

Helldiver

by Dan Edelman

Cinnamon Rogue leaned back on the side bench of the shallow-drafted launch and shut her sunburned eyes against the blazing horizon. Bored, anxious, and achey, bum numbed from the sea-worn leather-wrapped padding, she'd been watching since before dawn for an armada reputed to be ten, twenty, a hundred times larger than all Myriadian fleets combined depending on who spun the tale. A tale growing from some convoluted prophecy that gibbered in weighty archetypes. *The Shadowdeath Wind*, Sei Javala had said in that loaded matter-of-fact way of his. A tempest howling the end of all things, he said, bringing The Darkness.

Her launch drifted on the boreal Aestiva nearly four hundred leagues to the north of *Helldiver's Ghost*. Out on that vast sheet of shifting gold plate, far from the ship, she gave some leash to the fear that the prophecy, howsoever packed with hyperbole, spawned within her. Cinnamon hated the feeling, but it felt worse to batten it down all the time among the ship's leery-eyed gobs.

Her right foot rested on one of two small ovate green tanks strapped to the polyplate motor housings. Boosters, these tanks were called, designed, they said, to get you out of trouble as fast as you got into it; warnings covered them in prim Western Danalae script. Back in the day, when the West thought it might find purchase and influence in the Myriads, its minions had skulked over the islands like a morning fog with gifts of technology and materials that no sun had burned off. The crass gargling idle of the launch's two powerful Western engines worked unpleasantly on her head, an insistent reminder of the residue of war machines the West had left.

Ever restive, the boreal Aestiva's long, placid rhythms of evening carried a predatory stalk. With its sudden squalls and great swarms of sea drakars and basilisks and kraken, the boreal seas belonged to no one. This far north, the nearest land fell some seventy-eight leagues away, a spatter of atolls at the very tip of the Myriads named for the flesh-eating kelpies rumored to infest them. Not her idea of a haven. The launch's bubble screen, proven, the Westerners said, to protect vessels from aggressive wildlife, was, as usual, off; such a defense might have value in a quiet austral lagoon somewhere. In the boreal seas, the pucker factor always ran high.

Cinnamon's lids dragged tired grit over her slowly opening eyes. She sipped a bit of sweetwater from her canteen and slid a hand under her purple scarf to agitate her scalp. A few loose strands of coal-black hair waved across her field of vision. The evening breeze teased glittery points from the sea. She turned her attention to the north. A blue-grey line foamed with a burly lather of bloody clouds. Her eyes narrowed. The light was wrong. The fire was gone, the sky hemorrhaged. But this far north the sun could not have set already. It hadn't. The horizon had risen. Cinnamon blinked several times to be sure.

"By the gods," she murmured and slipped behind the launch's wheel. She powered up the engines and spun the launch around, flinging a silver veil of water that momentarily hid the chopped horizon rolling toward her.

Twin engines bellowed and the launch squatted on its foils as she laid into the accelerator. She hurled an incredulous thought at Sei Javala:

It's coming.

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Rodonovan Swords, captain of *Helldiver's Ghost*, called the Pirate in Taelemone and all points West, called the Prince, the Sultan, and Helldiver everywhere else, stood on deck beside a salt-coarsened signaling lamp, watching acrid black smoke roil over the swaying *Aestiva*. The shattered prow of *The Flying Sprite* resembled a pyramid's ruins jutting from the burning water. At the edge of the oil fire, which painted the sea with dancing and fractured gold, frenzied sharks churned the vast blood patch, picking over sailors of *The Flying Sprite*. Their screams were frail things flitting about like the white-and-grey gulls already trolling for bits.

A large shark, easily twenty paces long, scudded by *Helldiver's Ghost*, its man-high dorsal fin wearing a zag of grey light along its ragged edge. The shark tilted, turning a dark eye up to regard Rodonovan, and nudged the transom, tasting the black corvette with its sandpaper hide. A flick of its tail and the fish drifted through the flotsam back toward the wreckage.

Rodonovan climbed the stairs to the overlook leading to the bridge. Pink curds spread across a bruised sky, falling upon the dying sun's saber, and a keen anxiety clawed his gut. Sick of it all. Soon the West would again intrude on his world. He wanted no part of anything involving the bad-luck West. None of it. The idea of Myriadians on either side dying over Western troubles disgusted him.

The Flying Sprite slipped beneath the *Aestiva* with a frothy sigh, another specter to haunt the shallows while the reef patiently claimed it as its own. Beyond its sizzling print, another steam launch bobbed. Sailors were helping others out of the water with desperate yanks on outstretched arms. You could go down with your ship or take your chances in a lifeboat after losing a battle. A Myriadian crew generally split on that choice. And most would rather be killed in battle than choose between drowning or feeding the fish.

Rodonovan was tired. Who'd once said that empires were forged from the fires of war?

Mantra swept past in a shimmer of scales to loop up toward the fruited sky. The little drakonier peaked, hovered, and fell in a slur of speed toward the boiling blood patch. She struck the water and blasted skyward with a tiny shark in her oversized talons. A larger shark leapt clear of the water narrowly missing Mantra's rapier tail with a gnashing of water and grave cracking of jaws. The drakonier's warble seemed a taunt.

Some glib fool, Rodonovan knew, tracking Mantra's path aft to the stern walk where she would feast. Some long-dead *emperor* who had ordered men into battle from a throne far removed from the carnage, amusing the court sycophants with his cleverness. Well, Rodonovan had never pursued empire. He wanted only to unite his people and return to Taelemone, the land of his ancestors, a land he'd never seen but as a scar on the horizon. Lately though he was having

trouble remembering why. Perhaps his disgust at the West was a flimsy shield of righteousness against a deeper repugnance. How long had he been fighting for his people's right to a land none had set foot on? Really though, the question was how long had he been fighting his people for their rights?

Helldiver's Ghost had nearly died this day, engine room gutted by one of *The Flying Sprite's* ship killers. Six sailors killed, and eight out of a dozen engines damaged or destroyed, a gaping wound in the hull. Fortunately, his Chief Engineer, the only man in the *Myriads* and like as not most other places who understood *Ghost's* propulsion system, was spared. It could've just as easily have been he and his men feeding the sharks.

Bangs and clanks and whirrs and zips, whooshes and wet slaps, curses and grunts and edgy laughter, the wheezy breathing of the pump spitting water from the portside vacuole in the engine room. The activity of sailors standing down. The familiar simmer. Sea wasp launchers lowered into their bays. Rotary cannon pods retracted into gun ports and their armored doors slammed shut. Hoses dowsed the base of the charthouse, damaged by a sea wasp fired by *The Flying Sprite* as it approached for its killing stroke. Moments before the hostile corsair struck the massive coral reef entwined with the blazing fumaroles stitching the *Aestiva* to give the Fiery Ring its name.

Wounded, *Helldiver's Ghost* had killed the foundering *Flying Sprite* quickly, and now its sailors chummed the water, clinging to a thin loyalty born of greed. What a waste. With Red Sky Magus killed last month in the fall of Black Tombs, most fleets sailing under his standard had immediately and unconditionally declared their neutrality, willing to neither throw in with Rodonovan nor be drowned by same. They too were tired. Some of those fleets disintegrated too -- sailors held allegiances only to their ships -- you lived and died on and for your ship -- beyond the rails though, fidelity was a matter of short-term interests. But *The Flying Sprite* had sailed under Hang-Low Christian's Crooked Cross. Hard as it was to imagine, Red Sky had an actual friend. One who smelled some phantasm of power left in the wake of Red Sky's death. One who had become a lingering annoyance. Rumor had it that Hang-Low's fleet skulked about the Desolate Atolls to the southeast. Goblin Rod's juggernaut had been dispatched.

War polluted the scent of the *Aestiva*. So much blood spilled. The blood of men and womyn who'd followed Rodonovan or defied him. And what to show? Unity? This unity he had prayed to and preached his whole life? The fleets had fractured, ships had scattered to the winds. Had everyone but him seen the utter emptiness of his pursuit? Irredentism. It was a concept wholly void of the passion, hatred, blood, desolation that spoiled its reality.

The black deck vibrated with the reloading of weapons below. The next time those weapons deployed would be against someone other than Rodonovan's own people. Other than humyn. Turning his gaze onto the curl of surf on the outer reef, revulsion at the thought held an edge of despair and shame and failure limned with the faintest dew of relief.

In a shattering geyser of red water, a breaching sea drakar gripped a huge shark in its long spike-toothed jaws. It flopped back into the water with a boom, ivory belly up and an elongated,

triangular fin of mottled blues and greys waving briefly in the froth. Panic resounded from the sailors in and around the other steam launch.

"A draksy inside the Ring?"

Rodonovan looked down at Squeezebox Davy, who squinted to watch the true giant of the *Aestiva* take its full. The old Master Chief's cheeks billowed like two fresh-baked buns around a mouth pinching an ancient whalebone pipe. His curly greyed muttonchops climbed up under his black wool-knit cap and seemed to drape over ears bespeckled with tiny gems.

"None of this bodes well," Rodonovan said, knowing he must avoid the luxury of existential musings with his sailors. And yet this waning afternoon, it seemed he had given in to that urge.

"That launch is overloaded, Captain," Squeezebox said with gravel in his voice and a spew of sweet blue smoke that shredded in the breeze. "It'll either capsize on its own or the draksy will take it down."

Hatred was the only thing in this world that persisted, Rodonovan knew. And he knew too that he still persisted after forty years not by showing mercy to those who hated him. A lesson reflected in the pool of blood spilled from the slash put in his wife's throat by a man once given mercy. Gone over a score of years now, Ambra persisted in the unhealing wound of her absence.

To the west, three corsairs from his fleet stood down to reassume their picket positions; the ships to the east would be doing the same. When the Western war passed over the Myriads like some infernal squall, men and womyn would die.

"We've poisoned the *Aestiva* enough for one day maybe?" Squeezebox said. "Surely some of them men'll sail for you." His tobacco-torn voice rolled out in an odd monotone that made Rodonovan look at the sailor. He couldn't hold the older man's earnest gaze for long before returning his own to the sea.

The drakar, easily a hundred paces from snout to tail -- nearly the size of *Helldiver's Ghost* -- churned the bloody water. Dorsal fins slashed the water as sharks scattered around the oil fire; they'd soon find the other launch. Or the drakar would. "Some maybe. And what of the rest of them, Master Squeezebox?" Rodonovan asked. Wind nuzzled through his hair to murmur in his ear. He'd already allowed that weird-eyed Ferracane -- yet another Westerner -- on his ship, much to his superstitious crews' irritation.

Squeezebox scratched under his cap, smoked his pipe. "I'd wager they've had their fill of all this, Captain."

"Master Squeezebox," Rodonovan said, thinking, "this" meant his thing, his war, "I need a damage assessment on the charthouse and the engine room. I want the hull breach closed by sunset. I want a status report on all engines. Has the tender picked up the replacement blocks? I want all engines back online by sunrise, when we will honor our dead. See that all gun crews secure their stations. You will also see to the care and housing of *The Flying Sprite's* sailors. You are, as you've always been, the busiest man on this ship."

"I was always the busiest man on your father's ship, so I wouldn't have it any other way, Captain." Squeezebox headed for the charthouse, a rotund ball of bustle barking orders and trailing drifts of redolent pipe smoke.

To Ensign Tommy Greensticks, Rodonovan thought, *Please bring Ghost about. See that the launch bay doors are open and secure that last steam launch. I want those men.*

Aye, Captain.

Captain...

The mellow thought of Sei Javala, *Ghost's* healer and navigator, jarred Rodonovan coming so quickly on the heels of Greensticks' terse reply. *Yes, Javala?*

We have a report from the North: The Darkness will arrive at dawn.

Rodonovan turned away from the railing to head inside the bridge as three of *Helldiver's Ghost's* twelve engines idled up. *Please bring Kai Ferracane to the bridge.*

When Rodonovan entered the bridge, Greensticks barked, "Captain on deck!" Terence Eight Legs stood and saluted, while the Western fugitive, Dexter Revenant, managed to offer a turd-eating grin without even smiling. Rodonovan waved a hand -- *at ease* -- and said to Sei Javala, "That Westerner knows more about this than he's told us."

Revenant tossed out an arsehole's laugh. "That sounds familiar."

"As you wish, Captain," Sei Javala said.

Panic shaded through Rodonovan, a queer sense of aimlessness. He gazed out the panoramic bridge window as the black corvette circled past the funeral feast of the sea drakar toward the overcrowded steam launch.

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The engine drone waxed and waned in long abrasive whines as the recon launch rode giant long-backed waves.. Each sweeping rise and fall a brief forever under the moonless sky that intensified the chill creeping into Cinnamon. She skated south on the black water, a sense of hugeness made more gaping by the star spray overhead. She would have wide open water until she passed the Ascensions to the West. To shrink that open space, to dull the dread wrought by the trouble following her, Cinnamon turned her mind to more mundane matters. Or if not so mundane, at least more palatable. Tasty even..

They'd fished Kai Ferracane out of the *Aestiva* about a dozen leagues off the northern coast of Talemone as he gutted one shark after another in a losing battle. Standing on deck, naked but for one of those Western combat knives and a heavy pack on his back that he guarded jealously, blood from a massive wound painting his leg, he wouldn't say who he was or what he was doing

out there. But Dexter Revenant had breathed, "Kai Ferracane," and the story in that utterance rang with the same epic resonance as the rumors of this Ferracane also tolled. Dexter Revenant, a fearsome man with a warrior's posture, as intimidating and deadly as any sailor in the Myriads, despite his penchant for japery, had whispered, "Kai Ferracane," with a sort of superstitious awe as the two Westerners exchanged an elaborate and fairly absurd handshake she'd learned was called a dap.

She generally considered Revenant an asshole, but, well, there was something about Kai Ferracane. Maybe it was something juvenile like he showed no interest in her when most sailors sniffed about like dogs trying to get at a slab of meat. If she had a ducat for every minute of insufferable conversation... Maybe it was his carriage, the way he glided on sea legs, despite the gash in his thigh, like he wasn't a lubber from the endless dirt. Maybe it was simply that he'd been bare-arse naked when she first saw him two days ago, dark as a southerner, mapped with countless scars that netted muscles like wild roots witch-bound into the form of a humyn, not a tattoo in sight to speak anything about him. Maybe it was the death lurking in his weird eyes. Those weird eyes that changed colors like some sorcerer's trinkets to match his dark moods.

Against her better judgment she'd asked Dexter if Kai Ferracane was as dangerous as the rumors said. "He could kill this entire ship," Dexter had said, scrubbing a hand over his bristly blond hair. "None would be the wiser." Blustery words without an iota of bluster in them. "A former friend of mine put it best," Dexter had gone on, as was his predilection. "To his enemies, Kai Ferracane is evil incarnate."

"Former friend?"

"Well, dead friend. But you get my point.."

"Evil, yes."

"He is wall-to-wall. Big, big, big *éclat*."

"Hmm, wall-to-wall and big eh-clah."

"Means he walks it, walks it, from one end to the other -- wall-to-wall." He'd gawked at her to see if she understood. "And *éclat* is respect."

"I get it."

"But he's a congenial sort," Dexter added with a wicked little asshole smile. "Advocates nonviolence."

As for how Kai Ferracane managed to end up in the Aestiva with only a knife and that pack strapped to his back, he only said he'd been to the Lorlands.

Cinnamon laughed, a flat honking in her ears, whipped away by the speed of the launch. The Lornlands. People didn't go there. You sure didn't come from there either. Not by yourself, not naked with a knife. She laughed again. Seemed Ferracane had been swimming the Aestiva home.

Cinnamon liked that. She liked that a lot.

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Kai Ferracane sensed the roll of the Aestiva as he emerged from the clean black roused by an intrusive thought. The fuzzy hum of the pumps was gone, suggesting the hull breach had been repaired. He smelled his sweat, his salt, and the salt of the ocean. Right leg extended to accommodate the zipper of stitches holding his thigh together, he sat with left leg tucked in on a small bunk suspended from the bulkhead of a small, low-ceilinged room, walls hung with intricately patterned tapestries of earthen reds, browns, greens, and yellows that concealed the utilitarian grey bulkhead lined with conduit. He kept his head down to keep it from hitting the other bunk directly overhead. The meditation cleared away the last vestiges of his short-lived maiden voyage on the Aestiva -- or rather *in* the Aestiva. Sweat stuck to his flesh in cool but moisture-laden air.

Mister Ferracane, to the bridge, please.

Sei Javala's thought sang softly in his head again.

Kai slid off the narrow bunk to dress, leaving a dark sweat stain on the crimson cotton blanket. The body machine was mellow, refreshed if damp, but still feeling the effects of three unpleasant days carousing all too intimately the creatures inhabiting the powerful body of water. The wound in his thigh had festered quickly despite the body machine's ministrations. Sei Javala had treated it with various noxious powders, which seemed to help. Although the wound still wept a cloudy fluid, the pain had subsided to a muted wailing well beneath the body machine's threshold. Come morning, he would ask for a launch. Time to go. He wouldn't be responsible for destroying this ship.

A rug similar to the tapestries covered the cold polyplate floor. The clothes provided for him lay folded over the back of a chair made of some dark wood. It accompanied a small lacquered writing desk of the same wood. He had to bend to keep from smacking his head on thick conduits running along the ceiling. He pulled on the sturdy black pants -- breeks they called them -- and hassled with the string ties of the annoying shirt, a blousy thing of admittedly comfortable linen. The pack containing the Lornlands relic leaned against the desk.

An empire wanted it back.

And he had a feeling that might be why he'd been summoned to the bridge.

Kai swung the pack over his shoulders, cinching the leather straps tightly against his shirt. He immediately felt ill. Dark, dark magicks in the thing. The pack's ancient leather, black with time and wear, was stiff from its extended dunking in the Aestiva. He left his hair down.

He peeked out of the room's single blacked-out porthole; the indigo sky indicated the recent transition from twilight to night. One tapestry partly concealed a rack of swords and rifles, none ornamental, standing beside a narrow storage locker filled with ammunition and pistols. The desk and tapestries made for a kind of failed coziness that could not conceal the chill of combat and death emanating from every corner. A familiar ambience to Kai, cozy in its own clutching way.

He left his private quarters -- it belonged to absent people with the curious names of Sinister Van Dyke and Jester Dan -- and wended his way through the aft berthing compartment where sleeping crewmembers played the traditional rude nocturne. To starboard, he recognized the hatch that led to the launch bay. They'd brought him onboard from there.

In noncombat situations, the body machine let him feel pain to reduce the chance of reinjury, so he limped a bit. In tight grey passageways dimly lit by intermittent caged lights, the scent of the ocean danced with the odor of paint and soap. He couldn't read the signs and was unsure of where he was. That uncertainty fed the constant faint specter of fear that fueled the body machine's passive heightened awareness.

In turn, it chafed at his sense of urgency to return to Zahariad to deliver the relic and aggravated his unhappiness that his presence, or rather the relic's, could bring far worse down on these people than the sad war they fought amongst each other. Tomorrow he'd ask for a launch or something to get him off this ship.

As Kai stepped through a hatch, voices and the zip and ring of tools filtered up from a passage to a lower deck. Likely the engine room. And likely the tender had arrived with the replacement engines. He continued forward, hoping he was heading toward the stairs to the bridge. Then, at a dark, tight intersection, Kai sensed furtiveness, heard a tiny jangle, smelled sweat and stale tobacco and rum. He grabbed at it.

A choked "Whoa!"

Kai recognized the face he yanked from the unlit passageway and immediately released the old sailor they called Squeezebox. "Sorry," Kai said.

Squeezebox held up one hand and rubbed his neck with the other. He sweated profusely, breathed a bit heavily. "No, no, it's my fault, Sirrah. Didn't expect anyone. Didn't hear a thing. Hard not to make noise in these passageways. And you with your leg half cut off." He reeked of rum. He chuckled, revealing a fractured grin of a few lonely yellowed teeth. "But then they say you're the devil's own to your enemies."

"Devil?"

"They say."

"Is they Dexter?"

