

THE LOST STAR STORIES VOLUME TWO

# THE LOST STAR'S SEA

C. LITKA



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A version of Part One of this book, “Castaways,” was originally published as “Castaways of the Lost Star” in 2016. The rest of this book is new material. Readers of “Castaways of the Lost Star” can start with Chapter 11 for the rest of Wil Litang's adventures.

If you should happen upon any mistakes, I'd be delighted to correct them as well. You can email me at [cmlitka@gmail.com](mailto:cmlitka@gmail.com) Thank you.

Information and news about my other and upcoming books, can be found here:  
C. Litka's [Works in Words Blog](#)

### Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my wife and friends who spent many hours making this book better than I could have ever made it by myself – and far more fun. I am very grateful to Sally Litka, Hannes Bimbacher, Carlos, Dale Shamp, Bwaudou Sirip, and Walt for their eagle eyes and all their helpful comments.

## Chapter 01 Things Gang A'gley

Can you dream pain?

Fear, yes. I felt that, but was the sharp splinter of pain in my head part of the dream as well? Dream-like, it had no context – no beginning, no end, no reason to be – pain and blackness as far back as I could remember. Yet it seemed too real to be a dream. I must've slipped into consciousness. Not good. I need to do something. But what?

Perhaps if I tried opening my eyes. Ouch! Maybe not.

“Oh, just do it, Willy,” I told myself.

I was very reluctant to just do it. I was pretty certain I wasn't going to like what I'd see and I wasn't that curious. Even with the pain, there was some comfort in the blackness.

"Do it now," I ordered myself.

Action may not be the antidote for the pain, but it might be for the fear lurking on the edge of my consciousness.

"What the Neb?" I tried opening them.

A new dart of pain. I stopped, took a breath and tried again, prying them open a slit.

It was still black. But not quite as black – there were fuzzy shadows and shapes. Slowly turning my head to one side – ouch! – I made out the sheen of screens and rows of buttons close to my head. Turning it the other way, I saw the outlines of a small compartment lit by a faint shaft of greenish light coming from beyond my viewing angle. I kept my eyes open long enough to recognize two pilot chairs facing a control console and a semi-familiar pattern of shadows – a boat's control compartment.

I'd seen enough.

I closed my eyes and tried to make sense of my discovery. Picturing myself within the boat's compartment I realized I was likely lying on the folded out treatment table of the boat's emergency med-unit. That semi-explained the pain, though not why I was still in pain. The med-unit should've taken care of that. I let that question slide, and tackled the big one. Where was I, and why was I in pain and in a dark ship's boat?

I came up blank. All blackness. No memories, beyond a sense of self. Fighting panic, I told myself that the blackness could be explained by the pain in my head.

I lifted a hand to my forehead to find a painful lump over my left eye with a dart of pain that ricocheted around my head when I touched it. It felt odd, dead-like. That took several seconds to register – I was feeling a synth-skin patch. Right. A blow to the head, now patched. Don't remember doing that, but I must've. Where did that get me?

Nowhere.

I decided I needed to do something more. Should I sit up? I considered doing it.

Sometime later – "Anytime now," I told myself.

"Easier said than done." But I tried anyway. It hurt and I didn't get far. It took me awhile, but eventually I realized that I was strapped to the treatment table. Finding and releasing the strap, I swung upright easily enough – the boat was in free fall – and stared about the small, dim lit compartment through the little flashes of light before my eyes and darts of pain. The boat was eerily silent, and with no status lights glowing, clearly powerless – dead.

I studied the shadow shapes. The details were unfamiliar. It wasn't the Starry Shore's gig or longboat – that much came back to me from out of the darkness. Ah, had to be the Rift Raven's gig, left behind aboard the Starry Shore. I'd taken it to return to the Archipelago of the Tenth Star.

To kill Hawker Vinden. A stupid idea. Bad karma. Not that Vinden didn't need killing. I just wasn't the one to do it. Too Unity Standard. Clearly it had proved to be an ill-considered idea, though try as I might, I couldn't push the curtain of blackness apart wide enough to know how it had gone so wrong.

"Are you going to find the answers just sitting here, Willy?" I asked myself, and then replied, "No, but do I really want to find the answers?"

Not that I had a choice. I was still alive.

I was surprised to note that I was wearing a darter on my hip. I didn't wear darters as a rule. Not unless I was going out into the Pela. You always wore darters out in the Pela. There are dragons and talon-tigers about. That thought released an additional rush of memories.

I remembered taking over control of the gig from Botts – who had been remotely piloting it from the Starry Shore – on reaching the edge of the Pela and just before I lost radio contact with the ship, I reminded Molaye to give me twelve days and then clear out for the Unity. I then followed the string of laser-linked buoys to Redoubt Island, periodically sending a brief message to Tenry aboard the Rift Raven, without a response. Since radio range is very limited in the Pela with all its islands and atmosphere, I wasn't concerned, and so cautiously pressed on.

Cautiously being the key word. I'd a feeling I wouldn't be warmly welcomed back by anyone, unless

it was with missiles. Tenry, at least, would give me a chance to explain, and warn me off, if he felt it was too dangerous to make contact with Min.

I reached Redoubt Island without receiving a response, so I was not surprised when the radar showed no hunting party or guard boats around it. As it came into visual, I found it floating serenely, fresh and green in the light blue-green sky, with the usual birds, minor dragons, flying feathered lizards, and fist-sized beetles darting through its spiny forests, soaring over its little mossy glens and circling its knobby, lichen covered knolls. I edged the boat closer. The entrance to the secret redoubt was a black shadow in the vine laced cliff. The paths radiating from the cave were still distinct and the mooring spars that had held the anchored warships off the island were floating in a tangle of vines along the shore. I remembered feeling a mixture of disappointment and relief. I was slightly ashamed about that relief.

With the fleet gone, my options narrowed, but got less iffy. I'd return to the airless outer region, and there, await the Cimmadar fleet's emergence from the Pela. Once we were both in the airless region, I could deliver my warnings by radio from millions of kilometers away, well out of missile range. And as long as they were still in a hurry to reach their first objective, the Cimmadar space station in the shell-reef, that emergence would be sooner rather than later.

Still, something, obviously, went wrong.

But what?

Blackness. Well, not quite. The darter.

There was one other reason for returning to Redoubt Island. Naylea Cin. That one had too many strands to neatly unravel. I just knew I had to land. And so I must've, hence the darter on my hip.

Then...

Blank. And try as I might, I could not dredge up any memory of landing, nor, any explanation of how I ended up in this condition. And sitting in the dark compartment, I had a very incomplete idea of what this condition involved, save that I was pretty sure I wasn't going to like it.

"I suppose I might as well face it," I said to myself. "Aye," reluctantly.

I slipped off the edge of the med-unit table, my boots latching on to the deck, and stood, the pain sloshing around my head with every movement. I glanced down to my boots and noted that I was wearing the claw attachments used to enable walking on the gravity-less islands. I was set to leave the gig – but then the darter on my hip told me that as well.

I punched a few buttons on the med unit just to make sure it was dead. It was. So I started towards the companionway, brushing some floating leaves and twigs out of my way and noted that the air had a sweet tang of crushed vegetation to it. Not good. And on reaching the short companionway to the gig's main compartment, I wasn't surprised to see a light streaming through a wide hole torn in the crumpled bow of the gig. Beyond, a wall of vegetation, with faint, greenish light filtering through it.

As I stepped into the dim compartment, one of the darker green shadows stirred. My heart jumped to my throat as it uncoiled into a long, slender, crocodile-like dragon in green feathers. It yawned, showing lots of teeth, and lazily undulated towards me with a swish of its tail, swimming through the air as if in a pool of clear, green-lit water to drift right up to me, touching its cold nose to mine. I stood stock still and croaked 'Hi.'

She studied me for several seconds with her bright black eyes, and then, opening her mouth a little, hissed dismissively, sending a puff of rather rotten dragon's breath my way. That said, she waved her four limbs to back off a bit and turning away, slowly undulating her body and tail to swim across the compartment and out through the hole in the bow to disappear from sight in the crumpled foliage.

My heartbeat, pounding painfully in my head, slowly returned to normal. I had recognized her as a sentry-serpent like the one, if not the same one, who had been nesting at the entrance to the hidden base on Redoubt Island. I'd gotten to, reluctantly, know her better when she and her youngsters had taken shelter aboard the Raven during the talon-hawk attack. The little ones were everywhere, and mom, well she seemed to have taken great delight in swimming up behind me whenever I was working just to hear

me yelp when I turned to find myself nose to nose with a feathered crocodile. I'd little doubt that this was the same sentry-serpent. I'd only met the one full grown one, but this one's attitude seemed awfully familiar.

Looking around I could see the compartment had been greatly compressed by a powerful collision. Half the compartment was a crumpled and torn hunk of debris. I couldn't remember what had happened. It was a wonder I was alive to wonder about it at all.

The next question – where was I? Likely Redoubt Island, but that would hardly explain the condition of the ship. I'd have to look outside. Stepping over to the gaping hole, I discovered a narrow passage in the tangle of vines along the hull of the boat. I wiggled out and pulled myself up along the hull for a couple of meters to stand on the engine room bulkhead in the milky Pela sunlight. The gig, or rather the wreck of it, lay tangled in vines at the bottom of a ten-meter-deep vine-walled crater, no doubt formed by the impact of the gig in this deep mat of vines. The engine compartment was another crumpled mass of metal twisted off to one side. I felt a wave of cold black despair welling up within me. There was no way home. And the Pela, for all its beauty, was no place for Wil Litang. Fate could have been kinder and let me die with the gig.

As the despair settled into a dull black ache, I tried to cheer myself up with the thought that the Cimmadarians may have left enough behind in their base to make my chances of surviving a little better than it appeared. I couldn't be too far from the base. Best find out where I was, so I stepped over to the almost perpendicular wall of torn and twisted vines and started up the side of the crater.

I found a flattened plain of vines on top, stretching before me for some 60 meters, ending in the pale sky, dotted with the vague shapes of distant islands. The battered vines must have been flattened by some great force or impact. Out of habit, I glanced up and around and then behind me, checking for nearby dragons. I saw none, but sitting on the edge of the island, not more than 20 meters away was what I took to be a spaceer with the sentry-serpent draped across his or her lap. The spaceer was facing away from me, but wore a spaceer's cap at a rakish angle over wild grey hair, and the black jumpsuit type work garment favored by engineers. He or she was idly petting or combing the feathers of the sentry-serpent. For a long moment I put the image down to the blow on my head. I closed my eyes for a second to clear my mind, but they were still there when I opened them again, so I scrambled up, and setting my toe claws firmly into the torn and matted vines, started for them.

'Hello!' I called out as I carefully crossed the little island.

The sentry-serpent, who had been watching me approach, hissed. The spaceer turned toward me and said, in a gravelly voice, 'Ah, Litang, so you've finally decided to join the living. Good. I was worried that the knock on your head was more serious than I took it to be. You certainly bled enough. Patched you up the best I could without med-unit.'

I stopped and stared. It was Glen Colin. No, but a close match. He had the same droopy mustache, and dissipated, whiskery face, the same oily jumpsuit open to the waist with a dirty grey shirt underneath. But he wasn't quite right, he was like a dream Glen Colin.

'Are you all right?' he asked, seeing me stop and stare.

'Yes, no. Sorry. My head feels like it has a spike through it. Who are you and what happened? The blow to my head seems to have set my wits adrift.'

'Well then, don't go banging your head on the control console.'

'Yes, certainly, but why was I doing that?'

'I suppose because you were unconscious when the island blew up and I was too busy with one thing and another to stop you.'

"The island blew up?" I muttered, still dazed and confused as I reached the edge of the flattened vines where they abruptly fell off into the bottomless sky. The spaceer was sitting on a large vine, feet dangling over the ragged edge, though I noted that he'd carefully slipped one leg under a smaller vine for a bit of safety. In these weightless conditions an unexpected strong gust of wind could lift you off if you weren't careful. The big sentry-serpent shifted about to watch me.



'I'm sorry, but you'd better start at the beginning. I'm completely adrift. Who are you, how do you know me, and how did we get here?'

The spaceer looked up and regarded me with bright, laughing, grey eyes under his – no, her – (false) bushy brows. 'Forgotten me, have you? We've crossed orbits before.'

I recognized the eyes. Even in that false face, I recognized her eyes. We had indeed crossed orbits before and they sent such a dart of joy and relief through my heart that I forgot my pain. 'Naylea!' I exclaimed, and just stood beaming down at her. I hadn't killed her.

'Blast!' he/she frowned, and then laughed under her drooping mustache, 'How'd you recognize me? This is our finest living mask and voice transponder; it should've been impenetrable!'

'Well, you recognized me – with my beard – on the flagship.'

'Who said I did?' she growled in her strange, raspy voice. 'You were just a body in the line of fire. Even if I killed you, you weren't likely to fall out of my way, so I needed a diversion to give me a second or two to get a clear shot at my prime targets. Discharging a dart on your cap emblem should've provided one.'

Her eyes didn't lie, and I saw in them that he/she wasn't expecting me to believe that. 'Right,' I said with a smile.

'Besides, you should've missed.'

'You can't beat luck,' I replied, and then, crouching down, I took one of her hands in mine. 'And then it deserted me. I'm so sorry... I was so careless...'

'What are you raving about, Litang?' he/she growled, giving me a look I couldn't read between her uncanny mask and racing thoughts.

'You see, it never occurred to me to post a guard by your sleep pod. I assumed Vinden would come after me, not you, so his men just slipped aboard and kidnapped you.'

'Oh, that. Never mind. It gave me a second chance to kill Min and Vinden.'

She wouldn't be alive, if she had tried, so I ignored that.

'I felt terrible. You were my responsibility...'

'I was your prisoner. And I gather from the gossip that you made quite a fool of yourself making me one.'

'I'd no choice. A matter of principle. Several of them. And yet after all that fuss, I just let them kidnap you as easily as simply cutting a door-panel latch. What a fool I was!'

He/she, Cin/ Glen Colin, gave me a long, searching look from under those shaggy brows, and that strange face, and then said, still in a low gravelly voice, 'No harm done. You were also careless about disarming me which allowed me to look after myself.'

'It wasn't carelessness. At the time I was simply concerned about getting you in stasis before you recovered from the dart. D'Lay told me that stealths often had implanted capacitors that greatly nullify a dart's effects, so I was in a hurry to get you secured. We could finish disarming you before we revived you. I wanted to get my thoughts in order before we talked.'

She noticed that I still held her hand, and gently pulled it away. I sat down on the edge of the island beside her and the serpent dragon, planted her tail on my lap and gave me a meaningful look.

'She wants you to preen her. She had a rough ride. See how messed up her feathers are? She's very fussy about them. They have to go just so,' he/she said, combing her fingers through them. 'Each in its place. You never ruffle them...' which she then proceeded to do.

The dragon reared its head back and opening its wide mouth, gave a loud angry 'hisssss!'

'Oh hush, Siss,' exclaimed Cin, gently swatting the angry sentry-serpent lightly on its crocodile snout. 'I was just showing Litang what he shouldn't do.'

Which pretty much summed up Cin. Annoying a wild, three-meter-long dragon just to show me what annoys it. And then scolding it when it got annoyed.

'Why the sentry-serpent anyway?' I asked, carefully combing some ruffled feathers into place – never one to ruffle a dragon's feathers when it could be helped.

'I'm not sure I'd a choice.'

It, she, Siss, gave a small bark and wagged the tip of its tail. She swung her head around to give me an eye.

'If she's the sentry-serpent from the grotto we're old shipmates. She took shelter aboard the Raven during the talon-hawk attack.'

'She is. I set up my base in a crevasse behind her nest in order to discourage casual callers. We bonded, didn't we Siss?'

A bark of agreement from Siss.

'And once everyone left, it was just Siss and I. She must have gotten used to company, so when it came time to leave, she insisted on coming along.'

'Ah, yes... About that. I don't seem to remember, well, anything really. I take it I landed on Redoubt Island...' I muttered, rubbing my forehead. The pain had returned. 'What exactly happened after that? And why was I banging my head on the console?'

'Aye, you landed. I was watching from the cavern. And when you emerged to tie the gig up, I put a dart in your back,' he/she laughed.

'Why? You must've guessed I'd landed for you, on the chance that you were still live.'

'Hardly a given. Didn't matter. You had just handed me another chance to complete my mission. All I had to do was capture your gig. I figured putting a dart in your back before you sealed the boat it would save us from a lot of unpleasantness, and – for you – pain, if it prove necessary to convince you to unseal it and turn it over to me. Besides, it felt good...' he/she smiled and mimicked aiming and firing a darter.

All likely true. I shrugged. 'No matter. What's another dart between us? So what happened next? You said the island blew up...'

'I assume so. I hauled you into the gig and secured you in the co-pilot's chair, gathered my gear from the cavern, and after failing to chase Siss out – she insisted on coming along – I had just closed the gig's hatch when the whole Neb-blasted island must have exploded.

'It could have been a timed explosion – burning bridges and all that. They had been expecting the Empress's navy to arrive at any moment, and had only sailed less than a round before you arrived. Or perhaps your boat's arrival set off a delayed booby trap. Who knows?

'In any event, something big and powerful went off. Fortunately for us, the hunk of the island you landed on remained intact, shielding us from the full chaos of the blast and carrying us along as it shot outwards. I was slammed to the deck by the acceleration and had to crawl to the control compartment to try to power-up the boat. We were just slowing down enough for me to climb into the pilot's chair to get it under power when we hit the second island which sent the gig cartwheeling across it. I was hanging on for dear life, you were banging your head on the control console and poor Siss here was hanging on to both of us, terrified...'

Siss protested with growl.

'You were, my dear. It was all very frightening. Nothing to be ashamed of,' cooed Cin and then continued, 'And then we landed on this little piece of rock and vines – the gig dead; poor Siss was pretty shook up, and you were bleeding all over the place. I patched you up the best I could, soothed Siss, and came out here to get a read on our situation.'

I had a hundred questions, but the pain in my head was back, and I tried, without noticeable success, to think of what to say or do next.

'When can we expect the rescue boat?' Cin asked, breaking into my confused train of thoughts.

'Huh? Rescue boat?' I glanced across to the old, disreputable spaceer engineer with Cin's grey eyes. Perhaps it was all a dream after all. I hadn't gotten around to considering a rescue.

'How long will your crew wait before they come looking for you?'

What should I say? And did it matter? Couldn't seem to think clearly, so I went with the truth.

'They're not. I told them to give me twelve days and if I was not back, sail without me. I'd find my own

way home after that.'

'And they'll obey you?' he/she laughed.

"They might." I doubted it, which was a bright thought. 'But if they don't and send a boat in, they'd still have trouble finding us now that the island's gone.'

'Oh, I'm sure you could get the radio up and running.'

'Maybe. The control compartment didn't seem to be too damaged. We'd need to rig a new antenna, but as long as we're not too far from Redoubt Island we should be able to make contact.'

He/she fished a compact survey viewer out from one of the pockets of her grimy jumpsuit, and put it to her eyes. 'I've been tracking our movement against that large island. I think it's the island we bounced across. Redoubt Island may have been ten kilometers or so beyond it. The viewer scale is showing that we're still drifting away from that large island at about 20 kilometers an hour,' she said, pointing to a distant shadow of an island.

'The thing is, I have a feeling this little island is drifting in the air currents. With the blast behind us, we should be slowing down and we're not.'

'Aye,' I muttered while trying to do the math in my head. 'At 20 kilometers an hour, we could be six thousand kilometers away from the point where they'd start looking, assuming the current continues to take us away.'

'Too far for radio contact?'

'Yes,' I said, and glanced about. The sky was brighter looking away from the island. 'And it looks like we're drifting inwards, so there's no chance of them passing close enough on their inward journey to pick up our signals.'

'So we could be here for a while.'

'For forever,' I muttered, as a wave of black despair closed in around me. I wasn't going to grow cha on a green peak above a blue shimmering sea. Or see my family and shipmates again. Or live a quiet, civilized, Unity Standard life. Or a long one...

'Wil?'

'Yes?' I said, giving her a curious glance, catching the "Wil" instead of the usual "Litang."

'I need to make something clear – now, at the start. You need to know that I am still bound by my sacred vows to complete my mission, or die in the attempt.'

'Which is?'

'The primary one is to eliminate the two usurpers, Min and Vinden. Failing that, I was to disrupt their campaign as much as possible. But there is one more – my old, and still uncompleted, assignment – eliminating you.'

I sighed. I had hoped... 'You've seen what's left of the gig. The Min and Vinden assignment is over. It's a planet astern. As for eliminating me, well, you've passed up too many chances for me to believe you will. The last time was just an hour ago,' I said, touching my synth-skin patch. I then added, 'It never mattered anyway and it certainly doesn't matter here and now. It's time for us to chart a new course, Naylea.'

'I can't. I have no honorable course but to proceed as instructed, even if it is a trivial assignment – a lesson for me, a punishment for my failures. But there's more than honor or orders involved. You've destroyed me, and in doing so, ended my family. So there's revenge as well.'

Her grey eyes had grown icy with anger, and perhaps sorrow. She wasn't teasing. And yet, if revenge she wanted, she could've had it on the flagship deck. I sighed. 'All I ever did was try to stay alive – and would've failed, except that you let me live, Naylea. It wasn't me who destroyed you or your family, it was you. But that's a planet astern as well. Our old life ended when the island exploded. We'll never return to the Nebula – it's gone forever. We have a new life now, and we could, perhaps, make it a good one if we worked together as shipmates and friends.'

She shook her head. 'I was dead long before the island blew up. I'm only alive to die with honor. My revenge, Litang, will just sweeten the poison,' he/she said fiercely, before adding with an almost



apologetic shrug, 'But I need you for a while – until the boat is repaired. So you live, for a while. Or even longer, if you can find the courage.'

I just looked at her. 'Right.'

'I mean it.'

'Right now, living longer is no incentive at all.'

'Oh, it will be, once you're feeling better. You're armed, you know? It's for my protection as well as yours – four eyes, two weapons against any dragons, talon-hawks and such. It's also your chance for that longer life. You're free to try to dart me – kill me or throw me overboard. Or escape, if you are too Unity Standard to kill me. I make no conditions. Saving my life on Redoubt Island bought you this chance to live, if you've the courage to take it.'

'I can't...'

'That's up to you. What is not, is making the repairs needed to allow me to continue with my primary mission.'

'You've seen the wreck. Shoot me now.'

'Oh, you'll come up with something, I'll see to that – with pleasure,' he/she added with a leer. 'You're a spaceer, after all.'

Siss, her head between us, watched us both intently with her bright black eyes.

She was playing her cat and mouse tease game again. She'd lost on Despar.

'I repeat, Cin, shoot me, and be done with it. I've no intention of lifting a finger to help you and I won't play the mouse again. If you feel you owe me a favor, use that Cimmadarian side arm you're wearing to put a hole in me. I'm too Unity Standard for the Pela. Do it, if you have the courage,' I added with a leer of my own.

'Oh, that's just your headache talking, Litang.'

'The Neb it is! Do it,' I replied, angry enough not to care, confident enough on another level, to believe she couldn't, or at least wouldn't.

'I'll do it in my own time – when I no longer have any use for you.'

'Right. And here we are again. Every time you've found an excuse not to kill me, you've failed. Don't keep making the same mistake again and again. I don't need you. If the gig can be made mobile once more, I can do without you. You played this game and lost once already. Just do it.'

'My, such spirit, Will!' he/she exclaimed, taunting me in her faux gravely voice from under her ridiculous mustache. 'You're armed. And, I gather, sailed the drifts for years while I slept. Show me what they've taught you.'

'They've taught me not to be a fool. I'll shoot you in the back while you are asleep.'

'He/she laughed. 'Then the drifts have taught you well. Still, I'll risk it. And as I said, I need your spaceer expertise, and wouldn't mind having to, ah, compel, you to supply it.'

'You were smiling like that when I put those darts in you on Despar. Don't underestimate me, Cin.'

'And instead of finishing me off or leaving me to the Legionnaires, you tucked me safely out of sight and left my darter with me.'

'I debated leaving you for them,' I replied feebly, as the flare of my anger faded.

'But you didn't – and for that weakness you would've died later on the landing field, but for that lummo of a legionnaire getting in the way of my dart.'

'No. You shot him to save me, yet again,' I replied, unwilling to concede her anything.

He/she just laughed and shook her head. 'You don't really believe that do you?'

'Neb! It fits the pattern, doesn't it? But what I believe or not doesn't matter. What you need to consider is that I'm not the Unity Standard fool I was back then.'

'Right.'

'And I've a grandmother from the drifts. Blood will tell.' I never considered revealing my St Bleyth heritage. First, because I couldn't prove it to her, and secondly, because my St Bleyth ancestors would've sneered at me. Even as a half-blood St Bleythian, the heritage of 500 generations should

enable me to conquer Cin without hauling them in.

He/she laughed, eyes bright now with amusement, 'Well, you and your drifteeer granny can try any time you like – awake or asleep.'

Cin was enjoying playing her game of cat and mouse – her good spirits restored. I wasn't, so I gave up.

We lapsed into silence once again. I remembered to search the sky again for dragons while I brooded on my fate. While sitting alongside a crocodile in feathers and a girl in whiskers who promised to kill me some day, it struck me that fate, the Black Neb, or whatever superstition ruled chance in the Pela had a sense of humor. A rather dark sense of humor. And yet, was it? I could've been alone, which, after spending my life in the small, closed worlds of a space ship, would've been far more depressing, and frightening. If I had to face life in the Pela, having the fearless Cin and a three-meter dragon at my side would make it a whole lot, well, safer, especially since I've never taken Cin's threat to kill me as seriously as I should. She could be cold and cruel, and perhaps in anger she could do it, but not in cold blood. I had hoped, for a few minutes, that finding ourselves castaway together in the Pela, that she'd put the past behind her and we could be shipmates, friends.

I glanced across to her. A very dark sense of humor. Yet I'd not kick.

I turned away to stare at the sky that surrounded us. I could see half a dozen sizable islands around us, lush green fading to hazy blue in the distance. The closer ones were bright and colorful, trimmed with flowering vines, as was our own island. The sweet smell of sap and crushed flowers laced the little slipstream breeze as the island leisurely tumbled in the stream of air that was carrying us ever further from rescue. Brightly feathered birds darted overhead, while the lazier feathered lizards swam through the ragged edges of the vines, idly chasing butterflies and stalking the big, dark green beetles that chugged and buzzed about us.

There were undoubtedly far less pleasant places to be marooned on. It could've been a rock in the cold, airless drifts. But no place was further from home. I glanced again at the whiskered spaceer-engineer that was Cin. She was staring out at the sky as well and idly running her fingers through the feathers of the sentry-serpent on her lap. I suppose there might be far more pleasant companions to be cast away with as well. You know, ones who were not promising to kill you. But to my dismay, I couldn't think of any, assuming, that is, she'd eventually take off that eerie mask.

I sighed. I needed to settle some things, both in my own aching head, and with Cin, which meant saying things out loud – now, or never. And I'd a feeling never wouldn't have been healthy.

'I'm sorry,' I said, after I'd carefully charted my course and gathered what was left of my wits and courage.

'For what?'

'For getting angry. Forget everything I said. Do what you must. Be true to your ideals, your heritage. Defend the honor of your family to the end.'

'Nice of you to say so,' he/she said sarcastically. 'That'll make it all so much easier.'

I didn't let that deter me. I pushed ahead. 'And I'll be true to mine as well. We both know that I can't kill you. And I won't. So you can sleep soundly at night...'

'How about during the day?' he/she laughed. There is no night in the Pela.

'Yes, during the day as well. And, well, I've no intention of jumping ship either. I'm too used to company, of having shipmates around me. I've no desire to be alone in the Pela. Whatever happens, I'll live longer with you than without you. So in the end, when I'm no longer useful to you, you'll just have to kill me. Sorry.'

