."

The High Admiral nodded. "I have for days now been trying to secure your release, but my hand was forced when I received word that your life was in imminent danger. It would not have

done to use force so a plan was devised to release you in secret. I think your father would have approved as long as there is no proof that it was I and allies who authored your escape."

"Allies?"

"It is complicated, my lord, but you must go now before you are missed. The boatman will tell you more. Return via the escape tunnel and he will take you to your ship and explain along the way."

"My ship? My crew?"

"Yes. They have been reminded of their oaths and are clear on the fact that they are now on a mission for the duchy. They seem very loyal to you."

"What of Ajator now? Will you seek him out?"

"I have commanded the Ardalrion fleet to watch for him. We will do him no harm unless your father orders otherwise, even be it the wish of the Emperor himself. We are loyal to the duchy first."

"That is good to know."

"Your father however has made it clear that should Ajator not present himself to give account of his actions, he will be cast out."

I nodded. My father would be a broken man by now, but he will never be an oath breaker. He, like Ajator, has always been and always will be loyal to the Empire even at the expense of his heir.

Lord Villor then turned to a side desk and took up a small chest which he handed to me.

"Gold, my lord. Your father cannot support you now, nor can the Navy openly help your cause."

"I understand," I said taking the chest. "Where do you think Ajator can be found?"

"I do not know. Talk to the boatman. He may be able to shed more light on the matter."

"Thank you, Lord Villor. Your loyalty will not be forgotten."

"Lord Ardalrion," said Villor "I have no doubt that the Young Lord is loyal to the Emperor and that his name will be cleansed in due course, but you I have had the honour of fighting alongside. I admit that when I first saw you, I did not think much of you. Then you warned us of the rebel fleet, you secured a trap for them, and you probably saved this very ship from destruction. My loyalty is not only oath sworn, but earned."

I did not know what to say. To hear such a man as Lord Villor say these words was somehow unreal. It was something I would imagine Ajator hearing, but these words were for me. I felt honoured and yet somehow dishonest. How could Villor say this about a coward, a cripple, a failure? I simply nodded, then turned back to the officer who accompanied me back to the secret hatch. Down below waited the small boat and its hooded boatman. I was keen to find out more about him after Villor's words. This boatman was probably one of the allies he had referred to. As I took my place at the back of the boat, the boatman shoved off and began to pull again.

"Who are you?" I said.

The boatman paused in his duty to pull his hood back.

"Pavantu!" I was shocked to see the very man who had arrested me.

Pavantu smiled and began to pull the oars again. "My lord."

"One minute you place me under arrest and threaten my life, the next you aid me in my escape."

He chuckled, and then said, "Forgive me. I had to place you under arrest. As for the threat, it was only the heat of the moment. You hit hard and I lost my temper. You see? We have more in common than you would like to admit."

I nodded. I had attacked the man after all, and knew well that my temper sometimes prevailed.

After a short silence, Pavantu said, "A pity about Mister Sudlas."

"You knew him?" I was surprised but sudden realisation dawned on me. "He was your man!"

Pavantu smiled ruefully. "He was. He was meant to watch you - not go and be a hero and sacrifice himself. Pity. He was a friend from an old life."

"I'm sorry to hear that. He was a good man"

The spy nodded.

"I've mentioned before that I see a big puzzle with many missing pieces, Malspire. They are coming together bit by bit. Have you ever put a puzzle together?" said Pavantu, dismissing his moment of melancholy.

"Of course I have."

"Then you understand that it is impossible to tell what the final picture will be, but with a little imagination you can dream up all sorts of images, and I have a very good imagination, Malspire. In fact I would say that I have rather run away with this puzzle and dreamt up a bit of a nightmare."

"Go on."

"I think your brother may have found himself in the eye of a storm."

"Tell me what you know, Pavantu. Tell me why my brother is accused of treason and I'm locked away. Why?"

"I locked you away because I was ordered to lock you away. Believe it or not, I did not want to, but I had no choice, although I had a good mind to let you rot in there after the beating you gave me." He paused then said, "Let me tell you of the puzzle. I have been watching the rebels for years now. They have grown in power as the Western Fleet has been stripped. I thought it odd that the Empire should commit so many resources to the ragtag beastman invasion and not the threat of rebellion and so I had people look into it. Not Secret Servant people but others from my old life."

"What did you find out?"

