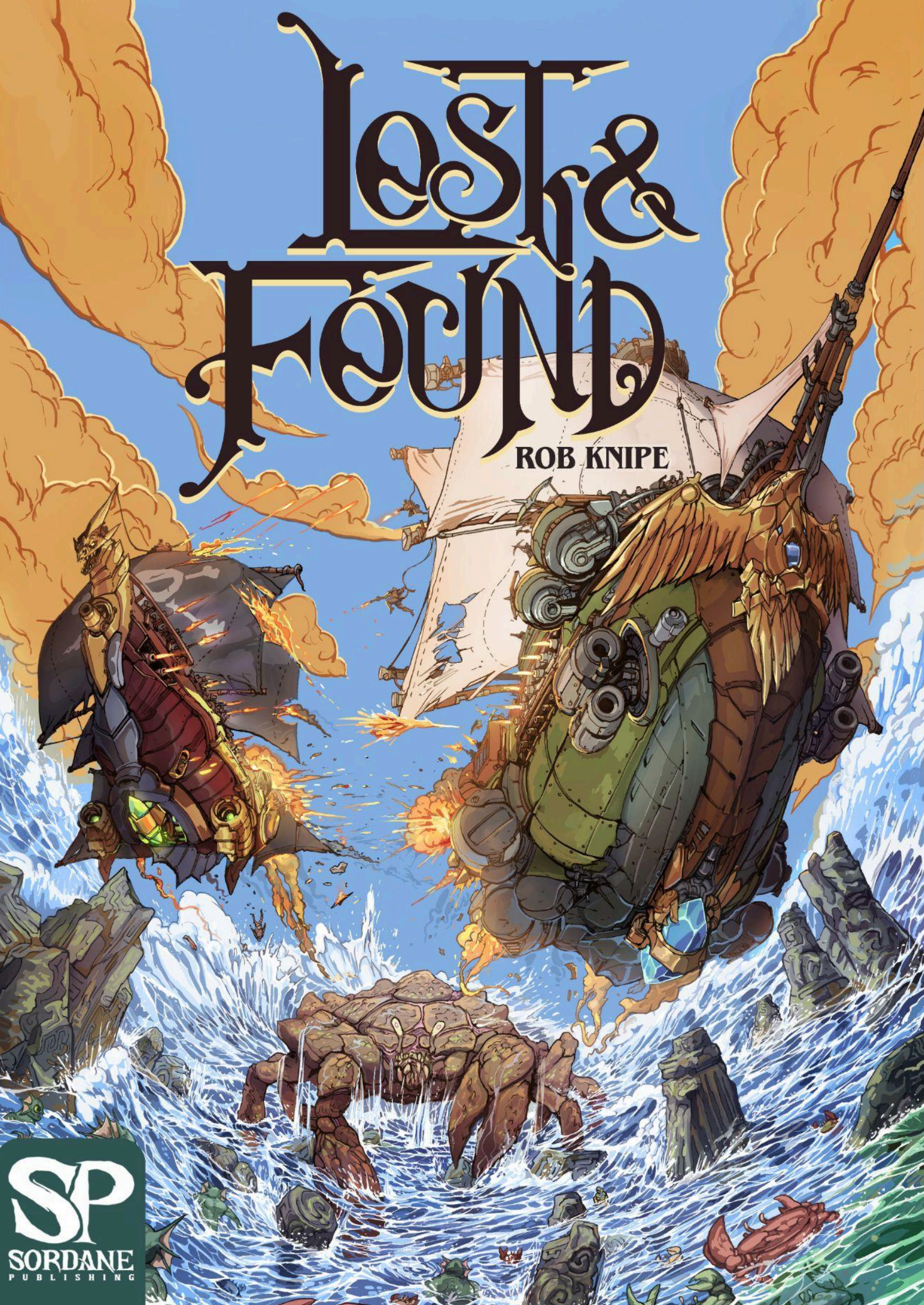


Lost & Found

ROB KNIPE



PROLOGUE

FOOL'S GOLD

“Leave the humdrum of Ezdin, come to Forastad, there’s a fortune to be made,’ that’s what you said, wasn’t it?” Josswees snarled, slamming Ravenbeck against the eroded sandstone wall, her forearm exposing his neck to the point of her stiletto blade as thunder rumbled through the sky above.

“It’d only just risen from the sea, Joss! If we’d come here in a few months’ time, it’d have been picked clean!” Like most of the crumbling buildings here, there was no roof, and rain splashed as it hit Ravenbeck’s round, stubbled scalp. The shine of its fresh shave was lost during weeks in this ruined city. “Look at what we have, Joss. Look.”

“It’s no fucking use if we die here, is it?” Her gaze didn’t leave his grey, bulging eyes, which stared back at her from either side of his bulbous nose. She’d been the fool for following him here. “We’ll be lucky if we don’t add our corpses to the mounds of rotting fish, Ravenbeck. We should never have come here!”

“Joss,” Ravenbeck whispered, eyes flitting between the blade and a torn sack on the seaweed-strewn floor. Gold spilled from the tear, glistening, as though minted only days earlier. “We’re rich!”

A storm hit around midday and carried on hitting, and now, in the dead of night, the wind was whistling through the ruins, and the sea was roaring, battering the island city on all sides. Over the sound of everything, she could hear the clacking of those fucking crustaceans. The sound of a million tiny feet scurrying through Forastad. Despite being cold, soaked

through, and with a stiletto at his throat, Ravenbeck was quite chipper—they had enough treasure to live well for the rest of their lives.

Glow orbs hanging from posts on the street outside were a great idea when the weather was calm, but they swayed like a willow branch in high winds, casting their low light everywhere but where it was intended. Lightning flashed, making everything seem crisp and bright for an instant before the clap of thunder seemed to plunge them into near darkness once more.

“Only if we can get it back to the ships,” Joss growled, her eyes flicking to the door as she sheathed her dagger. The rough wooden door was a recent addition, someone was planning to use this room for something. “I wish this forsaken place stayed beneath the waves.”

“We can do it, Joss! We can do it,” hissed Ravenbeck, still leaning against the wall. “It can’t be far now, a few hundred meters at most.”

Ravenbeck slowly turned his head at the sound of scraping, and a trio of crab-like legs emerged from a two inch wide gap between two stone blocks. More scraping came from the makeshift door. Ravenbeck stifled a cry of alarm, and Josswees silenced it with a filthy hand over his mouth. Around the walls, crabs of every shape and color forced their way through gaps in the ancient stone.

She raised a finger to her lips and crept across the room as the crabs skittered across seaweed and up piles of barnacled rubble around them. A terrific crash from outside made her start. She dodged away from the door as something hit it, splitting a sodden wood panel.

“Out the window, quick!” Ravenbeck scooped up the sack in his strong hands, holding its mouth and the tear together to prevent spilling their loot.

Josswees pulled herself through the small window, landing face-first outside. Rain

lashed at her, and she slipped on the seaweed-covered rocks as she tried to stand. Righting herself, she leaned against the wall beside the window, catching her breath. Ravenbeck's arms shot out of the window, clutching the sack, and she swiped it from him, dropping it to her feet, closely followed by his sword. Bracing one foot against the wall, she grabbed him by the wrists and pulled. He slid through a little, then stopped.

"I'm stuck, Joss! Pull! Pull harder! I can fe—" Ravenbeck's eyes widened, and he let out a sharp, pained screech.

Blood sprayed through his gritted teeth, and he convulsed, his white-knuckled grip like iron. His face twitched and contorted as a scream quickly became a gargling choke, then stopped. Blood poured from his mouth as his bald scalp writhed. His right eyelids bulged, then split to reveal a small, gore-covered crab. It scuttled across his eye and down his cheek, dropping from his chin to the floor beneath as two thick crab legs burst from his mouth.