"Ah! Funny! Dexter. So true. That's funny! Not so successful an ambassador of the endless dirt, that one, eh? A bit long in the tongue. But I see kindness in your eyes, lad. Even if they do change colors. Hah."

Kai nodded, a bit at a loss, saw the lie haunting the mirthless gaze of the small old man, who then said, "I was just checking on the lads in the hold. My idea to bring them aboard, my job to see that they got what they need. Make sure they got enough food -- some big, big southern sailors down there. Some of them got injuries; some of them are just scared. And it's hot as the hells down there."

"Probably not as hot as in the belly of one of those fish," Kai said, cringing at the stupidity of that sentiment, wishing to be cordial without involving himself in incessant drunken gabbing. And yet wishing he didn't feel that way either.

"Hah. So true. So true." The short round man's blue shirt wore countless stains like islands in the dark wash of his sweat. "They needed us but we need them too. It's far past time to let go of our differences. I seem to forget what they were. The differences, eh? Want to treat them lads right, show them some respect. They'll see we ain't so different. Or the differences don't make no difference. Hah. All just brothers. Like it used to be. When loyalty went easily beyond the rails, when loyalty was about -- " he pounded his chest, "a man's heart and will and not about a flag's coercion or twisting words about grand ideas. Nobody remembers anymore. By the hells, we don't even fight the same anymore. Used to be you'd board a ship and look right into the eyes of the men you killed. Know the cost. Now there's rarely a boarding. You hardly catch a glimpse of your enemy. Nowadays, it's all Western cannons and missiles fired from afar. No idea what you've just done to a brother. Yellow, if you ask me. Hah. No offense."

"None taken," Kai said. He'd seen up close and personal what stand-off weapons could do to a man, friend and foe alike. He'd seen up close and personal what a knife could do too. Results were the same. Everything about Squeezebox told Kai that the man hid something and not just the sidearm under his vest. The rum? Maybe the old sailor had shared a few with the "lads." A medical treatment or a "show of respect" that Rodonovan might not condone. Some might argue that winning loyalty with drink differed little from coercion. Then again, the elder Myriadian's nervousness was nothing new to Kai. Many men behaved that way around him. Of course, it could simply be the dislike most of these Myriadians held for any Westerners.

"Someday mayhap you'll share your tale of how you ended up starkers in the middle of a swarm of sharks," Squeezebox said, smile stiffening a bit. "Gotta be worth a tankard or two." Gold loops in his ears tinkled against each other as he looked down as if checking himself, then up at Kai, at the pack on his back.

Kai wanted to offer a genuine smile, wanted to laugh, liked the idea of throwing back a few ales and listening to the old domo's lies.. He liked the idea of many things the body machine wouldn't allow. He said, "Can you direct me to the bridge?"

"You're on your way, but this ship is tricky, tricky, tricky. `S why no one can take it with a boarding. Designed so you can't control the key chokepoints. Not without the schematics, anyway. Hah. I'm yammering on. Keep on forward `til you nigh about leave midships. At the sick bay -- can't miss it, light's always on -- " a chuckle, apparently, that was funny, "take the portside hatch and then the very next forward hatch. Go too far and you'll find yourself looping back to the officer's berthing. Take the `tween decks ladders up two decks to the main deck. Well, I better go check the lads in the engine room, make sure Chief Crabwalk is happy. Hah. G'night, Sirrah."

Kai figured Squeezebox and his "checks" were probably in high demand among the overnight crew. After a fashion, he found the ladder to the deck, and felt its steepness deep in his thigh with every move. He made his way to the bridge, sensing the energy above well before he slipped into a sparse hexagonal room bathed in green light and simmering with urgency. The broad and bald-headed Dexter Revenant looked like a child next to the giant captain, Rodonovan. The man held near mythic status in the Seven Valleys and for once the reality matched the rumor. They stood with the robe-clad Javala around a small table that matched the shape of the bridge listening to a gangly wan fellow in a grease-smearred smock.

A sailor sat at a console of gauges glowing white. A medley of hairy spider tattoos played over his bald head, their color lost in the green night light, and the lobe of his right ear wore three small discs that looked black. Those were some mark of status in a place called the Wavery Islands, which had, according to Dexter, some tenuous alliance with Rodonovan based on marriage and political expedience. Another sailor with a thick braid of hair brushing his belt stood by the wheel. The pilot stared with tired eyes through a sliver opening in the otherwise blast-shielded glass that wrapped around the entire bridge at a serene oceanscape rendered in green and black. Fumaroles formed a chain of breathing white beads.

" -- the last of the head bolts for engine eleven and we're adjusting the lifters for engine twelve," the smocked sailor said hoarsely. "Another two hours." His eyelids hung over his eyes, and his blond hair seemed to have died trying to escape the bow holding it captive. Rodonovan absently walked his fingers down the manicured slashes of beard on his cheek. The green cast of the bridge accentuated the fatigue drawing out his face. "You have an hour, Chief," he said. His head nearly touched the bundles of conduits running along the ceiling.

The engineering chief crossed his lanky arms, face void of any emotion, and said nothing for a moment. Tattooed tentacles wrapped around his pale right arm. He spoke softly, "Then there's break-in time, Captain."

"I'm aware, Crabwalk," Rodonovan said. "Yes, Captain." Chief Crabwalk slouched around Kai with a cool, flat glance and disappeared through the hatch.

With arms bracing him, Dexter mugged at the chart on the table. Sei Javala's eyes slid over to Kai, and his expression became that of a polite person refraining from announcing the presence of some unpleasant odor. Kai couldn't suss out the reason why -- perhaps, simply, he smelled bad. Like a Westerner. The healer managed to tip his pointed chin in greeting. The motion caught Dexter's attention. He looked up and grinned. He and Kai exchanged a short dap.

"Something change?" Kai asked.

"Something changed."

"What're we talking about?"

"Don't you know?" Rodonovan asked.

Kai raised his eyebrows.

"The Shadowdeath Wind," Sei Javala said.

Kai took in everyone's nonreaction to those overweight words.

Rodonovan's fingers stopped at his chin, rat-a-tatted. "Sei Javala, please show Mister Ferracane."

Kai had learned that *sei* meant witch in Javala's far eastern language; it was a title of high regard. The witch treated Kai with the least circumspection. Not to mention that the man had likely saved his life. It was bad enough Kai was from the West, but his coyness about the relic had done nothing to warm things up. The sei turned to a small screen on the starboard bulkhead, the hem of his lightweight robe whirling. He had no hair and in the green, color-leaching light, his robe glowed against his dark skin. Shorter than them all and thin, Sei Javala had the delicate bearing of an aesthete. His dark eyes narrowed in concentration, his breathing became audible, not quite labored. Another oceanscape bloomed slowly on the screen. Images sharpened, faltered, flickered. While many odd things flashed across the screen, one reappeared consistently and lingered.

"A little noisy, but actually fairly clean given the distance from which the thoughts were sent."

Kai studied the screen. "Thoughts..."

"An early warning," Sei Javala said.

"That's from one of your pickets?" Kai blinked when he saw his own face on the screen for a split second. No one seemed to notice.

"Cinnamon," Sei Javala said.

"What?"

"Cinnamon Rogue."

"Oh." Her. With the shiny black hair and unabashed green eyes that had touched him in a way he knew well from so many other touchless experiences but was barely able to imagine thanks to the body machine's pragmatic chastity. Who smelled of exotic spice and war, alluringly unknown and comfortingly familiar. Cinnamon with the questions nearly as forward as her gaze. All said,

an unwittingly annoying person. What would it be like to just be with her, to answer those questions? "How far out is she?"

"At last contact, one hundred sixty leagues. We expect her -- and it -- at dawn."

"And *it* is what I think it is?"

"Yes."

"Huge magicks," Sei Javala said. "To subvert nature like that is huge magicks."

"It's coming for you I presume?" Rodonovan said.

"This." Kai tipped his head back to indicate the relic. "For this."

"Must worth a fortune," Greensticks said.

"And what is it, exactly?" The Captain asked.

"The less you know, the better, I think, Captain...."

Rodonovan's expression darkened.

"An emperor's ransom," Greensticks said.

Kai continued lamely, "Um, Captain, if you could spare me a launch, I'll leave now. Maybe redirect this thing."

A muttered, "Yellow," floated about the bridge.

"Understand that every picket reported the same thing," Sei Javala said.

"There's more than one of these things?" Kai refused to look in the direction of the sailor piloting the ship.

"No."

"And the pickets ran, what, a thousand leagues?" Kai said.

"Roughly, yes."

"Crazy, huh?" Dexter said.

Kai did not share Dexter's bright and slightly desperate trench grin. "Big anyway," he said. The potpourri of images faded from the screen and Sei Javala said, "Most of our ships advocate heading to open sea now."

Rodonovan shook his head curtly. "We know these reefs far better than any alien armada does. This Legion's ships will be forced to trickle inside the ring where we can hit them as they maneuver or run afoul of the reefs. And we can ride out anything just as well here as we would in open water. Inside the ring we can use our fastboats to strike their larger vessels. Our island positions will be able to strike as well. We can defend the island.. Show them a wolverine and perhaps they'll leave our lair alone." He turned to the Kai. "Do you reckon it will matter whether you're on my ship or somewhere else when that thing arrives? A politer man might thank you for your consideration, but your gesture strikes me as simply dimwitted. Whatever it was you were up to in the Lornlands has brought your war to my people."

Kai waited a beat before saying, "I met Omen and -- "

"So you said," the Captain snapped. "After we pulled your sopping arse from the middle of a feeding frenzy. You seemed to think you purchased berthing on my ship with that bit of trivia. If so, consider your currency spent."

Kai liked this hard man, this legendary pirate prince, and wished he could know him as a friend. Why he seemed to gravitate to the unreachable was an interesting question. "He reminds me of you," he said. Rodonovan stilled; only the fire continued to simmer in his eyes. Kai knew he had to step lightly. "Don't know why he came to the Seven Valleys, but Omen recognized early on that this war was his war. He's leading the Ramblewood resistance against the armies that are conquering my homeland. I'm here now because I wished to help him and everyone else who has taken up arms against this Legion."

"Do you consider yourself clever?" Rodonovan said. "Trying to game me?"

"No one's ever mistaken me for being clever," Kai said. "As you have already recognized."

"Omen is his own person; he makes his own choices and he lives with them. And dies with them."

"The other fleets have been warned," Sei Javala said, chin bobbling on gnarled fingers. "They think it's some ploy."

"They make their choices too," Rodonovan said. "We see what the morning brings and then we sail for the Misty Broom. Sei Javala, please raise the prefect's office at Chiming Harbor and ask for permission to drop anchor." He turned to Kai. "You'll go ashore there.."

The pilot eyed the spider-headed sailor, clearly unhappy. The air, already thickened by the green light, stilled by the coldness emanating from the captain, swelled further with silence. Kai gazed at the ocean tilting and rolling in some secret gambol. "Hey, Dex," he said, feeling an all too familiar inertia, a blended charge of violence and despair. "Show me that heli."

####

Engine bellow rose and fell as the launch skipped over a strangely flat dawn sea. Cinnamon Rogue forced herself not to look over her shoulder every few seconds. The speed of the thing was unnatural. But that's not really true, is it? Sorcery was every bit as natural as the tides. But it was fast.. No denying that.

At some point her kerchief had snapped off her head and now her black hair flung behind her like whipped smoke. Sea mist ran in rivulets down her cheeks. Her fingers ached from squeezing the wheel.. In the pale light, she couldn't make out the redness surely coloring her knuckles, but she could see the dense lines of the small black tat dotting her widow's finger on her left hand between the first and second joint. A rune of hate, what the gentle called a rune of memory and the superstitious called a devil's eye, to remember the hurt wrought by the Taelemonites who killed her husband for fishing too close to their shore. There were other runes. Hidden in the curls of her quim and tucked in her arse cleft. For the rape that same day so long ago.

Kai Ferracane hadn't a single tat on his body.

"Then who are you?" she'd asked. She, Kai, Rodonovan, and Dexter had been sitting in the officer's galley the night they'd pulled him from the water. Ferracane had asked for some red beans and rice, had accepted a bit of fish only after a strange and somewhat unreasonable pause to ponder the idea. He kept that mysterious pack as close to him as his prick. "I mean," Cinnamon went on, flustered for verbalizing what she'd intended to be only an idle thought, "how do you define yourself?"

Ferracane's eyes had flushed from amethyst to a startling blue. Rodonovan had shifted in his chair, shoulder-length hair swinging, blade-like eyes crinkling with amusement restrained by melancholy.. Dexter grinned like a fool, tossed back his ale, and got up to draw another from the keg. Cinnamon's flabbergast had less to do with what the change in eye color had done to Kai's countenance than what it had done to her.

"I don't," were his last words to her.

In the peach blush of dawn, Cinnamon thought how fun it would be to pursue someone not already interested in her. Provided, of course, she escaped what currently pursued her.

She looked over her shoulder. The wall of water rolling at her stood scores of paces high. Hundreds of paces maybe. A smooth wall, not quite sheer, and profound as the Devil's Cliffs of the Fiery Ring. And it would overtake her launch long before she could reach that haven..

Cinnamon had survived typhoons and waterspouts and the angriest winter squalls of the northern seas. She'd seen rogue waves swallow corsairs, and swarms of sea drakars tear apart fishing ships. But she'd never felt betrayed by the Aestiva until now.

She saw shapes in that wall of water. Beasts bigger than any sea drakar meandering up to the limits of the wall to reveal preposterous bands and veins of color; and vast clouds boiling forth, darting to and fro, and vanishing back into the green murk. Once, a tiny reptilian head on a long

green neck spotted with black and white peeked over the top of the wall to leer at her with a mouth full of crooked spikes.

The twinkling of the Fiery Ring's outer reef on the horizon brought a strong sense of relief. She tried to will more speed from the launch and eyed the anonymous black toggle beside the throttle. She'd wanted to wait until *Helldiver's Ghost* was in sight.

"Well, close enough," she muttered and flipped the toggle.

A moment, then the engines wound out in a terrifying wailing harmony. The launch squatted and blasted forward. A yell leapt from Cinnamon's mouth. The launch skipped hard, began to wobble, then lifted free of the water, bow pointing at the pale blue sky.

Cinnamon backed off the throttle and the launch dropped, slamming her against the console. The boat skidded sideways with a scythe of silvered water and the engines stalled. In the raging silence, the green bottles hissed. "Well, bugger me," she growled, slapping the toggle off. She smacked the blue-lighted ignition button a couple of times, cursing the unanswered zip of the starters.

Finally, with twin *Whu-u-um-bubba-bubba-bubb*as the engines burst to life with belches stinking of raw fuel.

Cinnamon shoved the throttle forward, cranking the wheel to correct her direction. The wall of water grabbed the launch and hoisted it.

####

"How do pirates end up with a quad-gen Vipra?"

"First of all, Kai, that's a good way to get your stones kabobbed on a saber." Dex stood behind the heli's port wing, drummed his fingers on its polyplate armor. "They're fisher folk."

"Kabobbed, right." Kai ran his hand along the port cannon blister just aft of the cabin, slicking his fingers with condensation. Somebody had slapped on a single coat of light blue and white paint over the heli. The streaked and drippy attempt at countershading for the environment barely concealed the high-temperature standard black paint of the Vipra, giving the colors a greyish hue. Squatting -- and feeling that move deep in his thigh -- he scraped a fingernail along the inboard hardpoint, a fat tube launcher dimpled with the heads of nineteen antiarmor sabot rockets called screaming stars. White paint curled up like a worm and fluttered to the deck. "This boat seems perfectly equipped for fishing.." Kai flicked paint flecks from under his nail.

"*Helldiver's Ghost* is a ship. A corvette to be exact. These are oppressed people, pushed off their land. I mean literally. Sound familiar? And second, the Vipra was payment."

Kai switched his attention to the outboard pylon hung with a rack of four NI crystal-eyed Deathstalker missiles. He stood, a little woozy from the relic that clung to his back, the leather straps like talons. The leg wound clung to the breeks. Kai eased the stiff fabric free of the tacky stitches. "Payment?"

"Part of it. For giving us haven."

Kai grunted, sauntered around to the Vipra's nose and eyeballed the housing of the NIVOTADS mission avionics. His fingers caressed the heli's skin, usually a smooth blast-reactive polyplate over Wet-7, a thick liquid armor able to absorb direct fire. Had it been its standard black, the polyplate would absorb the light pouring from the floods illuminating the makeshift pad. He felt the coarse lines and burrs of hastily applied paint. He loved helis, loved how the NI technomancy made the gunship a massive extension of his being. He hated how the body machine allowed him to love a weapon.

"Us?"

"Oh." Dex coughed up a snicker. "Didn't I tell you? These islands are infested with Dagian Guard."

"That you neglected to tell me." Kai squatted again checked the belt feeds to the four articulating rotary cannons suspended in standard diamond stow position from the heli's chin. "That's good."

"Should make you feel a little better about yourself." Dex forced a chuckle. "Most of us are off to some place called the Desolate Atolls, hunting a fugitive."

"A fugitive?"

"Strictly recon. Under the command of one Goblin Rod," Dex said. "That's the other part of our payment."

"Fetching Rodonovan's enemies or working for a domo named Goblin Rod?"

Dex laughed again, more easily this time.

The black Vipra barely fit on the makeshift flight deck. It hunkered there, insectile and predatory with the center fuselage cannon blisters like burly shoulders, barely contained by the taut three-finger-wide yellow straps secured to tie downs on the black armored polyplating that curled off the fantail in large pointed petals, like an awakening flower.. The little drakar thing, what's its name -- Mantra -- watched them from the swept outboard tip of one of the bobbing rotors, wings arched up over its vulpine head. The predawn scent of the ocean swirled about the heli. *Helldiver's Ghost* sat low in the water, unwisely low it seemed to Kai, and the waxing and waning *tish* of ever-moving water against the hull suddenly grated on him. Standing, he looked into the canopy's black glass, the floodlights like ivory eyeballs, his reflection lost in the glare.

"Lanto's not here, is he?"

"What? No. Huh? I mean, um... The Archgeneral is dead. Right?"

"I guess he did tell me that."

Dex laughed not so comfortably. "He told you? Well, he wasn't lying. Told you...." Shaking his head, trying to seem less uneasy.

It was more than his eyes that made even RAITHs edgy around him. The men and womyn respected him as a soldier and unit commander, but only a rare few had ever become what Kai would call friend. And Dex wasn't one of them. He released the canopy and it popped upward with a sigh, beads of water spilled over the curved glass. The cabin light illuminated the cramped space.

"So, hey, I know what you told the captain -- and on his own ship too." Dex gave a smiley grimace to punctuate Kai's etiquette misstep. "But you can tell *me* what you got on your back, right?" Dex asked. "It's making everyone nervous."

Kai recalled his trek from Zahariad, his easterly jaunt through the Fracture, how the land had shifted from deadly desert waste to deadly frozen waste when he reached the Lornlands, the vast chaotic cavern system on the southwestern Malakite frontier where the relic waited, the gigantic Selph and Otra, the grand drakars, ancient enemies, twinned against him protecting it. The thing on his back had almost killed him, and seemed to harbor malevolence toward him still. It made him nervous too. He undid the straps and tossed the pack to Dex, feeling instantly better with it off his back..

"It's heavy," Dex said buckling. "Damned heavy."

"It's got a queered kind of magicks about it." Kai used his toe to release the heli's single step-up. He climbed into the cabin and slipped around the armored wing of the seat. He eased into the armored bucket's tight embrace, drawing an unexpected comfort from the thin black-checked gel-cushions. Beyond *Helldiver's Ghost*, the Aestiva seemed strangely desolate, its shifting surface chipped like worked stone and broken by white boils marking the peaks of reefs. The body machine was refreshed and moving into combat readiness, but Kai felt so tired suddenly. Bone weary. A fatigue colored the same barren grey as the water moving all around him.