"Not much, but the fact that I had taken an interest was like shaking a hornet's nest. There have been agents in Umuron. Not my people but Secret Servants all the same. This was followed by my loyalty being questioned as yours has. I am careful in such things however and never could any man find a way to prove or even find evidence of such. There is none. When this failed, the assassins came. They came to clean me away. I have become a danger to someone."

I suddenly thought of the encounter I had had with the strange man who had put a double-barrelled pistol to my forehead, the first time Sudlas had saved my life.

Pavantu seemed to guess my thoughts and said: "I believe you met one of them. The man you picked a fight with some time ago."

"I remember." I remembered the dead body of the man, crushed and tortured to death. So Pavantu was his target and Pavantu had killed him.

"My man, Mister Crurt had his way with the poor fellow. Crurt is thorough in his work."

So Crurt had vented his anger. In a cruel world, the cruellest rules and Crurt was a cruel man. What did this make his master, Pavantu, and what of Balegrim? Of course High Admiral Villor was not cruel as far as I could tell. My father was not a cruel man and he was a duke, yet what did this mean for the future? Would such men eventually be wiped out?

There was a silence as the Secret Servant looked round to make sure of his heading through the harbour. He then continued, "Ajator came to me to ask about a man called Obein Klarans."

"Yes, I remember Ajator mentioning him, the one spotted in Sulenfir."

"I looked into the man and it seems that he truly is an agent of the enemy. Or he is at best a double agent."

"And at worst?"

"At worst, the puzzle gets ugly. I am not sure, and I do not have proof, but I think your brother uncovered a plot to overthrow the Emperor or at least hurt the Empire."

"I knew it! Ajator is loyal."

"I think there is an enemy in power close to the Emperor who is orchestrating many of the Empire's current difficulties in order to weaken the Emperor. I think your brother knows who this is and confronted the man."

"Who is it?"

"Can you not guess? Who did Ajator attack?"

"Balegrim?" I hissed. The Master of the Secret Servants.

"Yes. Lord Luthis Balegrim. My employer, but also the man whom I suspect has been trying to have me removed for being far too inquisitive. I may be wrong, but if this is the case then your brother has bitten off more than he can chew, Malspire. Balegrim is always by the Emperor's ear. He runs the show in that he is the Emperor's eyes and ears in the world."

"The Emperor must be warned!"

"Of course, but will he listen? Balegrim is one of the thirteen advisors. We need proof before this can be brought before the Emperor."

"Then I must find Ajator. Together we can speak to my father. He will listen to Ajator, and the Emperor will listen to my father."

"Yes, but as you say, you must first find Ajator, and in that regards I can but help you to your ship and turn a blind eye as you sail away. I do not know where he can be found nor even if he is still alive. You however are his twin. If anyone can find him, it is you. You must find him."

I did not like Pavantu, yet here he was helping me to escape. Was this some cunning trick played in order to find Ajator by the Secret Servants? If so, Villor would probably have to have been involved in the planning, yet Villor seemed sincere. It did not matter however. I was now set on a path to hunt for my brother whether or not Pavantu was using me as bait.

"Then I shall seek him out."

"Good," said the Secret Servant, just as we came alongside the Dragonfly. "The agents of Balegrim will not know how you escaped, but should you remain here come sun up, you will be boarded so make haste, Malspire. One more thing..."

"Yes?"

"A fast messenger arrived today carrying a special cargo. You will find it in your cabin."

"Very well," I said, reaching for the climbing net that was waiting for me. Above in the darkness I could just make out Harl and Olvan.

"Good luck, Lord Ardalrion. Remember that you are now outcast from the Imperial and Ardalrion Navy. I will work with Lord Villor to make sure that any record of the taking of the Dragonfly is destroyed, making you a free agent. Villor will speak to his admirals and I will speak to those I trust. You will have allies but be secret in your moves and contact. Be cautious in your actions. Ride the shadows until you have what you seek. Balegrim is a dangerous man and he has the trust of the Emperor."

I nodded and began the climb. After a few steps, I stopped and turned to Pavantu who again was hidden by his hood. "Thank you," I said even though I did not trust the man, but if he was true then he deserved it, for he was risking as much as any in this plan. Pavantu did not answer but instead began the long haul back to land. On reaching the deck level I was helped over the gunwale by Harl after handing over the chest to Mister Olvan. Olvan stood with a grin on his face. I then saw Doctor Eebel, Jodlin, Willan and the rest of my crew, all smiling and seemingly happy to have their captain back. I suppressed a smile as I nodded to Mister Olvan who saluted.