Josswees realized she was screaming and recoiled from her comrade before slipping on the seaweed and slamming into the rocks. Scrabbling back on her hands and knees, the glimmering of gold caught her eye, and she dived for the sack, pulling it toward her. A shard of precious, sordalite clinked onto the spilled gold, and her eyes locked onto it. Its magical properties were valuable. So valuable. But Ravenbeck's sword was now more so. She grabbed it as thunder boomed overhead.

Ravenbeck's top half dropped from the window, landing with a wet thud as a wave of chittering crustaceans of every size poured toward her. Her boots skidded through seaweed and scraped mussels from rubble as she clambered over it to reach the road beyond.

Swinging glow orbs gave the crumbling buildings a ghostly appearance, faded and pale against the sharp, flickering shadows around them. Confused and disoriented, she turned this way and that, searching for something recognizable as the rain lashed at her face. The

wind howled between the shattered city's ruined buildings.

Uphill, to her left, four orbs swayed together. The compound!

Squinting through the gloom and the rain, she spotted the eye-catching blue glow from an airship's engines, gently illuminating its hull and the side of a nearby ruined building. Twin masts with furled sails rose from its decks, and the faint silhouettes of people on deck were moving with haste, the ship was preparing to leave. A wooden scaffold supported a boarding ramp that ran up the side of the ship, stopping at a horizontal platform where the gangplank allowed entry and egress onto the ship. Josswees made for the ship and toward the outline of four guards on the street at the bottom of the ramp, barely visible in the shadows. Forastad beggars huddled beneath rough overhangs on either side of the road, the adventurers and explorers who lost everything and couldn't pay to get home. The coral and seaweed strewn road gave way to sand, then worn stone paving where deep sea detritus had been cleared. Her feet splashed through puddles on uneven stone and even the *plink* of coins hitting the road couldn't slow her. Beggars turned at her approach, a few standing and stepping out for a closer look. More coins dropped and figures lurched from the shadows to either side. Gold and sordalite clattered to the stone as she switched her grip and drew Ravenbeck's short sword—giving the beggars enough pause. She seized those added seconds, sprinting up the road.

The guards moved to stop her approach; their fine mail shone bright in the blue engine light. Helmets with scalemail face coverings had two shadowy slits for the eyes. Two guards adopted firing positions, fingers twitching on triggers while the remaining two shifted uneasily, each gripping the shaft of a long glaive in saturated leather gloves.

"You! Slow down. Can't you read the figgin' signs?" The glaive-wielding guard on the right gestured to a crudely painted sign to her right with the spear tip. A flash of light

caught it: “Approach with Caution.”

“Please let me through! We need to leave! The lake! *Please!*”

One guard unclipped his face covering, letting it drop to one side of his helm. He was a dark-skinned elemдар, his yellow eyes appearing glowing in the gloom, and stepped toward her, lowering his blunderbuss, its sordalite crystal shimmering red and orange. Born with characteristics of one of the four elements, fire, water, air and earth, strangely magicked with elemental energy, the elemдар always unsettled gave Josswees. This was a fire elemдар, she guessed, as his skin reflected flecks of red in the swinging light. She recoiled from his hand and took a half-turn. The elemдар guard raised a pacifying hand, showing his palm.

“Easy, love. *Forlgrain’s Mercy* isn’t due to leave for...” he checked the clock beside the airship, “...three hours. You might fare better with *De Vien’s* east of here.” Looking the torn sack up and down, he cocked his head. “Be a hell of a journey to make on your own in this weather. Especially with that lot.” He gestured over her shoulder to the beggars fighting over her spoils.

“It’s not safe! They’re *coming*.”

The guard unclipped the face mail and let it hang to one side of his helmet. His skin was deep crimson, and his eyes blazed. “We can protect you against the beggars if you want to wait here, but the *Mercy’s* waiting for the weather to abate.”

“What about them?” Josswees pointed past the beggars.

The elemдар scrutinized the darkness behind her with glowing yellow eyes. After a few moments, he put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. She stiffened but allowed the touch. “Why don’t you pay your way on board and rest until *Mercy* sets off?”

“There were...”

They had to be there, but there was nothing. The sea crashed against the side of the

island and jets of spray crested the cliffs that fell at the city's edge. Lightning flashed and for a split second, she saw everything.. "There... there! See?"

The guard followed her gaze. The floor glittered. Flickering every time light caught it, but it wasn't flickering; it was moving. A living carpet of chitin flowing up the street like a storm's surge. The hand on her shoulder slid off slowly, and the guard pushed her toward the ship. "On the *Mercy*! Now!" He yelled before turning to the other guards, "All arms to positions!"

The blunderbusses fired. Long goutts of flame released innumerable balls of white hot magical shot. A swathe of crustaceans exploded with a hiss of steam and a warm gust of burned crabmeat. Josswees turned on her heels and ran for the gangplank. Guards on the boarding ramp took up firing positions, blocking her path. One came to the bottom of the ramp and shoved her aside to take up his position. Beggars, still fighting for loose gold, were lost beneath the chittering mass. One by one they rose, crab-covered hands brushing at their clawed attackers in vain, screaming and gagging as pincers tore strips from them, then filled their mouths with stabbing feet and snipping claws.

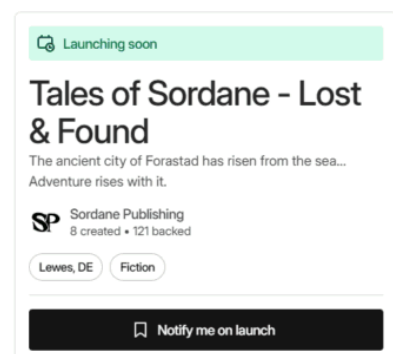
Bursts from the blunderbuss put holes in the mass of crabs, but the magazine wouldn't hold enough charges to kill them all. The second guard swung his glaive, a sheath of golden energy bursting crustaceans before the blade could slice them. They popped and hissed as they flash boiled. Bursts of fire came from the boarding ramp and deck in a rainbow of devastation. Josswees backed away, stumbling into a stack of wooden crates, jarring her elbow and dropping Ravenbeck's sword. Gold spilled from the sack until she gripped the one remaining crystal through the burlap with white knuckles.

Overwhelmed, the guards disappeared beneath the undulating mass. Her back against the crates, she watched a giant pincer rise beneath the ship, gouging into its flank and

crushing wood to splinters. A second claw rose up, grabbing the prow and pulling it down. As the bowsprit angled toward the ground, the sea of crabs surged, climbing over each other until they reached the ship and swarmed it, burying it beneath their mass. The crew screamed, cries for help echoing through the night as wood crumpled and metal buckled. Spell thrusters misfired, jetting the ship into the ruins. The prow shattered, allowing egress to the chitinous mass while the giant claws dropped out of sight. East, she had to head east!

Josswees fled, rushing for the alley between the ruined buildings on the opposite side of the street to the airship. Screams and shouts swelled, then faded into the night as she ran—through alleys and avenues littered with seaweed and broken coral, with fish guts, muscles, and mollusks. She had to keep running. She had to get out of Forastad.

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CHAPTER 1

A Bard Barred

“I didn’t mean it like that! You were laughing!” cried Valdeer.

The palm of a huge, grey hand grabbed his face, propelling him backwards out of the door. His heel caught on the threshold, sending him crashing to his rump with a yelp. The wind howled past him, and he felt the filthy water soaking into his voluminous, colorful trousers. They would never be clean again. Cold rain hit him, running through his brown curls.

Enraged, the titaran, Arol, gripped him by his jacket’s collar with thick, scarred fingers. Teeth grinding together, he pulled Valdeer’s face right up to his. Valdeer dropped his lute trying to pull himself free of the giant’s grip. Titarans were massive, and Arol was no exception. When he initially stood up from his table, the top of Valdeer’s head just about reached Arol’s nipples. His arms were like thighs, his legs like tree trunks. When he spoke a stink of stale beer and spiced sausage blew across the bard’s face. “That was before yer said me missus was *loose*.”

“I didn’t... I swear!” choked Valdeer, feet scrabbling on the ground.

“You said she was *full of dick*,” the titaran drew a fist back.