The heli's cabin was pristine, no flakes or scuffs in the dull black finish, no wear on the spongy cyclic and collective grips, no pits in the canopy; although damp like everywhere else on that ship, it smelled of fresh lubricants and had a crisp tight feel. The silly watchwords of the RAITHs spread across the leading edge of the forward console: *You can run, but you'll only die tired*. The NI halo sat on the starboard console atop the darkened caution-warning panel. Kai picked up the black band and fit it on his head, its two spider-like nodes, the magick component of the NI called arachnites, dangled against each cheek. It had been a long time since he'd used any neuro-initiation technomancy. The halo tangled in his hair now.

"Oh my," Dex murmured from outside, gingerly clasping the end of the relic. "What're you going to do with this?"

Kai held one grey arachnite in his left hand and pressed it against his head above the NI halo. A sharp prick as the arachnite's stubby legs pinched his flesh through his hair and self-inserted. "Bringing it to Zahariad," he said. A spurt of vertigo whirled through him. "That's all. It's the Claymage's burden to save all worlds. Or something." He attached the second arachnite, shook off the dizziness. Arachnites were supposed to be made from bits of one of the twelve Lodestones destroyed during the Dagian Conflict. "Default set?"

"Right," Dex said, tying up the pack. "Straight from the crate." He grinned up at Kai. "Never had a virgin before, eh? You go easy on her. I've seen you fly."

"Never flown?"

"Rodonovan refuses to use it against other Myriadians. He straps it to his deck as a deterrent."
"Expensive ornament."

"More than you know. It only seemed to make his enemies fight harder. They seemed to know he wouldn't use it or the entire air wing we made available to him. Stupid war."

"Redundant," Kai muttered.

Hello, Kai Ferracane, the Vipra's stilted androgynous voice said inside his head.

Auxillary, Kai thought. *Never had nothing.*

Across Kai's field of vision, the annoying NI display glowed once, a single phantom light.
Auxillary power.... Repeat second query.

Cancel.... Load cues and commands.

The words "Load cues and commands" appeared in the air between him and the canopy. A quickly fading green stamp. How you were supposed to fly while hallucinations of your thoughts blinded you was a mystery known only by the Aerodustrial techs who designed these helis. No Dagian Guard Kai knew flew with visual display engaged.

Load cues and commands. Ready.

Forward area weapons system, ready cue.

Ready cue, the heli said.

Faws.

Cue ready.

Ready fire order.

Ready fire order.

Ah.

Fire order ready.

"So Kai, tell me, you going to get Cinnamon or what?"

"What? I'm trying to concentrate. Get cinnamon... What do you mean 'get'?"

"Get, go'bro." Dexter said with a prurient cackle. "Get that fig. Or take it. Looked like she was ready to give it away. If her eyes had hands, they'd'a torn your clothes off."

"Oh... Ha ha." Kai lost the NI display, shook his head. NI technomancy required absolute focus - *absolute* -- which was why the application had never diffused beyond the Dagian Guard. Neuro-initiation and the kind of distractions inherent to combat flying mixed poorly.

"I know her a little bit, go'bro. She's definitely ready to ride your purple. And she's what's known in polite company as discriminating."

Purple polite. Time to ride, go'bro...

Chaotic thinking detected, Kai Ferracane. Please disengage and reengage.

Damn. Kai released and turned toward Dex. "Domo, I need to concentrate here."

"Sorry, go'bro," Dex said, looking contrite for a moment before a wicked grin bloomed. "She is sweet though, huh?"

"Sure," Kai said. The body machine cleared his mind. He kind of doubted he'd be any more comfortable with this kind of talk even if the body machine tolerated it.

"Sweet, sweet, sweet, more honey than cinnamon." Dex chortled huskily. Maybe growled a bit. "Hey, Dex?" Kai said.

"Yeah, go'bro?" "Wait a minute, will you?"

"Domo..." Dex fell silent.

Kai squared himself, reengaged.

Hello, Kai Ferracane.

Load cues and commands.

Load cues and commands. Ready.

Starboard outboard hardpoint, ready cue.

Kai meticulously went down the list, fire control, engine control, safety control, loading his usual set of cues and commands. He provided any general information he thought might be useful that the heli couldn't ascertain on its own, like the current location of the other Dagian Guards and the name of the town where Rodonovan intended to put him ashore. Behind the ebb and flow of green visuals, the spare instrument panel loomed with its few unlit manual flight control gauges,

the angled canopy jettison handle, the boresight. There was a major drawback to NI technomancy: if it failed, airspeed indicator, altimeter, engine/rotor indicator display, fuel indicator, caution warning panel provided enough information for you to fly, and all weapons systems could be handled manually, but that organic connection to your heli was gone. Which, after growing accustomed to it, was a bit like having a limb amputated. A couple of limbs.

Engine check complete, the heli said. System is gold to go.

Weapons check, Kai thought.

Weapons check proceed.

Faws.

Faws.

Kai slid his eyes starboard, heard the four forward cannons move as a unit. He tracked horizontally to port and the four cannons swept that direction. He made four rapid calls and each cannon tracked separately to distinct targets.

"Yo, yo, yo, go'bro. Wake up, Kai."

The haze of the NI display wavered again. Dexter peered around the right blast shield.

Visual display off.

Visual display off.

Systems check complete. Standby.

All systems gold to go. Standing by.

Kai pressed the small releases on the backs of each arachnite and they popped off with tiny *ticks!* and a vague vertigo. NI headaches and post-flight hangovers, ugh. "What?" The sky had brightened to a cool pale yellow scarred with cloud frills. The silhouettes of small islands tilted in the distance. Distant bird cry tripped about in an ominous stillness. Kai realized what he'd noticed earlier without registering: all the other ships had vanished.

"Incoming, go'bro."

"How many?"

"One. We better get back to the bridge."

####

The steep angle threatened to flip the launch, but its foils held. Cinnamon was higher than the Fiery Ring's protective cliffs. She might simply be pushed right over the Fiery Ring and the rest of the Myriads until this hell-born wave simply ran out of energy. She took little comfort in that. She could also power down the launch, rise up and over, and let the wave pass her by. But that would leave her amid whatever was swarming within the water. No comfort there either.

Cinnamon had seen dreads and jugs and `vettes and `sairs running full speed to the north and the east and the west, hoping, she figured, to meet the enemy on the move. Or maybe just to escape. One corsair was caught broadside and rolled, but it was out of her sight before she could learn the fate of its crew.

She saw *Helldiver's Ghost*, sleek and low and black like a lazing shark and at the same time looking like an unwitting fish might from the vantage point of an osprey. She also saw the outer reef, a bracelet of white and orange and black and brown encircling her home island. And she knew that once this section of the wave struck that reef...

####

"...it'll impact on the island," Rodonovan was saying when Kai and Dex entered the bridge. The captain snatched a comlink off its rack on the side of the map table, the tiny black square lost in his huge hand. "Engine room. I want full power to all twelve engines."

"All twelve, Captain?" Crabwalk's scratchy voice replied. "We haven't had enough break-in -- "

"Full power, Chief." Rodonovan's voice was even and low, but the sailor piloting *Helldiver's Ghost* kinked his head, wariness in his lined eyes.

"Full power, aye, Captain."

Rodonovan then said, "Sound general quarters, Mister Greensticks."

"Aye, Captain." The pilot reached up and tapped a red button on a busy overhead console. A harsh braying started slowly aft and marched forward.

"It's taller than I thought," Rodonovan said. "It would seem that I miscalculated."

"It would seem that nature has a way of reasserting itself," Sei Javala said. "I doubt this was part of the Shadowdeath Wind's calculus."

"Sei Javala, please send message to any remaining ships to make for open ocean. Please send message to the island to execute the evacuation plan. Please web thought communications throughout *Ghost*."

"Only *The Harridan* is left and she is moving, Captain. I will communicate your wishes to island command.... All communications have been webbed for combat."

Rodonovan grunted, dashed beard hiking up his hollow cheeks as his mouth set dourly.

A vast green cliff dominated the view from the bridge. Kai estimated three minutes until the wave hit the outer reef. He knew little about oceans, but he could guess the outcome of that impact. Not much time to evacuate the island.

On the console that Terence Eight Legs monitored, a bank of buttons winked one at a time in slow succession. "All engines online, Captain."

"Full speed ahead, Mister Greensticks.."

Greensticks eased the throttle to the right of the wheel forward. *Helldiver's Ghost* shuddered and began to move, a rising thrum underscoring the strident cry of the alarm.

"Sei Javala, please contact Chief Squeezebox and have him secure for storm running," Rodonovan said.

"Aye, Captain."

"Did the pickets make it in?" Dex asked. He held the wrapped relic as if presenting arms.

"Some are dead," Sei Javala said, "others have scattered to the east and west, hoping to find this sorcery's end."

"What about Cinnamon?"

Javala thrust a slim, long-nailed finger toward the wave where Kai made out a sliver "There."

"Oh my," Dex said. "We need to help her."

"She is not asking for help," Javala said quietly.

"What? So?"

"She's lost," Rodonovan said without looking at anyone. Maps and other things shifted on the bridge as *Helldiver's Ghost* picked up speed, the thrum deepening, emanating through the bulkhead.

Long whips of mist snapped off the wave's edge. The clamor of men scrambling for general quarters added counterpoint to the pre-battle song Kai knew so well. "I can get her," he said.

Rodonovan tipped his head to gaze at Kai from behind a fall of brown hair. "I'll not lose another launch. Or another sailor."

"Like as not, Captain," Greensticks said, "you'd be able to find both somewhere far to the south." Terence Eight Legs nodded vigorously.

"I'll use the heli," Kai said. The malicious chuckles faltered. He recognized the look on Rodonovan's face as one of resignation. "Oh?" the Prince of the Aestiva said.. Even Sei Javala's eyebrows rose.

"Seeing as it's available."

"That's a load of whale turds," Greensticks said.

"He flies like the devil's own," Dex said with glee.

Greensticks muttered.

"Is that so, Mister Ferracane?" Rodonovan asked, favoring Dex with a witheringly mild look. "I've been hearing about my kinship with this devil of late," he said.

Greensticks growled, looked to his captain, his lined eyes sharp with outrage. "He'll fly like the devil to his own safety, I'd wager."

A smile may have made Rodonovan's mouth move, or controlled anger. Kai couldn't tell. The man didn't like him on board his ship, bringing trouble, talking about his son. Kai understood that and accepted it. What he was less sure of was whether the man trusted him. That he didn't much like.

"Sei Javala," the captain said, "can you contact Cinnamon?... Tell her help is on the way."

"I can." "Can you patch the Vipra's NI into your communication web?" Kai asked.

"Yes, with some qualification. It was easy once I recognized the magicks at the heart of your neuro-initiation systems. Your Dagian Guard comrades were very helpful in negotiating what really amounts to an overly complicated camouflage. However, it is not a perfect integration so your communication remains in open air."

"Good enough." Kai headed for the door. He grabbed the threshold and looked over his shoulder. "Dex, you get that relic to Zahariad."

"What? How?"

"Be creative," Kai said, ignoring the other eyes drawn to him with the force of those two words. "And take the rest of the Guard with you. They'll be far more welcome there than they are here. And. And. Do not lose that."

####

Sending someone! Who? How? No!

Kai Ferracane.

Was there irony in that? Cinnamon wondered. *How?*

Apparently he has some flying prowess.

Flying!

Cinnamon was irked. It would've been annoying enough having some hero shove off in a launch, but flying? And a Westerner too. She'd seen that contraption. Rodonovan's trophy. His gigantic sacred prick. How ridiculous.

Helldiver's Ghost made for the Maiden's Cleft in the outer reef at building speed. It sailed right through the impact zone. Not a chance, Cinnamon knew. Not a chance in all the hells. She'd seen the other Westerners fly their ungainly looking airships around, but the way the ugly sky blue heliunit flicked off the aft deck of the corsair made it seem that some large bird of prey had taken to the air. It darted straight toward her.

Cinnamon?

Kai Ferracane. You're on a fool's errand.

For many years now.

Oh please. Cinnamon twisted her face. How annoying.

Cinnamon, this is what I need you to do for me....

Cinnamon laughed mightily at Kai Ferracane's absurd idea even as the wall of water struck the reef and began to hollow out, pulling the launch up at a radical angle and throwing her off balance.

#####

"We're at full speed, Captain," Greensticks said.

The heliunit flitted past the navigation bridge portside, nose dipped, sleek and rapacious, yet hulking like some bloated insect. Rodonovan watched it head straight toward the massive surge and then shoot skyward as if yanked on a rope, still amazed at the precariousness of the machine's flight.

Kai Ferracane's voice filled his head, lacking the usual clarity of the com-web and available for all to hear: *Captain, once over, deploy all weapons.*

Can you give me a status?

Stand by.

Rodonovan did not think he was afraid to die, but he had unfinished business and that always stoked up a frantic anger within him. But this time, a near-dizzying sadness gnawed at him. He could find no meaning to this current state of affairs. And he had led people who had trusted him into this situation.

He missed his son. A chilling pride gripped him. Two days ago, a naked Kai Ferracane, dripping with water and blood, had greeted Rodonovan with the words, "I've met your son, sir. Omen Swords is a brave leader." The Westerner's deviled eyes swam from purple to blue to purple, shifting like the seas. As quickly, the pride withered and an abominably barren sadness perched inside Rodonovan, a tumor.

Well... Ferracane's unsure thought meteored through Rodonovan's head, different from the more lucid and easy communication he was used to onboard, ships of two classes. The small craft look like Miniak elements. They're small not as big as your ship, but I would anticipate taking heavy fire, Captain. They're escorts, I think, for the rest of the ships, which look like supply ships or troop transports. A lot of them. Lay down a suppressing fire across all fields and bear east full speed. And expect storm conditions. I'll do what I can to run point and help you break out.

And Cinnamon?

And Cinnamon.

Rodonovan gripped the chart table. That response lacked conviction.

Chief Squeezebox's thought burst into Rodonovan's head: *We are secure for storm running, Captain.*

The wave hit the outer reef and leapt upward, pulling taut, an emerald sky clouded with flaws. The Maiden's Cleft vanished beneath deep water. To the west, the wave peaked and began to suck back as if taking a deep breath. And there like a bug on a wall, hung Cinnamon.

Time to impact, Sei Javala? By simply willing it, you could direct a private thought toward one person and it would remain ears only for that person, save that Javala could hear all communications should he wish. Not even the sorcerer knew how the ancient magicks of the sounding charm accomplished such an effortless thing.

It will be close.

That's not what I asked.

Seven seconds. Or so.

Rodonovan announced that over the com-web.

The heliunit swooped down and headed north-by-northwest. Straight for the wave's peaking section..

####

When the landing gear bays whirred shut, a jolt moved through Kai. The comfort of the cyclic and embrace of the twin turbines' roar, the taste of violence.

From the air, the water was teal fading to crystal blue near shore. The reef coiled like a snake through the water, across white sands, and between the carcasses of sunken ships. Kai got his first good look at *Helldiver's Ghost*. Pointed at the bow, it flared out a bit amidships, and tapered near the stern. At the bow, the hull curved protectively over the deck in a manner that probably cut drag. It sat low in the water, seeming nearly submerged and the superstructure flowed smoothly out of the deck, raked backward, and eased back down in a narrow teardrop shape.

"Don't know where he got the polyplate technology," Dex had said. "And he ain't saying. Everyone recognizes *Ghost* because it looks nothing like any other ship on the Aestiva. It looks like something from the future, but I heard it's just the opposite."

Helldiver's Ghost was the dull black of a RAITH heliunit. It cut through the water with impressive speed, trailing a boiling white froth. To port, Kai saw the lone ship that had stayed with Rodonovan. Running parallel to the incoming wave, making for the same break in the reef that *Helldiver's Ghost* sped toward, it had no chance. Kai also saw Cinnamon's launch moving easterly on the wave's face. She had little chance too, he thought. He looped around to the west, climbing above the wave's height to take in the vista beyond.

Hundreds of ships riding gigantic if gently sloped swells under a sky blackened with storm clouds. Most appeared to be transports, huge and broad and moving in a relatively orderly flotilla at the stately pace of a confident expeditionary force. Humyn ships of rust-streaked metal, standing in stark contrast to the smaller ships slashing the uneasy ocean in an arrow-shaped vanguard. Those were faceted oblongs camouflaged in blocky greys and blues and whites and blacks. Miniak.

"Well, this should get festive."

Dozens of ships burned, chunks of them drifted amid flaming slicks of oil, others, mostly submerged, floated belly up. And bodies floated in the water. Kai knew the vulnerability of being in the deep water and felt a sympathetic anxiety that the body machine quickly quelled.

Captain, once over, deploy all weapons, Kai thought, not exactly sure who all might be picking up his communication. He explained as best he could, chalking up the storm theatrics to the Hand of Morath, the power behind the Miniak.

The wave seemed to gather itself and rise, lines of tension radiating out. Kai dropped the heli down and dipped in toward the wave's sheer jade face just as its peak pitched forward. He spotted the launch in dimming dawn light. Beyond it, *Helldiver's Ghost* climbed a section that was not quite vertical, looking like a toy. Below them all, he caught a glimpse of the other ship, another toy, this one abandoned, sliding helplessly sideways.

The lip of the wave curled overhead to crash on the reef hundreds of paces away. The world became a spiraling, howling tunnel of green with a bright and towering gash ahead embracing a serene alternative of sky and water and islands.

####

Clinging to the wheel, Cinnamon pulled herself up, spreading her legs to keep balance. She saw *Helldiver's Ghost* meet the wave's trough and climb. *The Harridan* was not so lucky. Its posture to the wave's face had been too oblique and like a silken cloth sliding over a table, the *Aestiva* dragged the corsair into the breaking wave where it disappeared beneath the collapsing lip. An incredible roaring squall; an entire ocean spinning in huge coils.

Cinnamon stopped breathing. Her launch sat low on the wave, not so vertical now, but soon the collapse would catch her. In that breathless moment, fear accelerated into calm. She looked back toward the gnashing white wall boiling toward her and saw the queerest thing.

A heliunit.

Diving from near the arc of the curl, its canopy black

Grab the cannons.

The words boomed in Cinnamon's head, louder than the exploding water around her. Gently, the flying machine crept to within a pace of her launch, hovering there as if curiously investigating some scent. Like the fingers of some god, the four forward cannons of the heli eased in toward her, black and dripping with moisture.. She drew a hoarse breath and wrapped her arms around the lowest cannon barrel. It dipped and the heli bobbed.

I'm –

The heli shot forward.

Facing backward, Cinnamon caught the launch shooting up the wave's fracturing face and beyond her line of sight. She swung her legs up and gripped the cannon's receiver assembly as best she could and hung on.

####

Rodonovan gripped the chart table and fought gravity as *Helldiver's Ghost* climbed the rolling green slope. Mantra dug her talons into his shoulder, warbling nervously into his ear. Greensticks clung to the ship's wheel and Sei Javala gripped a conduit, placidly staring through the bridge's window. The corvette creaked and moaned like some decrepit rust bucket, and the dozen-engine harmony had taken on an ominously growling whine. The breaking wave consumed the vista. At the same time a monolithic infinity and racing immediacy.

Helldiver's Ghost had weathered some of the worst ship-swallowing northern storms Rodonovan had ever had the misfortune to sail through, danced with a typhoon in the southern reaches, shaken off the slaps of rogue waves all over the Aestiva. Rodonovan knew the corvette would survive the wave; he worried instead about what waited over top.

All weapons deploy on my command. Fire at will.

There was a kind of snarl and then a skidding noise as Terence lost his balance and fell away from the monitoring console. He struck the bulkhead beside the hatch and lay there cursing and rubbing his spider-tatted skull. Dexter reached to grip the man's arm and helped him scabble to his feet.

To port, Rodonovan first saw the leading edge of the wave's lip, the massive frosted whirl of the wave's heart, and then, something he had trouble processing: the aerial contraption, the machined insect from the West. Zipping toward him from out of that spinning tunnel, great wings of mist whipping off of it.. With a humyn hanging from it like prey.

"By the gods..."

Helldiver's Ghost breached the top of the wave nearly vertical with a *boom!* Green density gave way to a sky, black and boiling.