'I can do it.'

'We'll see. There is, however, one more thing I need to say to you. I shouldn't be saying it now – it's far too soon. But, well, I don't want you feeling angry at either yourself, or me, so I'll just say that you've not been a fool for nothing.'

'A fool, Litang?'

'A fool over me. You know; letting me live when you should've killed me. I know you're rather fond of me, Naylea – perhaps on account of our night together on Lontria...'

'Ha! You were out cold the whole night, my dear! I was just about to give you a stimulant jab to get you awake for our bedroom scene, when you started coming around.'

'So you say. Unfortunately, I remember nothing of it. I do, however, remember that kiss before the duel. And what you said after you kissed me.'

He/she gave me a searching look. 'I believe I told you to die gallantly. But you didn't die, did you?'

'Aye, and you were rather annoyed by that, as I remember. You've a bit of a temper, my dear. Yet, in the end, you let me live.'

'You're imagining that. I had no viable choice but to do so, if I didn't want to end up in Felon's riff.'

'Perhaps. I thought so at the time as well. Yet you had bolt holes and time to get away... Anyway, Neb help me, what I'm trying to say is that in the end, you can't quite bring yourself to kill me because you find yourself rather fond of me for some reason...'

'Ha!' he/she laughed. The sentry-serpent barked and wiggled the tip of her tail.

'And you also suspect that I'm rather fond of you as well,' I said, sailing on. 'I want to tell you straight out that I am rather fond of you, though I haven't many illusions – I've seen murder in your eyes, and your pleasure in my pain. I know there's a wide, cold, ruthless, and sadistic streak in your character. I'm not blinded by my fondness for you. But on the other hand, you have a certain cheerful, wild, sort of joy about you. You're fearless in the face of danger. And, well, you're as happy as I am to find us here together. Oh, you have a sharp edge, but I don't mind that. There's a friendship between us.'

'Ha!'

'Deny it if you want, but it shows. And while it might be my Unity Standardness that makes me reciprocate that feeling, I think there's more to my fondness for you than can be explained by either my Unity Standardness, the little time we've been together, or the circumstances....'

'You're raving, Litang. That blow to your head must've been far more serious than I imagined.'

'Laugh if you like. I'm fine with that for now. I'm only saying this now so you'll not think you've made a fool of yourself over me and then get mad at yourself – and take it out on me.'

'I don't need an excuse for that.'

I shrugged. 'True. But I think that perhaps for the first time in a long time, you have a friend...'

Siss growled a protest.

'Two friends, then. And well, I really think you're going to find me useful for a long, long time to come...' That last part was mostly wishful thinking.

Cin gave me a long look that I couldn't quite read, and then said angrily, 'You are the snakiest, most devious person I've ever crossed orbits with, Litang. You could give Siss here lessons on being a serpent.'

Siss hissed her objection to being called a second class serpent.

'Everything you said is so sweetly self-serving, it's sickening,' he/she added.

Which was true, of course. No denying that. Still... 'Self-serving it may well be, but the fact is, I like you. And now you've heard me say it out loud – no wondering, no guessing.'

'You're lying to save your life.'

'No. I'm a very cautious fellow, Naylea. I know that if I lied to you about this you'd not only kill me, you'd take your time doing it, just as you promised on Despar. So I've been very careful not to overstate my case. You just saw how happy I was to find you alive. I wanted to put that into words. However foolish you may've been in sparing me, whatever price you've had to pay for doing so, it has been, well, as I said, not for nothing. It's been for friendship at the very least.'

And with that I found I'd said all I could safely say. I'd not tell her that I'd fallen in love with her, because I'd not, not to the point where I'd admit it even to myself. But then, I'm rather reluctant to admit things like that. And with my encounter with Min only months past, it would've seemed wrong. I just didn't know what I felt, nor the depth of whatever it was I did feel, or the price to be paid.

Cin, grotesque behind her whiskered cheeks, droopy mustache, and bushy brows, said nothing more, but her eyes, well I'm not sure what they said either, but there was nothing in them I found to fear.

Siss barked softly and wagged the tip of her tail.

'I'll see if I can get the med-unit up and running,' I said, carefully lifting off Siss's tail, so that I could rise. 'I need to treat my head.'

'Yes, you do, Litang. Take your time. Do a thorough job of it. You've been babbling. And after that, see if you can get the synth-galley up and running as well. I'm getting rather hungry. Make yourself useful,' he/she said with cool, but laughing eyes.

'Right,' I said, and climbing to my feet, gave the sky one last glance – no dragons – and walked back to the impact crater.

## Chapter 02 A Visitor

01

The gig's emergency equipment locker survived intact, as designed, so we had a micro-reactor generator to power the boat, plus plasma cutters, welders, and power tools to make repairs. Things do go wrong in space and provisions are made to deal with the things that do. Half the wrecks in & Kin's flats arrived under their own power.

Connecting the micro-reactor to an auxiliary power input port brought the control compartment to life with a galaxy of red, yellow, and even a few green status lights. The med-unit's status lights were one of those glowing green ones, so within minutes my head was being treated and the pain gradually erased, allowing me to find enough optimism to motivate me to tackle the synth-galley. That, and with the pain gone, I found I was hungry as well.

Unlike the med-unit, the synth-galley was ablaze in red status lights. I downloaded the gig's manual to my com link and ran a diagnostic on it to identify what was wrong and how to fix it. Its problems were mostly confined to its below deck plumbing, so I set about pulling its lower panels and surrounding deck panels to get at its discrete, but necessary, connection to the gig's sanitary system which supplied the raw material for synth food. I found a floating jumble of uncoupled tubes, pumps, tanks, power lines and sensor connections in a pool of leaking sludge. Clearly, the underside of the gig hit something hard enough to displace the plumbing.

Looking at the mess, I lost a bit of my appetite.

Starting with the sanitation unit, I pumped the sludge back into its tank, and then, set about restoring the rest of the mechanical units and tanks to their proper places, more or less. I then reconnected the power cables, sensors, pipes and tubes using the gig's manual on my com link as a guide. Fortunately, the tangle of tubes was flexible enough to conform to the slightly realigned units.

Sometime during the process, Cin and Siss showed up.

'Ah, being useful. Good. Need a hand?' he/she asked, crouching down beside me as I lay, belly to the deck, silently cursing while blindly groping for an awkwardly-placed nub to attach a tube to.

'Thanks, but I don't think an extra hand will speed things along. Tight quarters. Still, I should have it up and running within an hour.'

'Good work, Litang. Feeling better, I trust?'

'Much.'

'Right. Then I'll rest until you've got it operational.'

'There should be hammocks in the locker,' I said, pointing to the other side of the passageway.

He/she nodded, stood up, snagged a hammock from the locker and disappeared into the control compartment. Siss stuck around for a few minutes, but seeing that I wasn't going to preen her, swam off with a flick of her broad, feathered tail and went outside again, hopefully to guard us from the riffraff of the island.

02

I touched the button on the display panel and (thankfully) clear boiling water filled the covered mug with the swirling cha leaves. I didn't travel without cha. I disconnected it and held the warm mug in my hands, watching the cha leaves unfold in amber swirls. Would I ever taste real cha again once my supply was exhausted? The galley seemed to be working fine and with Cin still napping, I decided to make a quick inspection of the gig before awakening her. The landing jets set in the underside of the gig offered a vague hope of getting the gig somewhat mobile – and that only with a lot of blind optimism, seeing that the displaced plumbing indicated possible extensive damage to the underside. I needed to know if we had any hope of escaping the Pela.

Crawling back into the milky light, I climbed up to the engine compartment bulkhead and stepped to the other side. There was a large ball of crumpled hull and machinery in the way, and the vines obscured most of the undercarriage, but I pushed my way deep enough into them to get a glimpse of three landing jets that seemed undamaged, with the promise of more. There was a long dent, but it seemed fairly narrow. I'd need a better look, but with what I'd seen, I was optimistic enough to start forming plans. Which alarmed me. I've found that every time I let myself get optimistic, I get a dart in the back, or the equivalent. I could only hope the worst had already happened. But even that thought was tempting the Black Neb, yet again.

I cleared my mind, and climbed back down to cabin to sip hot cha until I decided I was hungry enough to awaken Cin. I stepped into the dim control compartment. She'd slung the mesh hammock along the port bulwark and hung her sidearm on the nav console next to me, no doubt just to tease or tempt me. I didn't fall for it. I just stood silently watching her for a minute before she gave up, opened her eyes and smiled under that Neb-blasted mustache.

'All fixed?'

'I believe so. Breakfast in bed? Entree no.1 is Vin-dre, with fresh greens and pasta, meal no. 2 is Char-nuts in a light sauce with vegetables and rice, plus there are ten other buttons I can push. Just pick a number and take your chances.'

'I think, Captain, that with your permission, I'll sign on as cook – and owner,' she said, swinging out of the hammock.

'You're more than welcome to both. I seem to remember that you sailed as cook for your passage to Despar.'

'Aye. Cooking is my one domestic skill. It's entry into all sorts of places – from dives, to palaces. A useful skill in my work. And while it's not for me to say, I know my way around synth food machines. Captain Flory was very generous with his praise.'

'Take your time, I'll clear the debris out of the compartment and see if any furnishings survived the crash intact.'

By the time Cin produced two steaming meals under their covers, I'd gathered up and shoved the loose leaves and branches outside and pried two slightly askew acceleration chairs up from their storage slots in the warped deck.

'Next time it'll take a lot less time. I had to manually program in a lot of spice and texture specifications. I hope you like it,' he/she added, with, a rather surprising amount of sincerity, and trepidation. 'It's a Tienterra dish.'

'Well if it tastes even half as good as it smells, it'll be delicious.'

It was, and I told her so, enthusiastically praising both the taste and the textures of the meal – which is far harder to create than taste alone.

'Oh, don't be such an oily serpent, Litang. It's annoying.'

'I'm not being an oily serpent. I'm merely giving you the compliments you've earned. This tastes and eats like real, grown food. Trust me, food was one of the hallmarks of the Starry Shore. We had our own moss garden and grew much of our own food. And our cooks were from Mycolmtre so I'm used to spicy foods as well. My compliments are sincere.'

He/she shrugged, but didn't look displeased.

'Besides, I'm very Unity Standard. Being pleasant is simply just part of my nature.'

'I hope you're good for other things as well.'

'That sounds promising...'

'I'm referring to repairing this boat.'

'I fixed the synth-galley, didn't I? So you see, I have my uses. I needn't snivel and scrape to save my wretched life. So if I am pleasant and complimentary, it is simply my nature, and the company. And I'll boldly add that this meal would be even more enjoyable, if you'd take that grotesque mask off and quit distorting your voice. You've a pretty face. There's no reason why we can't spend our time together pleasantly.'

She gave me a sharp look, half angry. But only half. 'There's every reason not to. I'm still mad that you recognized me right off, and removing it requires time to do it properly, so you'll just have to live with it for a while longer. I can be spiteful. How did you recognize me right off?'

'Restore your own voice and I'll tell you.'

He/she gave me a dark look, and then peeled off a small skin toned patch from her throat under the dirty bandanna around her neck. 'Happy?' he/she said in her own voice.

'Very. And the answer is just as simple. Who else could you have been? Who else but you would have remained on the island when the fleet had sailed? And why do you still have the mask on after they'd gone anyway?'

'They had sailed only hours before you arrived. I don't keep track of hours anymore, but I hadn't slept before you arrived.'

'That close. Damn.'

'You needn't be too upset; your Min wasn't there. She and Prince Invoy sailed with the Indomitable and Raven for parts unknown shortly after your dismissal. From the gossip I heard, you put the fear of the Empress into Invoy with your talk of more agents, radio tracers, and all that. They left DarQue and half his forces behind with orders to finish work on the Guardian and Triumphant while they went off somewhere to hide, fearing the Empress's forces' immediate arrival,' she said brightly.

'Ha! I was so angry about your abduction that I said that just to light a fire under the complacent Captain LilDre so he'd call DarQue or Min for me. I guess I can be spiteful, as well,' I added, and glancing across to her I saw her leering at me and realized, 'But then, I suppose it was all true, after all.'

'Of course, my dear Litang. I made contact with Cimmadar's space station as soon as we emerged from the shell-reef. Between my account and the data from the radio sensors I'd brought with me, they tracked the Rift Raven until it entered the atmosphere of the Pela – no doubt giving them a good idea where the rebel base was located. Your friends, however, didn't have to worry. The Empress was, and is, content to let them come to her. The intelligence I provided simply allowed her forces to place satellites along the likely track of Prince Invoy's rag-tag fleet in order to give them plenty of time to prepare for their reception. I'm afraid it's all quite hopeless for your Min.'

'She's not my Min,' I said bitterly. I had realized that my association with Grandmama had likely doomed Min's hopes, unless the Empress was completely incompetent. Oh, I had warned Min, even without realizing that Cin would have tracking devices with her. I could only hope the Rebel leadership took my warning more seriously than I did at the time, and move with extreme caution. Nothing I could



do – yet – so instead, I said, 'Tallith Min is a friend, and my former owner. She's not mine in any other sense. You're teasing me, of course, but I'm not a complete fool. I had to make a very important choice before landing on Redoubt Island. I hope you understand the full implications of the decision I made, my dear Cin.'

'The most likely explanation is that you're a Unity Standard fool. Why did you come back at all? And don't tell me it was for me. It could only be because you missed your precious Min and wanted to beg for your job back.'

'It wasn't just for you and it wasn't for Min – in that way – or my job either. I came back well, to kill Vinden and failing that, warn Min about the depths of his treachery.'

'You? Kill Vinden? Why?'

'The dead can tell no tales of the Pela. And Vinden had no intention of running any risk of stories being told. We were never meant to return to the Unity. It was always a one-way voyage. Both parties will protect this secret and it's something we need to remember.'

'You're saying that he tried to kill you?'

'And my shipmates by destroying the ship. He programmed a secret pilot bot to hijack and crash the ship into the shell-reef. We were very, very lucky to survive long enough to disable it.'

'And then you came back to kill him? You? Wil, Unity Standard, Litang? How in the Neb did you think you could do that when you couldn't even put a dart in me with your eyes closed?'

'Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time. I was very angry.'

I considered what story I wanted to spin, and decided the truth would do, so I spun my yarn of how a self-destruct bot overrode the controls and drove the Starry Shore into the rocks of the shell-reef, and our narrow escape – without mentioning Botts's role in the affair – attributing our survival to hitting a big rock early, taking the pilot bot off line, but still allowing the ship to more or less survive. '...So with some luck, we should be able to make it back to the Neb, but it'll be a very long voyage, perhaps a decade or more. I felt that I had time, while repairs were still underway, to return with evidence of how utterly ruthlessness Vinden is, and, hopefully, see that justice is served.'

She considered that in silence for a while. 'And finding them gone, you landed anyway.'

'In the hope that you had somehow survived and that I could offer you a ride home.'

'Did it occur to you that if I had indeed survived, I'd take your boat to complete my mission?'

'As I said, I'm not a complete fool. Yes, I considered that possibility. But I owed you my life and when you were my responsibility, I failed to protect you. I really needed to find you alive on the island, or I'd have to live with that guilt for the rest of my life. I knew that if your kidnappers made one mistake you'd turn the tables on them, so it was possible that you were still alive. And if you were, I'd just have to deal with the downside.'

'And how did you expect to deal with the downside, Litang? With oily sweet talk?'

'First, I'd offer you a ride home and a new start.'

'You didn't believe I'd accept that, did you?'

'Well, not right away. I knew things would get complicated. But I owed you for my life and I pay my debts. I felt we could reach a mutually beneficial understanding concerning Vinden and Min.'

'What sort of understanding?'

'Well, to begin with, Vinden would be yours to do with as you cared.'

'Oh, you'd let me kill Vinden, since you're too Unity Standard to get blood on your hands.'

'I'd leave Vinden's actual fate up to you. We wouldn't need to kill him, just removed him from the revolution. Marooning him on some passing island would do. As much as he deserves killing, I am too Unity Standard to do it – in cold blood anyway – or expect you to do it either.'

'Right. And Min? You'd let me kill her too?'

'No. We'd kidnap her and with the help of my friends, escape to the Neb aboard the Rift Raven. That would serve the same purpose as killing her. Without Vinden and Min, and in the face of certain defeat, I'm sure the rebellion would've collapsed. However, if we couldn't swing that, I thought I'd be able to

discredit her standing within the movement from afar, while at the same time exposing Vinden for the monster he is. I know things that could potentially throw the rebellion to disorder and likely end it. Once again, that would accomplish the same thing as killing her – the counter revolution would fall apart and you'd get the credit for completing your Honor Mission.'

'My Honor Mission!' he/she snapped. 'What do you know about Honor Missions?'

I lied. 'Your old friend D'Lay told tales out of school and, well, given your failures to eliminate me, the loss of the Sister Sinister, and the fact that this is clearly a one-way mission, I'm guessing this is an Honor Mission. And since I may bear some responsibility for putting you into this position, I feel an obligation to do what I can to see that you're remembered with honor – short of killing Min.'

'You'd betray your friend Min to buy your life and salvage my honor?'

'I said nothing about saving my life. Only about saving Min's and the lives of my friends, in a way that would restore your honor as well. My life is a separate issue that we'll have to resolve between us.'

'Still, you were ready to betray her cause. That's very serpent-like, Litang. It gives one pause...' he/she said with a leer. 'But then, I know well how serpent-like you are.'

'Her cause is hopeless. Lost before it began. Her life is not, or need not be. If a friend insists on walking along a cliff blindfolded, and you see that the next step will take them over the edge to their death, do you stand idle and let them fall? Or do you do something to prevent them, even if they told you not to?'

'And yet, it wasn't all that long ago you were willing to let her take that step.'

'True, though I had tried to talk her out of it, with no luck. I had no choice except to accept her decision. Whoever listens to me? And, well, back then, it still seemed to be a noble purpose with a chance of success. Now, given Vinden's actions it seemed to me that there was nothing to choose between the Empress and Vinden – both are ruthless murderers. With the noble purpose gone, I'd have done whatever I could to save her from both of them and the bloody Cloud Throne. If she hated me for it, I'd just have to deal with that.'

'So you see, I thought your inevitable demands could be met – with a little compromise by both of us. All I had to do was convince you that we would've accomplished both of our aims, and escaped the Pela as well, if we worked together.'

He/she shook her head. 'You are a very snaky fellow, indeed.'

Five hundred generations of St Bleyth ancestors will do that to a fellow. 'Blame it on my drifteeer relatives. But the fact remains, with some compromises on both our parts, it may well have worked. So, knowing my plan, would it have lifted?'

He/she laughed. 'Perhaps.'

'Then keep it in mind. There may still be a way...'

'With your rescue party?'

'No. We'll be well out of radio range even if they do send a boat in. But there's another chance, but I'll say nothing now, I'll not tempt the Black Neb until I've examined the gig in greater detail. However, I assure you, if there's a way back to the Nebula and the Unity, I'm going to find it. And as far as I can see, the only way back leads through my friends in Min's expedition. So give my proposal some thought, just in case it comes into orbit again.'

'You'll work to that goal, whether I agree to your terms or not. Getting close to that expedition is something I must do as long as I've a breath in my body. I'll see to that.'

I shrugged. 'Oh, I'll work to that goal, no strings attached for now. In the end, you'll find that you will need me for your success. And you'll pay the price of success. Min's life.'

one watch and have one with all hands on deck. With the possible exception of poisonous snakes, I rather doubted there was anything very dangerous on our little tumble-weed of an island. Still, it seemed wise to have someone always awake until we could seal the gig tight. And well, it was Cin's suggestion. These days Wil Litang is nothing if not agreeable. And useful.

I don't actually remember making the decision to land on Redoubt Island, but having done so, I'd clearly made Naylea Cin my first priority. It was sobering to realize that not only was I comfortable with that decision, but I found that, turning a blind eye to certain aspects, being shipwrecked with Cin could be something of a lark. A desperate one, for sure, but a lark nevertheless. When looked on from the right angle. So with my head fixed, my belly full and my head full of ideas for a possible escape, things were looking rather promising, at the moment.

Cin opted to resume her nap – it had been a long day for her, and I was eager to survey the gig, so I took the first watch. I took the plasma cutter out to cut away the vines from around the gig so as to get a good look at the landing jets. Siss briefly turned up to watch, but was soon off chasing the small rodents my attack on the vines sent scurrying. Every so often I'd hear a high pitched squeak that ended rather abruptly. Better them than me. Between my cutting and her hunting, we scared up quite a noisy flock of small birds, flying lizards and large beetles, shrilly voicing their complaints – but no snakes, that I noticed, anyway. I was looking.

As I cut away the vines – but not all of them, I wanted to stay on this island – I found that both ends had been crumpled and almost torn off from its cartwheeling over the landscape. The central core of the boat, with the exception of the dent in the underside, remained intact. Humans have been building spaceships for some 80,000 years, and have pretty much perfected the art of it. The functional core of the gig, the control room, environmental machinery, and synth-galley were enclosed by heavy bulkheads in order to survive anything but the most catastrophic collision. The engine room bulkhead was thick and solid with only a few small holes for cables and a fuel line, and the meter and a half wide central section housing the ship's computer systems, environmental and sanitary machines, the synth-galley, and various supply lockers were set between two strong bulkheads, to prevent it from being crushed as well. Thus the key operational elements of the ship, less its engines, had survived more or less intact.

The crumpled sections of the bow and stern could be salvaged for patches to fill holes in the bow and then cut away. I'd have to make sure the upper access hatch worked in emergency/manual mode so we could seal the gig to make it airtight. The damage to the underside of the gig proved to be more extensive than I had initially hoped, but four or five of the landing jets looked undamaged – enough for my vague plans. These micro-reactor-powered plasma rockets are complete units, so that I could remove and remount them on the engine room bulkhead to drive the boat. They would work with water as well as pure hydrogen, and while they'd not drive the gig at any great speed, great speed wasn't needed for my plans. All I needed was the spaceship equivalent of a rowboat.

I was sitting on the edge of the engine compartment bulkhead with such vague daydreams masquerading as plans running through my head when I noticed it was growing darker. I snatched my darter and looked up, heart thumping.

It wasn't the shadow of a large dragon, as I feared, but the shadow of a large and very close island that was swinging into view as our little island slowly tumbled in the river of air. It was very close, indeed. Close enough to imagine crashing into it. "If this island could capture us..." I thought with a jolt of hope as I quickly clambered up to the top edge of the crater. I looked down on the tops of the fern trees slowly marching by with the usual darting lizards and birds weaving through them – they had to be only a half kilometer away. We were almost certainly close enough to the late Redoubt Island's position to have a good chance of contacting any boat Molaye might send in looking for me, if only our tumbleweed of an island could become entangled in those trees...

We must have been drifting over it for some time, since it soon filled the sky of our tiny island, horizon to horizon in all directions. Looking back, I couldn't imagine how we missed the jagged little

mountain peaks astern. Looking ahead, there were hills and the towering fern trees that we might snag... Or not. It was hard to judge if we were closing in or just drifting over it like a cloud. The island was likely far too small to have enough gravity to pull us in, so it would be a matter of air currents and chance.

In any event, it was not out of reach. The locker next to the main hatch was undamaged so that we had emergency spacesuits with small jet packs that could carry us and some gear to this island. And since we couldn't be more than 200 kilometers from the late Redoubt Island's location, we'd have a good chance of being within the emergency radio's range of it, and certainly so if the rescue boat did any sort of search. But if Molaye actually followed my last order...

I was still considering all the downsides when Siss swam up next to me.

'Think it'll snag us?' I asked her.

She gave a low, rather negative hiss. She had that toothy, ever present, crocodile smile, and was, after all, an old shipmate, so I rather easily came to accept her as being, well, a shipmate. We watched the island – so near – drift past in companionable silence for a while. We were approaching the hill line. 'If we get close enough, I'll hold on to your tail while you grab a tree...'

She gave me a one-eyed dismissive look, a low bark and languid wag of the tip of her tail, which I'd come to take as her laugh. She didn't think the idea was very funny.

I realized a decision had to be made and it wasn't mine to make. 'We'd better wake up Cin, she needs to know about this,' I said to Siss, and turning to climb down, discovered someone, or something, standing on the far side rim of the impact crater, silently watching us.

'What the Neb!' I exclaimed. Siss swirled around me, and seeing the tall, dark figure, hissed softly and froze.

At first glance, the figure looked like a very tall, thin and broad-feathered human. He stood – almost three meters tall, clothed entirely in scarlet feathers – stock still, his arms held behind him, watching. My second impression was that his head was more bird-like than human, with a protruding, beak-like mouth, with eyes set more to the side of his head than a human's. Long feather tufts on either side gave the impression of ears. He had two belts, one across his chest, the other around his waist, with the tip of a long bow sticking up over his shoulder, and no doubt, a quiver as well. He did not react to our discovery of him, but continued to watch us, like a slender red statue, with unblinking black eyes. I grabbed the handle of my darter, but didn't draw. However ominous he looked, he had not attacked when our backs were turned, and he could've been watching us for minutes, so I was guardedly optimistic that I was dealing with a non-belligerent being – the Unity Standard default assumption.

'Sorry, you startled me,' I said out loud in Cimmadarian with what I hoped was an apologetic smile. 'Didn't hear you arrive.'

He, or possibly, she – no way of telling – said nothing. He just continued to watch us with its large, rather reptilian eyes.

'My name is Wil Litang, my feathered friend here is Siss. I'm rather new to the Pela, so I don't know who or what you are, so please forgive me if I appear to be rude...' I rambled on.

No response.

His feathers were his own, so beyond the belts he was wearing no clothing, save for a collar about his neck with a large, black, and glittering gem mounted on it like a third eye. As soon as I focused in on it, it seemed to spring to life, grab me, and pulled me – or rather my mind – towards the creature. It almost seemed like I was being dragged from my body. My very thoughts were being sucked out of my head and were swirling like leaves in a whirlwind towards the three black eyes of the creature. I tried to force my eyes to close and draw my darter without success. And then, my head seemed to explode with pain...

The next thing I remember clearly was the scarlet feathered figure expanding before me, as he raised his extremely long arms – which, like so many Pela creatures were used as wings – and with a downward sweep, soared overhead. I clumsily drew my darter, but he was quickly lost from sight

behind the island's short horizon. I stared at the empty sky, trying to make heads or tails of what just happened. Siss, as stiff and still as a board next to me, slowly came back to life with a long, low growl. She turned her head to me and looked at me with frightened eyes.

'What in the Neb was that, Siss?' I muttered, softly. The telepathic contact seemed to have left no trace, beside a vague headache. And yet, I'd a sense of black gap – a second or a day? 'Ever met something like before?'

She replied with a long low hiss and a slow shake of her head.

'And I suspect, we don't want to again, do we?'

She agreed with another soft hiss.

'Let's get down to the gig. We need to talk to Cin.'

Siss agreed, and led the way down. In a shot.

We found Cin awake programming the synth-galley, still hidden behind the grotesque mask, still dressed in the grubby jump suit. Siss shot forward and wrapped herself half around her, hissing excitedly.

'What have you done to my poor little dragon?' he/she demanded as I crawled through the hole in the hull. 'She's so scared she's shivering!'

'We saw something...met something. I'm not sure what...' I began before finding myself at a loss to explain what the something exactly was and why it was so frightening.

Cin waited impatiently for me to continue. 'Speak up, you're no more articulate than Siss. What in the Neb did you see that has Siss so upset?'

'I don't really know. Siss and I were topside examining a large island we're drifting close to, and when we turned back to get you, we discovered this figure...' and I spun my yarn.

He/she gave me a searching look. 'If it wasn't for Siss here, I'd say you've been hitting the synth-sauce.'

'I haven't, but it sounds like a good idea.'

'So you say that he could've sent an arrow through you without you even knowing it was there?'

'Which is why I didn't draw my darter. He looked sinister enough, but since he hadn't acted unfriendly, I didn't want to start anything.'