“I said ‘her pocket was full of knobs,’” he said. “It was a play on w-”

Pain flared in his cheek as Arol’s fist tried to reach the back of Valdeer’s head via the front.

“I’ll show you a play,” he sneered, his red tattoos drawing an intimidating, jagged line

from his mouth to his earlobe across grey-white skin. More tattoos ran from his blue-grey hair down to the bridge of his wide nose.

“Easy, Arol, he’s just a fella with a smart mouth,” the landlord, Smithon, placed a hand on the titaran’s shoulder, gently pulling it back. Despite Arol’s aggression, Smithon was calm, his kind round face framed by a beard of white, and matching fluffy hair. His eyes were always friendly, winning people over with his politeness rather than force or a harsh tongue. He’d taken a shine to Valdeer and had saved him from an angry patron on more than one occasion. “That smart mouth might have a couple fewer teeth now, mind. You know he’s got a tongue quicker than common sense.”

“He’s getting a pasting.” Arol shrugged off the landlord’s hand. “I’ll make him eat that fucking lute.”

Arol’s wife appeared over his shoulder, resting a calming hand on his other arm. “Come back in here, Arol. The little boob don’t know what he was saying. Don’t let it ruin a nice night. His songs are meant to be funny.”

Arol’s face moved too close to Valdeer’s. When the titaran spoke, his bushy mustache tickled Valdeer’s face. “Next time, I’ll twat yer into nex’ week, got it?”

His hand opened, and Valdeer dropped back to the sludgy wet ground. He landed awkwardly, his arm slamming into his lute with a twang. He lay hunched on his elbows for a moment; the lute digging into his right kidney, blood trickling from his left nostril, rain running down his face. The landlord leaned out of the door and offered his hand. Valdeer reached up and took it.

“I told you to watch what you sing about, Valdeer,” he said. “Some people lose their humor once they’ve had a skinful.”

“His wife’s a chippy. She makes handles for cupboards down on Fulgrith Street. You

see? Pocket full of knobs, because she makes handles.”

“And the double entendre is?” Smithon cocked his head.

“Not worth ruining my clothes over,” said Valdeer miserably. His heart sank when he saw the state of his outfit. It would take him months to save up for another set for performances.

“I said you were too smart for those the worse for drink.” The landlord smiled sadly and glanced back through the door. Several broken and upended tables and stools lay around the tavern—a path of destruction, the approximate width of a tossed bard. Smithon shook his head. “I can’t take losses like this, you know? I said so last time. Even with the coppers you pay me, I lose money every time someone takes umbrage to one of your songs. We gave it a shot, but it’s not working out, my lad.”

“What’re you saying, Smithon?” asked Valdeer, reaching down for his lute and cursing under his breath. The strap had snapped.

“You’re barred, son.”

“Damn right I am. The greatest there is,” said Valdeer, smearing dirt into his clothes as he attempted to brush it off.

“No, you’re *barred*. From the tavern,” Smithon emphasized the double “r,” and it hung in the air. “Gather your things, and sling yer hook. Sorry, lad.”

“Really? Come on, Smith—” He stopped, noting the regret in Smithon’s expression. Maybe he’d come round again in the morning. He had before.

“Go on, get your stuff.”

Valdeer trudged inside for the final time. Around him, faces frowned and glowered. Heads shook. The miserable old sod who was always next to the bellows beside the fireplace leaned forward and spat into the flames, narrowing his eyes at Valdeer. Only one face held no

malice, Cherry, half-hidden behind the bar. Her thick, black hair framed a soft, gentle face. She was a beauty and gave him a sad wave, which he returned with a warm smile.

“Don’t forget your winnings!” The cry preceded his upturned tricorn and satchel sailing across the bar and landing on the terracotta floor tiles, scattering coppers and the odd silver piece across the tavern. Valdeer winced and closed his eyes slowly, feeling the familiar sting.

“I’ll help you.” Smithon threw the man a glance of fatherly disapproval before kneeling to the coin pile.

“Don’t bother. Just my hat and my bag,” said Valdeer, “I’ll not scrape coppers off the floor.”

Outside, a gale picked up, and as Smithon moved from the door to pick up his hat, Valdeer held it open with his worn shoe. If he was going to be cold, then stuff them, they could all enjoy a chill. Smithon scooped up his hat and dusted it off. He rotated it until the tricorn faced the right way, then placed it on Valdeer’s head. Valdeer picked up his near empty satchel and slung it over his shoulder.

“Look after yourself, Valdeer. You’ll find something better than playing your tunes. You’re more than that.”

Valdeer’s lip tightened as he looked into Smithon’s gentle face. “Maybe,” he said, giving him a nod.

Valdeer turned and stepped out into the night, allowing the door to slam shut behind him as he scooped up his lute. Even over the weather, he could hear the laughter inside. The wind hit hard, and he braced against it. Which way to go? It was close to closing time meaning there would be no coin to be made indoors, and no one would rummage for change on a night like tonight, so busking was out of the question.

An airship's prow appeared like the sun cresting over a horizon, floating gently into the air from behind slate rooftops at the bottom of the street, before the engines thrust it higher into the sky. On board, another bunch of travelers headed somewhere new. Somewhere no one knew their name. A new start, away from all the bollocks and bullshit. Covered lanterns across the deck of the ship illuminated the underside of the balloon and it glowed orange in the darkness.

"Maybe one day," he mused. He pulled his hat down on his head, sank his neck into his collar, and walked up the hill toward his one room lodgings. Hopefully it would be warm enough to dry his clothes a little before the morning.

#

The cruiser *Merchant's Destiny* came to a stop alongside the Northeastern Jetty. Deck crew cast lines out from the vessel to waiting dockhands, who tied them off on the pilings. Shafted afternoon rays gleamed off the golden Yukimora figurehead, the androgynous figure proffering a goblet with one hand while the other trailed a long blade. The figure's unfurled wings covered the top half of the prow and spread amidships. The rest of the cruiser was stained deep green, with a bold white line running along the port and starboard side, just below the bottom of the golden wings. Three swivel guns on each side, two on the stern, and a ballista platform on the prow were all the guns on display, but telltale gun hatches warned of three rows of five additional cannons. Despite them meeting in a trusted location, the visible guns were crewed and ready. Three huge masts supported cream-colored sails, furled up to the boom, hiding the Yukimora crest: a skull with two gold coins for eyes and crossed cutlasses beneath it. It gave off the usual aura of intimidation as any Roshan Cruiser, the mainstay ship for the Cin'darian Empire, but maintained a look of exuberant elegance. The

Yukimora were the most powerful of Murgaven's Conglomerate, and their vessels had become ostentatious with displays of wealth and strength.

"They've arrived," Truelen sneered, watching through the diamond lattice windows of the Murgaven's Conglomerate meeting room. The panes were identical to those in her quarters aboard the *Sunspot*, nice, traditional, but too much frame for the size of the panes, and the corners trapped grime regardless of how often they were cleaned. Sure, they could be made into larger panes, but they gave the *Sunspot* a touch of class. Her finger played with the safety catch on the zap pistol holstered on her hip, its red sordalite crystal faintly glowing from its housing where the breech of a black powder pistol would be. "He's brought his usual collection of bodyguards and hangers-on."

The green-scaled drakin, Haveris De Viens, slouched in his chair like a drunken emperor, one scaly leg cocked over its arm, the other under the wide, pentagonal table, tapping the floor impatiently with a long-taloned toe. Large and brutish, the dragon-like humanoid was a blunt instrument, whose thick, swishing tail gave away his mood. He was like most of their kind, arrogant and self-aggrandizing. He shook his head, and the three deep blue feathers swayed in his oversized tricorn hat, perched on his head at a jaunty angle. He always wore one of the hat's three corners slightly off-center, and it infuriated her more than it should. "If it helps him feel important, let him bring them," he snorted, gently shaking his golden goblet so that his bangles and bracelets jangled at the wrist of his baggy shirt sleeve. "They can be brought down low alongside him."