#####

Kai adjusted the Vipra to handle the extra weight of Cinnamon beneath his feet. The heart of the wave exploded behind him, blowing a thunderous, drenching gust from out of the whirling barrel that grabbed the heli and flicked it forward. Kai fought the cyclic and directional control pedals.

Cinnamon!

Get me the hells down!

As Kai righted the Vipra and climbed, ahead of him, *Helldiver's Ghost* blasted through the very edge of the wave's break like a sword thrust at the seething sky. Most of the ship cleared the water. It hovered, a long beard of foam unfurling from its prow, before splashing down with a burst of white.

Every gunport dropped and *Helldiver's Ghost* bloomed with fire.

Kai passed athwartships of the corvette's stern as it broke to the east.

I'm coming in, Kai thought. He swung the Vipra around and piloted it toward the landing pad just above the firing line of the rotary cannons below the fantail. The corvette bobbed crazily on the wild sea, far worse than when Kai had taken off. But he maneuvered in and hovered above the tilting deck for a moment.

I'm off! Cinnamon Rogue thought.

Kai eased into the cyclic and applied power. He saw Miniak gunboats break toward the East. *Gold all weapons systems*, he thought.

The fuselage blisters scalloped open and twin sets of rotary quads extended clear of the cannon bays on either side of Kai's peripheral vision. Gold squares dotted the top tier of the warning light console.

All weapons systems are gold to go, the Vipra told him..

Kai went hunting.

#####

Helldiver's Ghost rode massive, hoary swells, powered down to six engines, shaking with the indiscriminate firing of all weapons.. If they were hitting anything, it was dumb luck. Rodonovan took some solace from several plumes of smoke until he saw that one and then another swayed over the remains of Myriadian ships.

"Our sea wasps are not finding their targets," Rodonovan said, melancholy and fear glassed over by the odd, vibrant calm that allowed him to command under fire.

Dexter nodded. "The Miniak know how to hide their heat signature. We learned that the hard way during the Fugue War. But that heli's got FaF NIVO tech. Watch how that works."

"You Westerners are the only people I know who unnecessarily complicate communication by shortening what you say."

Dexter grinned. "Fire and forget, neuro-initiated, visually operated technology," he said. "Or if you prefer, as do we, Captain, 'look and cook.' Does that uncomplicate it for you?"

"That's very sweet," Rodonovan said. *Find your rhythm and find your targets, he thought over the com-web. Sea wasp batteries switch to manual targeting. Fire at will, but maintain control, and find your rhythm. You know this ocean's dance. Find your rhythm.*

We cannot dial in a firing solution.

This is no ocean I recognize, Captain.

That sentiment was echoed by other gunnery masters.

Dexter nodded his head. *Miniak armor takes a beating. Without joint support and standoff fires, we can't defeat a van of Miniak ships. And we can't harry with launches in this ocean. Best we can do is put down a suppressing fire and haul ass to the East, make it to the Broom.*

Rodonovan would rather keep such talk off the com-web. The Misty Broom lay hundreds of leagues away and was no guarantee of safety anyway.

The Vipra boomed across the bow from starboard, heading north. Twin carriages of four rotary cannons emerged from either side of its fuselage. Rodonovan grunted; he hadn't even known those weapons were there. Its chin cannons waggled and whirled, like fingers warming up.

Cinnamon?

Yes, Captain? She sounded dejected.

Rodonovan grunted again, mouth crooking up on one side. *He got you.*

Never seen anything like it. Totally ridiculous.

Where are you?

"Here," Cinnamon said, stepping onto the bridge. Her dark hair splayed over her shoulders, her beauty strained by a profound exhaustion casting a pallid hue over her face. Terence Eight Legs grinned broadly, "He got you."

"Got you," Dexter said, hanging an arm around her shoulder. "Got you nothing. He owns you now."

Cinnamon pulled half-heartedly away from the large man's grip. Rodonovan could almost feel the quivering in her body from across the bridge. And as much of it was from anger as from the come down.

"Maybe you should go to your cabin," Sei Javala said.

"I think not." She stayed a hand that wanted to run through her head and instead tilted her chin up defiantly.

"I could order you," Rodonovan said, knowing her response. He'd once thought Omen and Cinnamon might find each other. Well in fact, they had. But his son's understanding of women remained utilitarian, while she clung to a shuttered need to prove herself better than all men and in need of none of them. That generated the wrong kind of sparks. Rodonovan hung on to a fatherly affection for the young womyn who might've someday captained her own ship, might've given him grandchildren.

"You could, Captain," Cinnamon agreed, steel in her smoke-ringed eyes. "But, I'd say *that* is far worthier of your exertions." She chucked a dripping chin toward the window.

Huge transports rolled in an endless flotilla beneath a black sky glowing crimson with lightnings. Even had Rodonovan not been fluent in the language marking the superstructures with long-winded charms for good weather, he would've recognized those dirty white icebreaking hulls

with their specially scooped bows as Malakite. While dismayed, he was not surprised. Ferracane had been in the Lornlands, and anything worth possessing there belonged to the Malakite Empire. *An emperor's ransom indeed.* The stakes of this game rattled him with a queasy sense of smallness.

Sitting low, the smaller enemy ships swarmed the heaving water toward *Helldiver's Ghost* unmindful, it seemed, of its weapons. They had yet to fire a single return salvo; such discipline and confidence was disconcerting. Rodonovan scanned the dismal vista. Over the prow shield, he saw one of them bearing directly toward *Ghost* from the East. "And where is the Westerner?" he wanted to know.

Dexter, leaning on Ferracane's pack, said, "Oh, he's out there."

"I see nothing, lubber," Greensticks snapped.

Dexter tossed the pilot an obnoxiously happy grin and infuriating shrug.

"He's supposed to be opening a route to the East," Rodonovan said. "He might consider starting with that impediment." Straight on, the enemy ship, about the size of *Ghost*, resembled a black-and-white-and grey motley orb with deliberate faceted planes and a low rise that might've been a superstructure. A cluster of scarlet lightnings gashed the black sky behind it.

"I told you that Westerner would fly off," Greensticks said with a bitter laugh.

"Mind the wheel, Mister Greensticks," Rodonovan said. "Mister Revenant, do you imagine your friend expected the Miniak to be aligned with the Malakite Empire when he thieved that?" Rodonovan eyed the sword-like package on which Dexter leaned.

"I figure he knew his enemy," Dexter said.

Greensticks spat another laugh.

"Does that 'relic' then belong to the Miniak?"

"The Miniak are war dogs and nothing more," Sei Javala said. His face wrinkled as if inhaling a pungent fart. "That relic has the disturbing properties of something far more fundamental than anything that could emerge from a civilization of our time."

"It's magic?" Cinnamon asked.

"Very powerful," Javala said.

Dexter shrugged. "Kai Ferracane doesn't say a lot. When he does, I listen. 'Don't lose it,' he said. If the Miniak or the Malakite or *you* want it, it'll have to come off my dead body." He hefted the package, which seemed heavier than its size would suggest, and strapped it around his shoulders. Greensticks hissed.

"Don't try so hard to be an asshole, Mister Revenant," Rodonovan said. "I'm trying to evaluate our chances for survival. Look out there. That's a rather sizable force. All for one stolen artifact?"

"That's a lotta-lotta people out there," Dexter agreed. "Even for Kai Ferracane."

"It's an invading army," Rodonovan said.

"For the Myriads," Dexter said.

"I think they care nothing for the Myriads," Sei Javala said. "That expedition is for Taelemone. But its mission has been slightly expanded to include the recovery of that item you are prepared to die for." *We should prepare for the possibility of a boarding, Captain*, he thought.

Rodonovan barely nodded, turning to look aft through the panoramic window to where his home had once been. The Fiery Ring was gone but for Storm Castle's modest peak, a lump of green slapped by boiling white. He'd lived his whole life on that island. Nearly every childhood memory had just been drowned. The scale of magicks needed to do that -- he couldn't begin to get his head around that. This was the war his son had willingly joined?

He turned his attention to something more manageable: the threat against *Helldiver's Ghost*. He wanted those Miniak ships kept outside the line. What if he gave them the Westerner's precious relic? A launch and Dexter Revenant to save his ship?

The three remote cannons arrayed along the leading edge of the prow shield began to track the approaching ship, but without the sharp assuredness typical of Western precision gunnery. Moments later the gunners stationed over the bridge opened fire. Golden ribbons arced toward the ship, boiling the water around its hull before it vanished into a trough. When it appeared again, its profile had changed.

"Weapons deployed!" Greensticks cried as the Miniak ship disappeared behind a silent yellow glow.

Howling.

"Incoming!"

The starboard remote gunner station exploded overhead. Conduits ruptured and a portion of the bridge ceiling collapsed. Already falling, Rodonovan dove to the deck beside the chart table, grimacing in anticipation of being crushed. The com-web erupted in a chaos of thoughts.

Firefighting system on in forward RGS!

Damage report!

We've been hit!

Where were we hit!

Are we being boarded!

What hit us! What hit us!

Starboard RGS! We need medics!

And over it all the worst part of the com-web: the horrible thoughts of the burning, the dying, wild and formless.

Water showered the bridge from a ruptured line, sounding like a vast cascade in the tight confines. Rodonovan climbed to his feet. Things moved with the familiar velocity of combat. "Mister Revenant, shut down that valve. Mister Greensticks, get up and get control of the ship. Now!" *This is the Captain. We took a hit on the forward RGS, starboard side. I want a damage report. I want forward sea wasp batteries directing fire dead ahead. I want all gunnery stations targeting in their killing fields and calculating firing solutions. Launch bay, prepare FABs. Master Squeezebox?*

Aye, Captain.

I want all nonessential personnel armed to repel.

On these seas, Captain?

On these seas.

Aye, Captain... Captain, I, uh, was wondering then about the lads below.

Below?

From The Flying Sprite, Captain... Nonessential you said. We could sure use them, `specially if you think the enemy is good enough to board on these seas.

No. They know nothing of our –

But Captain, a fight's a fight! We need sailors! Now is no time to hang on to the old grudges... With all due respect, Captain, look at what's out there.

Rodonovan traced his beard, flicked water from his face, and remembered the last time he felt so out of control had been when he'd first captained a ship through a southern typhoon. *Post a guard, with a weapon's rack. On my command, release the sailors. Not a moment before.*

Aye, Captain.

The water's roaring *shush* fell off to a rapid tic-tac. Rodonovan wiped his face, looked to Dexter, who was making sure the small valve was firmly shut, and said, "Prepare to get down to the launch bay. You and that thing on your back will leave should they attempt a boarding." Turning back to the Miniak ship, Rodonovan blocked out the com-web as best he could, failing to convince himself that he was asking Dexter Revenant to escape.

"I don't think so," Dexter said, and then sensing Rodonovan's annoyance added, "I mean, Captain, you want me out in *that* in a tiny boat?"

Westerners could be so gods damned weak livered. "We may all be in that soon enough. You'll do as I say or I'll have someone else transport the relic."

"It has to be a boat that'll get me to Chiming Harbor."

Rodonovan merely looked at the brash warrior. He'd come to rely on so many other people since Omen had left for the same gods forsaken lands from which Dexter and this new one, the markedly absent Ferracane, had come. And he'd allowed them on his ship. He wished Omen were there and then took it back. Better to not know whether his son still lived than to know the boy was going to die.

"Sei Javala," Rodonovan said, "please contact Goblin Rod. Ask that he disengage immediately and set sail for Fool's Cap."

"Aye, Captain."

Smoke wafted past a bridge window laced with fractures; it wouldn't hold up under any kind of fire now. A familiar stink drifted onto the bridge. Rodonovan gripped the coarse leather wrapping the edge of the chart table and told himself that the automated fire system would knock down the fire. The forward sea wasp batteries came around and began to elevate above the prow shield. Terence Eight Legs had moved aft and opened the weapons locker. It was lined with Western weapons and stacked with ammunition. Terence began handing out weapons.

"Hey, Ter, I'll take a C-CAPR," Dexter said. "They're always fun."

"You get one of them bombs your own self," the sailor said.

"Heh, heh." Dexter far too happily snatched one of the close combat antipersonnel rifles from the rack, then squatted to open the small freezer at the bottom of the locker where the drum magazines of disconcertingly unstable C-CAPR loads were kept. He grabbed a drum and slammed the locker shut. Chuckling, he slid the drum onto the black, stockless weapon, tweaked it into place.

The Miniak boat dipped down in another trough. *Prepare to take fire!* Rodonovan thought. The ship reappeared, and something was different.

"Look!" Terence Eight Legs said.

On skirling wings of misted water, the heli ascended behind the Miniak craft like a soft blue angel. Two yellow streaks stabbed from it toward the ship.

"Brace!" Dexter cried.

A white fireball swelled with incredible speed in all directions from the Miniak ship. Shocking heat buffeted *Helldiver's Ghost* along with a concussive *Crump!* that further frosted the glass. Everyone on the bridge shied away or ducked.

Shielding his eyes, Rodonovan watched the turbulent white wall spread skyward and over the water. Then, from its heart burst the heliunit, trailing spiraling coils of flame.

"The hells..." Terence Eight Legs murmured.

The heliunit leapt upward out of view, dripping fire from its now black skin.

#####

Kai took the Vipra up in a half mage wheel, then into a lazy screw, leaving the extreme heat behind. Red lightning, the familiar residue of heavy magicks, scarred the smoked vault overhead.

General status.

General status... Cooling systems operational. All weapons systems gold to go. Hull integrity maintained with noncompromising buckling to the aft equipment bay hatch, port engine nacelle hatch, and aft avionics bay hatch; thermistor reading: surface temperature dropping to normal. Main rotor head integrity maintained; thermistor reading: gearbox temperature dropping to normal. Tail rotor integrity...

Kai listened to the drone with distant satisfaction. He dropped quickly to the deck, which resembled rolling hills. The status report cutoff:

Impact imminent.

The proximity alarm sounded in his head not for the first time. He caressed the collective and followed the face of the wave up, skipping off the rounded peak. "Outstanding." He'd flown hilly topography before, but not hilly topography that moved. *Disengage proximity sensor.* He didn't want to listen to that warning all day.

Do you really want to disengage proximity sensor?

Yes.

Proximity sensor off.

There were a score or more of remaining Miniak ships. Little was known about Miniak magnetic-based weapons systems other than that they could throw a stunning amount of metal onto the killing fields at a breathtaking rate. Any chance of avoiding the reception of that offering would require speed and maneuver, bold, stones-out flying without a thought of hesitation. Not a moment of hesitation. A single hostile lock on and festivities would end quickly.

Most of the ships, all weapons now deployed, were arraying themselves to cut off any escape route for *Helldiver's Ghost*. Others were bearing down directly on the Myriadian vessel. Classic interdiction. Kai had limited firepower and limited time. He targeted and locked the easternmost ship as he crested a monstrous wave then dropped down into a vast trough like a blue-metal valley. When he swept back up to another peak, Kai ripple fired three screaming stars from the portside tube launcher. They tumbled toward the Miniak ship, which suddenly appeared right in front of Kai riding the peak of a wave. With their weight and speed, the wailing sabot rounds tore into the ship's ovate superstructure, dissolving it into shards. A cacophony resounded around the heli as a cloud of fragments was chewed by its rotors.

Rotor status.

Damage to hub assembly; damage to number one pitch housing; damage to number two pitch housing; damage to number one lead-lag link. Recommend RTB.

Festive, he thought. Even if inclined to return to base, how much fun would he have trying could land the heli back on the deck with the ocean moving so insanely?

Repeat query.

Cancel.

Damage to hub assembly; damage to number one pitch housing; damage to number two pitch housing; damage to number one lead-lag link. Recommend RTB.

Noted.

He really was out of practice. Kai dipped back down to the deck, acquiring the next target. What? Only twenty more ships. He chuckled.

####

Rodonovan watched the heliunit slide through the debris-choked space occupied a moment before by the Miniak ship's superstructure. *Helldiver's Ghost* sliced through the flaming patch marking the end of the first Miniak ship. Rodonovan could hear the rush of men positioning themselves to defend the ship from boarding and the chaotic yawping of the com-web. He spotted only five of the Miniak vessels on the high seas, closing in on *Ghost* amid nets of impotent cannon fire.

"What is that?" Cinnamon asked.

"What?" Dexter said.

"He's laughing," Sei Javala. "Your friend. It comes over the web as a sort of echo."

"He finds this funny?" Cinnamon asked, a look of distaste deepening the fatigue lines in her face.

"It's not that kind of laugh," Dexter said. "That's Kai Ferracane. He's -- "

A white-yellow flash drew everyone's attention, and, slowly, like the huge cats that stalk the beaches of the Endless Archipelago, the black heli skimmed over a wave crest, nose down. Cannons poured ribbons of gold weave into the pyre that had just been a Miniak ship. The heliunit zipped away and, just as it dipped into another trough, twin red flashes whipped from either wing, cutting sharply backward to streak straight toward the bridge. A sharp *whoosh!* smothered choked cries of fear on the bridge as the missiles winged within a pace of the panorama window before anyone had time to move. A moment later offset *crumps* sprouted twin fireballs fine on the starboard quarter where a Miniak ship had been approaching the line.

Rodonovan glanced at Dexter and in as steady a voice as he could muster said, "That would be flying like, how did you say it, the devil's own?"

Dexter's nonchalance blipped into a quick frowning shrug. "Hey, Captain, I'm a ground pounder. What do I know about aviating? But I do know that enemy elements are being removed from the battlespace."

"Arseairs, the lot of you Westerners," Greensticks muttered, clearly shaken.

"Hey, Greensticks," Dexter said, smile a warp of utter humorlessness, "if that's got you all a-shiver, you should see Ferracane's wet work. Close up and intimate."

"Seems by the gleam in your eye you might be the only one here interested in Ferracane's 'wet work,'" Greensticks said, meeting Dexter's smile with one as iced. Eight Legs snorted.

"Both of you, that's enough." Rattled, Rodonovan turned back to watch the heli move off in a seemingly impossible ascent. He was mortified at the idea that he could've turned that contraption on his own people by simply asking one of the Dagian Guard he'd foolishly allowed near him. That the line between leadership and repression was as thin as his will sickened him. Through the frosted glass, he could hear the heavy whirr of rotary cannons, the sizzle of missiles, and the horrific chorus of those rockets called screaming stars.

"What're them other noises he's makin'?" Terence asked, fingertips to the strew of spiders capering over his skull.

"Just fire commands," Dexter said. "That's how you communicate with the NI system. See, that's kind of funny, those grunts."

"Sounds... musical," Terence said with a small smile.

Sei Javala smiled too, but it was tremulous with confusion. "The ancient rhythm of the landed nomads," he said. "Underout, they call it. Hah. He is not even aware of it."

"Aye," Terence said, head cocked and moving slightly to the rhythm shuffling along beneath the urgent back and forth of the gunners. "Like Wavery swingin' stride." He began to hum, keeping time with a pistol-shaped hand in the air, and his thoughts soon moved along with Ferracane's continuous fire commands.

"Only a Southerner would think it was time for a sing-along," Greensticks muttered. "Them spider legs, tickling your brains, Terence."

Javala's thoughts beat over the com-web too, his own low grunts adding counterpoint. Rodonovan eyeballed both men, and said nothing, while Greensticks scowled. Sei Javala met the Captain's stare and his expression was encouraging, his head nodding. It did indeed seem like a sing-along.

An angry *shu-u-u-ush!* preceded an explosion that rocked *Ghost* aft. This was followed by a rapid tattoo of explosions and polyphony of gunfire raking armor. Urgent calls to action, confusion, and death swarmed the com-web like ants of a disturbed colony. Miniak ships swarmed too.

"That heli can't handle all of those ships," Dexter said. "If we can't start dialing in on those targets, they're going to take us apart."

"No. They wish to board us." *Open the bay doors.* "Master Dexter, please find your way to the bay."

"Not a chance."

Chief Bones?

Aye, Captain. Defenses are firmed, ready to repel. Soaking Madge's fire team is positioned to defend the bridge.

Good, JackLuck. I need you on the navigation bridge now, please.

Aye, Captain.

"I'm not leaving, Captain. Not in one of those coffins. Not out in that."