'And he just flew off, after trying to suck out your brain?'

'My thoughts, memories – who knows? I'm not quite sure just how long it all lasted or what he actually got from me – it got sort of black there for a moment or two.'

Cin pondered that for a while before shrugging. 'Live and learn to keep one eye on the sky. Now what about this island?'

'Come up and have a look. It's large and reachable with spacesuit jet packs. And we're likely still in radio range of any rescue mission. The downside is that we'd have to abandon the security of gig. We have no more than an hour to decide and gather what we can to take along.'

'Right. Let's have a look.'

That meant going out again. Siss and I exchanged a brief glance. Still, we'd have to go out again sometime. We let Cin take the lead and followed her up the crater wall and on to the flattened plain, to view the upside down large island, still close at hand and slowly drifting by.

'An hour, you say, to decide?'

'And to act. With the wind currents, the jet packs probably have a five kilometer range. It looks like we're coming up on the edge of the island, so we don't have much time to gather what we'll need and clear off.'

Cin said nothing. We all stood silently, heads craned back, watching the forests and mossy plains drift by – weighing our options and consequences.

'How certain are you that your crew will obey your last order and not come looking for you?' he/she asked after a bit.

I hesitated, still weighing the consequences.

'Come on, Litang, time's a wasting.'

'I'm thinking.'

'Then think out loud. Time's wasting.'

'Right. Molaye Merlun is now the ship's captain. It will be her decision. My last orders are neither gas nor dust. She'll make her own decision regardless of my orders.'

'Your guess?'

'If everything is in order on the ship – her first priority – then... Well it comes down to whether she decides to respect my wishes, or see it as her duty to provide any aid she could render.'

'And she'll?'

I shrugged. 'My gut feeling is that she'd ignore my wishes and send in a boat. She has a great deal of confidence in herself. And we're friends...'

'The odds?' Cin growled impatiently, turning her grizzled spaceer face to me and glaring from under her false eye brows.

I shrugged, 'If pressed I'd say we'd have an eight or nine in a dozen chance of seeing a rescue boat.'

'And more likely twelve out of twelve. So why are you so hesitant? Afraid of what I'll do when the boat arrives?'

'I'm the biggest fool aboard the Starry Shore, especially when it comes to you. Trust me, Molaye and the gang can handle you. You'll either settle for the compromise I mentioned last watch or wake up a decade or two from now on a planet to be decided. I owe you my life, so I'll not kill you. But I'll send you far, far away.'

'We'll see...'

'You'd not be given a choice. But I'll not argue. The real reason I'm less than wildly enthusiastic is that I don't like the downside risks. What if I they don't send a boat? Or if they do but out of range of our emergency radio? Between the islands and atmosphere, who knows its range? Neb, who knows if we could survive for two weeks down there. I've met dragons, we've both seen what talon-hawks can do. And we can't count on the continued indifference of that red-feathered chap. On a large island like that, there's bound to be large predators, not to mention poisonous snakes...'

Her mustache lifted with a grin. 'And spiders.'

Siss, floating between us, barked – her laugh.

'I'm sorry I'm so Unity Standard, but the idea of being marooned on a deserted island in the middle of a vast nowhere, doesn't appeal to me.'

'We'll have our weapons and gear. We can take tools, the emergency radio, synth-food machine, and power supply. We could pull some wires and electric motors and such to build a boat if need be if the boat doesn't come and we get restless.'

'But we'd abandon the protection of the gig, the med-unit, the synth-galley and the parts printer. We'd spend the rest of our lives – and likely short ones – eating tasteless paste from the little synth food machine and shitting in the bushes...'

'Litang!' she said with a mocking leer, 'You needn't get so graphic.'

'I'm just saying that the downside consequences are rather grim.'

'So what's our alternative? Spending our lives on this little island shitting the sanitary unit and recycling it for dinner?'

'Don't get graphic, Cin. We're not supposed to think about that. Besides, with your talent and the synth-galley our meals would be far more edible – regardless of the raw material. Plus, we'd have a med-unit to keep us healthy, and an impregnable redoubt from dragons, talon-hawks and savages once we patch that hole in the bow.'

'And “our” mission?' she sneered.

Again I hesitated, arranging my thoughts.

'Litang?'

'Right. I've only made a visual inspection of the undercarriage of the gig, but it seems that we might



have six undamaged landing jets. Each is a mini-reactor/rocket engine that can be moved and reinstalled to use to drive the gig. We've got tools, plasma cutters and welders to patch the hole in the bow and clear the gig of all the wreckage, so that I'm fairly confident that I can get the gig mobile, not only in the Pela, but in the outer reaches too. At least for short runs out. If I'm right, we can use the gig to send our radio warnings, and do so over a longer span of time.

'Plus, if I can contact Tenry, and things go well, we might get a ride home aboard the Rift Raven. Nothing guaranteed, but we could achieve the same results as we would with the Starry Shore's boat, but the downside risks would be much less drastic. Even if we failed to make contact, we'd be left with an almost impregnable ship to explore the Pela. And, as I said, we'd have the med-unit and synth-galley...'

'And the sanitation unit,' Cin added with a laugh.

'And the sanitation unit. And well, just for your consideration, we might be able to locate and reach Cimmadar's space station in the shell reef. And, well, you being a stealth and I a spaceer, who's to say we couldn't find our way home someday...'

'Are you trying to seduce me with the promise of piracy,' he/she laughed.

'I want to go home to the Unity, and if that takes a bit of piracy, well, I'm in.'

'Unity Standard Litang, a pirate?'

'Unity Standard Litang has no desire to make the Pela his home. I've a feeling I'm far too Unity Standard to survive in the Pela for long.'

Cin shook her head sadly and said quietly. 'I'm afraid I must agree with you, though it may not be the Pela that you have to fear the most.'

'Only when I'm no longer useful, and I intend to be useful for a long, long time, the Pela permitting. I'll start by giving us a boat to roam the Pela with.'

'And how long will that take?'

'A month, maybe a bit more. I think, however, that we have the time. Given that Vinden feared the appearance of the Empress's forces momentarily, I'd have to believe they'd be a bit more cautious now. They will likely scout things out before rushing in, so that we should have time to fix the gig and still warn them off.'

'Can we fix the gig and still meet any rescue boat from the Starry Shore? We should have the better part of two weeks. How long can it take to cut away the wreckage and move the landing jets?'

'I suppose it's possible. In that case, we should make getting the radar up our first priority, since we'd need to find our way back here. Finding the edge of the Pela is easy – just a matter of putting the brightest sky astern. But for finding our way back here, we'd need a radar map. However, I have to tell you that there are likely a hundred little items that I've not thought of and that would have to be taken care of before we could sail, so that I'll make no promises of having the gig relaunched by then.'

'Is that what you're suggesting we do?'

I turned things over, and then over again, in my mind, before I realized, 'I will leave that decision to you, Cin. You're the owner now. It's your call. I've been making those calls for a decade now, and I've grown weary of them.'

'Coward. I'm asking for your advice, not looking to you to make the decision.'

'It's a coin flip,' I said. 'That's what makes it so hard. I'll support your decision, whatever it is.'

'You most certainly will, that's a given. Until I no longer need you,' he/she added grimly.

I just smiled. She'd passed on too many chances to kill me for her hints and threats to have any meaning. Ignorance is bliss, I guess.

He/she put her hand to her face and ran it across her whiskers, thinking. 'What do you think, Siss. You're no coward like Litang. What should we do?'

Siss, who'd been floating between us, looked to her, and slowly let out a soft hiss.

'Sssstay, you say? Right. I'll program breakfast. Litang, you look to get the radar up and running,' she said, turning back to the crater.

'Aye, aye, Skipper,' I said, following her. It was the decision I'd have made, but I was glad she made it rather than me.

04

'Breakfast's ready.' Cin called out from the main compartment.

I found I was very hungry, so I hurried out, and settled into the chair next to her with a steaming, covered plate. I lifted the cover and took a whiff of the fragrant steam. 'Ah, you and the synth-galley, I'm very glad I don't have to give up that combination.'

'Don't be so oily, Litang.'

'I'm not. I like your cooking, and I like you. Sorry.'

'What's with the radar?' he/she said to change the subject.

I took a bite before answering. 'As good as it smells. The radar unit is fine. I have set up the parts printer to begin printing out the components for a replacement transponder. I'll show you how to operate it so that by the time I've had my nap, you could have it printed out and assembled. Then it's just a matter of attaching it to either the hull of the gig, or somewhere on the island and we can begin to record our course and build up a chart that we could use to retrace our steps.'

'You expect to sleep with me working in the compartment and the printer going?'

'Aye, with a sleep machine,' I said, and took another bite.

We finished our meal in silence, thinking our own thoughts.

When done, I made two mugs of cha, and as I handed one to her, I asked, 'Tell me, Cin. How'd you come to be here in the first place? How did you get this assignment? I'd have thought...' I stopped myself from saying "...that you would've been given an Honor Mission years ago" since that might be hard to explain. I shouldn't know that much about St Bleyth. So I said instead, '...you'd have been the last agent they would have assigned to try and tackle Min again. No reflection on your ability, just on your luck and history.'

'I don't think the Masters had a choice. Like you, I have to believe that they would have chosen anyone but me, if they had a choice. It was simply their bad luck that the planet they sent me to was the one.'

## Chapter 03 Cin's Tale

'When the Starry Shore sailed for the drifts,' she continued, 'every available agent, including the expendable ones, were rushed to the drift worlds that the intelligence department considered likely planets of call. I was shipped off to Ravin, being the only agent close enough to arrive in the expected time frame.'

'So you were, ah, stationed, on Shantien.'

He/she gave me a sharp look. 'Perhaps. I climbed into the sleeper-pod on Despar and was revived on Ravin, so I couldn't say for certain. I didn't need to know and wasn't told. What do you know of Shantien?'

'Nothing much, except that we called on it with boxes several times a year for five or six years. I hadn't realized what it was when I took on the cargo the first time. After that, well, we needed the cargo, and if they ever caught on who we were, we'd know by our reception there...'

'Which they did.'

'So it seems,' I said, deciding it was best to say nothing more. 'But only after seven or eight years.'

But go on, it's your yarn.'

'I was discharged in disgrace from active service on Despar, but as you guessed, I was offered an honor mission to salvage my reputation. I was very tempted to decline and return to Tienterra to live as an outcast. With my father dead, I'd no close relatives on Tienterra, and no friends to lose, for I hadn't grow up there and had been operating solo in the Unity for years. And well, the Cin family's reputation has decayed to the point where I'd not be regarded much worse even if I had retired with honor, so I thought, I could live just as well as a failure – what did I care?'

'But you accepted their offer in the end.'

'In the end, it came down to family. My father had been determined to revive its reputation. He was an exceptional stealth, but died young. As was I, until I crossed orbits with you. Still, I thought that if I could survive my honor mission I might not only restore my standing in the Order, but would have the chance to restore the fortunes of my family as well. And then, too, I found that I had no intention of letting the Masters of the Order bury their mistakes with me and my family.' And turning a fierce glare at me, added, 'And I had scores to settle.'

'Ah, yes,' I muttered, and hurried on to deflect her anger, 'I believe you were made the scapegoat. The Order had plenty of opportunities to kill Min and me, both on Zilantre and Despar, if they cared to. And you could hardly be blamed for Nun's decision to follow me into the reef.'

'You survived it.'

'We were very lucky. I've always been lucky. As you know.' And thinking it best not to dwell on that either, added, 'But go on.'

He/she gave me a long hard look, and then shrugged, 'I was revived on Ravin and given a list of a dozen firms to investigate to see if I could turn up some connection with the Tallith Min. No explanation given, no hint of what I was to look for. The Ravin Cloud-Yacht Company was second on my list and it quickly became my prime suspect, since its security systems were far, far too sophisticated for an innocent zep manufacturer. It would've taken me a week to fully penetrate it. Clearly someone was hiding something very secret. I managed to get a few cautious peeks into its security system before the Starry Shore showed up in orbit. Only then was I given the full brief...'

He/she paused to give me a quick glance.

'Until that briefing I had believed the Lost Star, with you and Min aboard, had been destroyed in the Despar Reef along with Sister Sinister. It was only then that I was told that you and your ship had escaped the reef and had been recently discovered trading in the Aticor system as the Starry Shore. However, since Min, the main target was not aboard the Starry Shore, nothing had been done pending her eventual arrival. So once again you were being used as the tethered goat...'

'Baa! Still, better a tethered goat than a target. Speaking of which, was I named as a target in your honor mission?' I asked with forced casualness. I knew the tethered goat was Grandmama's cover story for St Bleyth, but she was a hard boiled woman, so I couldn't quite be sure it wasn't a cover story for me as well...

'Not specifically, but the initial plan involved smuggling a bomb on board the Starry Shore and blowing it to atoms in passage.'

That was murky. I was warned to steer clear of Min, but if I wasn't listed as a target, did that mean that Grandmama and Grandfather had gotten me removed from the elimination list?

'But that wasn't the final plan, was it?'

'No. Getting bombs on both ships, and one not taking on cargo, would have needed a team. And while we could guarantee destroying the Starry Shore, we could not guarantee that Min and Vinden would be on that ship, and thus could not guarantee success.'

'Just to be clear. The assassination of Min and Vinden were mentioned in the final plans, but not mine?' I asked, which annoyed her.

'You're a separate issue, Litang,' he/she snapped, and continued. 'I wasn't directly involved with the client, but I gather discovering Vinden, who was thought dead, together with Min, and the preliminary

information we supplied about the ships Vinden had built was quite a coup for the Order. It went a long way in restoring our reputation with the client. The client wanted the matter closed once and for all, and felt the best way was to let them arrive and destroy them in one final battle. So the bomb plan was shelved.'

The more I heard, the more it sounded like Vinden had been dreaming if he thought the Empress could be toppled from power with the small force he was leading.

'It sounds like your mission was successful even before you stowed away.'

'Exactly. And yet, that hardly counted as an Honor Mission. I wasn't dead and out of the way. So I was ordered to accompany the expedition to report on its progress to our client once it arrived. That would get me out of the way, and prove to our client we were pulling out all the stops in our effort to serve their interests. If possible, I was to accompany and report on Vinden's forces in the home world right up to their fatal encounter with the forces of our client. And if possible, eliminate Min and Vinden, in order to short-circuit the counter-revolution and save the lives of the many people who'd die in a battle to settle a hopeless cause.

'Did they tell you where you were going? Or how to get out?'

'I was given vague instructions on what to expect – a hollow world with a shell that would have to be penetrated before I could report, and given radio beacons to attach to the rebel ships. As for getting out, well, that was left to my own devices, once I had completed all that was required of me. It was an honor mission, after all. Getting out was not expected. The dead tell no tale, eh, Litang?'

'Remember that, Cin. No matter what you do, you'll never be allowed to live, even if you can make it back to St Bleyth. No doubt that's part of the deal with the client. We died to our old lives on Redoubt Island.'

'I'll worry about that after I succeed.'

I let that lift. 'Right. So, given all the security, how did you get aboard my ship?'

'Spaceport security was less stringent, so I stowed away in the cargo hold of the heavy-lift lighter and transferred over to the Triumphant after it was loaded into the lighter. I had with me a hybrid spacesuit/sleeper-pod which allowed me to not only survive the passage up in the lighter and make the transfer, but also to survive the long passage in hard vacuum in stasis as well. During the lift to orbit, I managed to slit and slip through the D-matter fabric that was used to shroud the vessel's crate during passage, and found a hiding place within the detached after-wing of the vessel. I then went into sleeper-mode for a week before transferring to the vessel itself. There I set up the tracking transmitters, created a hiding place in a store room, and programmed my stasis suit to wake me when the cargo hatches were opened. I was a bit unlucky in picking the last vessel to be transferred, but by listening in on the radio conversations of your crew during the offloading procedures, I had a pretty good idea what I could expect and was able to make contact with the Empress's forces and provide them with our course until we entered the Pela proper. My primary mission was accomplished.'

'And after that? How did you manage to stay undetected? From the way you were dressed on the flagship, I'm guessing that you wanted to appear as a member of the other group no matter who you ran into. Still, that would've been rather risky for an extended period of time.'

'Oh, I just stayed aboard the Triumphant until there were enough people going in and out to simply walk off with my gear without attracting any notice. I then hung out on the fringe of the main base for a while getting my bearings. Finding that my targets were on a cruise, I stowed my gear and spent a lot of time in my hideout behind Siss's nest until they returned.'

'Still, you had to eat. How did you get by? It had to be pretty iffy without speaking Cimmadarian or knowing the customs.'

'I made a point, early on, to find out. I shadowed one of Vinden's crew, and paid a visit to her when she was sleeping. She decided not to get her throat cut, and synced her com link to mine, so that I was up and running with the language and all the information every other outsider had. I then gave her a little jab so that she'd forget our little conversation and gave her a dart to put her to sleep again.'

'Ah Ha!' I exclaimed.

'Ah ha, what? What are you grinning about?'

'Our night together on Lontria. Now I know why I don't remember it! A little jab and the blackness.'

He/she gave me a sidelong grin (that was rather disconcerting with the mask) and said, 'The reason you can't remember anything, as I've told you before, is that there wasn't anything to remember. Those two darts I put in you had you out until my outraged cuckolded husband arrived.'

'That doesn't account for all the facts, Cin.'

'What facts?'

'The fact that I like you, even though you keep trying to kill me. That doesn't make sense unless it's some artifact of our night together in Prusza.' I stopped short of adding that it also explained her fondness for me – not caring to push her too far and force her to prove me wrong.

'You're either foolishly romantic, Litang, or just terminal Union Standard. Terminal being the operative word. In any event, after I had the info-dump on my com link, I could go about the base, pretending to be one of the outsiders off the ship. All I had to do was to be careful not to be caught in company of the other outsiders. I'd eat alone or help myself in the galley – I found that outsiders were treated like mythical beings, never questioned and best left alone if it could be helped...'

'They were friendly enough.'

'If you invited them to be. I didn't. And as I said, I set up my base behind Siss's nest, so that I could easily stay out of the way while I awaited the return of my targets.'

'And you would've succeeded too, if you'd have chosen your time half an hour one way or the other,' I said brightly. 'You're not a lucky assassin, Cin.'

'I prefer to think that it was you who should have chosen your time differently. And perhaps you'll come to see that before you die,' he/she replied darkly, only half kidding. At best.

'Moving on, how did you survive the kidnapping?'

'They must've revived me and then immediately darted me, since the first thing I clearly remember after the darter fight on the flagship deck was awakening in darkness with my hands and feet tied. As you guessed, I do have implanted capacitors so I may've come to less than 10 minutes after being darted. I found I was enclosed in a large cargo bag, no doubt to hide what it was they were carrying off your ship. From the way I was bouncing about, it seemed like they were just hauling the bag behind them as they walked, no doubt expecting me to be unconscious for at least an hour. And from their conversation, I gathered they were taking me to an old weapons bunker on the far side of the island for an interrogation to be followed, eventually, by an execution. Being hidden in the cargo bag was a fortunate break, since it allowed me to reach my glass knife and cut my hands free without them becoming aware of it.' She shook her head, 'You were very careless, Wil. I had myself free within a minute. Plus, I not only had my glass knife, but a sissy as well. Little did they know they were walking to their death. Only the fact that they expected Vinden to join them shortly kept them alive, as I was content to await Vinden.'

'On reaching the bunker, they pried the door open and shoved the cargo bag in. They then waited outside for Vinden. I cut a long slit in the bag so I could act when the time came and watched them beyond the door as we waited for Vinden. The talon-hawk horde alarm was sounded shortly after Vinden set out, so he turned back to the base. I heard him tell the boys to take cover in the bunker over their com links, and decided that I needed to act. I quickly slipped out of the bag and closed and locked the bunker door with my would-be killers still outside,' she shrugged, 'I gather they didn't make it back in time...'

'The talon-hawks got to them.'

'They were not very Unity Standard people.'

'I didn't shed a tear for Crain and Zervic. While I'd no solid reason to believe that you weren't being torn apart in the frenzied circus of talon-hawks I found, I knew that given the slightest chance, you could deal with them. It was the question, then, of had they given you that slightest of chances? I

landed on the island in the hope that they had.'

'Their mistake was keeping me alive so that Vinden could have his fun, and then theirs,' he/she said grimly. 'It was a shame Vinden didn't arrive before the Talon-hawks.'

'Indeed. I was out and over the island in a boat to collect some of my crew on the far side of the island and spied him racing back to base, pursued by a talon-hawk. Unfortunately he saw the talon-hawk and killed it before it could kill him. If I didn't have a witness aboard, I may've finished the talon-hawk's work myself then and there...'

'Right,' he/she said, with a leer.

'I was very angry with Vinden and myself. I might've, but go on.'

'Not much more to tell. I stayed in the bunker until most of the talon-hawks had left. I needed to get clear before Vinden came back with his crew, so I didn't wait until the all clear sounded. I carefully made my way back to my hideout and within hours, you, the Indomitable, and Rift Raven had departed, leaving DarQue behind to get the rest of the fleet ready to sail. Luckily, a couple of the outsiders remained so I could still get about, but I needed to be someone very different than who showed up on the flagship, hence my new look. The work went on non-stop for, what? Two weeks? And I got by without incident. DarQue had more pressing tasks at hand to spare personnel to look for hypothetical spies. I considered stowing away aboard one of the two hybrid space ships, but decided I'd never be able to maintain the deception in such close quarters. I also considered stowing away on one of the unmanned supply vessels they'd be towing, using my hybrid space suit /sleeper pod, but in the end, decided just to put radio tracers on the ships instead, since asleep I couldn't provide more data than the automatic tracers.

'And that's about it. After some two weeks of hanging about but staying out of the way, Siss and I watched the fleet sail away. And then, before we even had time to consider what we'd do with the rest of our lives, a ship's boat arrives and on landing, who should step out, but my old nemesis, Captain Litang? The rest you know.'

'More or less...' I found myself yawning. 'Do you want me to show you how to use the printer, or shall we wait until I wake up?' I had no expectations of completing the work before any boat from the Starry Shore arrived, so it wasn't a high priority with me.

'I've nothing better to do.'

'Right,' I said. We stepped into the control compartment, where I gave her a quick tour of gig's printer. I then folded the med-unit table up into the bulkhead, slung a hammock in its place, and slipping on a small sleep machine, climbed into the hammock.

'And if you have the time, I'd really appreciate it if you'd take that mask off. It's just eerie,' I said as I settled in.

'You know, Litang, I've worn it now for several weeks and I'm beginning to get really comfortable in it. I rather like being an old spaceer engineer. And seeing how much it annoys you, I might keep it on several more.'

'Right. Well, if you happen to see Naylea, tell her that I brought along her elegantly equipped darter on the off chance of finding her alive. I'm sure it has great sentimental value, so I'd not want to turn it over to just any old spaceer. Of course if she's taken a shine to that big, heavy, six shot, Cimmadarian sidearm, I suppose I'll just keep it as a keepsake.'

'You're a dear, sometimes, Litang. Can I have it on a promise? Or do I have to make you hand it over?'

'It's in my gear bag. On a promise of the old Naylea when I awake.'

## Chapter 04 The Castaway Life



I awoke with the plans I'd made as I fell asleep still swirling around in my head. It was dark and quiet. I lay in the hammock for a while, until I began to feel guilty. I swung out, buckling on my darter as I went. The forward compartment was dim, cool and very damp. Siss was curled up in a corner, a feathered mound, dozing. She half opened one eye, but otherwise didn't move. The light slanting through the hole in the hull forward was now a thick shaft of grey mist. We had gone through several extensive cloud banks during the shakedown voyage of the Indomitable, so I recognized this as a rainy day in the Pela.

'Cin?' I called poking my head out. It was much wetter outside – a fine mix of mist and floating rain droplets.

'Topside.'

'What are you doing out in this weather? Isn't it awful wet out there?'

'I'm doing my laundry.'

'Laundry? The gig's shower unit can do that,' I said, but rain or not, I was eager to see the real Cin so I climbed out and up the side of the gig.

Well, I saw the real Cin. She was standing on the engine compartment bulkhead in her magnetic boots, her laundry hung in the tangle of vines. My 'Good morning...' ended abruptly, with 'Oh! Sorry. You should've said something.'

'Don't tell me you've suddenly gotten shy, Litang,' she said with a wicked laugh. 'Come up. I've nothing to hide, nor you – not after our night together on Lontria.'

'Yes, I noticed,' I replied, ducking back down instead. 'The shower in the sanitation compartment is working, you know, don't you? You don't have to shower and wash your clothes in the rain.'

'It's too tiny. You have to wiggle around just to raise an arm. I needed more space to remove my mask and since I was wet already, I decided to do my laundry as well. Join me, Litang. No reason to be shy. 'You realize that I had to undress you, don't you?'

'Well, that's a small relief,' I said. 'I'd rather not think about Max undressing me,' I admitted. 'But you're entitled to your privacy.'

'Privacy in a tiny boat on a tiny island? I can look after myself. I don't mind being seen like this.'

I'd already seen enough of her to haunt my idle moments, and well, was pretty sure this was just a tease – her playing cat and mouse again. Did I want to play her game?

'Certainly you've seen a real girl before!'

'Several. There's no nudity taboo for swimming on Faelrain, and on Belbania, all those boxed-tourists from the cold worlds of Chantria and Neavery were taking off their clothing as they climbed out of their sleeper-pods and didn't put them back on until they were climbing back into the box to go home. It's just that... I'm not sure it's wise.'

It probably wasn't wise. The sight of her slim body had brought to mind Min – the Min aboard the Starry Shore. I had made my choice, but there was a whiff of betrayal in that choice, which the sight of Cin's, slim, sleek, understated curves, with every muscle in perfect tone, as one would imagine a stealth to be, brought that guilt to the fore. So who was I betraying? And why was I feeling it anyway? No clear answer.

'Coward.'

She said that with enough force to make me realize that this was more than a tease, it was a test. A challenge. And my St Bleyth ancestors insisted that I take it. So I slowly climbed to the top of the wreck to join her. The green-grey-lit rain didn't fall – it just drifted and lazily swirled around the hollow impact crater, but it was as wet as any falling rain – tasting of leaves and flowers.

Her darter and various undergarments were snagged on the vines. A kit bag lay at her feet and she

was squeezing the water out of her jumpsuit. She half turned to me. 'You could use a bath yourself. There's still some dried blood in your hair and, well, shipmate to shipmate, you could use a change of clothes, and a freshening up,' she said with that wicked smile of hers. The curious thing was that that smile didn't extend to her dark eyes. They weren't laughing. They were serious, even dangerous. I'd no idea what was going on, but I knew that this was indeed some sort of test, some sort of ritual. I'd a sense that this was something I needed to do, but needed to do it very thoughtfully.

'Sorry,' I muttered. 'I thought of showering after I'd finished work on the galley, but I didn't want to awaken you. The shower pumps make a bit of noise.'

I unhitched my darter and hung it on a vine, followed it with my jacket. I lifted my shirts over my head and off and hung them up as well.

'What's that?' she asked, pointing to my chest.

I looked down. I still had red scars across my chest from my injuries during the crash of the Starry Shore and subsequent treatment by the med unit. 'Ah, I got a bit smashed up when Vinden tried to kill us. I decided to put off the final treatments until I saw Min – for dramatic effect. They're just superficial. I was thinking a few scars might be useful when presenting my story.'

'Were you hurt badly?' Was there a faint shadow of concern in her eyes?

'I gather it was touch and go, for a little while, but I survived. No harm done,' I said as I began the tricky operation of slipping out of my trousers while keeping at least one foot magnetically anchored to the gig. I hung them up next to me and looked to her. Briefly. Defiantly. And then turned away.

'I thought you weren't shy. Or are you embarrassed? Aren't we past that?'

'I'm being polite.'