"You're sure you want to invoke a call for aid? You can't commit more forces there?" Truelen asked. Her jaw was tight, and the scar that ran from her chin to her ear felt rigid across her face. Her fuzzy reflection on her silver goblet's side showed it as a blurred pink line, but she knew it was always an angry red against her olive skin.

“It’s not that I can’t handle it,” sneered Haveris. He took a sip of Plunderer’s Cove rum and scowled. She knew he didn’t like it, it was cheap and harsh, but he tried to maintain his brutal image by doing everything the hard way. “I just don’t want to sink more resources into it. It will weaken my position at the table.”

“So will invoking the call.”

“Less so, and the losses won’t all be Makeetan if you’re all involved.”

“You’d rather weaken us all than weaken just one of us?” Truelen chided. She took a sip from her goblet. The rum warmed her throat and then her stomach as she stared at the drakin. Haveris was a blunt instrument, but if he could be directed?

Haveris’s brow raised a little. “Someone like Yukimora, you mean?”

“That’s not what I said,” she replied. He understood perfectly that he had been weakened, and could potentially weaken Yukimora.

Haveris mused on this a while. “You don’t want to risk your assets.”

“Does anyone? It’s why I didn’t go for the contract in the first place. There are easier ways to make coin than exploring an old city that’s risen from the sea. I’m surprised you didn’t expect it.”

“We live and learn,” said Haveris, “I’ve had forces in Forastad for three weeks, and I’ve not suffered losses like it. The rewards are great, but the risks are *too* great. I have two airships missing, presumed destroyed, one almost beyond repair. Total losses include nearly seven score of marines and equipment. Not to mention spoiled resources.”

“Spoiled? How so?” Truelen asked curiously.

“They dry out in the sun, and become damp and rot in the shade. Initially, the marines fed off fish that were lying around—they called it the sea’s bounty,” he scoffed. “After a few days, the fish were rotten, and the marines were sick. The smallest of wounds becomes

infected. A cut on the hand can turn the arm to a gangrenous stump.”

“Delightful. I would opt for a takeover rather than assistance,” she said, quietly adding, “His loss could be our gain.”

Haveris mused on this as footsteps approached from the corridor and the double doors burst open.

Dyneses Yukimora strode in confidently, deep green frock coat open, black tricorn hat angled forward and perched on his black-feathered head above a set of piercing green eyes only a little lighter than the colour of his ship. He was a ramphasti, one of the more colourful of the avensari - a race of bird-like humanoids - found across the world. The ramphasti sported colors similar to the tropical birds of the southern continent of Hexzedal. His face was serious, weathered with well defined scars, around a large yellow beak with an underside of orange. His yellow neck feathers disappeared into a cream shirt, and his black wings tucked behind his back. They added to his imposing figure, creating a silhouette that none of the others could match. Golden buttons shone, framing his waistcoat and a bandolier containing three extravagant zap guns, one modified, each decorated with gold filigree. Another two pistols were visible at his hips, above the grips of twin cutlasses. He paused at the drinks cabinet, pouring himself a glass of Rumback.

Yukimora moved around the table, eyes on his glass until he placed it before his chair at what Trulen considered the head of the table. She couldn't be certain if it was the scar beside Yukimora's beak that gave him the smug, half-smile. Haveris clawed into his chair, visibly bristling at the man's arrogance.

Removing his sword belt and hanging it over the chair's back, Yukimora glanced at the wall to her left. “Captain Truelen, are you joining us?”

“Of course,” Truelen said, taking off her tricorn and letting five long plaits unravel

down her back. She seated herself equidistant between Haveris and Yukimora.

Yukimora stared at the center of the table for a few moments, gathering his thoughts as two guards leaned into the room, took the door handles, and closed the doors quietly. As soon as they shut, Yukimora spoke. “This is not our usual meeting time, Haveris. I am a busy man and have a great many matters of importance requiring my attention.” He waved his hand—an invitation to proceed.

“It is good to see you too, Dyneses,” said Haveris through gritted teeth. “I called this meeting because I have a problem I feel... unable to resolve myself.”

“Forastad,” Yukimora said, pulling out a coin and tossing it onto the wide, pentagonal table.

Haveris swiped the coin from the table in a scarred, scaly hand, and held it up between two talons, examining it carefully with a beady, yellow eye. His eye narrowed, and he flicked the coin back to Yukimora, who caught it and slipped it into his pocket in one smooth movement. “If you have that coin,” Haveris growled, “...then you know of what I speak.”

“I do,” said Yukimora, before taking a sip.

As the only human in the room, Truelen had the disadvantage of being less imposing physically, but while Yukimora and Haveris wound each other up merely by being in each other’s presence, they also made things a lot easier for her. For Haveris she was a silent ally, for Yukimora an impartial witness, to herself, a secret plotter.

Haveris’s eyes narrowed as he nodded. “When I was awarded the contract by Murgaven, I didn’t realize quite what I’d bitten off.”

“And now you want help...to chew?”

“I want to pass on the contract to someone... more capable... with more resources.”

Haveris said bitterly, sliding a scroll to the center of the table. “An abandoned, lost city sounds simple on parchment, but this... this was another undertaking. I’m putting my contract on the table for anyone who wants it. I will take ten percent as a finder’s fee, the taker can have the rest, less Murgaven’s cut, and I will explain my reasoning to Murgaven myself.”

“You’ll need to,” said Dyneses. “She won’t be impressed if the contract isn’t fulfilled.”

“Hence the splits. I would invoke the call, but my losses have been too great already. It needs someone with resources on a larger scale.” Haveris glanced at Truelen. If Yukimora noticed, he didn’t mention it, though he rarely met anyone’s eye.

“How long have you been there? And how much have you made?” asked Dyneses.

“Three weeks,” said Haveris. “Six hundred and fifty pounds of refined sordalite, similar weight in gold and around half of that in unrefined sordalite and silver. There is more there, but manpower and mobility are my main issues. I’ve lost two ships and enough mariners to affect my operations. It’s not just a pillage or artifact recovery. It’s more of a...”

“Military operation?”

“Aye,” said Haveris. He picked up his flagon and tipped the remaining contents into his mouth, swilling it around a little as he slammed the flagon down on the table.

Dyneses stared at the table just in front of Truelen. “Does this contract interest you?”

“No,” she said, with a single shake of her head. “I don’t mean to sound blunt but I have new trading contracts I need to fulfill. I don’t have the spare resources to launch an operation in Forastad.”

“Either of you interested in a joint venture?” asked Dyneses, eyes flitting to each of them in turn without once meeting their gaze directly.

“Nay,” they replied.

“I will take the contract.” Dyneses reached out and took the scroll. His wings flexed, causing parchments and feathers to flutter. “I can tender out transport to allied merchants, recruit the exploratory manpower from poorer towns and cities, and provide guard and air support for them. Yes. Yes, that should work. I must go. I have much to prepare.”

Dyneses stood, scooping up the sword belt from his chair’s back as he strode towards the doors. Leaving as abruptly as he’d entered, the Yukimora leader left them in silence, waiting until his footsteps had receded.

When the doors closed again, Truelen spoke. “That couldn’t have gone better.” She eyed Haveris. “I wonder if any of the other Captains would be interested in a greater share of the Conglomerate?”

“Careful, Truelen, that sounds like treachery,” Haveris said, leaning forward and holding out a hand to her. She held it for just a moment, internally wincing at the cold, clammy scales on his fingers.

“When his position is weakened it could be an ideal time to redistribute his business and assets,” she purred. “With the other captains on board, we wouldn’t have so much of the risk, and we could also strengthen our position within the Conglomerate. We would need someone to be the new, stronger partner.”

Haveris’s eye narrowed, and he nodded slowly. She had him. “I think you could be right, Truelen.” He stood and rolled his broad shoulders, cracked his knuckles, and picked his sword belt from his chair’s back. “See what the others think, then we can decide how to proceed.”

“I’ll be discreet,” she said, watching him leave. When the doors closed behind him, she smiled and sipped her rum.