"Don't be a fool," Cinnamon snapped.

"Fool nothing," Greensticks said. "He's yellow."

A dangerous look clouded Dexter's face. Greensticks countered with a bland smile.

"They want what I suspect Ferracane stole," Cinnamon said.. "So let's get it the hells off this ship then.."

"You think the Miniak'll leave *Ghost* afloat?" Dexter asked.

Sei Javala's thought intruded, *Hold fire! Everyone! Everyone! Hold fire!*

Rodonovan turned sharply to the witch man, who went on, *Listen to the Westerner! Listen! Find that rhythm! What do you hear? That's right! Find it! Use it!* Insistent, but without urgency, he matched the rhythm of the Westerner's fire commands with his own hums and grunts. Terence followed suit. Soon other wordless thoughts joined in, and Rodonovan knew those belonged to sailors from the Wavery Islands and Darkstruck Bay and other places along the eastern spill of the Southern Archipelago.

The thoughts droned fuzzily, dissonantly and clashing, before finding a unity. The bellow of *Ghost's* war making began again to thrum painfully into Rodonovan's ears, but its character had changed. It marched. Somehow. With a cadence deeply complex and deeply arousing in his blood.

Now over the rhythmic burr came words:

Direct hit!

Right up the slats!

Direct hit!

Direct hit!

Impact! Oh my! Lookit that poltroon burn!

The vast bulk of Chief JackLuck Bones squeezed through the hatch followed by the lithe Soaking Madge. Not as tall as Rodonovan, but nearly twice in girth, JackLuck shrunk the damaged space, made Soaking Madge look like an adolescent girl, which in fact she was. Across his chest was a huge antique Wavery fighting knife, considered too cumbersome by most, the serrations on the top of the wide silver blade looking like a wild mane, its handle fuzzy with worn brown leather. An old double-barreled combat loader was swung casually over his shoulder, its stock and barrel cut down to sizes appropriate for the close quarters of deck fighting. "Captain, we are firm and prepared to repel. What be your pleasure?"

"Chief, please escort Dexter down to the bay and see that he gets on a launch."

"But -- " Dexter started.

"If he refuses, kill him and ensure that his package is on that launch."

"But -- "

"Aye, Captain." Bones' head was bald and a gleam with sea spray and sweat; on the back, a jagged scar stood in as a gaping mouth for a river cat poised to pounce over the curve of his scalp, only its orange stripes, teeth, and gleaming eyes revealing it from within the camouflage of his black skin. He put a gigantic hand on Dexter's shoulder. The Westerner's face darkened murderously and he tightened the grip on the C-CAPR.

Weapons leaped to point at him. Only Greensticks grinned.

"Steady down, Dexter," Soaking Madge murmured. She held a blade beneath the ear she spoke into, looking kind of sleepy behind a net of black hair falling over her thin, angular face. After Uriah Bloodangel left with Omen for the West, she had assumed command of the fire crew, a position coveted by more than a few sailors twice or more her thirteen years. None made even passing attempts to challenge her over the last six years. The force of the grip she had on the Westerner's wrist was clear in the way vein-laced muscles rising beneath cocoa-colored skin.

Dexter made a quick assessment, deflated some. The menace on his face remained. Soaking Madge released his wrist and faded toward the door, keeping her littoral green eyes on the Westerner. JackLuck kept his hand on Dexter's shoulder.

Cinnamon was nodding her head and smiling with a lazy smugness. She held a small knife in her hand.

"Good to see that you're satisfied, Cinnamon," Rodonovan said. "You'll be escorting Master Dexter to Fool's Cap." "Fool's Cap? Down to the Waveries? I thought you wanted me resting, Captain." Her eyes narrowed and fury flushed over her still-damp face in mottled blemishes. "You're trying to get me off this ship. To *protect* me! You think I can't handle a boarding. But Soaking Madge can? But this poltroon Greensticks can?"

"Hey, Cinnie!" Greensticks said. "Don't come that -- "

Cinnamon jabbed a finger at the sailor, but spoke to Rodonovan, "Nobody, not even you, Rodonovan, is forcing me to run from a fight!"

"The bridge is too crowded. I want it cleared of nonessential personnel. You have your orders." Rodonovan turned his attention back to the grim vista before him. The Aestiva undulated in that familiar sexual sashay of the deep ocean, its ensorcelled fury fading. Far off, broad on the port bow, the Malakite flotilla rode the huge seas like some vast serpentine. Enriched by their vast trading network, the Malakites were expert mariners with centuries more time sailing and shipbuilding than the Myriadians. Rumors spoke of submersible Malakitian ships able to sail under the ice floes that choked off the sea lanes above the Lornlands.

Lightning stabbed the water as if in the hands of a deliberate maniac. The burning hulls of Miniak warships seemed a crazed mimicry of the Fiery Ring, throwing volcanic light at the black sky. *Ghost* rumbled and trembled as it took fire. Heavy fire, just as the Westerner had promised. Rodonovan's lip curled toward a flaring nostril. That Westerner's very presence had promised disaster.

Ships inside the line! We have ships inside the line!

Ahead of *Ghost*, fine on the port and starboard bows, two Miniak ships bore down on them, well inside the line. On the port and starboard beams, more ships. On these seas, *Ghost* could not outrun them.

"Please, Cinnie," JackLuck said. "Don't make me get all condescending with you. It'll only make you madder."

"CLEAR THE BRIDGE NOW!" Rodonovan roared.

The damaged bridge stiffened with tension made palpable by the escalating, suddenly desperate tempo of the chanted thoughts and the rising keen of the spotters working on firing solutions. Rodonovan rarely raised his voice, and rarely did anything good come of it.

The bridge hatch opened and war screamed in. Rodonovan caressed the hilts of his southern war knives and the worn grip of his mini. He remembered the first repel on his father's ship, *Typhoon Blue*, a dream theater borne of fury and fear and smoke and blood-slicked decks and gut stench. He remembered his last boarding; the same but different. He hated both.

Prepare to repel! Prepare to repel! Port and starboard! Prepare to repel!

Other low-slung Miniak ships slipped over the line. Shot through with adrenalin that weighed on his limbs, Rodonovan eased the mini from its holster and chambered the first round. Soaking Madge unslung what she called her "deck swab," a single-shot monstrosity as likely to damage the deck as clear it of swarming enemies. She cracked the dark green weapon open. Its breach yawned with a metallic inhalation, and she fed it a fist-sized cartridge from a belt around her narrow waist.

Two of her fire crew entered and took up positions to hold the bridge.

Rodonovan nodded curtly, fought the urge to order the release of *The Flying Sprite* crew, and moved toward the bridge door, Soaking Madge trailing. She would guard him until death.

The heliunit roared over the bridge heading south, all guns, articulated in all directions like splayed claws, spitting fire. Spent casings tumbled in nets over the deck and into the sea. Red streaks peeled away from either side of the heliunit, stabbing into Miniak ships. Explosions spread over the water to meet in front of *Ghost's* bow; the heat was awesome..

"Open water," Greensticks said breathlessly. Ahead, blue sky and calming water met the hell-borne non-night and squalling Aestiva like the collision of two distinct seascapes.

"All engines, full speed," Rodonovan said. His teeth were gritted against the anxiety thrumming deep in his bones. Then he realized it was nothing within him, but rather on the com-web. Kai Ferracane calling fires at an astonishing speed with an astonishing rhythm. And Sei Javala and Terence kept pace, herking and jerking as if daemons rode them.

Ready FAX pods, Rodonovan thought.

"All engines, ahead full, aye, Captain," Terence said with almost no break in the rhythm he kept.

Preparing FAX pods.

Just a little space between *Ghost* and the Miniak and he could loose an inferno. With yet another Western weapons system. He'd used fuel air explosives only one time before -- to save his son -- and swore never to use them again after seeing the utter destruction.

The frenetic chanting ceased abruptly like the snapping of a blacksteel cable. Sei Javala staggered and crumpled against the communications console. One big step and Rodonovan was there to help him back to his feet. Breathing hard, the old sorcerer nodded once, clasped Rodonovan's forearm with slender fingers banded by delicate gold rings. At the navigation console, Greensticks helped Terence off the floor. "Javala?" Rodonovan said. A raging silence filled his head.

"The sounding charm has been damaged."

"Are you okay?"

"Of course, just a bit of a shock. We'll have onboard communication, albeit of diminished clarity, but we've lost all external communication until I can see to the sounding charm. Kai Ferracane is on his own." Sei Javala steadied himself and closed his eyes. A moment later, broken thoughts jerked through Rodonovan's mind, truncated as if struck by thick hatchets of silence. "Hm. Won't be easy to understand."

"No."

"How long can you keep that up?"

"As long as necessary."

Rodonovan doubted that, but did not press. *Master Bones?* He had to repeat that twice more before JackLuck responded.

Aye, Cap -- ?

Stand by in the bay.

Rep -- tain, you're bre -- up..

Stand by. Stand by in the bay.

Standing by, aye –

As *Ghost* bellowed and picked up speed, Rodonovan leaned over the navigation console, peering out through the cracked and crazed panorama glass to watch the Western contraption climb sharply into the fathomless sky, whirling insanely as weapons fire knitted the black sky all around it. He'd yet to meet a ship that could stay with *Ghost* running all engines, and hope chilled his flesh. But red filled his vision. A cage of lightning slammed down around the heliunit. It wobbled, slowed, began to drop.

#####

Kai targeted and loosed the last of his Deathstalkers and climbed in a vertical spiral to avoid fire. He realized that he no longer had the chatter of sailors in his head.

All area weapons systems overheating. Moving to mandatory cool-down stand by. Damage to hub assembly; damage to number one pitch housing; damage to number two pitch housing; damage to number one lead-lag link. Recommend RTB.

Kai terminated the Vipra's ascent to survey the battlespace. The air turned red and exploded, and for a moment he thought he'd been hit by surface fire. Then the sky was black again and he realized he'd been struck by lightning.

The heliunit's engines choked, the console went black, and the controls stiffened. *Power loss. All systems down. Shifting to auxiliary reserve.*

With a humming whine, power returned as the `unit slowed and wobbled. Kai regained control.

Mission avionics destroyed. All area weapons systems overheated and in mandatory cool-down stand by. Damage to hub assembly; damage to number -- Hostile lock on, take evasive action.

Somebody had him. Kai looked for the enemy. *Override –*

Hostile lock on, take evasive action. Hostile lock on, take evas –

Hostile lock -- Hostile lock on, take evasive action.

Host -- Hostile lock on, take -- Hostile lock on, take evasive action. Hostile –

A lot of somebodies had him.

Sending distress signal.

"Damn," Kai muttered.

####

Miniak weapons lit the blackened day with a fusillade of fire. Rodonovan watched the heliunit come apart, twirl and tumble to the *Aestiva* ahead of *Helldiver's Ghost*. A billowing curl of blackened fire marked its descent like some kind of question, like dumbstruck tattooed in soot across the bluing sky.

Enemy fire fell off to nothing as *Ghost* left the Miniak gunships behind. It passed over the burning debris patch that marked Kai Ferracane's grave.

FAX... ready... --tain.

Climbing the back of one last swell was like crossing a threshold into a new world. The *Aestiva* soothed to a rumpled sheet reflecting the sapphire overhead, and the storm of war faded. *Helldiver's Ghost* slashed through the water.

I want a damage report all stations, now, Rodonovan thought, wondering if they'd actually gotten away. He repeated the request.

Sailors returned broken acknowledgements. Frustrated, Rodonovan grabbed the handheld and used the old address system. "Stand down for repel and stand by for work details."

The all-clear alarm sounded.

Master Squeezebox?

After a pause that made Rodonovan's heart flutter. *Aye, Captain.*

I need you on the bridge.

Another pause. *Aye.*

Bay?

Bay, aye –

Please secure doors and clear the bay.

Secur -- doors and blowing... Captain.

Master Bones?

Aye, Captain.

Please inform Master Revenant that Kai Ferracane went down.

Please re -- tain, you're br -- ing --

Tell Revenant his friend is dead!

Aye, Cap --

Dexter laughed. "Nah," he said with an annoying mug. He hefted his shoulders against the relic slung there. Clearly the thing was uncomfortably heavy.

Cinnamon realized then that she just didn't much care for Dexter Revenant. None of the Westerners really. With their agenda. Trading weapons for haven. Western currency seemed always to be violence. "No?"

"No." Dismissive. "Kai Ferracane doesn't die."

"He was shot down," JackLuck said, annoying Cinnamon further for even responding. He leaned in toward Dexter, huge and looking as irritated as Cinnamon felt. The old Wavery fighting knife dangled in Dexter's face. Huge long fingers flicked into a spherical shape. "*Poof!* They say his ship come apart like that."

"He doesn't land either."

The bay doors slid shut with an echoing *clank*, cutting off the brightness of the renewed day and the smoldering nightmare they fast left behind. Lights dropped gold cones on the dark water and the launches moored to the narrow dock that ran around the bay's three sides. The red evacuation light began to whirl and the alarm sounded, drowning out the stand down signal. The three of them clasped their ears as powerful pumps blew the water from the bay, draining it quickly. The alarm silenced and the red light turned off. The launches, secured to the dock hung suspended over nothingness. Thumps and bumps resounded throughout the bay, and the murmurs of sailors walking the dock checking the hull and mechanisms for damage blurred with the echoing gabble of dripping water.

JackLuck picked up the conversation. "I don't even know what means, lubber."

Cinnamon's head ached, and the rank blend of seawater and fuel fumes, the casualty reports lacing her thoughts like stuttered lunacy, weren't helping. That she wouldn't be stuck on a launch with Dexter Revenant was a minor blessing; he seemed little more than an obnoxious façade hiding, no, protecting, not much.

"It was a running joke among the RAITHs," he said amiably as if having a chat in a tavern where ale and meat scented the air and not fire and blood. "Kai Ferracane crashed more helis than any three pilots. He walked away from them all."

"Right, his much touted piloting prowess."

Dexter gave Cinnamon a big grin, brittle beneath eyes bright with uncertainty. "That you're standing here digging on him seems to confirm that."

"I doubt he walked away from this one," JackLuck said. "Swim maybe. Sink most likely..." His eyes took on the middle-distance stare that came when receiving a personal thought on the com-web. "Captain wants you and that relic of yours in his stateroom, Dexter. He is a merciful man." He held out a giant hand. "No weapons." Dexter seemed about to protest, then handed over the C-CAPR.

"I'll be in my cabin," Cinnamon said through gritted teeth, letting the men's responses tap weakly off her back as she headed toward the bay's oval hatch. On the com-web, the broken drone indicated that *Ghost* had been hard hit, with some moderately serious hull damage, nearly a dozen gun positions destroyed or damaged, and a high body count. With Sei Javala's sounding charm damaged, *Helldiver's Ghost* was silent to the outside world. Rodonovan had long ago secured mooring rights with Chiming Harbor, some fifteen leagues inside the Misty Broom, where they allowed him to anchor a supply barge. Hull breaches, weapons systems, and other damage would be repaired; new sailors were another story.

Cinnamon wanted hot dark rum and a hot shower, knowing she'd be more likely to get the former than the latter. More than either, she wanted a good cry, but on this ship, any ship, no sailor could afford such a luxury. That Kai Ferracane was dead meant nothing. Her whole life, people had suddenly been ripped away from her. Far more important people than that untouchable Westerner with the devil's eyes could ever have been. Yet, dread spidered through her.

####

A ruckus of colors jagged over the mouth of the strait called Misty Broom because of the heavy fogs that swept through it nearly every eventide. Through the now glassless window framing, Rodonovan watched the hump and dive of its arc changing in the same slow manner in which a cloud morphs. The wind of *Ghost* speed howled around the damaged bridge, pulled tears from his eyes; he'd opted not to wear the goggles that the other sailors wore to pilot the ship.. Rodonovan had taken Ambra to the Broom years ago -- before Omen was born -- to watch the vast butterfly migration called the Rainbow Bridge. Not a bow of colors spanning the strait in orderly bands, the Rainbow Bridge smeared the air like an artist's genius afterthought, and he and Ambra had stood on the bow and raced each other to pick out different colors. Everyone had thought he'd married the daughter of a Wavery warlord for the alliance it brought. He wished that had been true.

He'd seen the Rainbow Bridge a couple of times since, found the silent march of the insects simultaneously breathtaking and soothing. Now he stared with little interest. His anxiety had shifted from battle fear to what part of him knew was irrational pathos over *Helldiver's Ghost's* condition.

The dead had been returned to the sea in a short and strained ceremony conducted by Sei Javala. Seventeen more sailors for a total of twenty-three in two days. While not as terrible as the Trilly massacre six years ago, the crew had certainly been depleted.

He'd planned to put Ferracane and his booty ashore at Chiming Harbor, which lay a few leagues inside the Broom, and ask who among the sailors of *The Flying Sprite* might join him or sail with *Ghost*, then return to the Myriads. But Ferracane was dead, and he couldn't quite get himself to free the sailors from the hold. And he had nothing to return to and no way to ascertain where else he might find familiar haven. By the hells, he had no way of knowing if Goblin Rod prowled Fool's Cap wondering what had happened to *Ghost*, or if he had found his own troubles.

For his entire life, the self-proclaimed First Nations had been Rodonovan's enemy; his overriding quest, the return to his ancestral lands of Taelemone. That pursuit had, over time, succumbed to the cancer of politics and mutated into civil war. He had been a principal part of that. *How the First Nations must love watching us kill each other*. The Myriadians were farther from regaining Taelemone than ever and now such a desire seemed small minded.

The eastern side of the strait, which the locals called the Strait of Shandra Razh, the Moon King, spilled into the Far Ocean. If he could negotiate passage with the reclusive tribes that jealously hold and squabble over bits of the Strait, Rodonovan could take the less cantankerous southern route around the Dead Continent and sail to the farthest East. With any luck, they might find the Drakar's Fan, and with questionable old charts and Sei Javala's magicks, they could navigate the unnavigable maze of the Aqua Reticula, and meet the West from its western backside.

They could do all that. Or one of a dozen tribes might slaughter the crew. Or the Far Ocean might drown them with a rogue wave. Or the phantoms of the Dead Continent might overwhelm them. The Aqua Reticula might simply lose them.

And if they made it where countless others failed?

It shocked him sometimes, how much he missed Omen, but to be by his son's side again only to be fighting a war he couldn't comprehend left him feeling twisted, confused. He despised this new sense of helplessness.

Rodonovan had made sure to walk among the crew before returning to the bridge. He praised their defense of *Ghost* and their care for her now. He laughed with them -- that forced near strident evacuation of nervous energy -- shared their grief for fallen comrades. For the most part, they seemed to understand that, this time, he had not chosen the battle, that this was something far different. Yet in their eyes, Rodonovan had seen the dimming of the light that all captains feared.

It looked like they would make Chiming Harbor near dawn. With the com-web and hard communications gear offline, he had doubts he'd be able to hail the prefect to give the customary notice of their arrival once inside the Misty Broom. He'd also like to know if the city-state had seen any of the kind of action they'd just sailed out of. Sei Javala's efforts to reconstitute the

sounding charm had borne little fruit. That the sorcerer's hearth of rare metals and stones might be ruined was a grim prospect.

"I'll be in my stateroom," he told the two sailors on duty. He left the bridge. Mantra swooped from the forecandle to settle on his shoulder. Soaking Madge trailed after him. Though he could do without a crowd in the stateroom, he didn't order her away. That she was unwilling to stand down vexed him in a strangely welcome way. *Javala, please meet me in my stateroom.* He repeated the order to make sure it was understood.

Aye.

Dexter Revenant curled on the velvet-wrapped sofa when Rodonovan entered the stateroom. The Westerner's mouth gaped in slumber, and he clung to the relic as if hugging a favorite toy. A devastated decanter of port stood on the cherry wood table beside a half-full snifter. Rodonovan grunted: price paid for locking the Westerner in his stateroom for the day. Soaking Madge moved a smoking chair into the shadow of the lava rock hearth and sat down. Any bare bulkhead had been painted olive and layered with shelves of leather-wrapped books, dark cherry wood wainscoting, moldings, and floor. The hearth glowed red. Rodonovan acknowledged the room to be an extravagance, particularly as he spent little time there, berthing most often in the cramped at-sea cabin behind the bridge; but the place had been his sanctum, a place to meditate, confront his daemons, and rejuvenate while his sailors caroused about the Aestiva's countless ports of call. Not to mention a place to woo various dignitaries and public officials from around the Rim. Now, the natural warmth of the room was gone, replaced with a cloying and funereal dimness.