'Hardly necessary. I can still picture you, Wil, standing naked yelling at all those poor, shocked Pruzzian spectators. You were hardly polite or shy then. Indeed, it was an amazingly brazen performance. I nearly broke out laughing, which would've sunk everything. You, and the sight of poor Max just staring wordlessly, totally lost, since that wasn't in the script. And all those prudes. I rather think they did have a nudity taboo...' she laughed.

I turned back to her. This time the laughter reached her eyes. She has a pretty face when her eyes held laughter in their grey depths.

'That was different. They had no business crowding into our hotel room. It was extremely rude of them, so I wanted to be rude right back at them. Besides, it gave them something to talk about, which I assume they did all morning.'

'Oh, I'm sure they did.'

'And I'm sure they talked about you as well.'

'Oh, I hope so. It was one of my better performances as well,' she laughed and tossing a soap packet to me added, 'Here's the soap. Wash up. Take your time. I'm about done and then I'll going down to dry off and make breakfast. No hurry.'

I snatched it out of the air and since she seemed in the moment, in good spirits, I decided to simply ask her what this was all about.

'So what are we doing here, Naylea? Is this some sort of test of my Unity Standard character? My meekness? Or my courage? Am I supposed to boldly sweep you into my arms or be discrete and respectful? Is this a St Bleyth courting ritual? Or simply a trap? An excuse to punish me for daring to... What? To look on you? Or touch you? Or not touch you? I'm sorry, but I'm not very bright in these matters. What is this about?'

She considered that for a moment and then said, 'Yes.'

'Yes, what?'

'Oh, just yes,' she replied, and then gave the jumpsuit she was wringing out an extra twist or two. I caught a familiar glint in her eyes and had the presence of mind to quickly turn my backside on her before she snapped the jumpsuit at me.

It smarted.

'Ouch!' I exclaimed, just to humor her.

'That didn't hurt. Quit faking it. It annoys me.'

'Yes, I know.'

Which earned me another snap.

I said 'Ouch!' again and looking back at her, adding 'You're very pretty, Naylea. It's only the downside consequences that keeps me only a friend, a shipmate...'

She gave me another couple snaps with her jumpsuit as I danced about, trying to avoid them.

With a final laugh, she said, 'Wash up. I'll have a mug of cha waiting for you.'

I looked back again and said as she slipped over the edge of the wreck, 'I'll be down directly. Thank you.'

I hadn't a clue as to what had just transpired, and neither, I suspect, did she. But it seemed a good beginning, a better one than I had any reason to expect.

02

I awoke breathing through feathers, my arms trapped in the folds of the hammock and the undefined bulk of a three-meter sentry-serpent. All I could do was growl, 'Get your bloody tail out of my face you Neb-blasted feather-rug.'

Somewhere in the darkness, Siss gave a low, menacing hiss, tightened her claws so I could feel them and twitched her tail off my face.

I don't know the physiology of sentry-serpents, but I suspect they're cold-blooded, since I don't overheat when she wraps herself around me when I'm asleep which was now her habit. She sleeps with Cin as well – waiting until the sleep machine puts us under deep enough to avoid any objection on our part. I doubt she's that needy for companionship, so I think it's just for warmth.

The sleep machine had turned itself off, so it was nearly time to get up. But not yet. I lay dozing and mentally going over my plans for the next watch when the feather tail swept back over my face. I had to growl again, 'Get it out of my face or I'll bite it off.'

She swept it off again, with another low hiss. The first time may've been an accident of sleep, the second time was deliberate. It was already clear that Siss found annoying Cin and me humorous, and she could be very humorous when she was in the mood.

I had to accept that Siss was telepathic. And given her uncanny ability to understand the thoughts and emotions of creatures so dissimilar to her – as we no doubt were – and her ability to communicate with hisses, growls, barks and body language, I had also come to accept that she was very intelligent as well. How she employed her intelligence in her daily life as a sentry-serpent, I don't know, but within half a dozen rounds she had entwined herself into our little society, acting in subtle ways as the link between Cin and I. And in not so subtle ways as well. Whenever we sat together, she draped herself over our laps so we could easily preen her feathers. I drew the line on this activity at mealtimes – I wasn't about to include the stray feather in my meal. But otherwise, whenever Cin and I would be sitting around, after our meal, or out on the edge of the island, Siss was with us as well, making herself available for preening and interjecting a bark, or a hiss into our conversation whenever she felt like commenting. She was a very sarcastic sentry-serpent. Still, as a native, she instinctively kept an eye skywards and would growl a warning whenever she spied a distant dragon, so her presence was welcomed when we were out and about.

Her tail brushed over my face again. 'That's it!' I muttered, struggling to get an arm clear of the hammock and the sentry-serpent.

She swung her tail off and shifted herself about, so that her long toothy snout was on my chest. She opened an eye just a slit to give me a dark look and a menacingly growl. Her idea of a joke.

Now I was breathing sentry-serpent breath, and that motivated me even more. I wiggled out of the

folds of the hammock and her clutch, and lifted her off me, ignored her threatening hisses, and swung out of the hammock. She gave me one last dark look, and wrapped herself around the empty hammock and pretended to go back to sleep.

It had been six Unity Standard days since we arrived on Tumbleweed Island. Cin was keeping count because she'd not abandoned hope of contacting the theoretical rescue boat from the Starry Shore. I had, and so I was living the timeless Pela life. In those six days we'd gotten the radar and radio transmitters up and running, and had sealed the gaping hole in the bow with a quilt work of welded patches. It didn't look pretty, but I was fairly confident they'd hold once we were in space. We had begun the process of pulling and examining the landing jets to see what ones could be re-positioned to replace the main engine and steering motors. They were secured to the inner hull of the gig, and had to be reached by pulling up the deck of the main and control compartments, exposing the landing jets' mounting fixtures, as well as the maze of fuel lines, cables, and deck fixtures stored under the deck.

'Morning, Cin,' I said, stepping carefully through the tangle of pipes, cables and fixture boxes to the small square of open deck.

She glanced up from where she was using a power wrench on an engine mount and said, 'Morning. Five more minutes and I'll have this one out and I can get us something to eat.'

'Oh, I can do that. Just tell me what button to punch.'

She brushed some strands of hair off her sweating forehead, paused, and said, 'If you're willing to go to all the trouble of pushing a button, you can choose the entree, Litang.'

'Right. And I'll make cha.'

I was making synth-cha these days. Being the pessimist, I was afraid my supply of real cha wouldn't last through our stay in the Pela, so I'd donated enough leaves to its sample-chamber so that it could analyze and capture enough of the unique chemicals to allow it to produce a passable imitation of the real cha.

Cin had continued to explore the possibilities of the gig's galley. She was collecting samples of leaves, flowers, and I suspect beetles and butterflies as well, and introducing them to the galley's sample-chamber. Expensive synth-galleys can create a wide range of specific organic molecules to produce complex flavors. The gig's galley, however, was not of that caliber, but it could store complex molecules from introduced organic matter, and then use and recycle them – thus Cin's botanical quest. Not only was our food growing ever tastier, but she had programmed the dishes into the galley's memory so they were just a button away. Many chefs would have kept those special recipes secret.

I silently watched Cin finish unbolting the engine while the synth-galley filled two mugs with its best version of cha and began to print out our entrees.

We seemed to have settled the workings of our little society in the rain while wearing only our magnetic boots. Cin was in charge. I was alive and employed to facilitate the continuation of Cin's Honor Mission. It worked for me. Cin could be in charge for all I cared. I'm a retired ship's captain these days. Cin's mission to short-circuit the rebellion and mine to save Min, Tenry, and Vynnia from death at the hands of Vinden and the Empress – and to return to the Unity – were so closely parallel that the differences wouldn't matter until very late in the game. I was confident that not only was my involvement critical to both of our missions, but that I could, in the end, convince Cin to compromise enough to make it just one plan.

She saw my fate as a separate issue. I didn't think she could kill me in cold blood, so as long as I could avoid a red hot crisis, I'd likely be fine, or so I told myself. I knew, however, I'd have to avoid being too nice to her, since she saw any overt effort of friendship or affection as an attempt to subvert her intention of killing me. (A fairly accurate assessment.) But, being a very Unity Standard fellow, this meant that I had to avoid her company as much as possible. And not only because of my Unity Standardness, but because we might be in love. Not that either of us would admit it, even to ourselves. There were too many obstacles. She had to decide not to kill me, and I had to accept her as she was, not just her cheerful, laughing side, but that wide streak of cruelty as well. Being castaways together,

working together, even if apart, and getting along comfortably together when we were together (within our rules) were already eroding away those obstacles, at least for me. She was often carefree and pleasant to be around, and while she could also turn cool and sarcastic, (especially when she realized she was being carefree and happy around me) I found her to be, on the whole, a very nice person. But then, love is blind. Still, we got along very comfortably.

To keep life comfortable, we worked separately during our common watch, getting together only for the meals, and for an occasional break for synth-cha. Over the meal we'd confer on our progress and plan our next project. I let her determine what, if any, idle conversation we engaged in. She didn't say much about herself, but when we'd be sitting on the edge of the island watching the Pela drift by – including, distant dots which the glasses showed to be large dragons in a variety of colors and shapes – we'd often drift into talking about our shared history; our various encounters on Calissant, Lontria, Despar and on Redoubt Island, filling in missing parts of our shared narrative or our points of view on shared incidents.

Every so often she'd ask something about what I'd done during the decade she'd been stored in the sleeper pod awaiting her Honor Mission. With the exception of revealing Botts's sentient machine nature or my knowledge that M'Risha Drea, the managing director of Jardinn Exports was also the Abbess of St Bleyth's Amdia Abby, and my grandmother, I could tell the plain truth. Which is to say that I was lucky and had exceptional experts inboard that pulled us through some iffy orbits. I spun my yarn about our encounter with the Falcon Rock drift hawks off the Kryver Reef and even dared to relate my kidnapping and rescue from Vinden's zep compound, though I carefully emphasized Kie's hacking skills and the weakness in the plant's security system in regard to robotic activity, that enabled them to use our legal robot as an avatar to exploit this weakness.

'And you have to remember, Cin, it was a one shot deal, we didn't need to cover up our breakthrough once I'd been freed.'

She gave me a dark look. Professional jealousy.

'Don't look at me like that, I was the one who got the dart in the back of my neck and was being held prisoner,' I protested. 'I take no credit for it at all. I was just lucky that I've some pretty resourceful people aboard my ship.'

'You can't beat luck,' she muttered darkly.

'But it does run out.'

'It has,' she said, quietly, but left it at that.

She didn't offer anything about her past life and I didn't press her. I'd spent enough time with Grandmama to know that she wouldn't talk about her past life as an assassin of St Bleyth. I didn't really want to know.

## 03

After my breakfast she pulled the last of the landing jets, while I cut circular patches from the flattest parts of the crumpled mass of the gig's bow and engine compartments to cover the holes left by the extracted landing jets. Siss swam slowly about, hunting through the vines, or watching us work. She didn't like the heat and brilliant blue sparks my plasma cutter produced, so she didn't pester me. Later, Cin made a second, light meal, and retired to the control compartment to get some sleep. I watched Siss drift into the control compartment a little later to nap as well. If I had to sleep with a feather-rug, Cin could too. After I welded the patch on the last landing jet hole, I made myself a mug of cha and climbed up through the crater that was rapidly filling in with new growth vines. I carefully searched the sky for dragons before climbing out onto the matted vines and on to the edge where I settled down to enjoy the view.

The battered and flattened plain of island was sprouting new life as well – fresh green and leafy

vines shot up from its matted surface. Colorful birds and lizards swooped and soared about me, chasing the big beetles and butterflies that flirted in and out of the loose tangle of vines. There were a few larger islands, hazy blue in the distance and no dragons in sight. And underneath the trivial buzz of the beetles and the calls of the birds and lizards was a vast, peaceful silence.

Peaceful, that is, until I found myself flung violently into the air – tumbling head over heel, with snaking strands of vines and a cloud of dust and leafy debris all around me. A lifetime in free-fall had me instinctively acting to dampen my tumbling and frantically, I looked about for a vine to keep me from being carried away from the island. The one I managed to grab proved to be unattached to the island, but it served to further stabilize my movements. Other vines, still attached to the island, waved out of reach. Around me the birds, lizards and beetles darted, shrill in their alarm.

This wasn't good, but fighting panic, I told myself that air resistance, which was already slowing my movement down would likely keep me floating near the island. Cin could easily reach me and tow me in using one of the jet packs. She'd be up shortly to see what happened. I didn't think the inexplicable violent movement of the island would fail to awaken her. Still, it wouldn't hurt to call for help, I thought, and so I did.

'Cin! Help!'

I was quickly proven wrong, about it not hurting. A very large dark blue feathered head with a wide mouth on a long neck suddenly appeared on the far side of the island. It peered around and spotting me gave out a glad roar. I could almost hear its telepathic exclamation – “A snack!” The dragon shot up, above the island with a single sweep of its long, wing-like arms – giving the island another abrupt jolt that flung up another cloud of leaves, vines, and debris.

I had my darter out before it cleared the island. It was one of the lizard type of dragons with a large, crocodile head on a long neck, a body like a prehistoric ocean dinosaur, and a long tail. All told, it was likely upwards of 30 meters long with perhaps a 15-meter arm-span. It had a crown of yellow and light blue feathers, though its body was feathered in dark blues fading to a pale blue underside with yellow fringes on its wing edges. It'd make a pretty picture, but viewed from 60 meters away, and seeing the eagerness in its eyes to enjoy an unexpected snack, I found it to be very, very unpleasant.

Its initial upward flight carried it maybe 60 meters above the island – a second or two away, so I didn't hesitate, letting fly half a dozen darts in its direction. I had the darter set for max non-lethal charge, with the usual A-B mix of regular and armor piercing darts. As I mentioned before in describing the last time I'd found myself this close to a dragon, they tend to concentrate your mind wonderfully. All six darts hit the dragon, though in truth it would've been hard to miss at this range. The regular darts exploded in three flashes of bright blue plasma on hitting the dragon, its feathers bursting into flames. The armor piecing ones gave off only a spark as they penetrated the dragon's feathers and thick skin. Alarmed by the smoldering little fires, the dragon let out a startled roar, and with a beat of its wing-like forelimbs, flung itself another 30 meters away from me, giving me a little more breathing room and time to negotiate, as it frantically beat out the two smoldering spots on its breast and on its wing where the darts had discharged.

Dragons are apparently fussy about their feathers, since it concentrated on putting out the little dancing flames amongst its feathers before turning its attention back to me. By that time, we'd drifted further apart and further away from the island. Though I was still slowly tumbling, I managed to keep my darter aimed at the big blue dragon. Flames out, but its feather still smoldering, it swung its large crocodile head back to me, and gave a loud, long, hissing roar. Angry, but now wary as well, it watched and hissed at me, but for the moment, made no move for me.

'That's just a sting, sir dragon!' I yelled out in Cimmadarian, holding the darter with both hands. 'The next darts kill! Don't be fooled by the small size of the weapon. I can and will kill you if you continue your attack!'

I was, indeed, pretty confident a lethal dart or two in the right place – its head or neck – would fry its nervous system, at least paralyzing it if not killing it outright, so I faced the dragon with a fair



amount of confidence in my negotiating position. I had my first encounter with a dragon well in mind and Tri'n's way of dealing it. She felt that they were telepathic, and my experiences with Siss seemed to confirm that. So I thought confident thoughts and conjured up vivid pictures of what my lethal darts would do to it. Even if they didn't kill the dragon outright, they'd likely leave it paralyzed, unable to move, to be eaten alive by the scavengers that it would surely attract. I tried to paint in my imagination gruesome pictures of scavengers, talon-hawks feeding on the living dragon.

And then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a frantically undulating form and felt a clawed hand on my waist as Siss drew up beside me. Wrapping her tail around my waist, she opening her mouth gave a loud and very menacing hiss in the direction of the dragon. I was impressed. And touched.

'Siss you're a very brave! Thank you! Together, we should be able to take that dragon on, if it comes to a fight.'

She cast me a quick, rather doubtful look, but went on hissing.

The dragon, in the meanwhile had begun to cautiously drift closer, studying me with its two jet black eyes.

'Keep your distance dragon!' I bellowed again in Cimmadarian. 'Or I'll send my fierce friend here to teach you some manners!'

Siss abruptly stopped hissing and looked up to me in disbelief, her wide crocodile mouth still open. The dragon, on the other hand, gave a sharp, bark, the dragon's laugh. It may also have winked as well. It certainly blinked.

'Just kidding, Siss,' I assured her. 'Just a bit of humor to begin negotiations.'

She regarded me warily, turned back to the dragon, but did not hiss. No doubt calling my bluff about negotiations.

The dragon was still slowly drifting closer, so I decided I'd better get talking.

'That's close enough. Or I'll sting again!' I bellowed. It may have stopped drifting closer, or just slowed down a little. It didn't move more than its head however, so I continued, 'I'm a stranger – I'm from the outside. I'm a peace-loving man and hope to make as few enemies as possible. I've been told that you're intelligent beings. Too intelligent to risk your lives foolishly. I believe you can understand me, and perhaps read the pictures in my mind. Don't mistake those little stings I just gave you for the full power of my weapon. The darts I used were designed just to put people asleep. It also has darts that kill them by burning up their insides. Even though you are far larger than people, they'll do the same to you! I've got plenty of them,' I added, carefully imagining what would happen...

As with the first dragon I encountered with Tri'n, this one continued to study me for some time with its great black eyes, in a manner that somehow left me in no doubt they are intelligent creatures. And then suddenly it gave a great wave with its forearms and shot upwards relative to Siss and I, but also in our general direction, the blast of air from the beat of its forearms threatening to send us tumbling once again. Siss, however, twisted using her three-meter length to keep us more or less stable – stable enough for me to send several more regular non-lethal darts exploding on the dragon's sky blue breast as it arched above us. I flipped the switch to lethal darts. Whether it was the little fires in the feathers of its breast, or it caught my thought that the next darts would be lethal, it seemed to abandon any remaining intention of having me for a snack, and continued its flight upwards and over us, using its head to beat out the smoldering fires in its chest, though roaring in anger as it went.

Siss and I watched it flap its way away from us, trailing the occasional tendril of smoke. "The vanity of feathers," I thought as I watched it regally fly away.

Siss gave an indigent hiss.

Reaching over to her, I pulled her close, careful not to disarrange any feathers. 'We sure scared that dragon, didn't we Siss? Thank you. That was very brave of you. I'm amazed with your courage and loyalty. I'm in your debt. You must be the bravest dragon in the Pela.' She had to have been, and I was in her debt. I was taken aback at her show of courage and concern. I looked at her with new respect.

Her eyes were bright and she was hissing and barking happily, the tip of her tail wagging.

'Our next problem is to get back to the island,' I said. Turning about, I found the island was even further away. I also saw Cin standing on the flattened plain of the island, hands in her jacket pockets, shaking her head.

'There,' I said pointing to a long trailing vine, not too far off. 'That vine seems still attached to the island. If you can either nudge or pull me in that direction, I can get back on my own.'

Siss grabbed the collar of my jumpsuit and undulating her tail and body like a crocodile in water, slowly hauled me to the vine. Once I had a hand on it and gave it a tug to make certain it was still attached, I said, 'Thanks, Siss, you can go on ahead.'

Siss raced ahead and wound herself around Cin. I could hear Cin loudly telling Siss how brave she was while Siss barked out her tale.

'What a careless lummoX Litang is to fall off an island! It seems he can't be left on his own without a keeper,' Cin went on. 'And then, after falling off an island, what does he then go and do? Why he annoys a big, dangerous dragon, that's what he does. The idiot. What was the man thinking?'

Siss barked and wagged the tip of her tail – finding it all so humorous.

'And then you, my brave, brave friend, go streaking out to save the clumsy lummoX from his foolish folly! Why I nearly died with fright, afraid my poor brave Siss would get hurt or killed defending Litang from the dragon he'd gone and riled up by putting darts in it. Why you could've been killed! Oh, my poor, little dragon...'

And so it went, the girls having a good laugh at my expense, as I pulled myself along, hand over hand, back to the island. Reaching the island, I climbed aboard and made my way to them, both of them watching me with laughing eyes.

'Why, Litang, you've gotten a lot better with your darter over the years,' she exclaimed. 'How many dozen darts did you sent its way?'

'I'll have you know I sent only eight, and it only took two to capture you,' I added. 'It seems I have gotten a little better. But then, these aren't barroom brawls either. Perhaps that has something to do with it.'

'And I did like the way you tried to talk your way out of it having you for lunch. Very Unity Standard, very Unity Standard indeed!'

'I have it on good authority that's the best way of dealing with dragons. I've already seen its success in action. They're as telepathic as Siss is, and if you conjure up a sufficiently convincing scene of the power of your weapon and your willingness to use it, they'll usually make the wise decision and lunch elsewhere.'

'Oh, that's just your Unity Standardness.'

'It's wisdom, Cin. The Pela is the dragon's realm. And I'm thinking it's wise to keep on their good side whenever possible. Look how lucky we are to have a dragon friend like Siss.'

Cin looked down and ran her fingers along Siss's feathered head. 'I suppose she is something more than a nuisance.'

Siss growled a mild objection.

'Indeed, I'm lucky to be able to count on such a brave friend,' I said, giving Cin a challenging look.

Cin returned my glance with an unconcerned laugh. 'Indeed you are.'

The insurmountable problem with a small island was that it hid half the sky, allowing any potential danger to get close enough to pop up without warning, a few dozen meters away. Something had to be done, so I devoted the rest of my watch to cutting a tunnel from the gig's upper hatch through the maze of vines to the edge of the island. There, I cleared a deep hollow arbor within the vines where we could sit and watch a bit of the Pela go by, while being hidden from sight and protected by the surrounding vines. And if another dragon should land on our tumbleweed of an island, we'd have enough vines around us to keep us from being flung into space. Once that was finished, I pulled the new growth vines out of the crater wall and wired some opposite vines together so they'd start forming a canopy

over the gig as well. We had, I decided, grown too casual about the real dangers of the Pela, beast and man.

04

'Shouldn't you be making yourself useful?' said Cin as she settled beside me on the woven vine seat in our new arbor in the vines, the following round.

'I'm being very useful up here' I replied, tapping my forehead.

'Imagining yourself useful isn't being useful and isn't going to save you.'

'I was thinking. I've examined all the landing jets and have hooked them up to the control panel to get a read on their status. Unfortunately, we have only three undamaged ones, – one less than the minimum I'd hoped for. Two other ones are operational, but their exhaust bells are cracked or dented which will cause problems over time. I'm thinking I'll trim the exhaust bells to eliminate the damaged area – we did that to the Starry Shore's main engine – which should prevent the damage from spreading to the combustion chamber. We can then use them for the steering rockets since they'll operate only sparingly. The only downside then is that our Pela operational speed will be reduced with only three drive rockets. I was just reviewing what needs to be done before I tackle the next phase.'

'And what are we looking at, time-wise?'

'Optimistically, we could launch in two weeks, maybe a bit more if problems pop up, but I expect we can soon get our operation underway.'

'We'll miss the rescue boat; it will be here any day now.'

'Yes. I made no promises about that. The thing is, that in two weeks we'll have an armored vessel to ply the Pela. And if no problems crop up in the environmental unit, we'll be able to sail the outer reaches at near interplanetary speeds as well. In short, the next phase of the operation is nearly at hand.' I realized I was tempting fate with that announcement, and regretted it instantly.

She shot me a quick glance. 'You're rather unconcerned about your future. I'm thinking the next phase might be somewhat different than you appear to expect.'

I gave her a smile. 'Oh, I think, in the end, you'll find that my usefulness will not end after getting the gig launched. I rather doubt Siss can steer and stand watch. And well, we haven't settled how we're going to accomplish our missions yet.'

'I believe I've settled mine. Which is the only one that counts.'

'Oh? Care to fill me in?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing has changed from what I said during our first meeting.'

'I doubt this gig will ever get you close to the rebel fleet, even if you could locate it. And without me, you have no in with the rebels. And I doubt you're of much value to the Empress any longer. I can't image what you can do to affect the outcome without my cooperation.'

'I don't need your cooperation. All I need is your body, Litang, preserved in a sleep-pod,' she replied coldly. 'They needn't know it's lifeless.'

She seemed deadly serious. I suppose Litang in desperate need of medical attention might get her near Min and Vinden.

'We'll see how that lifts, Cin, when it comes time to launch,' I replied with a sigh, and then hoping to pilot the conversation back to a more sociable course, added. 'In the meanwhile, have your survey glasses with you? I'm thinking that patchwork of greens on the plains on the island looks a lot like planted fields. They look too regular to be completely natural. We may have come across our first inhabited island.'

She pulled the thin set of glasses out of her jumpsuit pocket and placed them to her eyes. 'You're right, farm fields and workers,' she said after a pause, and handed them to me.

I brought the island into focus and slowly zoomed in. The patchwork of greens were definitely

planted fields – I could see tiny figures moving in the fields and seed-shaped punts loaded with produce being pushed and pulled low over the fields using a long pole wielded by the boatman. The pole likely had a hook to grasp the tough moss covering the fields in which the crops were planted, no doubt to preserve the soil from being washed or blown away. The figures appeared to be a mix of broad and fine-feathered people, though mostly broad-feathered.

We passed the glasses back and forth.

'I haven't seen a village or a city yet,' commented Cin, putting down the glasses.

'Given dragons in the sky, and other potential raiders, they may well have built their villages hidden under the trees or in caves – out of sight and easy to defend. I would.'

'It appears that the punts are heading for that clump of forest, so you might be right. Do you think the spacesuit jet packs could reach the island?'

I considered the question, and its possible implications. 'I'm sure they could get us there and back. Do you want to pay them a visit?'

She shook her head. 'Just wondering.'

Was that a hint to jump ship?

'I wouldn't recommend calling on them. I have it on good authority that outside of the civilized island nations, you need to assume the natives are no more friendly than dragons, and every bit as dangerous,' I replied.

'Oh, but look how well you get along with dragons!' she laughed. 'I'm sure your pleasant, Unity Standard manners would smooth over any instinctive urge to serve you for dinner.'

'Still, I've little interest in putting it to the test,' I replied, innocently. I had, in fact, none. I had no intention of jumping ship to save Cin the unpleasantness of killing me, should she actually feel the need to do so.

She gave me a darting glance – a warning? – and then rose saying, 'I guess I should be making something to eat. I think it'll be viento vegetables with sarrin-rice.' (A Tienterra dish.)

I laughed. 'My dear Cin. Don't subtly hint that I should jump ship when the opportunity arrives and then announce that you're going to make my favorite meal. I'll not voluntarily abandon viento and sarrin-rice. Nor you,' I dared to add.

She gave me a rather hopeless look, but said, 'Right. Five minutes.'

05

I spent the watch designing a mounting for the three landing jets on the engine compartment bulkhead, and a shield to protect them, should we run into talon-hawks or dragons intent on making the gig a meal. Cin cut up the metal parts of unneeded and damaged gig fixtures, to feed to the printer as the raw material since the parts printer could not handle the D-matter hull metals.

We had put the inhabited island astern by the end of the watch and were enjoying our after dinner mug of cha on our sheltered "porch" in the vines when a bare white rock, surrounded by a swirling flock of large white birds and their hunters in half a dozen kayak-like boats drifted into view. The boats were tapering tubes with an open cockpit in the middle and likely made of tightly woven vines, since the hunters – broad-feathered people – were able to walk along the outside of their craft with their claw tipped feet. Each boat had two oars with wide leather paddles latched alongside their hulls. They also had eight thin bamboo masts –two offset "X"s fore and aft of the cockpit, perhaps to keep modest sized dragons, or talon-hawks at bay and/or to set sails from when air currents served. At the moment, the poles were being used for protection – supporting a tent of netting that enclosed the cockpit – a necessary precaution for their hunting.