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CHAPTER 2

Relief Before the Storm

Valdeer was grateful his lodgings were tepid rather than cold throughout the day, so that when he finally climbed out from under his woolen blanket to face the evening, his clothes were only cold and damp, and not still dripping. As he neared the King's Teeth tavern to offer his services, the near horizontal rain and the howling wind made him wonder why he bothered trying to dry them at all. If he could just get close to the fire, he could dry off while he played, then get wet again on the walk home. It wouldn't be so bad if he had wood for the burner next to his bed. If it was a good night, he might afford some.

The King's Teeth's gridded bay window was bright, and steamed up, and his heart raced briefly as he thought of the warmth. A shiver ran down his back, and he pulled his jacket close. At least he could make a joke or two about being moist, and empty the water from his lute, that always got a laugh. The unintelligible murmur of conversation gave the impression it was a busy night. This could pay for another few days' rent.

He pushed the studded wooden door open and got one foot inside before the warmth and Smithon's call of alarm reached him.

"No," said Smithon, moving out from behind the bar and hurrying toward him, shaking his round head. "No, no." He tucked the cloth into the front pocket of his apron and rushed forwards, taking the door with one hand and gently ushering Valdeer back outside the door and closing it behind them. "No, Valdeer, you can't, I'm sorry lad. I made my decision last night, and I've got to stick to it."

Valdeer angled his tricorn a little, trying to stop as much rain as possible from going down his neck. “Come on, Smithon. You know it’ll be fine. Just a few more nights until I get on my feet.”

“You can’t, I’m sorry. The costs to me are too much; a few good nights for you are a few bad ones for me. We gave it a try, and I let you back the last two times, and it happened again and again. More damages and more costs,” Smithon said, irritated, not sad. He really didn’t want him there. “You’ll have to find somewhere else.”

Valdeer lowered his head a little. The rain was running down the windows and pouring from the wooden window ledge like a waterfall. “There is nowhere else, Smithon. You’re my last chance. The rent’s due tomorrow, and without it, I’ll be out on my arse.”

Smithon’s lip tightened, and he shook his head slowly. “Not my problem, lad.”

“You’re really doing this to me?”

“You did it to yourself, Valdeer. Go on, on your way. I’ve got thirsty patrons.” Smithon turned, pushed the door open, then paused. “You’ll find something,” he said.

“There is nothing... I have nothing,” said Valdeer.

Smithon shook his head gently, but didn’t meet his eyes. “Sorry, lad.”

Smithon retreated into the warmth to the cheers from his patrons as Valdeer’s eyes began stinging. Rain had soaked through his clothes and was actively running down his skin. The wind gusted, and he slammed a hand onto his hat to stop it from blowing away. Taking a step, his knee gave way beneath him, and he fell backwards to the ground on top of the lute. Valdeer rolled sideways quickly, but uselessly, as wood splintered and the lute collapsed beneath him. Lying on his front in the mud, tears welled in his eyes, and he lifted himself onto his elbows, his face in his hands.

Ah, Harmathy, how did it come to this? How have I fallen so far?

The first tear ran down his cheek, merging with the rain, closely followed by another. Wiping his face on a dirty sleeve, he twisted, bringing his legs around so that his feet were pointing downhill. He pulled his left leg toward him, rolled up the baggy trouser leg and strapped his wooden leg back on. Rain hammered on him as he rolled the trouser leg back down, and he sat in the dirty street for a moment. The lute lay broken beside him, the neck snapped, the body shattered.

Over the slate-roofed buildings, another airship soared skyward, the sails furled as it rose into the blustery night. It gently turned in the air, calmer than he expected given the weather, and as he watched it go. He thought back to Harmathy's light brown hair, her dimples when she smiled. How long had it been? His eyes blurred with fresh tears. There was no point in returning to his room—it was still damp from yesterday, and he wouldn't be able to dry himself before getting into bed again.

Wind howled between the buildings in long gusts as signs creaked, swinging above closed and bolted doors. Raindrops hammered the ground, heavy enough to splash dirt on the side of his shoe, and he watched it slide slowly down the leather and into the muddy street. He lifted himself up, rubbing his cold, gritty hands on his hips. Wiping his eyes with the back of a dirty sleeve again, he took slow steps downhill.

Most shops along this street had bay windows, and the majority were shuttered up. Chandlers, bakers, a standard shopping street for most small towns. He turned down the alley that ran between this street and High Street—he had a few coppers, and that'd be enough for a drink somewhere. Not enough to drown his sorrows, but maybe enough to splash them.

He spotted a leg poking out of a doorway a little further down the street. Someone too drunk to stumble home, no doubt. As he neared, he noticed the size of the legs, one folded under the other like a number four, then the burnished aluminum torso, its plating lined with

gold trim. At the center of the chest was a glowing blue-white sordalite crystal. His heart sank. It was an odari. Friendly though they tended to be, this appeared around seven feet tall, built like a keep, and sported a zap pistol and a longsword at its hips. Soggy black trousers clung to its thick legs, and its leather boots were soaked through.

As soon as he regarded its smooth metal face, broken only by two glowing blue-white eyes that illuminated raindrops and splashes of water, and an upturned “V” for a nose, it reminded him of his first odari encounter. Working on a farm a decade or more ago, he’d fed animals from the back of a cart with what he thought was a posh construct servant. When it nearly knocked him off the cart, his first reaction was to roll off a litany of expletives. After a half-minute calling it a useless metal bastard and throwing feed at it, it picked him up by the tunic, and said, with acid sarcasm, “Apologies, I sometimes forget how easily humans squish,” and threw him into the feed. Valdeer couldn’t work on the farm after that. He’d spent months slagging it off, and all that time the poor metal bastard had just listened and taken it. How was he to know? They appeared like any other construct, but it was that incident that made him realize they carried the same emotions he did, even if it was beastly difficult to tell what they were.

He took a pace or two past and heard the mechanical whirl of movement and stopped dead. He turned and found the odari staring at him. It raised a hand a few inches, paused, then lowered it again, then patted the ground beside it. Its other hand moved to its chest, and it gently checked for something that wasn’t there. Its head lowered until its chin rested on its broad chest.

“Are you okay?” he asked. Could it have been the same one but in a different body? Could they swap into different bodies?

The odari's head lifted, and it regarded him. "I... I am." Its voice was deep, metallic, like someone speaking into a metal bucket. Although the sentient automatons didn't have a sex like most creatures, this one definitely sounded male.

"You'll catch your death on a night like tonight," Valdeer said. Tired and listless, he didn't catch the logic until the odari corrected him.

"I would not suffer death by cold unless the temperatures were subzero and my joints became frozen. In all likelihood I would resume function if sufficiently warmed up," he said matter-of-factly.

"I might," said Valdeer, letting out a nervous laugh.

"Then you should extract yourself from the weather," he said.

To the side of the doorway was a shuttered window, and over the two was a small, dirty, green and white awning, folded up and secured to the wall. Valdeer moved to one end of the awning and unclipped the supports, then did the same at the other end, folding the awning out and stepping underneath it.

"Consider us both briefly extracted," said Valdeer, shaking the extra water out of his shirt. He held out his hand to the odari, offering to help him up.

The odari regarded the hand, but stood up without help. He towered above Valdeer.

"Your mum's going to kill you," he said nervously. "She told you not to be long."

"I do not have a mother."

"I... Yes, of course."

An alley gate rattled in its wooden frame, and a poster tucked away beneath a wooden overhang fluttered as the wind tried to tear it free.

"Really is a shocker of an evening," said Valdeer.

"It is lamentable," the odari said in a flat, indistinguishable tone.

“What are you doing out here on a night like this?”

“I...” The odari raised a hand and held its chin between a finger and thumb, mimicking a pensive expression. “I needed to recharge, and taverns do not like odari taking up space to recharge indoors.”

“You don’t have anywhere to go?”

“I do not.”

“I know that feeling.”