"Up," he said, nudging Revenant's shoulder. The soldier emitted a low moan and tried to roll over, halting halfway through at a lean against the sofa's back. Rodonovan bumped him again, a little less gently. The Dagian Guard's eyes fluttered. "Wha-a..." He grimaced, smacked his lips. Seeing Rodonovan looming over him, Revenant propped himself up on an elbow, grimaced again. "Ugh."

"Guzzling fifty-year-old port will elicit such a response."

"Nothing else to do, nothing else available," Revenant said groggily. He rubbed a hand over his head, then flipped it out: see for yourself.

Sei Javala entered the stateroom and sat at the table.

"Any luck?" Rodonovan asked him.

"I have been able to repair the hard equipment and I understand the damage to the charm."

"That's good news, isn't it?"

"I need a sustained period of concentration on the problem."

"So why are you here, your tone indicates?" Rodonovan pulled a chair close to the sofa and sat. Mantra cooed, flapped her supple wings. Javala tipped his chin. "Let's talk about this relic of yours," he said to the Westerner.

"It's not mine," Revenant said.

"What is it?"

"Who knows? Seems a weapon to me. Take a look yourself. I don't think even Kai knows."

Rodonovan ignored the present tense. "Javala?"

Javala undid the leather thongs, eased back the leather flap, and slid the sheath down the length of the relic as if undressing a lover. The rise of his thin eyebrows and flare of his nostrils startled Rodonovan. "It is an empire builder, an empire killer," the sei said. "It is wealth beyond imagining."

Rodonovan frowned. "All very... dramatic, is it what it appears to be?"

"It is a key," Sei Javala said. "*The Key*."

"To what?"

Sei Javala paused as if debating speaking. "To everything," he said.

Rodonovan didn't know what to do with that; he turned back to Revenant. "Ferracane told you to take it to Zahariad. My knowledge of Seven Valleys geography is sketchy at best. Where exactly is that?"

"In the eastern Maidenstones."

"It's the city of the Claymage, Zahariad is," Sei Javala said. He replaced the flap and quickly retied the leathers. His fingers anxiously massaged his chin. "This is for her. It is the Key. And perhaps in her hands it is the most dangerous weapon ever."

"Maidenstones are mountains?" Rodonovan said, discomfited by Javala's reaction. "Where relative to the western coast?"

Revenant laughed once. "Nowhere. About as far away as possible."

A simmering annoyance began to percolate through Rodonovan. He'd had his fill of Javala's grim hyperbole and this Western lubber's flip mouth. Sitting there like some eastern sultan. He curbed a deep breath. "Then how did Ferracane expect you to return it there?"

Revenant laughed again, but this time without guile and with a resigned shake of the head. "That's what I've been saying. Kai Ferracane is all about mission objectives. He's only about the

objective. I mean, didn't you wonder why he was naked in the middle of the Aestiva? Completing his mission, that's why. So when he says get the relic to Zahariad, that's what he means. Get it there. Meet the objective. I mean, they say go and he does. He didn't even know what it was he went to the Lornlands for. If they said cross Fugue Pedulae and assault the Miniak home world, he would. A thousand leagues of blue water or desert, or a hundred thousand soldiers, don't much figure into it. If you got the right gear, great, but if not, make do."

Rodonovan was about to tell him to shut up when a low voice from the far corner of the room said, "Machine Boy." Soaking Madge's clipped accent and high, sweet tone always jarred with her warrior's presence.

Revenant looked over as if startled someone was there, but said, "The stories I've heard -- "

Ghost shuddered way down in her guts, nearly tossing Revenant from the couch.

Bridge, status.

The ship was losing speed.

Engines one... sev -- ten are -- We've lost the number -- screw... raise the engine ro --

You always anticipated trouble with replacement engines, but the entire first bank?

Ghost shuddered again.

Status report, engine room. Now.

Nothing.

Bank two is -- We've two -- screws. Thank you, sailor, I can count, Rodonovan thought. Master Squeezebox, I need a status report from engineering.

Every -- going to be fine, Cap -- .

Helldiver's Ghost slowed further.

We have -- ! Enemy on!

-- come from?

Enemy on!

Gunshots. First a few, then a barrage, then silence. Rodonovan had gladly stowed his mini at first sight of the Rainbow Bridge; he now felt its absence like a gaping wound on his hip.

Repel! Rep -- !

Rodonovan looked at Sei Javala and stood.

The stateroom hatch whipped open.

####

Cinnamon Rogue stared absently through a porthole at the Rainbow Bridge, remembering the callous scrape of the white Memory Shrouds as her dead comrades slid off the teak burial boards, the wink of hastily applied runes of hate. She caressed the rune on her widow's finger, let the tears boil and a weak, whelping sob escape.

A jolt smacked her nose into the porthole glass, startling her from her grim reverie. *Ghost* groaned deeply and immediately slowed. Panicked thoughts crippled across the come web, and when gun fire shredded the air, it took her a moment to realize the noise came from inside the ship. She grabbed her mini and moved into the dim light of general berthing, head throbbing, body aching, wearing what amounted to sleep clothes, thin cotton shortie breeks and a thinner cotton shirt, both black.

Cinnamon slammed into someone stinking of sweat and let out an involuntary yelp as she bounced back onto her arse. A fat, shirtless sailor with a top knot lunged toward her with a streaked black machete. She fired two shots at enraged eyes and skittered aside as the man dropped. She got to her feet quickly, but moved more slowly now to allow her eyes to adjust. Her shared quarters were portside of the general berthing space, and she could tell the main firefight was occurring forward of her, near the passage to the engine room.

But the weapons fire quickly trailed off to a smattering of cleanup fire, leaving raving partial thoughts.

Nobody knew who had gotten onboard or how. Daemons and monstrous machines walked the decks. Once again, death thoughts poisoned her mind.

Then a silence so sudden, it made Cinnamon's eyes water and her ears thunder.

Her bare foot squished into a puddle and she thought *Ghost* was somehow taking on water until she stubbed her toe on something solid that skidded sluggishly ahead of her. She saw long, tangled hair and a dull gleam of an earring. Cinnamon grimaced and quickly took in the carnage. Nearly every bunk held an unmoving form. She slid past arms, ribboned with blood, protruding from stained blankets, and stepped over other heads, avoiding empty gazes but not spilled blood.. The stink hammered her. She tracked footprints.

Where berthing met the passage to the launch bay, Cinnamon squatted next to the body of JackLuck. His throat had been cut, his chest a bloody swamp. Low voices murmured from the launch bay behind her. She couldn't understand the words, but recognized the language as Malakite.

How had they managed to board without notice? This far east? She wiped the prickles of fresh sweat from her brow. The quiet and the loss of speed suggested that the ship had been captured. That was supposed to be impossible. The engine room had been taken, and the intersection of passages at the `tween decks ladder to it would be controlled. Part of her suggested she leave. There were ratways throughout the ship, loaded with rafts and supplies; she could slip off the ship and row to... wherever the Aestiva would allow her to go. No. That she couldn't do. Rodonovan had saved her life. He was her anchor. She couldn't abandon ship without confirmation that the captain was dead or captured.

Cinnamon looked up the passageway. Darkness squeezed the paltry glow of the lights. She squinted. *What was that?* Something had ghosted along the edge of the light that ought to mark the intersection where --

Then all the hells broke loose, and in the muzzle flashes Cinnamon saw something that tweaked an ironic, near manic, utterly joyless grin from her.

#####

The stateroom hatch whipped open.

Dexter Revenant rolled off the couch, a small pistol somehow in his hand, snapping off shots from the deck. Rodonovan had no time to ponder where the man had hidden the pistol before his target, a massive, machinelike thing, obliterated the Westerner with a thundering weapon too big for a humyn to hold.

Rodonovan knew the thing was a Miniak. It turned its helmeted head toward him and he eased his hands up. His ears rang and parts of Dexter twitched in his peripheral vision. There too, on the sofa, lay the relic.

Don't move, he thought to Soaking Madge, then realized the com-web had been broken. He looked at Sei Javala, holding his arms delicately out, palms up, as if in supplication. The mage offered nothing. *Helldiver's Ghost* remaining engines bellowed in full reverse, and the ship shivered in protest. The bridge had fallen.

The Miniak moved deeper into the stateroom, making space for a distinctly uncomfortable-looking humyn sailor who took up a position on the other side of the table, near Soaking Madge, but gave no indication that he saw her. Rodonovan prayed she didn't try anything foolishly brave. The sailor wore blue and red enameled mail armor. Bone trinkets stitched his earlobes, and his blond hair, pulled back into a tight bun, dripped sweat; no doubt, he found the southern climate a might sultry. Despite his discomfort, ice blue eyes simmered with smug malice. He was a Malakite, and if Rodonovan was correct, the captain of a marine maniple.

The Miniak hulked beside the Malakite, head near the raised ceiling and completely protected inside dull armor plates with flexible joints of a dark color that might've been green or grey or black. Dexter's pistol had done no visible damage. Its weapon looked to be integrated into its armor; it was hard to tell.

Rodonovan's wonderment gave way to revulsion when the next thing stepped into the room. Right from Myriadian folklore. Not quite as tall as the Miniak, nor as wide, the daemon seemed larger anyway. Mantra's talons dug into Rodonovan's shoulder and darted past the creature and through the hatchway with a terrified bleat.

Where the Miniak's armor was of indeterminate color and the Malakite's was a veritable festival of color, the daemon wore light-sucking black. A cape partially wrapped its body; Rodonovan saw writhing faces on it and swore he heard distant wailing as if from the far end of some catacombs. Its humanoid face was moon white and as blotched. Its eyes were concealed behind fine lacings of the same chalky flesh, its nose a stub of bone over two gill-like nostrils, and its mouth an arsehole-like pucker. Its first words -- perfect Malakite -- graveled the air: "The key sickens me. Get it back to the ship and secure it in the pyx." The captain grabbed the relic, stumbled under its weight with a surprised grunt, hoisted it onto his shoulder, and lugged it from the room.. Rodonovan noticed that the daemon shied away from the relic, the "key."

"Is that what you came for?" Rodonovan said as coolly as possible. His words were muted in his ears. He wondered how the daemon and the Malakites had been able to approach *Ghost* without being seen -- some kind of cloaking sorcery?

"Come for the relic, stay for the souls," came a familiar voice at the doorway. Squeezebox Davy kind of shuffled, kind of swaggered into the stateroom. He scratched vigorously at a grey-spangled muttonchop, looked around, a blend of disgust and outrage twisting his face, and chuckled a bit self-consciously. "So this is what this room looks like." Sweat matted his hair and darkened his clothing. His red face might've been exertion, but the glitter in his eyes suggested drink. "Don't look so gods damned surprised!" Squeezebox said to Rodonovan, then looked past him. Other sailors stood behind him slathered in sweat. Rodonovan recognized them from *The Flying Sprite*. They carried weapons from *Ghost's* armory. The engine room, the bridge, the armory. The impossible had happened: *Ghost* was taken.

"Get out of the dark, you slithering bitch," Squeezebox said. Soaking Madge drifted into view, placed her deck swab and ammunition belt on the table. If she was concerned about developments, it didn't show on her too-young face.

"All of them," Squeezebox said. He pointed a broadbore at her. "I'll burn you down you try to game me." Soaking Madge reached down slowly and brought up a couple of small throwing knives and a pistol. "Over there," Squeezebox said, using his broadbore to point her over to the Miniak. "And you," he said to Rodonovan, words slowed by contempt, heated by fury, "look at what you've done."

The firefight somewhere within the ship had subsided to nothing and now all engines had been shut down, leaving only the distant lament of the daemon's cape. Dexter's guts stunk. Terrible shock crept through Rodonovan on waves of ice water. He still had the toy fishing trawler that Squeezebox Davy had whittled from a hunk of teak driftwood over three decades ago. Still remembered the time the old sailor -- he'd always seemed old -- had somehow found him in the bowels of a Samphire Atoll brig after one of his youthful extravagances. He said somehow,

because Rodonovan himself hadn't known how he'd ended up there, having started the evening on Kava Kava with two ladies of delectable proportions and delightfully dubious moral fiber --

" -- listening to me!"

Rodonovan snapped back to the present where Squeezebox shook with fury and stabbed the broadbore at his face. Soaking Madge moved, and the Miniak backhanded her. She smashed against the paneled bulkhead and slumped to the deck.

"Hold," the daemon said raising a gloved hand. To Squeezebox it said, "Your miserable humynity will not deny me these souls."

"You actually believe this thing cares one whit whether you live your last days in solace, Squeezebox?" Rodonovan asked. "This thing may take my soul, but you gave yours away."

The daemon's chuckle was a death rattle. "I would call you perceptive," it said with a royal sort of laxity, "but quite frankly it is more accurate to label the old foo -- "

A short eruption of weapons fire echoed through the bulkhead. A level below and aft, Rodonovan thought.

A sharp crackle and a tinny voice growled from what was likely a communication device somewhere on the Miniak's armor. The Miniak grunted back and then cocked its head toward the daemon and grunted some more. The daemon replied curtly in the same primal language, and the Miniak marched out with a menacing heft of its giant weapon. A moment later, a Malakite with a multitude of wire-like blonde braids circling his pale, sweat-slick skull slipped through the crowd of sailors and took up a position inside the stateroom with a large-bore boarding rifle at the ready.

JackLuck and Cinnamon? Rodonovan wondered. Had they marshaled a repel? And how many other sailors? Against how many? There had been near about a score of men taken from *The Flying Sprite*. Add to that at least a Malakite maniple -- another 60 sailors -- and who knew how many Miniak warriors like the one heading out to counter the counter. Rodonovan did not like the odds.

Soaking Madge stood slowly, tongue swiping angrily at the blood coating her lips. Rodonovan took her chin in his hand and studied the laceration exposing her upper teeth; he avoided the fury in her eyes and the warnings of the Malakite. She pulled her head away and spit.

"Once the ruckus is controlled, you three will accompany me back to my ship," the daemon said with a kind of buoyancy that made Rodonovan's skin crawl. It propped a hand on its hip and the screaming cape swung jauntily. "I've heard much about you Rodonovan Swords. Nothing quite like harvesting a robust and seasoned soul. And a witch is always nourishing. Don't look so alarmed, it will be painless. Not that I couldn't make it excruciating, but I am civilized..."

Rodonovan was hearing the words, but not quite registering them. Not quite... He strongly doubted that he could take the beast hand to hand, if half the stories about daemon strength and sorcery were true. And even if he, by some miracle, escaped the creature, he still had a shipload of humyn and Miniak enemies to overcome. And what? Harvesting his soul? Seasoned? What exactly did that mean? Would he end up in that cape? An opportunity might come on the transfer to this daemon's ship. He'd take his chances with the Aestiva. Maybe Chiming Harbor would have a patrol out. And how bloody likely was it that the prefect would involve himself in this mess?

The cardiac thump of the Miniak weapon pulsed through the deck and bulkhead, crushing, it seemed, the other gunfire. The bellow ended abruptly, and the daemon grunted with satisfaction. To Squeezebox it said, "The ship is yours."

"Not too fit to sail, is it?" Squeezebox grumbled. "Sail it, sink it, it matters not to me."

A murky satisfaction wafted through Squeezebox Davy's bloodshot eyes.

The Malakite sailor uttered something a little nervously.

The daemon favored the Malakite with a witheringly dry tilt of its head, and said in Malakite. "Tell your Empress, should she see fit to make arrangements behind the back of an agent of the White Pantheon again, I will personally remove her heart." The sailor blanched and the daemon turned his gaze upon Squeezebox. "Now get out of my sight."

Squeezebox paled too, but quickly moved out into the passage and barked, "You and you! Follow me to the bridge. You, you said you're an engineer, right? Pick your crew and get down to the engine room. Kill anyone you don't recognize and restore power, get as many engines online as soon as possible. You're now the busiest sailor on the ship."

There were lackluster "ayes." The daemon turned its veiled eyes to Rodonovan and seemed about to speak when gunfire, a lot of guns, rattled the bulkhead. Squeezebox froze and looked aft. The Malakite looked up with alarm. Rodonovan thought: *that's on this deck*. He tossed a quick glance at Soaking Madge, stormily impassive with her chin trimmed in blood; Javala too showed little.

The communicator strapped to the Malakite's shoulder armor crackled and a panicked voice cried, "We can't hold our position! We're falling back!"

"How many?" the Malakite said.

A crash of static obliterated the response.

"Repeat!"

"One! Just -- !"

"You!" the daemon growled, pointing at Squeezebox. "You told me he was dead!"

"I-I saw him go down!" Squeezebox Davy yelled. The daemon charged the old sailor.

"A body! Did you see a body?"

"I SAW HIM DIE!" Squeezebox screamed, cringing. "The flying ship went to pieces!" But the daemon pushed past him and forward to the main deck ladder.

Rodonovan reached across the table and dragged the Malakite to him by his throat. The decanter of port tumbled to the deck and shattered. He crushed the sailor's windpipe and took his weapon. He fired three shots into the scattering crowd of sailors in the passage, wildly disappointed that none of the bodies dropping to the deck belonged to his mutinous Master Chief.

####

Blood blatted the bulkhead when Kai Ferracane swung his hair out of his eyes. When he'd bailed out of the heliunit, his leg had crumpled on him and he'd opened his scalp on the edge of the canopy's frame. Or maybe he'd been struck by a piece of the disintegrating `unit despite using the canopy as a shield on his descent into the sea. Something had certainly broken a rib or three. Frankly, most of that scene remained a blur. In bits and flashes, he recalled pulling the emergency canopy release, following the curved canopy slab into the black sky, then repositioning it behind him and sailing toward the water, tucked like some animal in its egg. Clarity had returned sometime later when he found himself clinging to a stanchion in the ship's waterless launch bay beneath a boat suspended precariously, it seemed, over him. The body machine had gotten him there. He didn't ponder how; it wasn't the first time. In the darkness he could feel blood gumming his hair and leg. His back hurt, possibly wrenched from the flip and twist to get the canopy between him and the explosion. His head throbbed from wetwire hangover, and, domo, someone jabbed a knife into his chest every time he breathed. So he took himself to the clean black.

Sometime later, pain drew him back to awareness. *Helldiver's Ghost* shook and began to slow. Then weapons play rattled the bulkheads, and the body machine took all the pain away. Rest time was over.

Kai had hoisted himself onto the service deck running around the launch bay. Two sailors had been ambushed in the otherwise deserted area, throats cut. The firefight blazed close and intense. Already dim lights glowed an even more feeble orange; maybe emergency lighting. His eyes gathered all available illumination. He moved into general berthing and smelled the massacre before seeing it, a score or more sailors murdered in their sleep. This then was a mutiny. Where might Dexter go during a mutiny?

The gunplay ended and he heard urgent voices hissing at each other in and around the crack and pop of mop up. From the body of the giant sailor with the funny name, Chuck Luck or something pet-like, Kai took a gigantic knife and headed forward. The hissing voices chilled to the murmur of reporting, likely to whoever or whatever now controlled the ship. So Rodonovan was dead or detained. Dexter might be with the captain -- dead or captured. Meaning the relic had been lost.

Kai familiarized himself with the giant knife, sized somewhere between a dirk and a machete, as he moved as silently as his reopened leg and broken ribs would allow. Well-balanced, but ordinary blacksteel and leather. It would have to do until he found a better weapon; nasty as it was, the knife would be sloppy at best against Miniak armor and useless against a daemon.

Moving through the darkest patches, Kai approached the chokepoint where he counted six men in a tight, clumsy cluster watching all directions. He should've been able to eliminate his targets before they saw him. Not with the injuries.. Three of them spotted him and, in a braying chorus of alarm, opened fire.