The white island was home to hundreds, if not thousands of large two-meter-long birds – they seemed to have true wings, though they had claws on their wingtips and a beak with teeth. The hunters

would fire one of their long guns with explosive bullets into the island, not to kill their prey, but rather to annoy them, setting the flock to flight screeching their outrage. Most of the birds would circle around the island before settling down again. Some, however, would swoop further out and aggressively attack the hunters in their boats, which seemed to be what the hunters wanted. These more aggressive birds would go after the hunters, tearing at the netting draped over the kayak's long masts allowing the hunters with long spears to stab the attacking birds in a spirited battle. I suspect the exploding bullets of their long guns would've left little to eat, so they hunted with spears instead.

Cin found it all quite picturesque. I less so. The kayaks were surrounded in a thin cloud of red blood after each round of combat, which rather put my Unity Standard appetite off a bit.

It was the end of my watch in the hammock. Siss was as annoying as ever, letting her tail brush over my face once she knew I was half-awake. She'd become even more annoying, since coming to my rescue, figuring she could get away with just about anything.

'Company,' Cin said quietly from the companionway.

Siss hissed and seemed reluctant to move, but I shrugged her off, alarmed. 'What?'

'Sounds like the beat of propellers. Close.'

I grabbed my darter and followed her up through the hatch. I could clearly hear the thumping beat of propellers and an engine. And then conversation as well. Looking up through the fresh green vines that now arched over the crater, I could catch glimpses of a boat through the leaves. We stood stock still, waiting to see if they'd look down – uncertain of what they'd see. We were pretty well hidden – the vines had regrown rapidly— but a glint of anything bright would certainly attract their attention.

Slowly the wide, pumpkin seed shaped boat drifted across the now overgrown crater to the thumping rhythm of a rear mounted propeller. Only after it had passed did I think to draw a breath again. Oh, we'd be safe enough in the gig, but without propulsion we'd be trapped if anyone set about to capture the gig.

Without a word Cin started up through the vines to get a better look.

I reluctantly followed her up – too curious to stay behind. We carefully poked our heads just far enough into the leafy upper layers of the tangle of new vines to catch a glimpse of the boat and its passengers. It was now nearly 100 meters beyond the island – a wide, nearly flat hulled boat with an arching wooden cage over it to protect its crew from both being swept off boat and from any attacking dragon or talon-hawk. It seemed to have a small engine aft that was driving a whirling propeller and sported several rudders or wings for steering. It had a mixed crew of five – colorfully dressed broad and fine-feathered people.

A deeper thumping sound came from behind us. Twisting about, we found a much larger ship with a long tail of steam and smoke behind it approaching our island. It was still perhaps a kilometer off, but the thumping of her steam engine and the beat of her propellers stirred up our island's residents, sending them swirling into the air with shrill calls of alarm. Cin drew out her survey glasses and studied it for a while before handing them silently to me.

The vessel was shaped much like Vinden's warships, which is to say rather like an ocean going ship, with a wedge bow and flat sides. It had short wings on each side, each mounting a large propeller at their tip, with a steering rudder behind the propeller. It was six decks deep– the center two were enclosed and sported half a dozen ports with long barrels – cannons or rocket launchers – protruding from them. The two tall upper and lower decks and their deckhouses were entirely enclosed by metal gratings. They were near mirror images of each other, which is to say, that the crew on the upper decks where standing “heads up” while those on the lower deck were “heads down” all with their feet towards the center deck. Several small smoke stacks poked out of the grating on either side trailing their thin tendrils of smoke. A dozen small boats like the one that had just skimmed our island were secured on top of both the upper and lower decks. The ship was festooned with half a dozen large banners or flags, waving in the breeze of passage.

When viewed with the glasses it became evident that it was a slavers' ship. The lower open decks contained a two deck high cage on either end that were packed with people – males in one, females in the other. All appeared to be broad-feathered. The deckhouse between them had one of the thin smokestack with a trail of smoke – likely the galley for the captives. It passed within half a kilometer of our island, so that we could see the type of people we were dealing with – a crew of mixed broad and fine-feathered peoples – all colorfully dressed and heavily armed – long knives, swords, and often sidearms as well, with ammunition belts crisscrossing their chests. Outside the gratings of each deck they had hung the heads of their conquered foes by their hair or feathers, the breeze carried the sour stench of the ship – the packed slaves and decaying heads – to us.

'Are they heading for home, or still raiding? They seem to be heading for that island we passed.'

'Hard to say. The slave cages looked packed,' replied Cin. 'Rather unpleasant looking people. Best be avoided.'

'Aye. Two against even a single slaver ship is not the best odds, no matter how primitive. We've only so many darts.'

'Two?' she asked softly.

'Well, three, with Siss.'

She gave me an icy look, 'Two, Litang. I wouldn't wait too long. I think I could carry on from here.'

'I think you might need to consider Siss in that program. She seems to think we're a crew, or is it family? If she is telepathic, as I'm sure she is, then she probably knows more about us than we care to admit to each other.'

She considered that for a moment and said, 'If she is telepathic, and if she is actually that sophisticated. Still, I rather think she's here just for the attention we give her. But in any case, I can do and will do what I need to do.' and lifted the glasses to her eyes, but not before I caught a glimpse of uncertainty in them. I said nothing as she watched the slaver until it faded into the distance.

06

Over the next few rounds we made good progress getting the gig ready to sail. And yet, at the same time, we felt we were falling more and more behind – for every step we took forward, two more appeared ahead. For example; I'd found steering rockets to be very clumsy in the atmosphere (and we only had two, to begin with), so I wanted to steer the gig using wing flaps and a rudder. They would have to be mounted on the hull and controllable, but where would they be most efficient, and how should I mount them? We had spare electric motors to move them, but axles and gears needed to be designed and printed and the motors had to be installed in some sort of protected housing on the outside the hull. Then, once installed, we'd need to reprogram levers on the control console to control their movement. And even then, we'd still need the two damaged rocket engines for steering once we left the atmosphere – and they needed to rotate – since we only had two to steer in four directions. All this meant that I was spending a lot of time designing and printing out samples of wings, fixtures, and mounting brackets, which was a slow, iffy lift since I was not an engineer by trade and often had to resort to trial and error to see what worked and what didn't.

The twelfth day came and we began sending out a distress signal with as much power as we could harness to the transmitter. I'd no hope and so wasn't disappointed when we got no reply.

It must have been around day 14. I was welding the last of the engine mounts onto the engine compartment bulkhead when Cin, who was on the opposite side of the ship cutting away the last of the tangled wreckage of the engine room said, 'Is it my imagination, or is it getting darker? And rather quiet?'

Looking around, it wasn't her imagination. I glanced up through the thin cover of vines overhead – it looked almost like night through the chinks in the leaves. And yes, the usual background sound of

buzzing beetles, calling birds and screeching lizards were entirely missing. 'I don't like the look – or sound – of this. I think we should...'

Cin, however, was already swinging up through the maze of new growth vines to see what was going on, which wasn't what I was about to suggest. Reluctantly, I followed her.

'I don't think this is wise,' I muttered as I pulled myself up beside her on reaching the surface of our island.

'Looks to be some sort of storm,' she said.

An understatement. I saw a black, violently boiling wall of clouds filling half the sky. Even as I stared at it, the eerie silence began to be replaced by a subtle, but rising keening, sound between a shriek and a roar. The vines stirred and their leaves fluttered uneasily as the wind began to rise.

Siss swam into view from the far edge of the island, uttering a loud warning hiss as she frantically undulated towards us.

'I think...' I began, only to be drowned out by a rising high pitched scream that swiftly swelled to the sound of a dozen rockets lifting off. The wall of blackness raced towards us, bringing with it that rarest of things in the Pela – night. Its darkness carried debris, from leaves, to branches, to entire shattered trees.

The wind-driven wall of debris and rain smashed into the island, ripping through the newly grown vines, stripping them of their leaves and sending the vines streaming. The little island swayed violently as I clung to one of the new, young vine, partially sheltered within the old impact crater. Even so, the wind and rain swirled around me, whipping me wildly about. I caught just a glimpse of Cin clinging to a vine, now on the other side of the crater wall, but I did not see Siss. An eddy flung my vine upwards, lifting me into the full brunt of flying leaves, twigs, and torn up plants. I feared I'd be carried entirely off the island, but the next gust brushed me back down and against the old crater wall where I managed to hook my legs around an old, thick vine. In a little lull I dared to switch my hold to the thick old vine that wasn't going anywhere at the moment. Glancing back, I saw Cin too had secured a hold on the crater wall opposite me and was starting to clamber down. Though the main force of the driven debris and pelting rain was roaring overhead, eddies of rain knifed their way down into the crater, stinging my face and making drawing a breath without drowning a struggle. I had to bury my face in the vines to find some air to breathe, and then started down the wall of vines as fast as I dared, holding tight whenever a wild eddy tried to tear me free.

I looked down. The smooth hull of the gig was only two meters below in the swirling rain. The access hatch was open, but there was a four-meter expanse of wet metal to cross to reach it. A very iffy expanse – the magnetic soles of my boots had not been designed to hold in a hurricane, and the claw attachments were useless. Still, what choice did I have?

I was about to continue down when I heard a keening bark overhead. Looking up through the stinging swirls of debris, I spied Siss clinging to a tangle of weaving vines near the rim of the crater, looking quite drowned in the rain and wind. She gave another croaking appeal when she saw she had my attention. I was surprised and embarrassed to see her – I had completely forgotten about her in the chaos. As the wind roared around me, clawing at me, I realized that even if she could climb down the wall of wind-whipped vines, she'd have no chance of crossing the smooth hull to the hatch. Her only option was to climb out on one of the whirling vines and hope that it would carry her near enough to the hatch to make a grab for it without smashing her against the boat. Unless I did something.

My chances weren't all that great, but they were better than hers, so I started back up for her. She was a shipmate, and I knew she would've done the same, roles reversed. She met me half way, her wet feathers waving wildly in the wind. When we met, nose to nose, she barked, '?'

'Climb on to my back and hold on tight,' I yelled. 'Maybe together we can stretch out enough to reach the hatch.'

She hissed, and swinging about carefully detached her claws, one by one from the vines to dig them into the folds of my jumpsuit and then encircled my torso with her four limbs, her snout next to my

head.

'Ready?'

A tentative hiss.

'Hold on tight,' I said, and started back down. Siss's extra weight and bulk, made holding on even harder than before as the wind and rain swirled around us.

I dropped down as fast I dared, one secure hold after another while the wind tugged at us, trying to tear us off. It nearly did once, when one of the vines my boot claws had a hold of gave way and sent us flying out like a flag. Luckily, the next gust crashed us back against the crater wall, where I was able wrap a leg around another vine.

Siss scolded me with a bark next to my ear.

'You want to switch places?' I yelled back. 'You've got more claws than I do.'

She declined with a hiss.

After what seemed like an eternity in the black fury of wind and sound, my leg in contact with the hull of the gig in the whirlwind. I stopped and carefully shifted my hold around so that I was facing the gig. The open hatch was just four meters of bare metal away, but between the wind and Siss, I had no confidence that my boots could keep a grip on the slick hull.

Beyond the gig, I caught a vague glimpse of Cin in the darkness, through the rain swirling leaves on the other side of the gig. She had about two meters of hull to cross to reach the hatch. With a well-timed lunge and some luck, she should be able to grab the edge of the hatch and pull herself in. We'd have to make some sort of running break for it to reach the hatch. The safest course of action would be to wait for the whirlwind to die down. You'd think it would have to, sooner or later. However, it showed no signs of doing so, and indeed, the vine island seemed in real danger of being torn apart. And if not torn apart, it still was entirely possible that the gig would work itself free of the vines that secured it to the island and be carried away. We'd have to act, but how? Perhaps if I send Siss ahead, holding on to her back legs or tail, she could grab the hatch and pull us in...

Next to my ear, she hissed a doubtful hiss, even though I hadn't said a thing.

Cin, as usual, acted with dispatch, snagging one of the waving vines from our side, and using it as a safety line to steady herself, made a lunging dash for the hatch. She no more started when the wind ripped her off the hull, and then slammed her back down flat against it. Undeterred, she was up immediately and hauled herself to the hatch. She dove in and then popped back up still holding the vine. The roaring of the wind too loud to yell over, but she indicated that Siss and I should use this vine as a safety line as well. With her holding it on that end, it was our best option, so I cautiously edged over to where I could grasp the vine. With it in hand, I planted my boots on the hull and crouching low I started off, pulled myself hand over hand for the hatch while shuffling my boots along the smooth hull, careful to keep both boots on the hull for maximum holding power. Cin's hold kept the vine stiff as a rod, but between Siss and my weight, the tumbling of the island, and the wind, it snapped just beyond Cin's grip when we were halfway across. I lunged flat out, landing on my chest, just managing to grasp the edge of the hatch and cling to it as the wind whipped us around until I got the tips of my boots anchored on the hull again. I pulled myself and Siss close enough for Siss to grasp Cin's out stretched arm and then the edge of the hatch to drag herself through the hatch, leaving me clinging to the edge of the hatch. With Siss off my back I pulled myself forward and dived into the dim lit shelter of the gig, joining the leaves and rain that swirled around the compartment. Cin, standing on the pile of salvaged parts that filled most of the forward compartment slid the hatch closed.

It was suddenly very quiet in the gig, save for Siss's excited hissing as she darted around us, no doubt feeling that rush of exhilaration at having dodged death. I was far from certain we had actually dodged death, so I just swung about and planted my boots on the narrow strip of swaying deck as the island and gig tumbled in the hurricane catching my breath and calming the pounding in my chest.

'Are you alright, Siss?' cooed Cin. 'He didn't hurt you when he tripped, did he? The clumsy lug – I thought he'd crushed them flat.'



Siss barked her laughter, wagging her tail and darted nose to nose with me, her black eyes twinkling, and her thin tongue darted out and licked my nose.

'Oh, cut that out, Siss,' I muttered.

'It's okay to bite off his nose, Siss, if you want. He shouldn't have tripped,' Cin assured her. 'Serves him right. Besides, the med-unit can grow it back for him if he misses it.'

I said nothing, I didn't have the breath. I just clung, dripping, to the rattling pile of landing jets and pipes and scrap metal to keep from being tossed about as the swirl of leaves and dust slowly settled into a quiet haze.

'I think it might be best if we get out of these wet clothes and ride out the storm in a hammock,' I said after they had their fun. 'There's no telling how long this'll last.'

'Why Litang!' Cin mocked brightly, arching her eyebrows. 'Whatever do you have in mind?'

'Nothing more daring than avoiding hypothermia. I'm going to change into something dry in the control compartment, unless you have any other ideas on how to avoid hypothermia. I will, however, be a gentleman, and let you have Siss to keep you warm,' I replied just as brightly as I made my way to my hammock, now enjoying that exhilaration of avoiding death yet again. Stripping and changing into a dry jumpsuit in the tumbling ship was a pain, but I managed, and crawled into my swinging hammock.

Cin shoved a reluctant, growling Siss into the sanitation unit and ran its air dry cycle to dry Siss's feathers. After a short period of yelping alarm, Siss suddenly decided she liked being blasted with warm air and holding herself in the tumbling unit refused to leave it until long after her feathers were dry.

Having dried Siss, Cin changed into dry clothes. In the control compartment. It was too dim to see her eyes, so I stayed in my hammock. I didn't think things had changed all that much, despite our time together.

With the island tumbling in the storm, we could do little more than swing in our hammocks, so we swung, girls on one side, boys on the other, and passed the time, in small talk and silence.

At one point one or both of the damaged bow and stern sections parted company with us, for there were several loud ringing bangs on the gig's hull, and then nothing.

After several hours the tumbling ceased.

'Has the storm passed?' I wondered aloud, and slipped out of the hammock to go forward and slide the access hatch open a little. I got a face full of wind driven leaves for my efforts. The roaring of the wind outside filled the compartment.

'Guess not,' laughed Cin from the companionway.

'Not yet, but it may be dying down. Either that, or it has blown all the vines downwind, creating a tail that's keeping the island semi-steady. Still, anything can happen.'

We returned to our hammocks and swung quietly for a time.

'You know, Cin, it's going to be rather cozy aboard the gig once we actually get under way and have to remain aboard the boat,' I remarked glancing across at her. 'What with only two small compartments to knock about in.'

'Oh, I'm planning to do something about our overcrowding problem when the time comes.'

Siss barked her laugh and pounded her tail on Cin's chest.

'I'm serious, Siss,' snapped Cin.

Upon which Siss instantly turned her head to me, bared her many teeth and gave me her most ferocious growl, which broke me up, and instantly had Siss barking in laughter as well. Cin may've been forced to smile in spite of herself.

'How can a sentry-serpent from a small isolated island be so attuned to human thought patterns that she shares our sense of humor?' I asked out loud after some thought on the subject.

'Your sense of humor,' corrected Cin.

'I'm certain she can telepathically read our emotions, but that doesn't necessarily explain how she

can be so attuned to the subtleties of our thoughts that she can respond so intelligently and so wittily.'

'I'm not so sure she's all that intelligent. She doesn't seem to realize that I wasn't joking.'

Siss gave a low growl, disputing that remark.

'But that said, you seem to forget that she wasn't alone on Redoubt Island. She was sharing it with over three hundred sleeping counter-revolutionaries. And who knows how old she is. She likely has spent her entire life observing the dreams of humans, so perhaps it's not all that surprising after all.'

'Ah, true. But do we dream in stasis?' I muttered, half to myself. 'Well, I suppose you must. I once met a ghost in wyrm weather who was dreaming in stasis.'

'A ghost?'

'Oh, I've met several. You were the last one, back there on the deck of the flagship. But this particular one, Glen Colin, was a real ghost,' I said, and spun her my tale of encountering Glen Colin during the Lost Star's passage through wyrm weather in route to Zilantre.

We drifted into silence after I'd finished my yarn in the dim lit compartment.

'You really don't take my hints seriously, do you?' asked Cin, after a while.

'Siss didn't.'

'Which goes to show her limitations.'

'I doubt it. I tend to trust her on this. She can see into your mind.'

'You know I would've killed you on Lontria and on Despar too, but for that lug of a legionnaire getting in the way as the hatch closed. Why do you not take my intention seriously?'

'Because you've make it plain you don't want to do it,' I said, looking across the cabin, 'with all your warnings and hints about jumping ship. I believe that our shared affinity, whatever misgivings we both may harbor, will, in the end, prevail. We simply have too much in common for anything too unpleasant to come between us.' The love conquers all theory. The love part was pretty iffy.

'We have nothing in common.'

'Says the girl sharing a small cabin with me.'

She ignored that. 'You don't know me, or my position. You seem to see only one facet of me, my Unity Standardness, and then you make the assumption that I'm like you.'

'Huh? Your Unity Standardness? I seemed to have missed that.'

'I didn't operate within the Azminn system for fifteen years without adopting something of the Unity outlook. It was necessary for my work. Plus, my mother is an outsider – a native of Barvene in the Amdia System, so that I suppose I may still have some Unity character traits in my makeup from her as well. But I'm a Cin, and trust me, Litang, we Cins are not pleasant people. We're known for our ruthlessness and vindictiveness, among other traits. I've no love for the masters of St Bleyth, but I will ruthlessly fulfill my duty at any cost. I will use you, and then,' she paused to give me a hard look. (And Siss a low warning hiss.) 'Even if you manage to talk me into believing that you now fall outside my official duty to eliminate you, you will pay the price for your part in my family's final extinction within the Order. As I said, we're very vindictive.'

Which should've scared me. A lot. But didn't. I guess my 500 generations of St Bleyth ancestors are a pretty tough, ruthless lot, too. And discovering that she was half Unity, made me bold. I knew firsthand how complicated and powerful a mixed Unity-St Bleyth heritage could be. Though I consider myself very Unity Standard, I know that my St Bleyth instincts made me more ruthless than I'd have been without that heritage. I had to believe that the reverse would work in Cin's case as well. Indeed, I could make a case that I was alive today because she was only half St Bleyth, no matter how ruthless and vindictive that half might be. So I said, 'Vindictive or not, you're no fool. But we'll settle that another day. Why not tell me about your family, and it's fall? Better yet, about yourself. No matter whose vision of our future turns out to be written, we're beyond worrying about secrets.'

## Chapter 05 Cin's Tale (Part 2)

01

To my surprise, she said, 'To understand me and what I must do, Litang, you need to understand my family. Family lines are very important within the Order of St Bleyth. There are families that trace their roots back to the earliest followers of St Bleyth. The Cins don't go back that far, but we go back at least 200 generations. And we have always been known to produce many of the most skillful and successful stealths of the Order. Cin has been synonymous with stealths for more than 10,000 years. We've always been a justly proud family and, perhaps unfortunately, an arrogant one, as well. So, over the ages we've become disliked by many for our many successes. However, in the last dozen generations or so, the family has grown even more arrogant, corrupt, distrusted, and hated.

'Being the finest stealths – spies and thieves, for the most part – meant that the Cins have always operated within the Unity, since only the best can operate successfully within the Unity. It is no harder to commit a crime in the Unity than it is in the drifts. The difference is that it's much harder to get away with it. Once a crime is discovered, the Guards of the Unity consult their extensive surveillance system – working forward and backwards from the scene of the crime – to identify all the possible perpetrators. And then using their powerful mind probes, quickly identify the actual perpetrator and administer justice. So to be a successful thief, the theft must be carried out without the victim ever knowing something was taken, be it information, credits or objects. At least not until the surveillance data has been purged from the system, or the thief long gone. And to steal something without the victim ever knowing it takes great skill and for most of those commissions, it takes a Cin.

'This tradition has continued up to this day. We have never lost the talent. My father was a brilliant stealth, and I was, too – before we crossed orbits on Calissant. But my father and I were the last of the Cins with any standing within the Order. And obviously, even so, we had enemies. Our family name insured that. I have aunts and uncles, who I've no doubt still have the talent, but they have all abandoned the Order. It is hard to say exactly what corrupted the family, but we grew increasingly greedy, lazy, irresponsible, cruel, and dishonorable. One can argue that thieves are not, in the ordinary course of events, all that honorable to begin with, but the latter day Cins seemed to have lost any thread of honor. Many became unreliable libertines, while others became ruthless criminals and/or businessmen and women on the planets they were assigned to operate by the Order. So instead of returning to Tienterra at the end of their field assignment days to take up administrative positions within the Operations Directorate or simply to retire, they – the newly independent and very wealthy Cins – stayed outside, choosing to stay within the Unity and live the life they'd built with their talents. Even in the Unity you don't find titles to vast estates in cereal boxes, so there's little mystery as to how they became so wealthy, since if they had been true to their vows and the Order, they would have only undertaken assignments from the Operations Directorate, and any proceeds would've gone to the clients and the Order, not to them. For a while they sent their sons and daughters back to Tienterra and the Academy to be trained as stealths, but eventually this practice died out as the families abandoned the Order altogether.

'This, of course, did not sit well with either the Masters of the Monastery or the other families of the Order, but little could be done. And if the Order ever did try to do something about it, they were still Cins, so that any efforts would've failed in the end. These days, great houses of the Cins are scattered across the Nine Star Nebula, tied together by a web of allied businesses. Though, of course, you'll not find the family name in any of these ventures.'

'Ah, but even if they couldn't do anything directly, couldn't the Masters have tipped off the Unity authorities about their renegade brothers and sisters?'

'They could've. But the Cins know too much about the Order and how we operate. We all have secrets to keep. The Cins keep the Order's secrets, so the Order has had to simply write them out of the Order. And really, by now, most of my relatives are no longer criminals, just ruthless businessmen, so that there would likely be little that the authorities could do. You cannot be punished for the crimes of your parents.'

'And your father? Did he come from one of these families?'

'My father was from the last Tienterra branch of the Cins still within the Order. He had the full Cin talent, and he set out to restore the Cins' reputation within the Order. He was determined to be the finest stealth, the finest Cin, and the most loyal Cin in memory. He was assigned to operate within the Amdia system with the cover occupation of a dealer in old First World art and collectibles.

'In time he met my mother, a fashion designer of all things! She is a scion of a famous fashion house on Barvene. A thousand-year concern. I don't know if he was selling a stolen treasure or stealing one, since these old, rich, provincial families often have a treasure or two stocked away somewhere. In any event, they seem to have truly fallen in love, became partners, and I am their crowning achievement.

'Perhaps my father thought bringing in new, outside blood into the family line might reset its downward trajectory. In any case, as it had apparently been agreed between them, I was sent off to the Academy to become a stealth when I was ten. My mother tells me that she wasn't as sorry to see me go as she should've been. I was a willful, cruel, and ill-tempered child. A very unpleasant one, in fact. At the Academy I was both a Cin and a half breed outsider, so I had little chance of being popular, even if I had the ability of being popular. But I was strong-willed and independent enough to survive being disliked. And, as D'Lay told you, I was exceptional at being sneaky, the old Cin hallmark. In my first years I'm sure it was simply tolerated by the authorities to encourage my talents as a potential stealth. But I assure you, by the time I left the Academy, I could go anywhere and do anything within the Academy or surrounding countryside without the authorities ever having a clue. I know a great deal about the Academy, and certain people, things that they would not want known. I thought it useful at the time, being a Cin, but alas, they proved too adept, herding me off to the drifts and finishing me off on Despar with such dispatch that all my collected guarantees proved useless against...' she paused in a black study.

'But you proved to be an exceptional stealth, in any event.'

'Willful, as well as exceptional. They wanted to assigned me to Azminn, but I insisted on spending my first two years in the Unity in the Amdia system so that I would have the chance to become reacquainted with my mother. While my father lived, we had kept in touch during my years at the Academy – exchanging vid messages – so she had continued to be part of my life growing up. Then, when I was 20 years old, my Father, for unknown reasons, was transferred to the drifts and sent on a deeply secret mission. From what I could discover later, I believe it likely involved Despar's growing ambitions – though he may have been sent to foil them, since we served both sides in that long brewing conflict. But in any case, it was not the type of mission he should've been assigned to. We Cins operate in the Unity – any stealth could have been assigned to a mission in the drifts. I don't know what happened, but he was reported killed. Once he was reported dead my communications channel to my mother was closed and hers to me as well. There was no one to speak up for me in the order, and as a student still, I had no status in the Order. I suppose the only reason they didn't send me off on some hopeless mission was that they recognized my talents, and had uses for them. At least for a while.'

'There seems to be more corruption within the Order than just the Cins. D'Lay was certain that his ship was ambushed because someone within the Order tipped Despar off. There seemed to be a lot of rotten things about the Despar affair, including that berserker.'

'Oh, the Cins are not the only family that have decayed in Tienterra,' she admitted. 'Power corrupts, even in an order like St Bleyth.

'And meeting your mother, how did that go?'

'Exceptionally well. We got along very comfortably. Perhaps being loved by just one person is

enough for me. In any event, perhaps because she loved my father, she could love me, though I'm sure she saw the Cin in me. But whereas as a 10-year-old, I was almost ungovernable, at 25 I had learned self-control – as you may've noticed, these last several weeks – and so I could keep the more non-Unity Standard aspects of my personality well-hidden or at least, well under control. I become reacquainted with my uncles, aunts and cousins, all very welcoming, and pleasantly surprised how wonderfully I had turned out after such an unpromising start. Mother offered to take me into the family business, but given my trade, I did not want to tarnish my other family's reputation should my career become known, so I declined, with the promise of perhaps some day joining the family concern as a second career. Unlike my father, I decided to take the low orbit to access my targets – as a servant or tradesman, mostly as a cook or caterer. During my time in the Amdia worlds I was given small, unimportant jobs to test me. I was usually subcontracted out to some planetary crime syndicates with whom we were allied with, mostly to steal or infiltrate their rivals, since I was an unknown outsider.