The odari looked him up and down. “It appears you have nowhere to go, as well.”

“Hah,” he laughed, too loud for his own comfort. “I’m not homeless,” he scoffed. He felt his lip tighten, and he closed his eyes. “Not until lunchtime tomorrow.”

The odari’s eyes locked on him, and it stared at him for an uncomfortably long time.

“I’d best be going,” said Valdeer.

“To where?”

“To the... er—”

Something whipped across the odari's face, and Valdeer laughed louder than he should, and felt terrible for it. Brushed metal and gold hands reached up, pulling the rain-spotted parchment away and holding it between them. In the light of the odari’s chest crystal, it was easy to see. There was an image of a city, with angled lines radiating above it, and above those, the words written in a fine arch. The ink was running, but the wording was clear.

Fortunes to be made!

Forastad Resurfaces! Adventurers and explorers wanted! Wages paid! A percentage of every treasure found. Airships leaving daily. Report to the Grundle Docks today!

The odari stuffed the flier into a pouch on his belt and placed a large, gentle hand on Valdeer's shoulder. "Thank you," he said. "For a simple act of kindness."

"You're welcome," said Valdeer.

"I hope everything works out for you," he said, turning and marching off into the rain in the direction of the docks.

"You too," said Valdeer. "Nice to meet you."

The odari disappeared around the corner at the end of the alley, and Valdeer was alone in the darkness. The rain seemed louder now that he was alone, the wind colder, the gusts stronger. He backed into the odari's doorway and tucked himself into the corner as best he could. He was still cold and wet, but now he also felt lonely.

What would Harmathy do? He tried to picture her face, the dimples in her cheeks, but he couldn't see it properly anymore. Those earlier, happier memories were now replaced with pain in her eyes, blood-flecked skin, her hand reaching to him. He hung his head as tears ran down his face again, and he slid to the floor. Wracking sobs escaped him, and he gripped his hair with both hands in frustration.

Valdeer stayed there for what felt like a lifetime, until the tears stopped, and the shuddering became intermittent, then he stood up and shook his head, tucking his wet hair behind his ears. Stepping out from the doorway and awning, he took his tricorn off and let the rain splash on his face.

In the downpour, he could almost convince himself that it was washing the sadness away, but it just washed itself into the drain of his heart where it could come bubbling up again like a volcano of misery. Replacing his hat, he wiped the worst of the water from his face with a dirty, wet hand before wandering back the way he came, stopping at the end of the alley to regard Kurzten, his home for the past two years. The King's Teeth tavern just up the

road, and the alley next to it where he'd taken a hiding from a group of apprentices. Then the corner of Farthingate, where the Musicians' and Bards' Guild stood, an outfit he paid more money than he could afford for the minimal benefit it provided. In the mud, moving towards the dock, large footprints that could only have belonged to a heavy odari trudged in the docks' direction.

Forastad it is then.

"Kurzten," he said, heading down the street toward the Grundle Docks with a swagger in his step, "I hope you sink into the fucking sea."

#

"Door please, Wongy."

Wongy, cropped black hair almost hidden beneath his tarp hat, gripped the door handle and spun it, pushing open the door so that the early morning gloom could enter the long wooden hut, serving as military barracks for the Twelfth Yukimora Marines.

Inside were the unmistakable shapes of wooden beds, lumpy with sleeping people. One or two raised their heads, then quickly lowered them with a groan. Others pulled woolen sheets over their heads, all remaining silent except for Jurinder, who snored away without a care in the world.

Wongy held the door open, and Sergeant Rinun stepped through, bringing his foot down sharply on the floorboards with a thud that raised more heads. "Hands off cocks and on with socks! Everyone up! There's trouble afoot, and the Glorious Twelfth have answered the call. A little later than the Twenty-First, perhaps, but we've answered, nonetheless."

Semi swung his legs out of bed with more vigor than his appearance warranted. The bionic lower leg made a deep thud as it hit the floor. The green sordalite crystal in its side was

glowing in the shade, reflecting off the metal prosthetic. “Has Scarfold signed us up for any old shite he can find again, Sergeant?”

“You’d better believe it,” said Rinun. “The Lieutenant sends his warmest regards and wishes he could be here to wake you himself, but I’m not due to wake *him* up for another hour. By which time you’ll have shit, showered, shaved, eaten a breakfast fit for a king, and be loading supplies on the *Wrath*. Machenzie's got his labor arms on and is already at it. We’re to leave by midday.”

“Where are we off to, Sarge?”

“Was that you, Sephton?” asked Rinun, squinting into the darkness at the far end of the room.

“Yes, Sarge.”

“How many times have I told you?” he asked, preparing his voice of authority where “-sage” sounded like “sarge.” “There’s only three kinds of sarge: massage, sausage, and back passage, and I wouldn’t take any of them from the likes of you. We, my lad, are off to the wonderful city of Forastad.”

“The fuck is a ‘floor-ed-stad?’”

“*For-ah-shtahd*, is a city of wonder,” he lied. He knew the name, and they were needed, but other than that... “All the food you can eat, all the gold you can carry, and the locals love a uniform,” said Rinun, spreading his arms wide dramatically and looking to the dark ceiling. The lads hadn’t been pulling their weight. There were cobwebs.

“Sounds great, sergeant,” said Calmek.

“I’ve never heard of the place,” said Semi, standing up and flexing his bionic.

“It’s not long been discovered, so we’re going over to hold the hands of explorers and adventurers who’re investigating it. We’ll have aerial support from the *Resplendent*,

Magnolias, and the *Wrath*, the *Moon's Hope* will make supply runs, and the *Glory* will be there just in case.”

“The *Glory*? Is it safe there?”

“With the *Glory* there, it’s bound to be a lot safer,” Rinun laughed. “What’s going to oppose the *Glory*?” A laugh ran around the billet. “Thirty minutes, lads, and everyone’s in the scoff house.”

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CHAPTER 3

Airy & Hairy

Legs swept out from under him, and suddenly airborne, Valdeer careened over the airship's railing. Sharp wind whistled around his legs, and vertigo sent a shock of nausea up his throat. Catching it, he swallowed bitter acid, and flailed in the grip of a muscular red-scaled dragon claw. One hand slapped down on his worn leather tricorn, the other gripped his satchel strap as his coin purse flopped against his stomach. He hoped no one noticed the peculiar angle his other lower leg was at.

Hundreds of meters beneath him, waves moved leisurely, and the bright, midday sun reflected off them blindingly. He couldn't keep his eyes from them. It felt like hitting stone from a certain height, and he was pretty sure this was that height and more.

"What did you mean?" The red drakin, Elegoral, held his ankle in her clawed hand with a grip even Arol couldn't match. "But not as many as *some*?"

"It was a joke. No, not a joke, an observation. I didn't *mean* anything by it," Valdeer said, faster than he'd ever spoken. The barge buffeted in the wind, and he felt his ankle drop a little. He smashed into the side of the ship.

"Are you... mocking, the very hand which holds your life in its grip, little man?"

"Look, I'm a bard, it's what I do. I make jokes and quips, I asked what you do, and you said you had your fingers in many pies. I said, not as many as some, because you have fewer fingers. It was a bad joke. I'm sorry."

"You will be. Do you still think it's funny? Maybe less fingers will weaken my grip?"

Her yellow eye glared at him from the side of her head, a vile sneer on her snout. Her fingers were thick, strong, covered in damaged scales and scar tissue, leading into an arm wider than his thigh and rippling with muscle beneath the scales. Why did he always have to open his big mouth?

“No! No! Look! I still don’t know what you do for a living. You were vague. I should have read the signs. You’re probably a fan of the five-finger discount... four-finger disc...” he dropped an inch and stopped.

“You just can’t stop digging, can you? Pathetic human.” She lifted him up to the handrail, and his eyes locked with a grinning goblin beside her.