"I presume Mister Perti is below."

"As always, sir."

"Welcome back, Captain," said Harl. The others mumbled welcomes in the darkness. I was touched and again had to suppress my joy at the sight of them all and the hope it instilled.

"Thank you all," I said. Should I say something else? "What are you all standing about for? We have a course and I want this ship turned about and at sea within the half hour."

"Yes, sir," said Olvan and began delivering orders to get the ship under way.

I then noticed Doctor Eebel nodding his head in the direction of the captain's cabin. Of course, Pavantu had mentioned something about a delivery.

"All senior crew to my cabin in twenty minutes."

With that I went to inspect my new cabin. Willan opened the door for me without a word, and I stepped into the lantern lit room where I came face to face with Veinara.

I was speechless. She stood before me in a blue dress and black coat. She was beautiful in the half shadows of the room, standing there, hands held together, a look of mixed joy and anxiety written on her face.

"Malspire." she said and smiled.

"Veinara... How...?"

"They came for me, Malspire. As soon as the trouble began. Your father was so upset about the news. He stalled them long enough for me to escape. Tell me you know what is going on. Tell me you know where Ajator is."

"I don't know what is going on, nor where Ajator is. I am sorry. Why did you come here?" I was having trouble believing my own eyes. Less than an hour ago, I was sure I was going to die and would never set eyes upon this woman again, and now here she was standing before me.

She looked crestfallen but continued: "Why? Dear Malspire, don't you remember? You are my knight and I need you again. Ajator was not there. You were the first one I thought of when I could not find him. Now that I have found you, I know we can find him. Will you search?"

"Of course," I said. "We leave within the half hour. We will find Ajator and put things to right again."

She smiled again. I put her in the captain's chair and looked about myself. Someone had managed to find my hat, cutlass and knife which were placed on a side table. The engine juddered and men began to raise the anchor.

"I am sorry, Malspire."

I turned back to her. She looked fragile and vulnerable. "What for? This was not your doing."

"That's not what I meant. I am sorry for being so cruel to you."

I felt the old pain again, but said nothing. I did not want to admit to any of it, but found it hard to speak. Eventually I just nodded and said, "What do you know, Veinara? What did Ajator say?"

"Nothing. They say he attacked Lord Balegrim and then vanished. Before this there was no indication of trouble. Nothing. I had never even heard of this lord before."

"There must be something. Did he mention a man named Klarans? Did he speak of the rebellion at all?"

"No. We spoke of it sometimes but never more than what was written in the papers. I have never heard the name, Klarans. There is one thing however, probably unrelated but it is important all the same."

"Go on."

"I have told no one, but you should know," said Veinara, then hesitated. "The day he vanished, I had been to see a doctor."

"Are you unwell?"

"I am in good health, Malspire," she said with a brave smile and an odd glint in her eye.

She was beautiful now, the strength of character returning to her. I longed to hold her, to stroke her hair and kiss her, but it was a dream. She was now my sister in the eyes of the gods and the wife of my best friend and brother.

"I am pregnant."

As the sun rose into a crisp, clear morning sky, the Dragonfly was making good speed through the Quarvor Sea. I stood alone on the castle, the others having the good sense to know when to leave me to my thoughts. I was pleased to have my men about me again. There was Mister Olvan, young but growing by the day. Willan, naive yet cunning, joking yet took his duties seriously. Jodlin, huge, frightening and yet all the while a comfort. Doctor Eebel, a man I was finally growing to respect. Grandon Harl, wise, silent and understanding. All reliable men, men I could trust. Men I had fought beside. Men I was proud to command. Below the pregnant wife of my lost brother slept. I wondered what the future held for us – all of us. I knew one thing for sure and that was that I had to find Ajator. I had to reunite the Ardalrions, and then, together we would bring Balegrim to account.

If only I knew then what I know now. Then, only the gods knew what fate had in store for us, and if I could see them, I would have despaired, for the gods cowered. The distant horizon of time crept inexorably closer, unstoppable, unforgiving, and it was, if mortal eyes could behold it, a black abyss.

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About the Author

Nikolai Bird is a lead designer for a global web application company. When he is not designing, he is writing. When he is not writing, he is illustrating and has to date illustrated four children's books. He also spent many years as an artist selling paintings worldwide, but his passion has always been reading and writing. This is his first novel and he hopes very much that you enjoyed it. To find out more about Nikolai and Malspire go to www.nikolaibird.com

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