'Most of these criminal syndicates are based on the various moons rather than the highly monitored planets for ease of operation, and ease of disappearing when needed. And though their operations extend to the planets, they rarely extend outside of the spaceports' quarters and certain industries. So I spent my first two years of field work working in relative safety – operating against targets that could not go to the authorities if I happened to slip up, and with bolt holes close at hand. Once I felt comfortable working in the Unity I reported to the assigned chapter house in the Azminn system and began my career of stealing the secrets, shifting the credit balances, and replacing the priceless treasures of the wealthy houses of Calissant, Pinelea, Quildondra, and Rigtania, with faux priceless treasures. For 15 years I plied my trade, no job too challenging to defeat me... Until one early spring day on Calissant when I happened to be between jobs and was free to supervise a subcontracted out assassination.'

I must confess my heart had been skipping a beat or two. I'd always assumed that Cin was a stealth specializing in assassinations. The idea that I was attracted to a cold-blooded killer – and it's fair to say there's nothing in her sometimes cold and cruel grey eyes, or the way she dispatched the Despar legionnaires who were attempting to kill us which would've made me question that assumption – well, it gave me pause to wonder where my wits lay. Not anywhere near enough, I'll readily admit. I blamed it on my St Bleyth heritage. So, discovering that she was merely a thief, well, to my Unity Standard shame, my heart skipped those beats.

'As you may've gathered, old Max was an idiot. Based on Lontria, he was too accustomed to having bolt holes handy to dive into after doing a job. I agreed to do all the prelim intelligence work. He was to handle arranging things with the wharf rat pack and to do the actual job. The rat pack was told to just beat Min up, a revenge beating for some sort of betrayal. Once she was unconscious, the wharf rats would scurry away and Max would finish the job. However, his casual handling of that end of the operation inspired no confidence in his ability to pull it off without tipping the authorities. He seemed likely to get caught and mind probed and the jig would be up. With the yacht our only escape, I decided it was safer to stash him aboard the yacht on the night of the attack and do the job myself. Which I then proceeded to botch, though without tipping the authorities, mind you. At the time, everything seemed to have gone down just as planned, save for having to eliminate a witness. We made our escape and were spending the window of security surveillance lying low on Lontria when we heard of your encounter with the Last Striker, and all bets seemed to be off. A check of our agents on Calissant told us not a peep had been heard about a double murder on the Yacht Club grounds. This was not exactly unexpected – it would've been well covered up – but the fact that you survived it seemed to suggest that Min had survived as well or the alarm would have been raised. The only other possibility was that Min had a different companion with her when she left the restaurant. Unlikely.

'And then you showed up, landing the whole mess right in our laps...'

'It was rather careless to use the same yacht for both assassinations,' I pointed out. 'Min had no doubt that the boat crash that killed her parents was no accident, so not only did she take precautions like

wearing layers of armored clothing, but she was able to search the anchorage records to identify the Azure Night as the only ship in orbit that was present for both occasions and which had no apparent reason for being there. She hitched a ride on her old ship and followed the Azure Night to Lontria, though we were heading for Sanre-tay in any event, to sail for the drifts.'

'The boat crash wasn't a project of mine. Someone else had the bad luck of not quite killing Min. Bungling the assassination on Calissant, however, was mine, all the more so because I was a Cin. It pretty much decided my fate, with the failure on Lontria sealing it. All they needed was one more failure to discharge me, which I provided for them on Despar. It didn't matter that I arrived too late. The last of the Cins had failed and the dream of my father was as dead as he was.'

I searched for words to say, seeing that I was alive precisely because she had failed. 'Well, you succeeded in your Honor Mission, so that the last true Cin ended her career in honor.'

'Oh, no doubt they'll find a way to disallow that too. The Cins will end in disgrace.'

'You can hardly be blamed for the ill repute of a dozen generations of bad Cins. Given the family's reputation, would they ever have given you any credit no matter how good you were? Very likely they were just waiting for something to pin on you and put an end to the family.'

She said nothing.

'Perhaps it's now time to embrace your other family.'

She shook her head. 'I'm a Cin, a Cin with a full measure of all our dark traits. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because I can be pleasant, I'm a pleasant person.'

'Oh, you have their dark traits. But I don't think they define you. I think you're more your mother's daughter than you'd like to think. And I think that is what your father wanted. He hoped in you to soften and mitigate the darker Cin traits that had slowly become too extreme.'

She shrugged but said nothing.

'I can understand, to some small degree, the struggle within you. I also share a mixed heritage. I believe I've mentioned I've grandparents from the drifts. For the most part my drifter heritage remains under the radar. It perhaps explains my being a spaceer instead of working downside on Faelrain in my parent's export business. But then, too, they were spaceers themselves in their youth... But I do know that my drifter heritage comes to the fore in a crisis. I'm alive today because I can call on it when the orbits get hot. But only in a crisis.'

'So, based on my experiences, I believe that your darker traits may well have served you as a stealth, but with a new life – and I believe we are living a new life, no matter how our plans turn out – your darker nature will lie dormant, until, of course, when you're saving my life yet again,' I added with a laugh.

'Actually, Litang, you are right in one respect. I can and have kept my darker nature at bay. All my anger with you, the Order, my fall and fate, I've kept them at bay. For now. But we Cins cherish our revenge and dish it out with relish. Only the fact that I need your expertise has kept you alive, and that need is fast dwindling.'

Her old tune again. Was it worth challenging?

'I don't believe that, Naylea. I think you're less of a Cin than you would have me believe...'

'You think wrong.'

'I know that you can be hard and cruel, but I've seen you lift beetles out of the way of the plasma cutter when you could've just as easily vaporized them. I've not seen you do one single cruel act these past weeks to suggest that you are any more sadistic than what is needed to do your job.' A bit of wishful thinking, perhaps, given my painful experiences with her, but they could all have been justified by the demands of her mission. 'And, well, I think my ultimate proof is lounging on top of you at this moment. Siss doesn't have to rely on observations and a great deal of positive thinking. I'm sure she knows how you think. Given her affection for you, I can't see you the monster you'd like me to believe you are.'

'She wants her Neb-blasted feathers preened, and isn't fussy.'

Siss hissed softly, following our conversation with a slight movement of her head.

'She's your friend, and you know it.'

'She's also a merciless predator. We're alike in that regard. Two of a kind.'

'She's also my friend, and as for a predator, she may be the terror of the island's mice population (a low menacing hiss from Siss), but she is also a carefree, fun loving dragon, who's been accidentally on purpose letting her tail twitch across your face this whole time...'

'And I'm about to wring her neck for it,' Cin snapped.

'Which is my point exactly – she knows you won't. So why should I take your threats any more seriously?'

'Because I like her more than you?'

I smiled. 'Perhaps. But I'll still take my chances.'

Cin sighed. 'The only reason you're so confident is that I'm a well-trained stealth. Though illegal, mind probes are widely used by the wealthy and criminal classes to protect their treasures and secrets. And while they do not extract the detailed mind-readings that the probes used by the Unity Judicial generate, they can detect angry, discontent thoughts, and dishonest intents. Thus, any stealth entering a targeted establishment, either on a one-time mission or for long term employment on a more elaborate one, must be able to hide his or her intentions from these mind probes. We're trained to bury our dangerous memories and intentions deep under our conscious mind, leaving only a very unemotional and disguised outline of the mission to guide our actions towards its completion. I'm using this technique now. Though instead of hiding my purpose and plans, I've locked away my anger to insure your continued survival right up to the end of your usefulness. The fact that Siss has no notion of my ultimate intent, simply shows how adept I am at this technique. So, if I were you, I'd not count on her as your barometer of my character.'

Siss gave a sleepy, dismissive hiss.

Oh, it was plausible, I'd give her that. But I wasn't only relying on Siss's approval for my unconcern. I was relying on my own reading of her character. And the fact that she was, like me, of mixed heritage, made my judgment only that much stronger. So I said, 'You're far better than a decadent Cin. I would be dead on the flagship deck if you were fully a Cin, since there was no real reason to spare my life. An excuse, perhaps, but no real operational reason. I'll trust my judgment. There's a lot of good in you Naylea.'

'It's your death.'

We lay in our hammocks in the dim lit compartment for a time in silence. It came to me that I had once experienced a similar circumstance, with Min in the Ghost right after the first assassination attempt. She had shared her history and opened her thoughts to me that evening. And just recently, subjectively anyway, she had hinted that if I had been bolder, perhaps things would've turned out differently for us. While I had mixed emotions on whether things could've ever been right, I had to wonder if I was making a similar mistake once again. Perhaps more than talk was called for. My St Bleyth ancestors would give me no clues. I was on my own.

'It seems as if the wind has died down. I'll take a look,' I said and swung to my feet. I then took two steps over to Cin's side. She (and Siss) watched me and for once, her icy eyes gave nothing away.

'Naylea, I care for you. More than anyone else. Perhaps I could say more, but I'll not risk your scorn, so I'll only say that I am your friend. I hope that you'll find it in your heart to be mine as well. For a start.' And if there had been any softening of her icy eyes, I would've kissed her. But there wasn't. She just watched me. I shrugged. 'At least you didn't threaten to kill me, so I'm making progress,' adding, 'I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry.'

'Push a button,' she said, but without venom. Progress.

Whatever environmental engine powered the tempest, it seemed to draw on an unlimited supply of energy, for it drove our island along for two days, keeping us trapped in the gig. With plenty of work to do, we kept busy. I spent time getting the full environmental system back up and running – a necessity if we were to return to space. We also dismantled the engine control console, useless with the main engine gone, reduced and configured the piloting station to a single console, constructing new fuel lines and printed out water(fuel) tanks as well the plastic rudder panels.

Siss got bored pretty fast, and perhaps hungry as well, though she refused any synth food, and instead slept a lot, wrapped around Cin's hammock.

As long as I was not too inquisitive, Cin would now relate discrete tales of her exploits, both the old school day ones, and her professional triumphs. Her story was that she'd taken Vinden's attitude that the dead don't tell tales, so she could tell me these tales since I'd only be taking them beyond the event horizon, and just as soon as the work was done on the gig. I, of course, didn't believe that, and tried hard not only to keep this skepticism from showing, but also that I was growing ever more attracted to her.

In my years aboard the Lost Star/Starry Shore, the crew had been family. In that respect, we were more like a small, family run planet or drifter trader than tramp freighter. These relationships, however, were set and rarely changed, since there was so little turnover in the crew. And, as captain, I was not in a position to form any special or romantic relationship. When Min was aboard, I occasionally allowed myself to daydream a little romance, but no more than daydream. This, however, was very different. Very different indeed. I found the prospect of living in such close proximity with a very attractive, if dangerous, woman pleasantly unsettling. And, as I mentioned, discovering that she wasn't a cold-blooded killer by trade had – for better or worse – removed the last barrier to falling in love with Naylea Cin. Her decision to open up about herself, even a little, only made any further resistance a slippery slope, especially since we passed two days living and working together in easy harmony. I didn't presume a new relationship, and she still muttered veiled threats from time to time, but they had become almost a joke, even to her. By the time we hit the island, I was convinced we could be partners.

We were lucky that we were dozing in our hammocks when the gig hit the island. The shell of the gig rang as we were driven aground, cushioned, however, by our trailing tail of vines. The hammocks cushioned the blow and kept us from being flung about the boat as it and our tumbleweed island bounced and rolled over the ground. This may've lasted only ten seconds before we came to an abrupt halt.

I exchanged a glance with Cin, waiting to see where the large rock somewhere in the vines would come to a rest.

After several seconds had passed without it landing on us, we let out our held breaths.

'Aground,' she said.

'And in one piece, I said as we swung out of our hammocks. 'We're still in free fall, so it's not a large island. Let's see if we can have a look.'

Going forward I pulled the hatch open a little. All we could see was a crush of vines and the roaring of the wind beyond them. 'It has to die down soon,' I said as I slid the hatch closed.

'Does it?' she asked with a weary sigh.

A good question.

## Chapter 06 The Island of Ruins



The girls were up before me, so I found myself alone in the gig. There was a thin trickle of light falling down through the open hatchway as I stepped into the forward compartment. Looking up I saw that Cin had cut a long tunnel through the debris we were buried in to reach the sunlight. I called out, but she didn't reply, so I made a stop at the sanitary compartment to freshen up and then climbed up the narrow tunnel of singed vines – some ten meters of them – to reach the sunlight. Topside, the breeze was fresh and flower scented, swirling leaves in and out of the crevasses of the canyon we'd come to rest in. What was left of Tumbleweed Island had ended up wedged in the end of a narrow canyon under a large pile of torn up trees, vines and assorted storm blown debris. Vine covered canyon walls rose on either side to the pale blue-green sky.

'Naylea?' I called out, startling some storm battered birds who flew up squawking.

'Up here.'

Looking up, I identified the likely ledge she had called from and carefully pulled myself up the canyon wall using tattered vines. I found her on a narrow ledge, surveying the island with her glasses. Siss was nowhere to be seen.

From the ledge, the island spread out before us. We were perhaps 250 meters above a broad plain, in the rugged folds of a miniature mountain that arched out of sight behind us. Below, the lower foothills were clothed in a kilometer of jungle, now torn and twisted by the storm. Beyond the jungle lay a flat savanna, five or six kilometers long by three or four kilometers wide which narrowed to a blunt point at its far end. The edge of the savanna ended abruptly, with no hint of what lay below its edge. Clumps of fist-trees and fern-topped trees were scattered across the savanna, many stripped bare of leaves or uprooted, clinging to the island by a few roots. The usual bright feathered birds and lizards soared in the fresh breeze around us and over the plain. What was strange, however, was that the sky was empty of any islands, an unbroken vault of pale, brassy luminescence.

"Morning, Cin. Any sign of inhabitants?"

She shook her head and lowered the survey glasses. 'No, but there may be some wreckage at the far end,' she said, handing me the glasses. 'By that last clump of trees. It looks to be pieces of metal.'

I brought the glasses up and zoomed in on the large clump of twisted trees she pointed out – half of which may've been partially uprooted by the storm, making them an entangled mess. 'Aye, I believe you're right. Nothing moving. How anxious are you to check it out?'

'I'd say checking it out and getting a better look at our new home is our first priority, don't you?'

'Second. Breakfast first.'

She shook her head sadly. 'You've no sense of adventure.'

'I avoid it when I can, and face it with a full stomach when I can't – given a choice. Where's Siss?'

'Like you, I suspect she's looking after her stomach.'

I showered and changed out of the jumpsuit I'd been working in and back into my armored uniform, trousers, shirt and jacket while Cin assembled a hot meal. After we ate, Cin showered and changed into some armored clothes as well. Before we went out, I pocketed the light line with a little grapple and grabbed my walking stick with a hook on the end, both of which I'd brought along for hiking on Redoubt Island. I had not needed it until now, since we'd done very little hiking on Tumbleweed Island. I then climbed up to the ledge and studied the island while I waited for Cin.

A sentry-serpent swam up from the jungle below.

'Siss?' I was pretty sure it was her, but then my experience in sentry-serpents was limited to her and her youngsters, on Redoubt Island. I wasn't sure I could tell her apart from any odd sentry-serpent.

It growled menacingly, and then she barked her laugh as I slowly reached for my darter.

'Very funny. Do it again, and I'll give you a dart just for laughs.'

Cin joined us shortly afterward and we set off down the rough mountainside, and then along the top of the storm battered jungle, since trying to hack through it would have been far more work. Siss took the lead, and occasionally she'd hiss us a warning – once for a long red feathered serpent that slithered away through the twisted branches, and once for a five-meter-long, but dying lizard, half crushed between two tree trunks. Cin drew her darter and shot it to put it out of its pain, without comment.

Travel was much easier and far more pleasant once we reached the broad savanna. The tough, thick grass of the savanna made walking so easy our walking sticks were largely unnecessary. Though we kept an eye to the brassy-green sky and a prudent distance from the cliff edge to give us some reaction time should a dragon appear, we felt it likely that the storm swept the skies clear of dangerous dragons. It was, in short, a carefree stroll, the wind fresh but mild, the hidden sun warm, but not oppressive, the calls of the birds cheerful, and the company very pleasant and comfortable. It was good to be so free after being confined to the little island for several weeks.

Looking back and around, I said, 'Still no islands in sight. We seem to have this corner of the Pela all to ourselves.'

'It's probably for the best. We've no need of company.'

'True, I have all the company I need,' I said beaming, though it earned me a halfhearted dark look.

'You can take that to mean Siss,' I said, 'If you care to.'

Siss, sailing on ahead of us, barked a laugh.

'I will,' Cin replied tartly, but we soon fell into chatting again as we strolled along.

The two days of enforced togetherness, and Cin's revelations about her family and past, had broken the last barrier of reserve. Oh, she'd catch herself being too friendly every so often, scowl and give me a halfhearted promise of revenge, get briefly angry when I laughed at the prospect, and soon we were either chatting again, or walking in easy silence – shipmates at last.

It took an hour to reach the distant clump of trees that held the wreckage. We circled around them to reach the wreckage, bringing us within fifty meters of the island's edge. The wreckage was widely scattered and buried in the grass and amongst the tangle of trees and underbrush. It looked weathered and old, scarred with old dents, though the freshly turned earth and shattered trees clearly showed that it arrived with the storm.

'It looks to have hit the island pretty hard. We were lucky to have a cushion of vines and the chance to bounce a bit, slowing us down, before hitting the canyon wall,' I said.

'We may have hit later in the storm, when the winds were dying,' she said.

'True. In any event, we're unlikely to find survivors.'

Even as I said that, out of the dark shadows of the trees came a low scream and a rustling of leaves and snapping of branches.

Siss gave a loud, alarmed, warning hiss.

Two large, blood-red shadows emerged from the trees with a sweep of their broad wings – a pair of storm battered talon-hawks. Though both showing signs of having been handled roughly by the storm – many feathers askew, they were just as blood-thirsty as ever. Beak to tail, wingtip to wingtip, they were twice as tall and broad as a man. They had claws on their wingtips as well as on their rear legs, and were as savage a beast as you'd find in the Pela. Both gave a savage, shrieking call of eager delight on seeing us, and extending their hind legs, dived for us – only to be bathed in blue flames as Cin calmly put a lethal dart into each. They shot overhead, smoldering, to disappear beyond the edge of the island.

'I'm sorry. Were you planning to negotiate with them?' asked Cin turning to me – who had only managed to grasp the handle of my darter by the time she was finished dealing with them.

Siss, recovered from her fright, barked a laugh.

'Feel free to handle all our negotiations with talon-hawks,' I replied. 'That's why I keep you around,' and then, added. 'Or rather, why I keep around you.'

She just shook her head. 'Shall we see who or what they were dining on in the woods?'

It was my turn to shake my head. 'Count me out on that. I'm going to look over the flier.'

'Come along Siss, let's see who or what we're dealing with,' she said, and started for the trees, her darter still in hand.

I drew my darter as well as I walked over to the half-buried wreckage amongst the moss and underbrush under the trees. It was pretty shattered, but I saw a bit of fuselage that was some four meters in diameter. All the pieces showed old scars and scraped off pale blue paint. It may well have been a derelict long before it was driven onto the island. Leaning against the trunk of a fern topped tree was part of a wing, twisted at an awkward angle, with a three-meter-long pod at its tip. The pod had been shattered on impact to reveal an intricate arrangement of bars and coils whose purpose I could not discern, perhaps some sort of magnetic field drive or maybe a weapon. Darter in hand, I pushed deeper into the tangle of underbrush. There I found a large unit in a tangle of wires.

'Anything interesting?' said Cin, behind me, as I spun around.'

'Interesting, but mysterious. This looks to be a power unit of some kind. Perhaps a reactor. I didn't see any rockets or engines, at least that I could identify. Clearly advanced technology, though it looks to have been a derelict long before it ended up here. How about you?'

'Nothing but blood drenched feathers. Not enough to say what the talon-hawks were eating. Could've been a broad-feathered fellow, but then again, could have been a local dragon killed by the storm. Unless you want to investigate further, let's take a peek over the side and see what the rest of the island looks like.'

'Lead on,' I said, and we turned to the island's edge.

'That's weird,' I muttered as we reached the end of the savanna and looked "down". We found a rugged, nearly perpendicular cliff, 200 to 300 meters tall, etched with cracks and ravines and laced vines that ended with the sky at its bottom. Except for a few overhanging trees, we could see nothing of the rest of the island. It seemed to have ended abruptly at the bottom of the cliff.

'It looks to be just a sliver of an island,' Cin said.

'Rather like one of the shell reef plates.'

'Well, let's find an easy path down and see what the flip side looks like. I don't relish walking on bare rocks,' said Cin, glancing about.

We walked along the cliff edge until we reached a ravine filled with vines that our toe-claw boots could cling to and started down. Of course, since there was no gravity, as soon as we stepped over the edge and took two steps in, the cliff changed to a narrow, ravine scarred plain. We followed the ravine to the other edge. Since we were near the tip of the island, the cliff stretched into the distance on our left, but to our right, it ended with sky close at hand.

On reaching the other side, we found its character to be completely different. It was a thick, vine-laced jungle, looming dark and forbidding over us as we stood on its edge. The storm had battered the trees along the cliff, piling them into an almost impregnable wall of vines, shattered trees and underbrush. Only by walking along the edge for a while did we get glimpses of the dark, dense and uninviting jungle beyond.

'We got lucky,' I said. 'I don't think I'd have liked landing in this jungle. This may be where the talon-hawks came from.'

Cin considered the jungle for a while. 'May not have been luck. If the storm we experienced is not all that rare, our side might be the windward side of the island, which would explain why its savanna rather than jungle.'

'True. Though I don't like the idea of frequent storms very much. I rather doubt our gig would be any match for a storm like that.'

She shrugged. 'A storm every ten years could make the difference. I'll be on my way before the next one comes around.'

I grinned. Veiled threats were now mostly a joke, even for her.

Having seen enough of the jungle, we headed back "up". And then drifted back towards the

miniature mountains at the far end of the island. We'd gone only half way when we came upon something unusual.

'That looks rather unnatural,' I said, pointing ahead to a low hill with a rock outcropping or wall peeking over the top of it.

Cin drew out her survey glasses and studied it. 'It is. It looks to have carving on it,' she said, handing them to me.

It may've been a natural rock ledge but it had been carved into intricate patterns. 'We're only seeing the top of it. It's worth a look,' I said, as I swung the glasses around, but could find no other evidence of habitation.

The low hill turned out to be a large, probably natural, crater, which had been shaped into an amphitheater. The wall we saw was the top of five narrow terraces faced with stone carved in flowing, organic designs, that stepped steeply down to a flat stage some 15 meters in diameter. Facing the terrace on the other three sides was a broad, grass covered slope down to the stage. Given the weightless conditions, pavement or stone seating would be out of order, so its grass covering said nothing about its age. Indeed, nothing hinted as to its age, since we knew so little about the Pela's climate. Nor could we come to any conclusions as to its purpose, given the apparent isolation of the island and the lack of any other signs of habitation – houses or fields.

'I suppose it could be a ceremonial or religious center,' I ventured, as we climbed out.

'For whom?'

'The islands might be only a couple of days' journey away and they'd be out of sight. Or maybe it drifted away from the civilization that built it many eons ago. Glen Colin said the islands of Cimmadar changed positions fairly rapidly.

'Ceremonial or sacred centers usually have attendants and facilities for the crowds they attract. Even the most isolated ones,' she replied. 'I don't see them or any sign of structures.'

'How long would wooden structures last?'

'Even wood structures leave mounds or patterns we should see in the grass.'

'Maybe they're here, living in the jungle, or in caves along the cliff, or beyond the mountains. We may be seeing only the tip of a much larger island.'

'We'll need to find out.'

And so it went – a lively discussion as we continued on our way back to the foothills and the little mountains that rose up and spread out a bit at the other end of the island. Though we looked, we found no other evidence of habitation.

02

We had just reached the edge of the jungle at the mountainous end of the island when I seemed to feel, more than hear, a low, throbbing whine. Siss must've heard it too, since she stopped swimming to swing her head about searching.

'What's that noise?' I asked, looking about as well.

'It could be that,' said Cin, pointing up the mountain side.

I saw something just poking over the top of the little mountain. It slowly grew in size as more and more of it drifted into view. The little mountain peak was not more than five hundred meters high, and the object, a ship of some sort, drifted just over it, covered a large swath of the sky overhead. By the time it cleared the peak it looked to be at least three times the size of the Starry Shore – say 600 meters in length and 400 wide.

'A Dragon Lord's ship,' I whispered.

'For a fact?' asked Cin, louder over the increased whine of the great ship as it slowly drifted down

after crossing the peaks.

'Well, no. They're said to be vast... Vast enough to push islands out of the way. So perhaps not. But what could it be?'

It grew dim around us in the shadow of the great vessel; the low pulsing whine took on a definite physical aspect, setting the leaves on the trees vibrating. It was oval shaped, with a rounded lens-like profile. Set along each side were at least two dozen short wings mounting streamlined pods, each the size and shape of a ship's boat, say 15-20 meters long. They appeared to be larger versions of the pod we'd seen in the wreckage, and from the lack of anything else in the nature of rockets or propellers, it seemed that they were the driving force of the vessel. Like the wreck, the hull had once been a pale blue to closely match the sky, but was now faded, scarred and dented, more dull grey metal than pale blue paint.

'Whatever it is, it's likely come to view the wreckage. Two of a kind,' said Cin, as it drifted slowly over us and on to the plain. 'It looks every bit as battered as the wreck. They certainly didn't waste any time.'

She was right; the great ship slowed to a stop at the far end of the island.

'Right. We'll have a better view from the gig,' I added. I didn't know how much protection the gig would provide, but it would be more than what we had at the present. 'And we might want to keep out of sight until we know more about the ship and who's in it.'

Cin grinned, but didn't argue, so with Siss in the lead, we started off, pushing our way up a wide ravine and through the storm-battered jungle, trying to stay under cover as much as possible.

'Could that be the Dragon Lords?' asked Cin as we wound our way up through the jungle – branch to branch, vine to vine.

'No clue. I gather that the Cimmadarians take the Dragon Lords, the ultimate rulers of the Pela, rather seriously. They're said to be very powerful and technologically advanced, and best avoided. Glen Colin hinted that the Cimmadarians are a hermit kingdom in part to avoid attracting their attention. That ship and the wreckage sort of fits the pattern – powerful, advanced and old. However, legend has their vessels being so large that they brush islands out of their way as they travel at great speeds. I rather doubt that can push islands out of the way, though it looks like it tried. But really, it could be any one of 10,000 civilizations yet to be discovered in the Pela. The Pela is vast enough to have that many great and advanced civilizations in it, without them ever crossing orbits. I'd say this is one of them.'

'Whoever they are, they're not keen on maintaining their ships – at least in their appearance. What does that say?'

'Certainly looks ancient, and yet it got them to this isolated island within a round of the storm's passing, so they're either local or can travel fast regardless of how the ship looks.'

'And they knew right where to find the wreck.'

'Aye, there's that too...'

It took us ten minutes to get through the jungle and onto the lower slopes of the little mountains. From that height we looked back over the savanna to see the great ship hovering low over the wreck. Cin drew out her survey glasses.

'See anyone? What do they look like?' I asked, seeing specks moving about.

'I have a feeling you've met them before,' she replied, handing me the glasses.

With the glasses I could see a swarm of figures gliding about – red figures, like animated crosses with their arms spread in flight. At full zoom I had no doubt I had met one already.

'Could explain the fact that two wrecks ended up on this little isolated island,' said Cin, as I handed back her glasses.

'What do you mean?'

'It seemed funny that the storm deposited two boats on our small island. But if that ship was keeping watch over us, that might explain how we both ended up here.'

'Perhaps, but why would they be interested in us? And if they are, why didn't they just contact us?'

She shrugged.

'Given the power of the storm, I'd say it's more likely pure chance. Who knows how many hundreds of islands the storm swept through before reaching us. It could've picked up that ship far, far away, along with hundreds, if not thousands of other boats and ships,' I added.

Cin shrugged, 'If they're not the Dragon Lords pushing islands out of their way, then that ship arrived too soon to have come from far away.'