Olive green skin surrounded a wide mouth with yellowing teeth and eyes full of devious intent as the goblin reached nervously for Valdeer’s coin purse. She wore tight fitting leather clothing covered in pouches and pockets. The little weasel would receive a double disappointment; the first would be grabbing the purse and realizing there was nought but moths inside, the second would be getting dragged through the handrails as a bargaining chip, or at least for company on the way down. After a few tries, her hand withdrew, and the goblin sneered as Valdeer dangled in the open sky.

“Tell me,” the drakin shouted over her shoulder. “What should he do to save his life?”

The motley group of ne’er-do-wells behind her whooped and jeered. Two elves, looking darker than they should have been in the sunlight, both had vivid blue tattoos swirling around their necks and up to their brows. Their garments, leather patches on hard-wearing, tight-fitting trousers and jackets appeared dark blue when light hit them, while their white hair gleamed in the sunlight. A robed human with a bob of curly blond hair and wearing a plain brown robe somehow appeared as nervous as Valdeer, standing at the back looking awkward, as if uncomfortable with the situation and trying to disassociate himself

from it. Beside the worried one was a bearded warrior of some sort, with thick fur around his leather armor's collar and bracers. His bare, tattooed upper arms gave the impression of strength without bulk. Beside him stood a hooded woman in leather armor, face hidden beneath a hood, which cast a darker shadow than he expected in this light.

The rest could have been the dregs from anywhere in the land. They'd seen their share of fights with stubble and hair broken up by clean scars. It was a group he should have avoided at all costs, but everyone else had avoided him like the plague. In his filthy, once-colorful clothing, he could have passed for a homeless jester.

He hated jesters. Everyone hated jesters, the prancing smart arses.

"A song," said the bearded warrior. He wasn't as keen on the situation and had kept himself away from the handrail. "The lad's a bard. Let him sing a song."

Elegoral smirked and leaned in close. "Sing us a song. Not something we know. Make one up about your situation now. If it doesn't entertain, it'll be your swan song."

"I usually have time to... write them..."

"You have ten seconds to start, or I'm letting you go."

"I... I... Right... okay... My gods..."

"Five seconds."

"I... I never thought I'd see the day, I'd have the chance to fly away..." He glanced down and gulped. It was so far to the sea. Her face said it all. She was dropping him regardless. It didn't matter what he sang.

*"I never thought I'd see the day,
I'd have the chance to fly away,
I'll soar and dive, I've won the right,
To follow down, the slops and shite."*

*And yet my fate remains untold,
My life, in claw, the drakin holds.
She plucked me up without a hunt,
The massive red and scaly c-”*

“Time’s up!” she snarled. “What do we think? Was his song worth his life?”

“I reckon,” said the bearded man. He met Valdeer’s eyes and nodded with an appreciative smile. The hooded woman beside him didn’t move, but he could feel her eyes on him.

“Let him go!”

“Yeah! Drop him!”

Elegoral turned back to him. “The judges have spoken. Enjoy your flight.”

Her hand opened, and he screamed. He was weightless for a split second before another hand snatched him not a second later, the metal fingers jarred him with their lightning-fast grab, rattling his jaw.

Elegoral glared at his unexpected savior, an odari—the same one he met two nights earlier, who matched her height, though his frame was slightly slimmer. His light blue eyes glowed brightly in the sunlight. “The show is over,” he said.

“Who do you think you are?” she hissed, jabbing a talon into its chest.

“I am Grone,” he said, jabbing her chest back so forcefully that her leg shot out, and her tail swished to maintain balance.

“What’s going on here?” The *Merchant’s Bounty’s* Captain, Zigurand, was leaning on the poop deck’s handrail with folded arms.

Valdeer was lifted suddenly and dropped unceremoniously toward the deck, cursing as his elbow clipped the handrail, hard enough that sharp tingles danced across his fingertips.

“I rescued the human whose life was in danger,” answered Grone.

The captain eyed them all suspiciously before speaking again. “If I see any skullduggery for the rest of this voyage, I’ll have you all thrown overboard or locked in the brig. Respect my ship, or fly.”

Elegoral glanced from Grone to Valdeer and scowled. “Until next time.”

Valdeer stared at the deck, his heart racing. The terror of the moment still warring with the relief he felt at his rescue. A gold and aluminum colored hand reached down to him, and he took it. The odari pulled him to his feet and regarded him.

“Do not worry about them. I will be present throughout the journey.”

“Thank you,” said Valdeer, holding out his hand. “I’m Valdeer.”

“Grone,” the odari replied, holding out his hand parallel to Valdeer’s.

Valdeer glanced at the expressionless face for a moment, then moved his hand to meet the odari’s. He gripped it and shook before the odari repeated the gesture.

Valdeer released Grone’s hand and turned his hat a few times in his hands. Grone stared down at him. “I don’t have much to be honest, and no real way to say thank you. But, take my hat. It’s a good hat. Think of it as a portable way to extract yourself from ‘lamentable weather,’” He held it out, and the odari plucked it from his fingers.

Grone turned the hat around a few times in the same way Valdeer had been doing moments earlier, then placed the hat on his shining metal head. “It is a fine hat, thank you.”

#

Rain hit his back hard, each drop like an ice cold stone through his thin black shirt. His fingers were so cold he could barely feel the window ledge beneath them. He glanced down. Harmathy was there.

Dear Harmathy.

She looked up at him, smiled, and their eyes met a split second before the first guard tackled her to the ground. The clang of the impact, the coconut sound of a head hitting the cobbles. Two more guards appeared and were quick to put the boot in.

Harmathy! He dropped from the window ledge, arms reaching for the ledge below and to the left. His fingertips hit the window ledge with his full momentum behind them, and something clicked in his wrist. Wood crunched and snapped, and he fell, hand gripping a piece of rotten wood, surrounded by wet splinters as he tumbled end over end. Barrels below the windows. He covered his head with his arms as the ground approached.

His legs caught the top of a barrel with a horrific crack, and he screamed out. Pain flared as he hit the mercilessly hard, wet cobbles.

“Another one! It’s our lucky day!”

Valdeer wriggled around. Every movement of his leg was agony. The crimson on his britches was visible through blurred eyes, and the sharp spike of bone protruding through them. He screamed. Harmathy was on her side, one arm covering her head, the other outstretched at a strange angle. Her eyes met his. Her mouth moved, but he couldn’t make out the words. He was about to cry out her name when a boot sent him reeling into blackness.

#

Valdeer awoke with a start, calming almost immediately when he realized he wasn’t bleeding in the street. His eyes flicked to his trouser leg, and he winced and closed his eyes tight for a moment.

He was lying at the prow, in the sunlight that reached between the deck and the balloon. The worn decking stretched out before him to stairs that led to the stern. A hand rail ran around the stern’s front, and a sheltered cabin stood in its middle, decorated with more brass and elaborate wooden details than were necessary. The barge seemed fancy when he

first boarded, but the longer he was on it, the more he felt it was all fur coat and no bloomers. There were only so many things that elaborate details could improve.

This was definitely the budget way to Forastad. Three larger airships passed them during the two days' travel; each was magnificent by comparison. One with tall masts and full sails powered along with three engines at the rear, the other two had no balloon and no sails, but the engines powering them had thrummed as they soared past. They were huge, with rows of portholes and gun hatches revealing a significant number of decks.

This was the warmest it had been on the journey so far. A lot warmer. Valdeer unbuttoned his dirty padded jacket and grimaced at the smell of stale sweat. Elegoral and her cronies were always watching from somewhere, and he didn't feel comfortable risking the possibility of having his throat slit while he washed, or having Grone standing sentinel beside him. He lifted his head, moving the shaggy curls from his face.

Everyone clamored for space at the side of the ship. Deck crew called out and beckoned for people to move away from the handrail to stop the ship tilting to one side. Grone sat cross-legged beside him, like a disconcerting statue.

"What's going on?" Valdeer asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

"There is a commotion," said Grone.

Valdeer glanced at him. "Why?"

"Forastad can be seen," Grone said. "It was on the horizon, but we have moved nearer."

Valdeer nodded. "Thank Marret. The sooner we land, the better."