Not a lot of maneuver room, but Kai dropped into a tactically lame deck crawl that drew a groan from him and covered the three-pace distance, not quite evading hot sprays of shot. Although his move lacked any aesthetic appeal or mercy, the oversized knife served him well. Back on his feet, he quickly silenced the sailors and grabbed a drum-fed combat loader -- clearly a RAITH weapon. Now his back stung.

He sensed stealth and turned to see Cinnamon Rogue skulking about back near general berthing. He headed forward.

#####

Cinnamon watched Kai fade into the murk and followed as quickly and quietly as possible, watching for any movement. She reached the passage intersection and ogled the bloody pool in which six feet all removed below the calf scattered about six footless and throat-cut men. She recalled Ferracane's light chuckle over the com-web as he killed ship after ship with his flying contraption, like a child having a private adventure with a toy. Had he giggled over this too?

At the ominously darkened sick bay, she stepped through the portside hatchway and straight into Kai Ferracane's eyes; fresh bullet holes, huge black pupils ringed by thin crimson irises. Two runes of hate etched in a face painted in blood. Cinnamon shivered. "Move," he said, forcing her back through the hatchway and behind the bulkhead with a blood-streaked hand in her face.

"Hey!" she said.

"Now," he said.

The low clatter of gear and the thud of heavy boots from behind him drew his attention. Cinnamon lifted her mini and prepared to step back through the hatchway to meet the enemy. No one, no one would keep her from a fight. But as she stepped forward, a weapon bellowed so loud, the innards of her ears felt like they might implode. With deep-toned *Ponks!* a slew of fist-sized pimples erupted in the bulkhead near Cinnamon's face -- pretty much where Kai had been standing -- sending her ducking and stumbling back against the sick bay hatch. She recovered and flung herself through the hatchway, weapon up, expecting to see Ferracane crumpled on the deck.

In grimy orange emergency lighting, she saw instead some kind of mechanized giant take a vicious swat at Ferracane, who slid aside like a wind-pushed feather, then suddenly changed direction to dart right at the thing. The thing moved incredibly fast to sidestep his charge, but not fast enough to crush the Westerner with another hammering blow that shook the passage when its weapon struck the deck with a weed of yellow sparks. Ferracane slipped inside the thing's reach, flinging away a rifle of some kind. Cinnamon heard a horrible inhumyn gurgle as Ferracane's left arm swept up under the thing's chin and forward. He whirled with an incredibly sexual grace, something -- a knife -- floating before him to strike the creature again. The thing twitched once and fell in two directions. Its helmeted head rolled to a rest against the open hatch. Cinnamon stared at it and then looked at Ferracane whose composure finally seemed to have fractured.

"What was that?" she asked. He was soaked in blood.

"Miniak light infantry," Ferracane rasped. Near the bulkhead, he bent to pick up the abandoned drum-fed combat loader.

"Light?" Cinnamon wondered why he just didn't shoot the damned thing, then recognized the fighting knife.

"He was dead," Ferracane said in response to her expression. "Already dead. I'd like to think he'd want it used against those who killed him rather than -- "

"You couldn't possibly know what JackLuck wanted."

"That his name?" He continued forward. "You're right. I didn't know him at all."

The passage was quiet, but Cinnamon heard activity above and below. Ferracane's noisy breathing irked her -- so much for the tough Western warrior. What had that other fool said? *Wall to wall?* "How much of that blood is yours?" she asked.

Over his shoulder, Ferracane tossed a blank look with eyes now black.

"Are you hurt?"

The Westerner responded with a feeble smile.

"I say something funny?" Cinnamon snapped.

They reached the ladder. Out of line of sight, Ferracane stared up at it like some kind of halfwit.

Cinnamon leaned in close, smelled blood, smelled him. His labored breathing was not exhaustion, she realized. Too wet. He maybe had a broken rib or a bullet wound. "They'll be up there," she whispered.

"I know," he said.

"So what're we going to do?"

Still looking up, he closed his eyes. His breathing quieted. His eyes opened and he looked at her. She wished he hadn't. Apparently he found that question amusing too.

####

Rodonovan charged into the passage and saw the very much alive Kai Ferracane rampaging through a clot of panicking sailors. Yet rampage was not quite the right word. He glided through the throng, breathing fire and striking like a serpent, standing frozen and flashing like lightning, moving in a beeline and dancing drunkenly. Sailors collapsed like sacks or blew back against the bulkhead. It made Rodonovan's eyes ache to watch. He stepped aft to help but found himself stumbling back into the stateroom. Soaking Madge had him by the belt band of his breeks. "Child!" he bellowed.

"You'll need to captain this ship when we get it back," she said, meeting his furious glare with one of her own. "We'll wait for the Western Machine Boy." Pistol in hand, she moved toward the hatch, dipped to the deck, fired a shot, then was knocked back by a Malakite sailor swinging a heavy double-gripped battering ram, a traditional boarding weapon ideal for close-quarter fighting. Soaking Madge sprawled under the table, groaning and clutching her right arm over her chest.

With a huge grin on his pale face, the Malakite stepped into the stateroom with two more sailors. Others poured past them to join the fight aft. He let the ram fall to hang from its thick strap and brought up a broadbore from a belt of bones and cartridges. "You drop," he said in thickly accented L'Endish, "or I dead you."

Rodonovan let out a disgusted sigh. He made to hand the rifle over, then flung it at the Malakite, who stepped sideways and fired his weapon. Some of the shot tore into Rodonovan's left shoulder and chest. *Stay on your feet*, he told himself, unwilling to be put down like some dog. As he staggered back, he saw Ferracane, resembling the dancing devils of the Helian Steppes, whirl through the hatchway and take down the two Malakite sailors. He slammed his knife blade tip into the tabletop and twirled over it to alight in front of the sailor with the battering ram. He jammed the combat loader up under the Malakite's chin, lifting him off the deck, and fired the weapon.

Under the raining gore and raging silence, Ferracane gazed into some distance only he could see. His hair hung in matted strings, the congealing blood all over him like some ritual paint. Rodonovan shuddered when the Westerner's eyes flushed from crimson to black like the quenching of a fire. His gaze roamed the room, stopping for the briefest moment on Dexter's remains. Then he helped Soaking Madge to her feet.

####

"Where's the relic?" Kai asked, supporting the girl's obviously broken arm. She pulled away from him. Despite the nasty kink in her forearm and the quavering of her right hand, she looked ready

to chew through the bulkhead. A sultry fury darkened her face, her blade-like beauty hardly dulled by the nasty cut splitting her lip nearly to her nose. Her name... something silly somebody somewhere might find somewhat provocative, he remembered. She was so young.

"On the daemon's ship," Sei Javala said.

Kai's breathing now rattled and gurgled. And there was pain, like a voice breaking through static. He'd need a doctor soon. He tapped the drum of the combat loader.

"Daemon?" Cinnamon Rogue peered into the stateroom as if seeing it for the first time. She carried a mini and wore what looked like sleeping clothes.

"Gone now," Soaking Madge said. "Scurried off like Satan himself chased it when it heard Machine Boy still lived."

Rodonovan walked to the hearth and pressed a palm against the wood paneling. A hatch popped open, revealing a sleeping berth beyond. "We must retake the ship," he said disappearing inside. "Engine room, bridge, armory, likely the launch bay."

"Definitely the bay," Cinnamon said.

Rodonovan returned, grimacing with the weight of the weapons he carried. He strew them across the table and with a flip of the hand bid the others to partake as if he'd just served a meal. "I suspect the Malakite maniple and the Miniak have withdrawn, leaving us *Flying Sprite* sailors and... mutineers."

"Dregs," Soaking Madge murmured.

Rodonovan cleared his throat and looked at Kai. "We could use your help."

Kai tasted blood. Domo, he was tired. "I have to get the relic."

"You have to get healing," Sei Javala snapped.

"Your captain would seem to need healing," Kai said.

"The four of us then," Rodonovan said. "Javala and Madge. Retake the engine room. I... I want the bridge. Cinnamon, you'll come with me. We'll worry about the armory and bay later. Communications after that."

Soaking Madge's face darkened even more, but now with a malevolent smile made terrifying by the laceration. "Just the four of us?"

"I think they figure us dead."

"With all due respect, Captain, let me have the bridge," Soaking Madge said.

"That has to be mine."

"Then let me accompany you, Captain."

"My orders stand!"

"*Ghost* sailors still willing to fight under your flag might remain alive on board," Sei Javala said into the uncomfortable breach.

"Likely they took to the ratways first chance," Cinnamon said.

"Or threw in with Squeezebox," Soaking Madge said, then stared intently at her broken arm as if intrigued by the unnatural lump beneath bruising skin.

"Perhaps," Rodonovan said. He held minis in both hands. The way he moved, his gunshot shoulder didn't seem to be bothering him now. But he wore a scowl, and his eyes were rounded by what looked like a bit of shock. "I suppose I can't blame them."

Soaking Madge busied herself by picking an ugly broadbore off the deck. With a snap of her good wrist, she broke it open, confirmed it loaded, and snapped it shut. She slipped it into her belt, then hoisted a belt of heavy rounds onto her shoulder.

"Is that the best choice of weapon, Madge?" Sei Javala asked. "You need healing too." He took a light automatic rifle from the spread on the table. He held it comfortably, though it looked odd in his delicate hands.

"Later," Soaking Madge said, hefting the broadbore. "And this is perfect."

"Let me at least do something for the pain."

"No. The pain is my rune."

"Here," Kai said, laying the loader on the table. Time to go. He wasn't much interested in teenage bravado. Or the guilt. "Maybe four rounds left."

"You're going to board an enemy ship with just a knife?" Cinnamon said, an incredulous smile wavering on her lips.

"Nice knowing you, Machine Boy," Soaking Madge told Kai with a contemptuous laugh. He glanced once more at Dexter, found himself missing the one or more idiotic comments he surely would've made about Cinnamon's state of undress, his unfazed response to Soaking Madge's deserved derision. Kai started for the main deck. The body machine jolted him with adrenalin. Pain faded to a nagging whisper.

"Stop," Rodonovan said.

Kai braced himself for a tongue lashing.

"Please show him the midships ratway, Cinnamon. It will get him off *Ghost* without being seen. Then meet me on the main deck."

"Aye."

Ratways? Was that some kind of insult? Kai swallowed blood, his own he thought, and said to the Myriadians, "Luck."

They just stared at him.

#####

The strange flotilla surrounding *Helldiver's Ghost* looked like a graveyard of foundered ships to Cinnamon.

"Malakite submersibles," Rodonovan whispered. "Used to navigate beneath ice floes.... I suppose the military uses of such capabilities are obvious."

They stood in the shadows beneath the navigating bridge. Cinnamon knew why she, rather than the more lethal Madge, was with the Captain. But rather than feel insulted or angry at his protectiveness, she fought exhaustion and fear. The main deck was deserted. The beating that *Ghost* had taken showed in the scored and twisted armor plate, the scorched housings, the patchwork repairs.

The *Aestiva* washed almost serenely over the grey ships, tossing spumes against simple stack-like superstructures. With so much of their hull submerged, their dimensions were hard to judge, but the size of the sailors manning single forward gunnery positions or scanning the area with spyglasses from those superstructures suggested the ships displaced at least as much as *Ghost*. She counted thirteen, including the ship now casting off of *Ghost's* port side with several sailors pulling a boarding ramp back onto the superstructure with the quick, rhythmic teamwork expected from any seasoned crew.

Neither commented on the plume of black smoke to the east, rising like a yelp from Chiming Harbor.

"Ferracane took the ratway?" Rodonovan asked.

"Yes." Making casual conversation? What were they waiting for? "I doubt there was a raft left in it though." "I'd say he doesn't need one."

"With a punctured lung? Most men would be -- "

"Look."

The Westerner scooted along the deck of the daemon's submersible as if walking on the waves. He reached the superstructure and scurried up a ladder, vaulting the superstructure's gunwale and startling the sailors as they seemed to be heading below deck. He moved toward them and they vanished from view. So did he.

And then so did the ship.

####

"Think he expected that, Captain?" Cinnamon asked. The *Aestiva* seethed with the white print of the vanished ship.

Beyond a sailor's curiosity about the workings of submersibles, Rodonovan didn't care. Kai Ferracane could burn in every realm of every hell -- he'd known they would come for the stolen property. The Westerner knew. Rodonovan's business was here with *Ghost*. With Squeezebox Davy. He looked at the young womyn who could've been, should've been, his son's wife if not for youthful ignorance and said, "Stay here. Watch my back."

"He won't be alone up there," she said.

"I'm well aware."

"You're injured. Don't be foolish."

He grabbed a ladder rung. The burning in his shoulder punctuated Cinnamon's insolence. "Just do as I say, girl. I'll hail you when the bridge is clear." He ignored her expression and climbed to the bridge, wincing each time he gripped the ladder with a left hand that threatened to quit. On the bridge walk, he squatted and eased his minis from his belt. Squeezebox's aggravated commands to engineering filtered out to the bridge walk in a voice Rodonovan wouldn't have recognized as coming from the man just yesterday. Now he heard the anger that he really ought to have heard some time ago. Now he heard the bitterness that coated all of his sailors' tongues. When had he deafened himself? Perhaps about the time he had decided these people were *his* sailors.

Even crouched, Rodonovan's head stood as tall as a shortish man. He saw the *Aestiva* through the damaged windows, placid, serene, fading into a thin pall of fog, disinterested in his tribulations. Then one of the sailors saw him as he crab-walked through the hatchway. He shot the man, spotted another, but when he lifted his left arm to fire, the impulse crashed against jolting pain in his shoulder, making a quavering claw of his left hand. The mini fell from it. Then a massive fist hammered him to the deck.

Dazed, Rodonovan raised his other mini, but a shirtless and sweating sailor loomed over him and kicked his hand. The mini flew out of it; a finger or two might've broken. The sailor pointed a pistol at Rodonovan's face. He wore a choker of yellowed bones around his neck, more bones skewering his ears and lips.

"DAMN YOU!" Rodonovan roared in defiance of his body's wish to slip into unconsciousness. He would not die prostrate. The sailor flinched, then fiercely jabbed the pistol toward Rodonovan, a vicious smile splitting a heavy beard.

"Stop," Squeezebox said. "Stop, stop, STOP!" Hands shoved the sailor away and the Master Chief's ruddy face filled Rodonovan's greying view. "Prince of the Aestiva. Prince of lies. Feeling a little... out of sorts?"

Rodonovan still could not believe that the man standing over him wearing a look of pure contempt used to bring him a concoction of garlic, ginger, and lemon when he was sick.

"Surely you were promised something more than just this ship," Rodonovan said. "A fleet?"

"That is why we have come to this. A fleet. That's your measure of a man? All you see when you look beyond the railings of this gods-forsaken bucket is an absurd claim to land you've never set foot on. Fighting to the death for that is your measure of a man? Even though you paraded it around, you kept it hidden, but not from me. Your father was a true leader, the real Prince of the Aestiva. You though, you wore the costume well, but you're hardly even a shadow of the man. You're pathetic. If your father could see what you've made of his name, he'd cringe, then he'd slit your throat, if not his own. You've killed thousands of your own people chasing the sirens' song."

"What then?" Rodonovan asked, feeling a pain in his heart that had nothing to do with the bullet in his chest.

"Peace." The word exploded from Squeezebox's mouth.

Rodonovan's eyelids flickered. He bit on his cheek to stay conscious, but, oh, wouldn't it better to just let go?

"A chance to live and die like an old man ought to be able to." Squeezebox's eyes pinked up and wetted, his face twisted with rage. "You've spent your whole life looting others' lives from them. And for what? FOR WHAT!"

"Peace," Rodonovan tried to say.

"Hah... Don't you dare. A piece is more like it. A king's share no doubt. Hah. You've made the same mistake as any pretender, thinking men want to live under another's thumb. Under your thumb. You've ignored the most important, the most obvious wisdom of this war you've brought on the very people you believe you can rule: the war itself. Why we fight. We fight because your fanciful idea of *nation*, of sovereignty, chafes at us. Chokes. Strangles! This land you so covet, Taelemone, have you paid any attention at all to how the First Nations live there? Obviously not, too busy have you been wielding your mighty weapons and dazzling words. And notice I said First *Nations*. Nationssssss. They've had that land for centuries and they haven't figured out a way to unity yet. They fight and fight. Over last names and petty differences. Over just... difference. Sound familiar at all? What makes you think -- " Squeezebox gritted his filthy teeth in fury. "Your father was a simple fishermyn, and a great leader. He had no designs on the kind of power

you desire, yet Myriadians respected him. And with that came a different power. One that you've squandered. You've sullied his name chasing aft -- "

CRACK! CRACK!

CRACK! CRACK!

Squeezebox Davy's head snapped back, face frozen with childlike astonishment, and disappeared from view. Cinnamon appeared, staring down at him. "Bridge is clear," she said to nobody in particular. "Sorry, Captain. Throw me in the brig later. Hmm..."

"Like distant rain," Rodonovan said, gazing at her hair falling toward him in wavy lines as she examined his chest wound.

"Don't try to talk."

Rodonovan tried to hold his lump of parched tongue, but words bubbled from between tangled lips. "Such beautiful grandchildren..."

"What?"

"Omen..." *is ignorant...*

Cinnamon's face roiled with distress. "I have to get Sei Javala up here."

"A chance," the old sailor had told Rodonovan.

"Stop trying to talk, Captain." Cinnamon stepped away, and he heard her using the comlink to hail the engine room.

"To live and die like an old man...."

"Shut up," Cinnamon snapped from leagues away. "You're not going to die."

"I think..." *I already have.*

####

She muttered, "Shut up," again and cursed Javala for his silence in the engine room. Through the glassless window of the bridge, the Aestiva was beautiful, donning deep shades to mark the twilight and already cloaked in a mantle of smoky blue fog about a quarter league out. Rodonovan's prostrate shuffling disturbed her. The pool spreading slowly around his head meant he was bleeding out. Cinnamon clutched the black comlink handset and keyed the send button for a ship-wide page. "Gods damn you, Javala! Bridge calling!"

A moment later: "Javala here. Steady down, Cinnamon, steady down. Madge retook the engine room and left little operational in it beyond a bank of engines. But we found more than a few sailors still with Rodonovan's flag -- all of them from the Wavery Islands, not a single Myriadian -- and she's clearing the ship deck by deck. I tell you, *Ghost* is near ready to scuttle."

"NEVER!"

"Steady -- down -- Cinnamon.... I'm in sickbay using the comlink. Where's the Captain?"

"Down. He's down."

"On my way. Careful now, Madge may be clearing decks, but your page means any remaining mutineers know you're on the bridge."

"Let them come." She dropped the handset, it banged against the console and dangled lamely from its black coiled wire. A sob scraped from her mouth. She knelt beside Rodonovan, watching him and the hatch. The captain's eyes were focused beyond the overhead conduits and his fingers delicately tickled the deck, leaving strokes in the leading edge of the blood pool.

"Hurry up," she muttered. Rodonovan's breathing took on a twitchy cadence, strangled and weak. A mealy panic began to ooze up from Cinnamon's bowels. She thought she heard the low boom of Soaking Madge clearing decks from far below. Had Javala just said no Myriadians survived or no Myriadians remained with Rodonovan? When the comlink crackled, she jumped, and cursed the witch man for lingering in the sickbay. Then she heard a tinny voice in a haze of fuzzy air.

"*Ghost*, this is *Leviathan*. Please acknowledge."

Cinnamon hopped toward the console, tripping over Squeezebox's body, and snatched at the still swinging handset. It squibbed from her grasp, but she clutched it after it bounced off the deck and rebounded. "Goblin? Is that you?"

"Aye, Goblin Rod here. Cinny? What're you doing on the `link?"

"We lost the ship."

"Say again. You *what!*"

Cinnamon opted not to admonish Goblin Rod for fouling the air with colorful strings of oaths as she quickly explained. "*Squeezebox fookin' Davy!*" Goblin yelled.

"He's dead."

"Unbelievable!"