'Aye.' I glanced back at the great ship and the darting dots. Dozens of the red feathered beings seemed to be soaring further and further from the ship. 'Let's continue this discussion aboard the gig. I've no desire to meet them again.'

We set off once more up and down the canyons and ravines, following the gig's beacon on my com link.

They must have either sharp eyes or used telepathy, since they found us as we reached the canyon containing the gig. We had just entered it when the first one glided overhead. Siss hissed a warning. Cin drew her darter, as did I.

'Best not start something, we're vastly outnumbered,' I whispered. 'Let's just push on and see if they care to stop us.'

Cin turned and gave me a mocking grin. 'Right. Charm them.'

'I'll try, but I've had better luck with dragons. Lets keep walking.'

The red feathered being wheeled and settled onto the pile of debris that hid the gig. He drew his bow from its case that he wore on his back, and fitted it with an arrow, held it pointing in our general direction. Within seconds, more shadows glided along the canyon floor, as more of the tall, silent beings arrived to land alongside the first one. And like the first, they drew their bows and notched their arrows. Ready, but not threatening. So far. However, we'd have to push past them to gain the gig, which looked iffy.

We came to a halt before the wind-deposited debris that filled the end of the canyon. Siss wound herself around the both of us, as leery as we were about what came next.

'What next, Litang?' asked Cin.

I could've replied that since she was the owner, it was her decision, but in the interest of peace, I said, 'I guess we talk.'

'About what?'

A good question. I looked around and counted eight figures lining the debris pile and canyon walls next to it. They had us more or less surrounded – and from beyond my usual darter range at that.

'Greetings,' I said in a loud voice, and a smile. 'We meet again.'

No response. Not that I expected any.

'Was that one of your ships that was wrecked in the storm? We're just coming back from inspecting it. I'm sorry to say that a pair of talon-hawks beat us to it, so that there was next to nothing left of the crew, at least that we could see.'

No response.

'So, what can we do for you?'

No response. They simply stared down at us with their large black eyes. Like the first one I met, they all wore the collar with the smooth black gem in it. This time, I quickly noted it and glanced past it.

'Don't look at the gem on their collars. That's what seemed to initiate the whole mind-sucking experience,' I whispered, and then added, as still nothing had happened. 'Siss, do you get any reading on what's going on?'

She gave a low growl, and shook her head.

'We can't wait here all day,' said Cin, who could hit her targets on the canyon ridge above us. 'I think we should just push on and see if they try to stop us. Put'em to sleep if they object.'

'You're forgetting that massive ship on the other end of the island. If it was just these fellows,

maybe. But we've no defense against something like that ship.'

'We'll give them a few more minutes and then push on to the gig. We can't just stand here forever.'

'I'd think that was preferable to getting smashed by that ship, but you're the owner.'

Even as I said that, another red feathered figure glided overhead. The others before us shifted to let it land amongst them.

'The boss bird has arrived,' whispered Cin.

He looked no different than the others, save that he didn't bother to draw his bow. He stared down at us for a moment, and suddenly, it seemed we lost our ability to look away, or to do anything at all. The black gem on his collar seemed to draw my eyes to it. To look away from the black gem at his throat took more effort than I could summon. I knew what was coming next...

'I think...' I said, but could get no further, as I suddenly fell into blackness. I felt my thoughts fleeing, like wind-driven leaves. It was familiar enough to know what came next.

Blackness.

They were all gone when the blackness faded back to milky light. We were, as we had been, swaying gently in the breeze, still attached to the carpet of vines by our toe clawed boots, Siss still wrapped around the two of us. It may've been a dream.

'Are you okay?' I asked, turning to Cin and Siss.

Siss hesitated and then hissed a soft affirmative, Cin shook herself, and said. 'I believe so. Strange friends you have, Litang.'

I couldn't argue that. Instead, I said, 'Let's get to the gig. We can discuss things once we've a D-matter hull between us and the Pela.'

Siss didn't wait, but started up to the pile of debris. Cin and I followed, climbing up the ragged side until we reached the top. Turning about, we saw that the savanna was empty. The great ship had gone.

'How long were we out?' I asked, glancing at my com link. 'It had been only minutes before, I think, but this?' I wasn't sure when it had started, but it seemed to have been more than a few minutes, especially with the ship, and any sign of the wreck, now gone.

'The better part of an hour,' said Cin.

'Neb! What is going on? What did they do?'

'I'd say that they stole our memories.'

'Why?'

Cin shrugged. 'Maybe that's how they live. On other people's memories. They weren't exactly vibrant people...'

I glanced at her. She was mostly kidding. 'Well, they're welcome to them. Hopefully that's all they stole,' I added, starting across the tangle of debris for our little tunnel to the gig at the far side.

The gig seemed to have been untouched at the bottom of the great branch pile. We pulled ourselves down through the tunnel and into the gig, closing the hatch behind us.

I let out a sigh. 'Home, sweet home. I'm glad you decided to stay with the gig.'

'For all the good it did us, this time,' Cin replied. And then, looking at me, asked, 'What is it about you, Litang?'

'What do you mean?'

'Why is it that you've not been in the Pela more than a couple of months and one of the most mysterious myths of the Pela – the great ships of the mythical Dragon Lords – just drifts overhead. What attracts this weirdness to you?'

'Neb, I wish I knew. Though, as a minor point, I'm pretty sure that wasn't one of the mythical Dragon Lord's ships. Too small. Besides, I wouldn't call those red feathered fellows dragons, much less Lords.'

'Point taken.'

'Still, you're right about being a magnet for weirdness. I've crossed orbits with dream dragons, black dragons, sentient machines that should have been in the Inner Drifts eleven thousand years ago, and

quasi-religious mercenaries. I've been attacked by drift navies and drift hawks, assassins, military fanatics and the last of the Four Shipmates. And that's all before I found myself in the sea of the mythical Tenth Star – castaway with you and all its strange and savage people and creatures, slavers, dragons, talon-hawks, and an annoying sentry-serpent,' I concluded, with Siss swirling around me, clearly begging to be included in the list.

'It's very weird. Were you born in space? In some sort of weird space?'

'No. I was born on Faelrain, in the ordinary way. My theory is that somehow, for some reason, the Dark Neb picked up on the fact that in my first years of being a spaceer, I took all the wild and improbable tales told by old spaceers as pure fiction, and the Dark Neb just decided to prove me wrong – leading me from one weird and dangerous thing to the next. I'm not sure if I fear or hope that I've only scratched the surface of the Nebula's inherent weirdness.'

She gave me a glance, 'And why is that?'

'Because if I've only scratched it, I've still got a long time to live.'

She laughed, 'Be careful what you wish for, Litang.'

'Ah, too true. I never learn.' I really, really needed to learn that. Then I looked at Cin and realized, not quite yet.

03

The following round we explored the other half of the island, its “mountains”. We climbed to the peaks above us and found maybe three kilometers of rough terrain beyond the first peak – moss covered ridges, laced with vine and jungle canyons and ravines, making the island about 10 kilometers long and perhaps a kilometer-deep highest peak to highest peak. We spent a watch circling the mountainous half of the island, finding nothing but a wilderness of rocks, flowering vines and jungles. Siss hunted, but we didn't come across any threatening creatures. The talon-hawks were likely blown here by the storm.

After a meal and a cup of cha on the ledge overlooking the savanna, we returned to work refitting the gig. It had ended up nose to the canyon wall, which was going to make it awkward to launch, but it allowed me to easily access to work on the stern engine mounts and steering rudders. We hacked out a little grotto in the tangle of vines and branches around the gig to give us room to work.

We lost the wreckage of the fore and aft sections of the gig sometime during the storm, leaving us only the gig's useless fitting to salvage and rework using the printer, making metal in short supply. However, plastic made from oil extracted from vegetation worked for many of the parts including the wing panels so we were not in desperate straits. Over the next several rounds, I set up a test site in the canyon to test the engines to make certain they were functional and controllable, with our newly reprogrammed controls, before installing them in the gig. Reprogramming the gig's program to control our new engine array was Cin's project, since she was adept at altering programs to steal secrets. In the process, I suspect she also took ownership of the gig as well. No matter. Tests proved that we had three solid micro-plasma rockets, and two serviceable ones. What sort of speed we'd be able to obtain from them was a question that would have to wait until the shakedown cruise.

With the main engines tested, we switched our efforts to installing metal and plastic components of the steering wings and rudder. We had stripped the interior of the gig of all its useless components – things like the control consoles for systems lost in the wreck, damaged acceleration chairs from the forward compartment and such, cutting them into small pieces and feeding them to the printer to be printed out as the frames, mounts, and control rods I had designed to steer the gig in the atmosphere. We assembled and welded the wing struts and metal frame on the upper hull, and then mounted an array of electric motors to control the movable plastic flaps. We built a control console for the rudder and wings as well as replacing the storm damaged radar transponder and radio antenna and mounted an



array of cameras to serve our view panels.

We ate, slept and worked quite efficiently, pausing only for short naps which we took at the same time, now that the gig could be sealed. I for one, didn't keep track of the time. Nor did I look further ahead than the maiden voyage of the "Phoenix" as I began to call the gig. I was aware of the fact that we hadn't settled on the nature of the mission once the Phoenix was ready to sail, but I'd become so comfortable working and living with Cin, that I could not believe that we'd not find an acceptable plan of action.

Cin, however, was not at ease. The closer we were to the gig being operational, the more urgent became her one pressing concern – my fate. I was not blind to this growing shadow in our relationship; I could see it in her eyes when I caught her looking at me. And yet, I paid it little heed, merely trying to stay as clear of her as possible to reduce the danger of her getting annoyed at me. I didn't think anything I could say would change anything, and I knew that trying to be too friendly, especially before the approaching crisis would only annoy her. So I worked and slept, and tried to be quietly cheerful when around her. That part was easy, because I was, whenever I was with her.

I rolled out of my hammock, freshened up, and finding neither Cin, nor hearing any work in progress, pulled myself up through the access hatch. Looking about I found her sitting on the newly installed wing in the dappled light that filtered down through our sheltering branches and vines. The dead trees that had been blown into the canyon had dropped their leaves, opening up the canopy somewhat, though the native vines were already weaving their way through the tangle.

'Ah, there you are. Just thinking?' I asked.

'Yes. Not much more to do, you know.'

'All we need to do is temporarily attach the steering rockets to move the gig away from the wall, and then attach them to the nose, clear away the vines and we should be ready for our maiden voyage. Just a short shake-down cruise, of course. But, Neb, we could probably get that done this watch if we worked hard.'

'I'm going to punch something up for breakfast and then get to work. Can I punch something up for you too?'

She shrugged. 'Anything you want. I'll be right down.'

'Don't bother, I'll bring it up. It's far more pleasant up here,' I replied and darted back down to pick a meal from those that she had programmed into the synth-galley.

As I was waiting for the galley to produce breakfast, Cin slipped down through the hatch and swung it closed. That struck me odd. Siss was outside hunting, and we usually kept the hatch open when she was out. Was the crisis at hand? And yet, the fool I was, I didn't detect any fear in my heart, though I knew, if it was, I'd have to navigate this interview very, very warily.

'We need to talk, Litang,' she said.

'Yes, we really can't put it off much longer,' I replied, as I put her magnet bottomed plate on the small square table we had built in the forward compartment. I settled onto the narrow bench next to it with my plate and mug of cha in front of me. I was content to let her do the talking.

She sat down opposite me. 'I truly tried, Wil. I gave you every chance I could to let you live and you ignored them.' Her eyes were dark, grave and sad.

'No, not really. I gave the problem a great deal of thought and decided that I had a better chance of living with you than without you. I'd not built to survive alone in the Pela for long. I'm simply too Unity Standard. The dangers of space I can deal with. Dragons, talon-hawks, savage people, and loneliness are more than I care to face. Alone. Besides, look around us. Where am I supposed to go?'

'You could've dealt with me instead of running.'

'No, Naylea, I couldn't.'

'You did in the past.'

'I can't kill you Naylea. I don't want to be without you. I rather think I love you.'

'That's either cruel or a self-serving lie.'

'It may be cruel to say it now, as you sit across the table from me to tell me you have to kill me, but it's the truth, and it's no crueller than killing me as a sacrifice to your anger – from another life, far, far away.'

'You didn't have to kill me. You could've stunned me in my sleep and put me in stasis; my hybrid suit was in the locker.'

'And then what? I'd still have to live without you.'

'You didn't need me to warn your friends. You didn't need me at all, as you said yourself. If you had succeeded, you could have then dealt with me like you originally planned, or let your friends deal with me. If you failed to contact them, you'd still be better off than you are now.'

I stared at her for a moment or two, and then laughed softly. 'You know, that actually never occurred to me. Why it might've worked! But you have become too dear to me to betray. And I believe our goals are the same, so there's no need for betrayal. We can work everything out.'

'If you really love me, as you claim to, and feel that I might love you as well, why then make it so hard on me? Why force me to do something I will regret the rest of my life – if you are right?'

I shook my head. 'That would've never lifted. You would've held that against me, too. I am sorry, but this is a rift we must cross, Naylea. Killing me won't douse your anger. I think you know that. Killing me may satisfy the pride of the Cins, but at what price to you? I think, my dear, that abandoning the ways of the old Cins is the first and essential step in starting a new and more noble line of Cins. Break their decadent hold on you. I've met neither your father nor your mother, but I doubt either of them would tell you to kill me. And, Naylea, I don't really think you can kill me. There is something between us. We can be happy. And I think you need to face that square on, and now.'

She stared at me, wild eyed, emotions flickering through them. And then, they turned to icy steel and darkness. She reached down, and drawing her darter pointed it at my heart. And fired.

In that split second, as I was engulfed in a sheet of plasma blue fire, it occurred to me that I may've been wrong.

## Chapter 07 A New Beginning

It had to end like that. With a lethal plasma dart.

It was never simple.

One doesn't simply abandon the life of a lifetime. The training of a lifetime. The outlook of a lifetime.

Not if you have any integrity. Any pride.

And not simply because someone says they love you.

In a lifetime of two hundred plus years, there's time enough to find love again, even if it was, indeed, love, not some ploy to save themselves.

Assuming one wants to be loved.

Still.

A dart of pain in my head. I was right, after all. And alive.

I opened my eyes and found I was nose to nose with a grey-green snout and beyond the long snout, the glittering black eyes of Siss. They were staring at me with some concern. She hissed softly.

'Alive, anyway,' I muttered. I glanced down at my chest. My yellow sweater had a large charred spot, the size of my outstretched hand over my heart. It had, indeed, been a lethally charged dart, but not an armor piercing one. The next squeeze of the trigger would've sent one of those my way.

'But not by much, Siss. Not by much.'

I looked around. Cin had gone. She had left me where she'd darted me, floating in the forward compartment. 'Where's Cin?'

Siss looked up to the open hatch.

I tried to gather my wits. Did I want to see her, now? Or was it better to wait awhile for emotions to settle down a little.

Poor Naylea – her failure to complete the killing of me meant that she'd failed to meet the steel-hard expectations of the Cins. In doing so, had she herself freed herself from their expectations, or was she now seeing herself as an absolute failure? She was no fool, and very cool headed in a crisis, but this was something different. I glanced at my com link. It was fried again, so I looked to the synth-galley timer and I found that I'd been unconscious for the better part of two hours. Probably not time enough to come to terms with what it all meant, but I'd best go and find her.

'Right,' I said to Siss. 'Give me five minutes with the med-unit to clear my headache and gather my wits, and you can lead me to her.'

The headache was erased within minutes. Rising from the treatment table, I glanced down and decided it would be in poor taste to see her with that great scorch mark over my heart, so I reluctantly peeled off the sweater. It was my favorite – the yellow one I'd bought on Calissant the day after she had tried to kill me for the first time, now more than a decade ago. It had seen me through a lot of very iffy orbits... Neb! I'm no more superstitious, or sentimental, than any other spaceer, but if I had a talisman at all, it was this sweater. Holding it in my hands I decided that if I turned it inside out, it'd look almost as good as new. So I brushed off the burnt fabric, turned it inside out and re-donned my lucky sweater. I'd a feeling I still might need it. She was no doubt still armed.

'Lead on Siss,' I said as I reentered the main compartment. 'Let's see if we can become one happy family.'

She gave an eager bark and swung smartly about and up towards the access hatch.

I followed her swimming lead for quite a while, through the rapidly renewing jungle, and then several kilometers across the savanna to the edge of the cliff. Here Siss grew cautious, and carefully peering over the edge, backed up and softly hissed in my ear.

'Figure you're going to get into trouble, showing me the way?' I whispered.

She softly hissed again, and blinked.

'Right. I'll take it from here,' I said with as much confidence as I could muster. We'd have to meet again, of course, though I wasn't about to settle for the old terms, though I was far from certain what I wanted in the new terms. Well, I knew what I wanted, I just wasn't sure it was wise.

I peered over. I didn't see her, but started walking down the vine-laced ravine, making as much noise as I could. She might still be on edge.

The ravine turned and I saw her sitting on a protruding rock overlooking the endless sky.

'Naylea?' I said softly, on the off chance that she'd not heard me coming down the ravine.

'Be kind, for once Litang, and just put a dart in me,' she said without turning. 'If you can't kill me, put me in my stasis suit and go on without me.'

'Sorry you're still out of my range,' I replied, and started forward. She continued to stare off into the endless sky as I settled down beside her on the ledge. It was all or nothing at all, this time, and I didn't need my St Bleyth ancestor to tell me that. I put my arm around her shoulder and drew her closer.

She tensed for a second and then listlessly relaxed, still not giving me a glance.

'It was my favorite sweater, you know,' I began.

'I hated it. Yellow. I did you a favor.'

'It happened to be one of my first armored items of clothing I owned. Bought it the day after you missed me on Calissant. I'm very sentimental about it. Luckily you can't tell the difference if you wear it inside out. It's even a little brighter yellow. Newer looking. No harm done.'

'Wear it again and I'll put another Neb-blasted dart in it – this time in your back,' she replied, still

without looking at me.

'I am wearing it now. Need the luck. You'll get used to it. And I think we're over the dart thing, Naylea.'

'So you think you've won?'

'It's not a matter of winning or losing. We've found each other and there's nothing standing between us anymore. You and I...'

A vague hiss from the underbrush behind us.

'...And Siss can start a new life here. We've worked together. We've lived comfortably together. I think we've been happy together. I realize that you've had to keep your pride and anger under lock and key, but in the end, we've triumphed.'

'You have.'

'We have. You unlocked that door and found that our ties were stronger. Better.'

She just shrugged her shoulder against my chest. It wasn't a denial.

'I'm in love with you, Naylea,' I found myself saying, because it was true. 'I assure you I'm not saying that lightly. I'm not blind to your St Bleyth and Cin qualities, but I've come to believe that given a chance, you're your mother's daughter. You're a Cin only when you need to be.'

'You think so?'

'Yes.'

'And when we come into conflict, as we certainly will, do you think I'll still be my mother's daughter? Care to run the risk?'

'Yes, if you feel for me as I do you.'

'If I do.'

'If you didn't, I'd be dead.'

'Maybe I'm just too Unity Standard to kill you in cold blood.'

'I believe you are. But I don't think that's the complete explanation.'

She sighed. 'Since you know me so well, what lies ahead for us?'

'I have been giving that some thought recently. I don't think we can return to our old lives, at least not for a long time. Our old ties need to fall away. So I'm willing to abandon any effort at contacting my friends or escape the Pela. They'll have to deal with whatever turns up by themselves. I'm sure they can. However, if you still feel driven to put the finishing touches on your mission, I will help you as much as I can.'

'And how far is that?'

'Right up to the point where you decide you need to kill Min. But you're not an assassin, Naylea, so I don't think it will ever come to that. You're an expert thief. Why bloody your hands for a mission that's already accomplished, for an organization that has betrayed and abandoned you?'

She just shrugged again and said nothing. She still hadn't looked at me.

'I think we have a whole new life to live here in the Pela. One without all the complications of the old one. You and I... and Siss,' I added, once more hearing a low hiss behind me. 'The three of us can start fresh and find our place here. I think we can find a place here...'

'To grow cha.'

'Some day. Maybe. If it's a mutual decision. For now, I am content just to be with you and do whatever you care to do. We can tour the Pela in our gig. Or we can find an island of our own to settle on, build a house in the trees and live like castaways.'

'So you've given up on returning to the Unity?'

'I've chosen you. If you want to return to the Unity, I will follow you. But I'm thinking that if we leave the Pela and return to our old lives, it would be hard on you. We're free here...'

She said nothing, and I carefully considered all that I'd just said, hoping there was nothing false in it. Thankfully, I found nothing I regretted saying. And I was holding an unresisting Cin very close.

Happy Litang?

Yes, I decided, I was. We could live together.

I'd said all I had to say for now. We could talk later.

I reached over with my other arm and pulled her around to face me. Our eyes met. She may've cried, for they seemed large and moist and as soft as I'd ever seen them. I pulled her closer and kissed her. And she kissed me back.

And then she gently pushed me away and sighed softly.

'I'm sorry I've made your life so complicated. But I'm not sorry I found you, or you me,' I said.

She didn't say anything, but there was a closeness now, an unspoken understanding, so that I was unconcerned. I kissed her again and then held her tight.

'Why did you fall for me,' I asked.

'Egotist. Who said I did. I don't recall saying that.'

'Well then, why are you letting me kiss you? You can't argue that.'

'I suppose because you're so benignly useless.'

Not exactly what I wanted to hear. 'Benignly useless?'

'Oh, you may have some uses. You're handy around ships. But the Litang I know is hardly the standard image of a tramp ship captain. At least you weren't when I knew you as Captain Litang. You didn't seem tough, nor did you have any dash or swagger. I used to hang around your crew when they were downside on Lontria. You were, as I'm sure you know, well liked, but considered, well, to call you something of a joke might be putting it too harshly, but someone of no great consequence. They went about their jobs and you stayed out of their way. When I managed to finally cross orbits with you at the race track, that's exactly what struck me as well. There you were, standing hands in your pockets, chatting with friends and acquaintance who happened to pass by, while just staying out of the way while your crew got the moon buggy ready to race. Ornamental, perhaps, but useless.

'The non-martial side of St Bleyth has a lot in common with the Taoist, and I couldn't help but wonder if you were some sort of Taoist Tramp Captain, adept at wu wei, or just a genial idiot, useful as a figurehead, a place holder to be used by a strong-willed hands-on owner without a ticket.'

'And? What did you decide?

'I haven't,' she replied with a sidelong glance.

'Does it matter?'

'It seems not. I can't decide if it's my Unity heritage that's telling me that here's a nice, Unity Standard fellow, or my Cin heritage trying to understand how this easygoing idiot can so effortlessly defeat me.'

'I assure you, it's just plain luck. But as someone pointed out, you can't beat luck, so useless or not, you're lucky to have me.'

'You think so, hey?' she said, not unkindly.

I pulled her close and kissed her again, until I felt a sharp stab of pain and tasted the iron in my mouth.

I drew away and ran my tongue over my lower lip. She'd nibbled on my lip hard enough to draw blood. I looked at her. She was watching me. I was about to protest – teasing was one thing, but... but I bit back the objection. She was watching me very, very intently. Instead of teasing or taunting, she was deadly serious, her grey eyes held mine. An agreement, but a warning as well.

My Cin rose had thorns. They came with the flower. I'd a choice to make. I looked into her dark grey eyes, and pulling her close again, kissed her softly. She tasted the blood on my lips and then she put her head on my shoulder, clung to me.

I'd made my choice and accepted her terms. If I had any misgivings, I don't recall them. The truth is, what choice did I have? But that never entered my mind.

As we held each other, Siss drifted in and wrapped herself around us, barking softly. If they paint sentimental paintings somewhere in the Pela, they could have painted the three of us and entitled it "Shipwrecked Lovers with a Dragon."

We clung to each other and contemplated our future, near term and far, until we heard someone bellowing commands and jocular replies.

## Chapter 08 The Pirates of Temtre

01

Cin acted with creditable dispatch, shoving me off, and then half dragging me into the cover of the vines behind us not a moment before a deep red kite or sail appeared around the bend in the cliff, followed by a pointed metal clad prow and then a colorful ship, not more than a hundred meters off the island.

We burrowed deeper into the tangle of vines as the ship slowly came drifting into view, its youthful crew laughing and larking about. A dozen or more were casually walking along the upper spar of a triangular sail extended, like a fish's fin, from each side of the ship. Others crowded on its upper deck and its array of masts, chattering loudly and excitedly, apparently happy to make landfall on the island. The ship itself may've been 40 meters in length, 15 meters in beam and 10 meters in depth – with a wooden hull in the general shape of a long, streamlined fish complete with a tail for steering and assorted masts for sails. Its bow was iron clad and pointed, suggesting it was used as a ram. A broad decorative band ran the length of the ship, carved and painted in the same flowing organic–geometric style of decoration we'd noted on the amphitheater rocks. A series of deckhouses stretched down the center of its main deck, bow to stern. There was smoke and steam coming from a stack in the last deckhouse, with a large idling propeller at the ship's tail along with steering rudders. The narrow deck that ran along each side of the deckhouses was protected by an arching grate to keep dragons and enemies at bay and careless crew members from being swept overboard. The upper deck that ran along the tops of the deckhouses was enclosed by long tent of netting, for the same purpose. Spaced along it, were half a dozen canvas covered objects which looked to be cannons or rocket launchers. As with the Cimmadar ships, the decks and many of the walls looked to be carpeted with a tough fiber mat providing a foothold for the crew in this weightless sea. In addition to the propeller, some of the array of spars protruding at various angles, not only flew long colorful banners, but held furled sails as well; others were used to control the kite-like sail deployed ahead to drag the ship along in favorable wind currents. Along the bottom of the ship was a long horizontal spar that was pulled down to create a keel sail to keep the ship on track, and on each side, forward, were those fin sails, two spars that could be extended out at a right angle to form a large, triangular sail, dull red in color on both sides of the ship.

From our hiding place in the vines we watched the crew – men, women and older children, all broad-feathered – hustling about, climbing various ropes and walking along the upper mast of the great fin-like sail. They appeared to be having a lark under the shouted orders and likely benign abuse of an officer on top of bow deckhouse. As the ship drifted by, some order was yelled, for the lower spar of the fin-like sail began to be cranked up and the sail secured on the upper mast. By the time the ship slipped behind the cliff, these two spars were being folded tight against the hull and a cloud of black smoke and white steam billowed from the engine room aft as the propeller whirled into action for the final maneuvers to land on the island.

'One mystery is solved,' I whispered. 'Recognize the art style?'

'Will you ever stop attracting trouble? Here we are, two weeks on an island in the middle of nowhere, and we've already been visited by the Dragon Lords and now these...natives.'

'I told you, the Black Neb has it in for me. Still, I don't see this as any cause for concern. the gig is well concealed and I doubt they'll stay long. There's nothing here...'

'Except that big amphitheater, which suggests more are on their way.'

'True. Even so, it shouldn't affect us. The island's big enough for the them and us.'

The exuberant cries of the crew faded as the ship sailed out of our sight, beyond the cliff. Cin pulled out her survey glasses to search the skies. A minute later she handed them to me and said. 'I see another one. I wonder how many of them will be arriving.'

I shrugged, and searched the sky. It didn't take long to catch sight of a dark speck in the milky blue sky. I didn't need the glasses to know what it was, but with them I could see the ship, fin sails extended, kite sails flying heading our way beyond it, likely a second one, a mere speck in the sky. 'I think we'd best get back to our boat, while the goings still clear.'

'I think you're right, my dear. For once.'

As we cautiously climbed to the top of the cliff, we could see the first ship coming to rest a few meters above the savanna, far across the way. With Cin's glasses we could see its crew, lines, stakes, and hammers in hand, diving off the ship to the to tie down the ship.