"It will be good to finally arrive," Grone said, repositioning himself onto his knees before standing. "It will be good to shake off the cobwebs."

"Have you been sitting there the whole time I've been asleep?" Valdeer shivered, and

this time he wasn't sure whether it was because he was chilled, or because of the odari who had become his shadow.

"Almost. I watched while you were asleep, but have maintained the same position for some time."

"You don't have to worry about me, you know. I'll be fine if you want to walk around the ship or have a look at our destination."

"Valdeer, Elegoral held you over the handrail by your ankle. If I do not worry about you, nobody will." Grone raised his expressionless face to the sky. The sun caught the odari's eye lenses, and for a moment, they seemed to blaze. "Actually, I think you would worry, but it is unlikely that you would be in a position to help."

"Right," said Valdeer. "Look, I appreciate it, Grone, but I shouldn't be a burden to anyone."

"You have not been a burden, except for your time hanging over the ship, but that burden was only briefly mine to bear," said Grone. The shining aluminum and gold being placed a hand on the handrail, then gently lowered himself to rest on his right forearm, looking out over the front of the ship. "I enjoy your conversation."

Valdeer stood, pulled his sling bag over his shoulder and joined Grone. He couldn't think of any conversation they'd had that was more than a few awkward sentences. Pushing himself up onto the rail, he swung his legs over and dangled them above the forepeak. The wind was refreshing, warm, and carried the smell of seawater and something he couldn't put his finger on. Clear ocean stretched for miles around. The waves below moved in slow white lines across the sea, and the memory of his time hanging upside down surprised him with a wave of vertigo. He swung his legs back onto the deck and leaned against the handrail, breathing heavily.

“I can’t see it,” he said, wiping his brow with a dirty sleeve.

“It is off to the left. In order to dock at our allocated port, we need to take a wide berth around the island to approach from the north. Flying over the city is prohibited.”

Valdeer raised a thick eyebrow. “How do you know?”

“I spoke to the night crew at length before they reached their sleeping quarters.”

“I’m sure they appreciated that,” said Valdeer, craning his neck to see around the crowd. The airship tilted a little more, and they turned toward the city. In the distance, Forastad came into view: a dirty, orange lump that rose from the sea. Cliffs around its northern edge stood tall, towering over the sea-bound ships berthed at tiny jetties. Zigzagging ramps ran up the cliff-face while specks of people moved on them. Small openings all around the cliffs let out a steady flow of water, creating tens of tiny waterfalls that shone in the sunlight like shafts of gold.

Here and there along the city level were breaks in the ruins where docks had been constructed. The buildings around the island’s perimeter were destroyed—little more than an occasional upright or collapsed wall next to a mound of broken stone. Further into the city stood taller buildings, generally angular and square with the occasional domed roof. Patches of brown and green covered parts of the ruins like poorly chosen camouflage. A huge brown area devoid of buildings or ruins looked like a bruise. Nothing appeared intact. Nothing was even well-preserved. His lip tightened a little. Centuries undersea had definitely taken their toll. A well of disappointment opened up inside him, and his eyes lowered to the rail. Its glossy black paint was chipped here and there, and he picked at it. After a moment, he took off his jacket and lay it at his feet. The heat was building as they descended toward the city.

“You do not look impressed,” stated Grone, his shiny, featureless face somehow seemed both concerned and sincere.

“I expected more,” said Valdeer. The distant figures on the zigzagging ramps were carrying crates and barrels. At least he didn't have to do that. “It almost feels like I’ve left one dump to go to another.”

“This may be the case. However, there is one thing here that many on board did not have,” said Grone. “Opportunity.”

“Opportunity?”

“Indeed. Here we could find something that will change our lives forever.”

Someone snorted behind them. It was a giant of a woman, a light grey skinned titaran, dressed in a flamboyant white shirt and brown leather waistcoat that did nothing to conceal her broad shoulders and thick arms. Her exposed lower arms were muscular, and as she towered over him, it dawned on him just how big she was. Arol was massive, but this warrior had a good foot on him. From below her tricorn, blue tattoos came down to a point in the center of her forehead, while others joined onto her eyebrows and ears. Her eyes were off-white with no iris, and they unsettled him.

“If you believe that,” she sneered, “you will believe anything.”

Valdeer turned back to the city and frowned at their destination. “I want to believe it,” he muttered quietly.

Grone glanced at the titaran and shrugged. “If there were no opportunity, why would so many clamor to be here?” The odari casually gestured to the skies around the city and the shapes and shadows moving around it.

Further out from the cliffside jetties, more ships sat at anchor, awaiting their turn to dock, and the skies around the city buzzed with airships. Only a few military vessels moved silently above the city. A flash of light came from the deck of one, and smoke rose from the city below.

Valdeer stared in amazement. The airships that came to Kurzten were smaller merchant vessels and trade barges. Here, there were ships the likes of which he'd never seen. One hovered between them and the city, a blue glow emanating from each of its spell jet thrusters, a huge golden eagle on its prow. It was made from metal panels, and he imagined it was strong enough to withstand a broadside from each of the other nearby ships. It was proud, and he could easily imagine a king on a throne somewhere inside, commanding his forces as they sacked the city.

He wanted that airship.

One day, he would have that airship. He would sit on the throne inside and command whoever was there to cook him an egg butt, or bring him a coffee. His imagination had failed him. He didn't know what he wanted, and he certainly didn't know what he would do if he ever got it.

Huge wooden scaffolds and platforms harbored great airships, one of which was made from a material he couldn't even identify, the color of bleached bones. A deep red line ran around the edge of its deck and another ran halfway down the hull and across the back end. A steady stream of people disembarked, some carrying bulky items, or in pairs carrying crates and large sacks between them. The passengers made their way down zigzagging wooden ramps to a huge open area at its base, like ants following lockstep behind one another.

A crowd had gathered there. A large wooden structure was being erected. Metal worker constructs lifted wooden frames into position while laborers climbed flimsy ladders and slotted them together. Sordalite powered and made of metal, they were built for practicality rather than aesthetics. Their boiler-tank shaped bodies had a pair of tubular arms, each joint fitted with a ball joint for maximum mobility while large clamps for hands could grip onto logs and lift them with ease. Their legs looked squat in comparison, and ended in

brick-shaped feet.

On the far side of the crowd was an area of tables and seating, some wood, some stone blocks, all vaguely covered from the elements by huge sheets of material. A thick palisade lined the edge of the compound, and guards stood on platforms spaced equally around it.

Off to the left was another large dock. An airship was leaving, and sailors hauled thick ropes back onto the decks while passengers looked on. Some leaned on the handrails, others, wrapped in patterned blankets, slept nearby. He noted the high palisade around that dock, too.

“They’re big on security here,” he said, almost to himself.

“With the many wondrous things said to be found here, it does not surprise me.” Grone pointed toward the departing airship. “I wonder how many of the passengers are leaving with something life changing. They have lived the dream of adventure, and return home victorious.”

“Maybe,” said Valdeer, “I hope that’ll be us in a few weeks.”

“I am sure it will be.”

The airship was turning their way, gently accelerating to pass across their prow. On the deck, a woman in buckled plate armor leaned on the handrail and stared through him with wide eyes. Her hair was a tangled mess, and streaks of dirt or blood blotched her face. Beside her, a man in rags rested, one forearm on the rail, his head on his arm, the same wild, lost look in his eyes. He realized the patterned blankets behind them weren’t patterned at all—they were bloodstained.

“They have seen terrible things,” said Grone as the ship shrank into the distance.

“Hopefully we won’t.” Valdeer glanced toward the empty dock and noticed another bone-white vessel moving toward the embarkation deck. To their right, the huge airship was

still taking on passengers. He moved to the side to see around the bowsprit. Ahead of them, where they appeared to be aiming for, was their dock, or at least what he assumed was their dock. “Are we landing in that gap in the rubble?”

“Our trajectory suggests so,” said Grone.

“It looks like a crash site,” Valdeer said.

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