Cinnamon imagined his giant round eyes bulging even farther from his ghoulish, sunken face as he brayed. "Believe it," she said.

Sei Javala flowed into the room and settled beside Rodonovan. Mantra clung to the healer's shoulder, little coos coiling into questions. Javala leaned in close to the Captain and murmured into his ear. She watched the healer cut away Rodonovan's shirt with a small blade and added, "And the Captain is down."

"Down? As in dead?"

"Not yet..." Cinnamon said, looking over her shoulder. "I mean no, he's not going to die." Javala gingerly laid hands on Rodonovan, eyes shut. "Where are you?"

"We're in the Broom. We are eastbound on your position."

Cinnamon turned to the west and saw only a billowy wall of fog. "How'd you know we were here? And how do you see anything?"

"The Dagian Guards received a distress signal from a heliunit. When they learned it was from this Ferracane character, you'd've thought the gods had descended to walk the seas. They were very... let's say, insistent that we break away from Fool's Cap and sail at full to the Fiery Ring. So we hit the Ring. The hells happened there? Like the whole region was drowned. We found the wreckage... Gods damn, Cinnamon, we found wreckage like the world had ended. But no body. I mean not *his* body. Which means not a damn thing in the Aestiva, right, but which about set these Dagian Guards into a mad arse frenzy of laughter and japing about good flying and bad landings."

Cinnamon stared with annoyance at the comlink. "Yes, yes, yes. Gods damned children, these Westerners." She paused. "Tell them that Dexter is dead. We have his body."

"Copy that."

"What?"

"That's Dagian Guard jargon for 'I understand.'"

Why was he so gods damned chipper?

"They won't like to hear that, the Guard," Goblin was saying. "After they identified a lot of the wreckage as Miniak, their mood darkened considerably.... We have the Miniak in our waters now?"

"Aye."

"Well, that killed the laughs for sure and they started making a lot of angry talk and, for some reason, insisted we set sail for Chiming Harbor. So we left *Charger* and *Monstrum* to help out at the Ring and headed east. Got to admit I wasn't much liking being told what to do, seeing as I was commanding the flotilla. And Chiming Harbor? Why there? I mean I understand now, but I didn't then. Of all the places in the Aestiva, Rodonovan might chart a course for, how could they

know to choose Chiming Harbor? They must have some pretty trick instruments in those flying contraptions. Or magicks, maybe magicks. Who knows? They're mum about that stuff. And Cinny, you should see these crazed lubbers use those contraptions."

"I know. Ridiculous."

"Ridiculous? It's a beautiful thing. Talk about magicks."

Cinnamon managed a grunt. A tear brimmed and rolled down her cheek. She gripped her widow's finger and twisted as if trying to slip off the rune. She glanced at Rodonovan, his blood now mingling with that of the other dead. He blinked in a disturbingly regular fashion.

Goblin Rod said, "The Guard are reading thirteen, repeat thirteen, vessels at your position. One friendly, that's you, twelve unidentified."

"Those twelve are Malakite submersibles."

"Submersibles? I thought that was just a rumor."

"Apparently not."

"Huh, well... They're not underwater now are they? How do you fight something under water, I wonder... Suppose the Guard will show us."

The fog's approach seemed to have slowed, but it magnified the rumble of idling engines and the tish and fizzle of water against hulls while also casting a deceptive tranquility over the twilight vista. "I think some of these ships are an escort for *Ghost*.... Squeezebox had some business with the Malakite Empire. I-I can't even imagine how that old tar got mixed up with -- you should've seen the Miniak. And the daemon... By the Gods..."

Goblin Rod said, "Well, well... this should be quite interesting. Are you in command then?"

"No, no, no, thank the gods. Sei Javala is here."

"Aye. I'm guessing you need sailors, yes?"

"Engineers for sure. And gobs who'll handle the weapons without turning them on us."

"Hah. I'll dispatch a tender to help you with that. See that the launch bay is open. And don't be surprised if you see a bunch of lunatic Westerners leaping out of the sky.... We are battle firmed and time out two minutes."

####

Rodonovan heard these chiding words: "I think it's safe to say that you've ruined this shirt." Ambra favored him with a one-sided smirk, almond eyes thinned into wry slits and veiled by a

fall of black hair stippled with stardust. It wasn't her voice. "This is a bloody mess," she continued. "But you'll be okay." He knew that voice, coming from somewhere near his left ear. He tried to turn his head to get a look. "Don't move, Rodonovan."

Odd pain curled through his chest, as if a prickly, velvet spider scampered through him. The voice faded away, began to sound like it came from behind pillows. Velvet pillows. Ambra loved her bed piled with pillows. They annoyed the hells out of him. She would laugh and laugh as he burrowed through them to reach her. Like excavating a rainbow. "We need to get him to a working surgery. Did I hear Goblin Rod on that comlink?"

Another voice, nearly lost, said aye.

"Some kind of miracle..."

"Those Dagian Guards. Apparently."

"We need *Leviathan's* surgery. Please hail Goblin. Have him send a launch. If Sei Atlai's available, I could use his help. I need to stop this bleeding. Sooner rather than later."

"Getting a launch through a dozen hostiles might be tricky."

"The alternative, Cinnamon. Please consider that."

"Have you considered the alternative, Roddy?"

"You mean a life of solace? Without war, without death, and disconnect? Yes I have." Rodonovan looked down at Ambra, who sprawled across a rocky pile of pillows, colors lost beneath the spill from the gaping wound in her throat. One dull eye, nearly hidden behind a bruisy, drooping lid, had drifted off to gaze at the Misty Broom's fog.

"You quit on Taelemone and you would never feel connected," she said. "Never. And that would be the death of us. I love the man whose passion is the unity of his people."

"My passion is only you."

Her smile was open-mouthed, lazy. "Who are you lying to? I love you precisely because your passion is split."

"And if you had it all?"

She giggled. Her dead eyes locked on him. "That's an intriguing thought. Isn't it?"

####

When Cinnamon hailed *Leviathan* to request a launch for Rodonovan, an unfamiliar voice responded: "*Helldiver's Ghost*, this is Commander Cyrus Quartz, Red Shrike Unit, Dagian Guard, flying Plague One. Acknowledge. Over."

"Aye... uh, Commander Quartz?" *Plague One*?

"Please have Captain Swords and Corporal Dexter Revenant on deck and ready for aerial evac in two minutes. Stay on frequency, and be advised we are coming in hot. Do you copy? Over."

"C-copy, aye," Cinnamon said. She looked at Javala, who said, "We'll need help getting the Captain down there. Send a page and get some sailors up here with a gurney, but we don't want to arouse the Malakites."

"And we don't want any holdouts onboard to show up."

"That would be ideal, yes."

Cinnamon gave the sei a baleful look as she sent a general page throughout *Ghost*. She pawed at the tears on her cheeks and waited with weapons pointed at the bridge hatch until four beefy, but exhausted-looking sailors appeared. They were all Waverly Islanders. Terence Eight Legs carried a folded gurney tucked against his side. One eye was swollen shut, and a large scarlet and blue bruise burst across a handful of colorful spider tats ranging about his stout torso. "Ah, Cinny, good to see you," he said, making it clear it was good to see her dressed as she was. "I think we made it without attracting any unwanted attention. Not sure, but the salts on the closest ship seem a might agitated."

"Probably wondering what Squeezebox is up to," she said.

Eight Legs spat on the old gob's corpse. The others followed suit, adding curses.

"Gentlemyn," Javala said, "to the business at hand." Under his direction, the sailors muscled Rodonovan onto the gurney. He barely fit. "I trust someone has managed with Dexter Revenant," the healer said while scrutinizing the Captain's wound, which, although he had cleaned, welled anew with blood. "His remains are in something of a state."

The four sweat- and soot-streaked sailors loosed chuckles. "Aye, a bit of a mess," one of them muttered. "A fookin' tragedy, that," another said to more laughter.

"Soaking Madge said she'd handle it." Terence tried and failed to mask his amusement.

"I'm happy you poltroons are entertaining yourselves," Cinnamon said, disconnecting the comlink's handset from its wire and clipping it to the band of her shorties. Over the sailors' laughter at her name-calling she said, "Any ideas on how we make the move inconspicuous?"

Sei Javala shook his head. "The fog will help some. But we certainly don't want to be lingering on deck. Ideally, arriving on the deck same time as --" The handset vibrated against her hip, and

the comlink speakers crackled.. Cinnamon expected to hear the Quartz fellow's terse voice or Goblin Rod. Instead she heard something else entirely.

"That's fookin' Malakite," Terence said and shushed everyone before they could chatter over the voice. "Har. He's wonderin' when that 'old arsehole's' gonna get *Ghost* under sail. Figurin' that one o' his own was to be handlin' the `link, I suppose."

"You speak Malakite?"

Terence Eight Legs winked at Cinnamon. "If you was an expeditionary sailor in the Waveries, you had to. Them Malakites are greedy for our land and resources and whatnot and they been sniffin' around down south for decades with their posy, shark-grinnin' diplomatic retinues." He added some snoot to the last two words. "Never knew when we might haveta sniff back. Want me to respond?"

"Never mind," Cinnamon said, thumbing the handset's volume knob down . "We have to move the Captain right now. Let's go."

The four sailors lifted the gurney with a collective grunt. They balanced Rodonovan precariously on the narrow canvas, his legs hanging absurdly over the end, spread wide to accommodate the two bearers. His blood had already left a fist-sized black stain on the olive canvas. He mumbled incomprehensibly.

They shuffled along the overlook, keeping low, and stopped at the ladder. No one said anything, but Cinnamon thought, *this will be a trick*, as she gauged the steep descent. "We wait here until Goblin Rod arrives," she said, peeking over the railing. As far as she could tell, the Malakite sailors, apparently none the wiser despite Eight Legs' worry, relaxed at their deck guns on the nearest ships. She could see conversations, smiles, easiness. "Then we have to hustle the Captain down this ladder without you tumbling and without him slipping off." Twilight lingered. Her handset scratched and murmured with clipped snatches of impenetrable Western military lingo. The heaviest of the fog seemed to have stalled, hanging back about a quarter league like a motley grey veil and blurring the submersibles farthest to the west into shades. Chill, silken threads of mist haunted the air surrounding *Ghost*.

"We wouldn't drop the Captain, if'n we were in the middle of a typhoon," Terence said, his swollen eye crinkling his face into a grave mask. The other three sailors looked deadly serious as well, as if she'd just insulted their mothers. Cinnamon almost laughed, but the realization that these men, with no real stake in any part of Rodonovan's quest, were the only ones still standing with him -- and her -- strangled it to a halting breath. She looked west over the railing before they saw the shame in her eyes.

Shapes burst from the wall of fog. Goblin Rod's juggernaut, *Leviathan*, and the two dreadnoughts, *The Wandering Witch* and *Tessa's Chance*, bearded in whitewater, formed a grey wedge that crushed two outlying submersibles in a puff of hull pieces. Just over the huge jug's prow, like some kind of shadow, flew the Western heliunits. Four small Vipra gunships like

Rodonovan's ornament, four plumper Falcons, and the massive three-rotored Drakar, what they called an aerial fire platform.

"Let's move!" Cinnamon said as the sound of destruction rolled over *Ghost* and the heliunits broke formation, the Drakar curling skyward, the others dropping below the height of *Leviathan's* ram. The four sailors hunkered over and hauled Rodonovan down the stairs with surprising agility. They hit the main deck, and bent at the waists, ran aft with the gurney held between them. Low grunts puffed from them, reminding Cinnamon of the strange rhythms Sei Javala had had the men making.

They halted on the port side of the lighted afterdeck where Rodonovan's heliunit used to be moored. Soaking Madge, squatted next to a black-stained grey canvas sack that had marked her trail on the black deck with a wide glossy band. Blood and bruises and sweat blotched her face, and she cradled her right arm. "I didn't know how else to move what was left of him," she said through a horrendous gash in her upper lip. Deep, exhausted breaths barked from her. Sei Javala tried to examine her injured arm, but she shook her head violently. "Not now!" She realized who she just snapped at and said, "Please, Sei, not now."

Cinnamon volumned up the handset and took a look-see over the railing. Heliunits threaded among the submersibles with the grace of innocent insects. From the Falcons' open side doors, black-clad men trained exotic weapons on the Malakite sailors, who scurried to bring ship-to-ship cannons to bear on the airborne threat. Overhead, the giant Drakar wheeled around the purpling crater of sky, its main rotors like twin parasols. The rapid tattoo of rotor blades pummeled the air like drums, echoing off the fogbank to create a mad polyrhythm.

Mantra cooed in distress, possibly at the noise, and umbrella-ed her wings protectively over the Captain's face. Rodonovan, however, was oblivious to that gesture, focused, it seemed, on things well beyond the immediate.

The handset clicked and crackled, startling Cinnamon and making her curse her jumpiness. A monotone voice just audible over the noise, said, "Black Death One, in position at heaven mark, all weapons systems gold to go," and was answered by another nonchalant, but scratchy utterance, "Copy that."

Before she could consider what that might mean, yet a third voice, this one amplified, reverberated among the vessels in Malakite.

"It's our flying lubbers," Eight Legs said, eyes roving the sky. "The accent is terrible. 'Stand down or die.' Heh heh. 'Hold your fire or be met with... an overwhelming response. Stand down.'" He paused, fresh sweat steaming off the spiders on his head. "Then it repeats."

The handset chattered again, and Commander Quartz said, "*Helldiver's Ghost*, this is Plague One, are you in position? Over."

With chilled fingers, Cinnamon fumbled the handset from her waistband. "Aye... copy... Uh, over."

"Prepare for dust-off. Over."

Leviathan had veered to the north, skirting the wall of fog, tall and long, running lights blazing like a king's cutter, while the dreads had cut south, all weapons directed at the much smaller Malakite ships. From the west, a large launch bounded toward *Ghost*, escorted by a bevy of fast boats and a single Vipra trailing behind like a gull.

Sei Javala said, "Madge, please go back down to the bay and await the launch."

"Aye." Soaking Madge jogged away, huddled over her injured arm.

The comlink crackled again: "Chaos Three in position on Resource One."

The Falcons converged on *Ghost*, Low, nearly identical voices droned from the handset: "Chaos One in position." "Chaos Two in position." "Chaos Four in position." Three Vipras faced the submersibles in a long, low arc to the east. The Falcons hovered just off portside, their rotorwash abrading the water. At the side doors of one, two Dagian Guard readied a thick-armed winch from which swung heavy black straps. On the closest Malakite ship, the sailors still wrestled with their deck weapons.

"Plague One, Chaos Two. Over."

"Copy, Chaos Two. Over."

"All bogeys remaining hard. Bogey Seven, Bogey Eight, and Bogey Nine bringing weapons to bear on Resource One. Repeat, Bogeys Seven, Eight, and Nine going red. Over."

"Copy.... Black Death, Plague One. Over."

"Copy, Plague One. Over."

"Please remove Bogey Seven from the battlespace. Over."

"Copy that."

The Drakar lit up like a sun vomiting its guts into the sea. Booming, whirring, and booming some more, it raised a fire-wrapped fountain where once were three submersibles. A gargantuan concussion slapped *Ghost*, spiking deep into Cinnamon's ears. The others grimaced and Mantra darted away aft, ducking down below deck height probably to hide on the fantail. Even Rodonovan stirred from his death reverie.

In the dirty silence that followed, the Dagian Guards renewed their warning. Cinnamon worked her jaw, trying to get her ears to pop. A surge of angry water set *Ghost* to rocking. One submersible had vanished beneath a black cloud twisting into the sky, rising like a soul from a Wavery death song. A second had foundered and another had capsized, revealing a mysterious propulsion system that, under different circumstances would've fascinated Cinnamon. Cross-

chatter sizzled from the handset, confirming what she saw: crews on the Malakite ships stepping away from their weapons, tossing arms in the air.

More Malakite echoed among the ships. Eight Legs laughed. "The Westerners just thanked them for their continued cooperation," he said.

Leviathan's launch neared *Ghost*, and a low vibration in the afterdeck told Cinnamon that the bay doors were opening. With Sei Javala accompanying the Captain to *Leviathan*, that meant she had the helm. She'd need a plan. She wished Omen was there. Gods damn him.

"Plague One, Plague Two. Over."

"Plague Two, go. Over."

"We are making out some kind of disturbance on the water. Approximately fifteen degrees aft of your grave mark. Can you confirm?"

"Copy that. Can't tell. Chaos Team, Black Death, can we get an assist?"

Various staticky voices chimed in, acknowledging the phenomenon, but unable to identify its cause. Cinnamon looked over the railing to see a patch of boiling water between the approaching launch and the closest Malakite ship. Two of the Falcons had turned bright spotlights on the area. Had one of the submersibles fired some kind of underwater weapon at the launch?

The sea blistered and burst, releasing a gray behemoth that leapt skyward. The escort *Vipra*, Chaos Three, sidled away from the thing as it *whomped* down within paces of the *Leviathan's* launch, drenching it and the fast boats with a silvery fan. Its glistening hull shed rivers of water.

"Another submersible!" Eight Legs said, as one of the *Vipras* shifted its position to cover the new ship. "Black Death, Plague One. Target new bogey. Over."

"We are locked and gold for fire. Over."

"Copy that."

Thick black smoke suddenly spewed from the new ship's superstructure and shredded into threads under the Falcons' rotor wash. "Hatch is open on new bogey," a Dagian Guard said. "Repeat, hatch is open."

"Black Death, stand by for fire call. Over."

"Standing by."

Cloaked within the twirling smoke and lighted from below by flickering fire, a figure rose. In the evenfall and thickening fog, it seemed red, blood red, and its eyes, flashing in the parrying white bands of the two spotlights glowed red too.

"We have movement on deck. Over."

"What in the hells..." Cinnamon's skin prickled.

The figure pumped a red arm in the air. It held a sword, one that glittered in the spotlights like a gem. It howled bloodlust. The handset rattled with excited hoots and singsong cries of "K-Dom!" and "Wall-to-wall!" that made Cinnamon forget her utter exhaustion and despair and stoked the fires of her annoyance. Then Colonel Quartz's voice broke through: "Plague Two, Plague One, please extract that lunatic. Over."

"All due respect, Sir, you remember what happened the last time. Over."

"Just give him his space until you get him to *Leviathan*. Over."

"Well, sir, we're combat heavy, we haven't much space to give, and he's, you know, got a sword.... Over."

"Plague Two, make the pick up... And whatever you do, don't look at him or make any sudden moves or noises. Over."

Laughs and japes followed that remark as a Falcon moved away from *Ghost* to hover over the smoldering superstructure. It settled down, down, down until it seemed it might alight on Ferracane's head. He grabbed a handle beside the side door and hoisted himself up. The Falcon peeled slowly away and curled toward *Ghost*. Cinnamon's annoyance withered as quickly as it had bloomed when she saw Kai Ferracane sitting in the doorway, legs hanging over the edge, sword across his lap. With his eyes closed, he seemed at peace; he was drenched in blood.

The Falcon sped up and faded to the north toward *Leviathan*.

"*Helldiver's Ghost*, Plague One is gold for dust off. Over."

The flurry of debris and unsecured items kicked up by the Falcons' rotor wash helped Cinnamon define "dust off." Squinting, she reached for the thick, looped straps dropping quickly from Plague One. Eight Legs helped her work one strap over Rodonovan's suddenly restless legs and under the rear of the gurney. Sei Javala fitted the other carefully over the Captain's head.

Cinnamon looked up to see a masked and goggled face peering impassively back at her from beside the winch. She tugged the line twice and thrust a fist upward to indicate they were ready. The soldier returned a black-gloved fist with an extended thumb. The gurney began to rise.

"HOLD!" Rodonovan's hoarse voice broke and his hand clutched feebly at the winch strap, flopped away and continued to hop and grasp at the air like a landed fish.

"You mustn't," Sei Javala said, trying to calm the captain. But Rodonovan swatted at the healer, then grabbed his hand, making him wince. "NO!" Rodonovan managed to turn his head toward

Cinnamon. "Set a course," he said, his eyes wide, fevered, and desperate. "Set a course east. We're going to the West."

The End