'Let's go,' Cin said as I handed the glasses back to her. We set off, keeping low and running along the edge of the cliff, quickly putting the ship out of sight. Back at the gig, I spent several hours rearranging vines and piling debris on to the hull of our boat to hopefully conceal even a glint of metal, and our access tunnel to it, from view. Cin and Siss kept a lookout, watching the ships arrive from the upper ledge.

02

When I had finished my work, I climbed up to join them I found ships arriving, one after the other, at a rate of four or five an hour. For the most part, they came from the other side of the island, and on arrival, spread out over the broad savanna, scattered here and there, as if each had their own traditional place. Within hours, lines of arriving ships were forming a virtual city seeded from the sky. As each ship arrived, with their long, colorful banners waving from their assorted masts, the crews alighted and quickly staked the ships to the ground. Then, without a pause, they began to set up tents, tables and booths alongside of them. By the time we went down to the gig, two dozen ships had arrived, and more could be seen in the offing. Nestled in the vines we exchanged the glasses every so often, and exchanged idle, inconsequential comments as the breeze carried the smoke and fragrant scents from the grills and ovens that were being set up as soon as the ship was tied down.

'Looks like the gathering of a nomadic trading clan, since the ships have women and children on board. They look to be grouped by similar banners. Probably family groupings...' said Cin. 'We're going to have to keep under cover. Couples are already pairing up and wandering off out of sight, I suspect in search of some privacy.'

I glanced across to her. 'Speaking of which...'

She put down the glasses and looked at me with a rather sarcastic smile. 'Yes?'

'I think we came to an understanding just before we were interrupted by the inopportune arrival of that ship. But I'm not quite sure what it was. I know what I said, but I don't recall you saying anything...'

And she didn't now. She just watched me with a faint smile and amused eyes.

'So I was wondering just how things stand between us.'

'A kiss is not enough?'

'That, my dear Cin, is a loaded question,' I laughed. 'One I'm not prepared to answer. I believe that kiss sealed something, but I'm not quite sure what. One of the wonderful things about you is that you've always been rather open with me on what you're thinking, but I'm not quite sure where we stand. And I want us to start out on the same chart. It could be just the two... ah, three... of us for some time to come,

and well, it could be a lot of fun, now that you've abandoned the idea of killing me. But it could be very awkward as well, if we're not on the same course. So you see...'

'Oh, alright, Wil. I've just realized that I can't kill you, after spending several weeks working up to it. You'll need to give me time to reset my thinking. I've just abandoned a lifetime of sacred vows and broken free of an organization and a mindset that has controlled me for nearly my entire life. I need to come to terms with that as well. And I'm not prepared to substitute one set of controls for another just yet. I am going to need time to adjust. If you give me that time, I believe everything will work out. But I need some time.'

'Of course. I'm sure we both need time. And you can count on me for any support you might need, as a friend, shipmate, or lover.'

'As a friend, for now.'

'Right. As a friend, Naylea.'

I may've hoped for more, but I could be patient. Well, I had to be patient; I'd no confidence in sweeping Cin off her feet. And, all things considered, it might be safest just to let her lead.

'Well, good. With that settled, point two. I find I'm hungry, and thinking back, I realize that I never had breakfast, or at least got to eat it. What do you say, we have something to eat? Shall I push a button, or do you want to prepare a special feast for the occasion.'

'You still need to make yourself useful, Litang. Push a button. I'll be down directly.'

Careful to stay under cover, I rose, and slipping over the edge, said, 'I like it when you play hard to get, Cin. Dinner will be ready shortly.'

The ships continued to arrive over the next two rounds. Cin watched the proceedings for hours on end from the upper ledge, concealed behind a screen of vines. We were lucky in that it seemed that we were too remote for the eager, amorous couples who were casually, but constantly wandering off to find some quiet bower, hopefully with better luck than I. In any event, it seemed that none had the patience to reach this far into the hills. I spent hours watching the proceeding as well, if only to savor the smoke and smells from the many food stands amongst the ships. I also spent a lot of time inside the wreck. I rebuilt my com link and put the final touches on the interior fittings, getting everything ready to sail.

Siss, however, became more annoying than ever. It had become apparent that sentry-serpents were common passengers on board the ships since they could be seen floating about the ship-city in a surprisingly wide variety of sizes and colors – they seemed to come in dozens of races. Siss was in a fever to meet and socialize with her fellow dragons, but, for some reason, seemed to feel that it was her duty to stay with us. On one hand, I didn't think she'd compromise our presence by standing out. But on the other hand, if she was telepathic, then they were too, so could our presence remain a secret? And would those sentry-serpents accept an outsider in their ranks? I couldn't order her to stay; she was a companion, not a pet. I didn't feel comfortable giving her leave to go down, either – and yet I was ready to wring her long neck as she whirled around me – a green ring of feathers – with her impatient excitement, as I tried to get some work done. And whenever I sat down for a break, she'd set herself down on my lap and demand, with a menacing growl, that every one of her feathers be put in its proper place.

I was putting the finishing touches on restoring the main compartment – its deck back in place and everything shipshape when Cin, who'd been napping in the control room, stepped in.

'What do you think?' she asked, twirling around so I could see her outfit.

She didn't bother to let me reply, not that I could think of anything in the moment.

'I borrowed one of your shirts. They wear them loose. Knew you wouldn't mind. My jumpsuit was roomy enough to be cut down for the pants. Not colorful, but it'll do. I'm not looking to stand out. Just the opposite, in fact. I don't want to be noticed at all. Then I disassembled my green lizard leather jacket to make the vest, and I used its sleeves to disguise and extend my boots. I printed out the belts in plastic, but they look leathery enough for now. I tore down my kit bag to be used for the pouches, and



printed out the hat. Done. So what do you think?'

'You're thinking of actually going down there?'

'Good guess, Captain.'

'You can't be serious. You don't know the language or the customs. It's too dangerous! '

'I'll be the judge of that.'

'But why? What purpose does it serve?'

'Don't be dense, Litang. The answer is obvious. So, what do you think? Is it authentic looking or not? I know it's not authentic, but since I'm planning on fading into the background, that shouldn't matter much. Does it pass muster?'

I could see in her eyes that I wasn't going to talk her out of it, so I gave her costume a good look. It seemed authentic enough, but then I'd only observed the dress clan with Cin's survey glasses from more than a kilometer away. No doubt she had studied them in great detail during all those hours staring down on the gathering, so I could trust her judgment. Both sexes dressed alike, wearing brightly colored loose-fitting pants tucked into bands of cloth at the ankles. The broad-feathered race went about either barefoot or with sandals. Fine-feathered people, with claw-toed boots, were far less numerous. Both sexes wore several lizard leather and silver work belts around their waist – one with a number of different sized pouches they used in place of pockets. They also wore a belt to hold their swords and daggers, either at their side or on their back, though the women usually settled for just a dagger. Both sexes wore loose blouses, with vests or jumpers, many ornately decorated. Many wore hats and caps, also ornately decorated, though many of the girls had jewels woven into their feathers. Cin, however, had settled on a plain, wide-brimmed hat.

'Oh, it looks right enough, as long as they don't look closely. But nothing is authentic. If they look closely...'

'They won't.'

'You can't count on that. Most of them seem to be broad-feathered, so you're going to stand out right without doing anything at all. And you're a stranger. Say something to you and you're lost. One wrong move out of character or custom, one curious look and you could be sunk.'

'Listen, Litang. I've been studying them for the better part of two rounds. I know what to expect. There are thousands of people down there, with more arriving every watch, a stranger isn't going to stick out....'

'But most are broad-feathered...'

There are probably two or three hundred fine-feathered people like us. I've paid special attention to them. I suspect that they're servants or slaves. They go about like shadows, unnoticed. The broad-feathered will likely never even see me, even if they look at me.'

'Tell me, Naylea, why are you running the risk? Are you bored?'

'First, I'm not running any risks. I'm a stealth. I spent 15 years learning how to be invisible, and when visible, how not to be noticed, and as many years practicing it. I could've accomplished this recon mission when I was 12. I know how to seem to be part of a group, without the group even knowing it. You've already mentioned that nothing in my costume demands a second glance. I'm completely nondescript, as drab as drab could be. I'm just an extra in a crowd scene. I assure you, no one will notice me.'

'But you know only what you're been able to see from a distance. If someone says anything to you at all, you'd be discovered.'

'I'll have my com link and my knowledge of Cimmadarian. I'll pick up a few words quickly enough. This is my trade, after all.'

'And if something goes wrong?'

'I can look after myself. Besides, I'll have my sissy and Siss along for protection.'

Siss gave me a long taunting hiss, sticking out her forked tongue as well.

'Hopefully Siss won't give you away. And you're forgetting that all those other sentry-serpents can

read your mind as well. They're sentry-serpents after all, You'd think it was their job to capture intruders.'

'That's why Siss is coming with me. She'll square things with her kind. I'm sure she's a very charming serpent.'

Siss barked a laugh, and gave me a taunting tongue again.

'You still haven't answered why.'

She gave me a taunting look. 'I would've thought it was obvious.'

'Not to me. We're safe and snug here. Why take needless risks? Or are you doing it just for fun?'

'And what if I am?' she asked with a taunting smile.

Siss chimed in with another taunting hiss as well.

'Are you going to forbid me from going?' she added, darkly.

I was on a dangerous course and knew it. 'No. Of course not. I have great faith in your skills, Naylea. And I know I've no right to order you about...'

'Good. Then there's no problem.'

'It's just that I don't like to see you run unnecessary risks. I've grown very fond of you, as you know.'

'They're not unnecessary, Litang. They're absolutely necessary, assuming you were serious a couple of rounds ago about making a life here in the Pela. Or was that just Litang being oily again?'

'I was absolutely serious. I want to be with you, wherever you are, Naylea, and I was thinking you'd be happiest here, beyond St Bleyth.'

'Right. Well then, here we are. We've been handed a golden opportunity to learn where we are and what our prospects are.'

'I wasn't thinking of becoming a pirate.'

'Pirates? You've seen too many costume vids. You don't know what they are. They're likely just a clan of traders and merchants. And so what if they are pirates? It doesn't matter. They're a source of information, and probably a very good one, since they likely range far and wide over this section of the Pela. Down there I can watch and listen in on their conversations while being neural-linked to the boat's AI via my com link. With any luck at all, the AI should be able to compile at least the basics of the language within hours. Once I acquire the language, I'll get a glimpse into all sorts of customs that might well keep us from making fools of ourselves, or even putting us in danger when the time comes for us to integrate ourselves into the local civilizations.'

All too true. I hadn't a leg to stand on.

'I assure you, I've done my homework. I've carefully observed how our guests behave. Plus, I'm a stealth. I wasn't kidding when I said I could do this when I was 12. It'll be easy. All I'm planning to do is observe, watch and listen to transactions and conversations – simple conversations that I might be able to pick up words from. And as I said, I'll just be an extra in a crowd scene.'

'Right. I give up. I can't argue with anything you've said. But I'm not going to let you go down there alone....'

Siss gave me a long hissing taunt.

'Siss or no Siss. Let me see if I can work up costume as well.'

'No. You sit tight. I'm not going to babysit you on this first mission. Siss and I will go alone. Once I've acquired enough of the language, once I know enough about how the society works, once I'm comfortable that I can talk our way out of any mistake you make, I'll consider taking you along. For now, however, it's just Siss and me.'

She was right, again.

I sighed. 'Right. No point wasting any more of my breath. But you better keep an eye on Siss. I wouldn't trust her. She's been way too excited lately. I suspect that there's a whole lot of boy sentry-serpents down there she's in a white heat to meet. If you don't watch her closely, she's likely to lose her head and who knows what she'll do, or what the consequences will be?'

Siss gave me a low threatening hiss, narrowing her dark eyes menacingly.

'Right. That's the look I expect you to give all those boys,' I said.

She barked a loud laugh, followed by a long dismissive hiss.

'Alright. Fine. Just remember that you've only just gotten over raising a bunch of kids. I'm sure that was a whole lot of fun... Plus, the last thing we need around this little boat is half a dozen little dragons darting about. It's small enough as it is.'

A low, warning hiss again.

'But then again, those little nippers were rather cute. It might be nice to have some really cute and playful little dragons about the place for a change. Neb knows, they'd keep us very busy arranging all their feathers...'

A deep menacing growl this time.

'Come on Siss, let's go and leave grumpy ol'Wil to his house cleaning,' said Cin.

Siss barked her laughter and swam around us several times before she ended up nose on the closed hatch, waiting, impatiently, for Cin to open it.

Siss is one strange dragon. If she is telepathic, as I'm sure she is, she not only knew I was joking, but was playing along with the joke as the straight man.

I checked the remote camera and sensors we'd installed in the canyon to alert us if anyone wandered up this way before cracking open the hatch. I followed them out into the bright, unending day and after they started on their way through the already renewing jungle, I climbed up to the ledge and followed their progress down to the ship-city with Cin's glasses. I lost them in the jungle and then waited until they reappeared and casually made their way across the half kilometer of savanna to reach the rows of anchored ships that had become a bustling city. They plunged into one of the crowded "streets" between the ships and the various stands and tents set up alongside each ship to sell food, and (perhaps plundered) trinkets and treasures. They were quickly lost beyond the curve of the crowded street, a nondescript girl and her green dragon, who meant so very much to me.

03

She was gone for what seemed like an awful long time. I knew that as a stealth of St Bleyth, she could take care of herself, so I didn't keep track of the time. But it seemed, well, as I said, awfully long. Still, when the sensors started to buzz and the hidden cameras showed her, carrying several bundles, and Siss making their way up the canyon towards the ship, I let out a breath that I seemed to have been holding for the duration.

I opened the hatch and Siss shot through to circle around me hissing excitedly. Cin tossed the bundles down to me and followed them in, just about as happy as Siss. I shut the hatch.

'Everything go well?'

'As easy as falling out of bed! This is just a quick stop to change into some authentic clothing and then we're heading back to do some more shopping.'

'Is that really necessary?'

'It is if you ever hope to accompany Siss and me,' she replied with a laugh, unpacking her bundles, and pulling out an intricate embroidered blouse, 'What do you think?'

'Pretty. Did you take along some silver to buy things? Or did you have some coins – souvenirs from Redoubt Island?'

'Oh, I just borrowed some,' she said, pulling out several belts, sandals and various other articles of clothing. 'I am a thief by trade, after all.'

True.

'I trust you ran no risks, as promised.'

'No needless risks,' and then she laughed, adding, 'No risks at all, given my talents.'

I gave up. 'Well what did you discover, besides a new wardrobe.'

'Well let me freshen up and change, and then I'll bring you up to date.'

'Can I make us something to eat?'

'Oh, no. Siss and I have been sampling all the delicacies – all sorts of smoked and grilled lizards, pickled vegetables, breads, and sweets, haven't we?

Siss barked her agreement.

'Did you behave herself?' I asked, staring at her.

She flicked her tongue out at me, dismissively.

'We brought you some samples in one of the parcels, if you want to try some. I must say, they put my synth-creations to shame.'

'I will.'

'And I must add that Siss was a perfect young lady. She stayed close by my side the whole time, never straying far, even when some big handsome boy serpents would edge ever so slightly over to check her out. By the way, they're known as "Simla dragons" in these parts. A much nicer name than sentry-serpents, I think.'

'Well, as a telepath, they wouldn't need to show any outward sign of flirting, would they?'

'True, Siss?' Cin asked, turning to Siss.

Siss just glanced away. And then barked a laugh. Simla dragons – I might as well use the local name for them – seem to live a very carefree life.

'By the way, how can you tell male Simla dragons from the females?' I asked.

'The males are bigger and have duller green coats of feathers, it seems,' Cin replied.

Siss hissed sharply.

'And they're dumber as well, but that's a given, isn't it Siss?'

She barked her laughter and wagged her tail.

When the girls had settled down a bit, I got more of a coherent story.

'We spent the first several hours just standing around observing trading going on at the booths each ship has set up to sell or trade their specialties. I had my com link neural-linked to my visual cortex and between watching and listening to what was said, I quickly began to get a handle on the basic language. I'd say that it's nearly half Cimmadarian, some words identical, others pronounced slightly differently. The grammar appears to be almost the same. A few more hours down there and we should be able to make basic conversation without fear of discovery. Just have to work on the accent a little. You can download it now from the AI and practice if you care to accompany me in the future.

'One of the things I was paying close attention to while I hung about is the relative value of the coins which were used to buy the goods. They used a great variety of them, but they fell into fairly clear value classes. Knowing what coins to use is important. We'd stand out if we bought a one credit barbecued lizard bun with a 100 credit coin.'

'Did those booths supply you with the coins you needed for your purchases as well?'

She shook her head. 'No. Too risky. They kept a pretty close eye on their coins. They were after all, selling to pirates...'

'So they are pirates.'

'They call themselves the Temtre. They're a clan, or rather a collection of clans – I'm not sure just how they're organized yet. I gather from the overhead conversations that they're a combination of small traders and pirates when the occasion presents itself...'

'Drift hawks of the Pela.'

'Perhaps. They operate amongst a large group of islands known as the Dontas, a fair voyage inward. This island, they call it "Dagger Island," is their secret meeting island. It seems that the clan gathers during a very long, but infrequent local holiday. But then, you know the Pela, time is pretty vague. Still, I overheard young men talking and it sounded like they were just boys at the last gathering. Dagger Island is far from anywhere, and only they, and now we, and the red feathered folk, know of it. It was kind'a hard to get an exact read from their idle gossip and boasting, but as I said, it seems that trading

is as important, if not more, than piracy.'

'Still, not the type of people who'd welcome us if we just turned up uninvited.'

'I think not. Yet they're not savages either. The assembly was remarkable for its good humor. I didn't see one brawl while I was there and neither Siss nor I were harassed, though you'd think the others of her kind had to have known she didn't belong...'

Siss gave a dismissive hiss.

'Right, we both can keep our secrets locked away. Still, it was all very Unity Standard. And, seeing that I had to haggle for everything I purchased, I'd say they're more trader than pirate. We could do worse... But it's still too early to tell.'

'It sounds like you've found a new home.'

She shook her head. 'They're a broad-feathered clan. We fine-feathered folk are mostly slaves or servants, but I'll get to that in a moment. As I said, my impression from watching them at their stalls is that they're pretty shrewd and sharp eyed merchants. Not people I'd care to steal from, given a choice, so I looked elsewhere for my coins. They seem to use pouches or compartments in their belts instead of pockets to carry things, so I figured I could find a nice full coin pouch and perhaps lighten it a bit in a press of people with a poke of my glass knife. However, as it turned out, that wasn't necessary. While I was wandering about looking for a likely donor, Siss and I came upon the Temtres' Clan-king, and his retinue, greeting a newly arrived ship. He apparently makes an official call on each ship, to welcome them to the Assembly and, conveniently, collect his cut of the ship's profits in the form of a heavy bag of coins and jewels. We watched as the Clan-king handed this bag off to his grand visor, who, accompanied by several guards, headed back to the Clan-king's ship to deposit the loot. Siss and I decided to tag along.

'The guards were either dismissed or felt their duty was done when they reached the ship and they drifted away. The ship was largely deserted, everyone off visiting. Those that remained on board were mostly asleep, with only an idle guard or two playing cards on the upper deck, so I was able to slip on board without being noticed. I left Siss on guard while I followed the grand visor to the forward deckhouse and then into it, quiet-like – he never noticed since he'd hurried on to a second room, the Clan-king's quarters. I slipped into the shadows of a wardrobe to watch him unlock a stout storeroom door at the back of the Clan-king's rather lavish quarters and then unlock and open a very large chest that nearly filled the small closet-like room. Once he swung the lid up, I gave him a very low charged dart in the back. The dart had just enough charge to keep him out for several minutes while I quickly sorted through the coins amongst the jewels in the chest, selecting a good assortment coins, with plenty of mostly smaller, low value coins, that I could use for my purchases without comment. I left him still standing there, coin bag in hand. Most likely he'll come out of the dart's effects without ever realizing he'd drifted off for three or four minutes. And, trust me, what I took will never be missed. It was a large chest. Siss and I then went shopping for clothes and treats before returning here to change.'

'If we know the language, and have some coins, why do you need to go back? We've already just about everything we'd need.'

'Hardly. Dressed in authentic garb and with a growing handle on the language, I can now begin to gather real intelligence, digging deeper into who they are, where we are, what we can expect, as well as getting a surer handle on the customs of this patch of the Pela.'

'Still, it seems...'

'Litang. I've let you call the shots when it came to refitting the gig. That's your expertise. Sneaking about, collecting information, stealing, is my expertise. "If" we are to be partners, you'll need to stick to your expertise and allow me to practice mine. I've just abandoned one long time master. I'm not eager to take on another.'

Couldn't argue that. 'Sorry. Point taken.'

'Right. As far as I can see, the party goes around the clock. Siss and I will go back, we'll shop around for some clothes for you and listen to the gossip to enlarge our vocabulary and see what we can

discover. If all goes well, we may have enough of a handle on the language and customs to allow you out. What size shoes do you wear?' she added, catching me off guard.

'Ah...'

'Never mind. Let me compare mine to yours... Any preference in swords and daggers?'

'A dagger with a guard that I can use to block thrusts, and a straight dueling sword,' I replied absently. 'Something along the lines of what I used on Lontria.'

'Right. We're off. Don't wait up.'

I didn't wait up. Well, I grew too tired to wait up. The sensor alarms woke me when they returned, once more bearing bundles and weapons. Both were exhausted, and both retired to Cin's hammock after a brief report. Everything went well. Cin captured enough conversations that if I cared to go down with them tomorrow, I should download the language to my com link and practice, which I did after I locked the hatch, and made myself a meal. I then spent several hours talking to myself in Temtreian, or rather "Saraimian", since the Temtres spoke the language of the large group of islands to the sunwards, known as the Saraime Principalities.

They slept for a long time. After breakfast Cin broke out the package of clothes she'd picked out for me – all of which were in various shades of yellow, from a mustard colored lizard leather vest, to a bright yellow shirt, to pale yellow woven reed hat.

'I know yellow is your favorite color, my dear,' she exclaimed with glee, pulling one yellow piece after another out of her bundle. 'Isn't this dashing! And I've even thought up a new alias as well. You're going to be Captain Canary!'

'Very humorous.' I was, however, delighted to see her having so much fun, even if it was at my expense. I'd a feeling I'd best get used to that.

'Captain Canary,' she said again gazing brightly at me. 'It so suits you. Not only with your fondness for yellow, and, uh, your fondness for caution, but also because, you're just so cheerful and bright.'

Right.

'I'm glad to see you in such blithe spirits. For that I'll wear your outfit without protest. This once. I'm sure that being seen in the company of Captain Canary will be my revenge.'

She frowned. 'We didn't think of that, did we Siss? Still, nothing to be done about it now,' she added with a laugh. 'Besides, they all dress so brightly, no one will notice.'

Siss barked a laugh.

'Now for our cover story. It's common practice to kidnap any prince or wealthy merchant from the ships that fall into their clutches. They're held for a ransom to be paid at a certain port within a certain time limit. We'll play the part of two such hostages being held for ransom. I'm a wealthy ship owner and you were the captain of my ship which the Temtres had captured while I was on board. We've given our parole, promising neither to hide nor try to escape, so we're allowed the freedom of the gathering. I ran across a merchant from one of the bigger islands who's being held under those terms, and he tells me it's a commonplace occurrence. Dozens of them about. So we have our story.'

'We need a complete story – where we came from and who our captor is, but then we'll risk discovery if we tell it to a person who knows otherwise.'

'There's a risk in any story. But this one narrows down our chances of doing or saying the wrong thing. We're strangers and we've been captured by the smallest, and I gather, the least regarded of the sub-clans, the Crea. They have only a dozen ships so there's only a few hundred of them about amongst the ten thousand. Besides, no one really pays attention to us fine-feathered folk. We're, at best, minor auxiliaries of the clan. Trust me, Wil. I know what I'm doing. I've integrated myself into countless dissenting societies, businesses and households.'

'I know you're very good. I just wonder if we're running unnecessary risks...'

'I'd rather go alone...'

'No. We'll do this together. It'll build trust.'

'Or not,' she muttered, but not, I think, seriously. Hard to tell.

'So what's our story?'

'I'll invent the details of our story on the way down. It'll be fun. All we need to do is avoid the Crea anchorage on the far edge of the island, otherwise we're unlikely to cross courses with anyone who knows anything about the Darter Dragon, its Captain SherKe, much less its ransom business.'

'We'll invent it together,' I said knowing full well that Cin, left on her own would end up making me the fool. I expected no quarter from Cin. Still, if being made to play the role of a fool was the limit of her dark streak, I'd not complain.

'I hope you like the sword and dagger I purchased. They are reputed to be forged of the finest steel, and from what I could tell, that seemed true. However, as a hostage, I don't think you can wear the sword. The dagger is considered an eating utensil around here, so you can wear that.'

I'd have my sissy along as well, so it was neither gas nor dust to me.

I retired to the control room to don my many shades of yellow. I slipped the baggy Temtre trousers over a pair of my armored pants and with the vest and belts, I figured I could get away with wearing my yellow sweater as well, for luck. The claw tipped boots came with lizard leather bands that wrapped around each leg below the knees to keep the baggy pants at bay. I cut a slit in the seam of the trousers wide enough to fit my hand through to reach my sissy in the pocket of my inner pants. I strapped on half a dozen belts and pouches to complete the outfit and donned the tricorne hat.

'So, what do you think?' I asked as I emerged from the control compartment. 'Happy?'

She tilted her head to study me. 'Yes, you're the spitting image of Captain Canary.' And then she gave me a quick kiss. 'Let's get on our way. And from here on in, we converse in Temtre. We need to get fluent fast.'

With an eager Siss leading the way, we, Lady Naylea and Captain Canary, made our way down through the jungle and out into the savanna. We'd no more emerged from the jungle than bugles began to blow, from ship to ship, and milling Temtres began to drift towards the amphitheater. We drifted with them.

Though I was leery of the expedition, I came to realize that with so many people about, we were not likely to be noticed, even if I was dressed entirely in yellow. We found a seat along the upper edge of the amphitheater – close enough to a ship's crew, men, women and children so as not to stick out, but just far enough away as to be unnoticed by them.

What followed was the grand general meeting of the Temtre Clan. It began its long course with announcements of notable deaths, promotions, and successes, followed by speeches by the Clan-chiefs of the various branches and then the Clan-king, all of which we could, more or less, follow with help from our com links as the AI's vocabulary was constantly being enlarged and its guesses more accurate.

A court of grievances followed the general meeting and most of the gathered clan drifted away before that began. We stayed on to glean as much information as possible about our hosts and the region of the Pela we found ourselves in. And then, following these legal proceedings there were some rather deadly duels fought to settle disputes that could not be resolved by talk. Not many, but deadly serious. Following this was an open meeting of all the ship captains of the clan. This provided a great deal of information about the islands, principalities and trades, which, at the moment, were fairly uninformative, but would likely provide a useful background once we acquired more and more information. It was all stored in the boat's memory for future reference. We were both pretty weary by the time the meetings broke up. Siss had long since gotten bored and drifted off, so we called it a round. Cin lead me to several of her favorite food stalls and I stopped at several more stalls to buy some non-yellow clothes and a brown tricorne hat, over Cin's objections, before heading back through the jungle to the gig and a nap.

This expedition proved to be the pattern for the next dozen rounds. We'd slip down to the ship-city to wander about, taking in the sights, the talk, the stories, the music and the foods of the Temtre assembly – well over 200 ships and a dozen sub-clans – that went on without a break. As long as we were careful to remain subservient and unremarkable, we could roam the ship-city confident in our anonymity and our growing ability to understand and communicate with our unwitting hosts. And with our growing understanding of the language, we found ever more attractions to keep us returning. Siss seemed to have made so many new friends that we rarely saw her, except when she'd drift home to sleep. Every once in a while, when we were down in the assembly, she'd happen by with some friends, swirl around us, barking her laugh and continue on her way. Luckily, the Simla dragons of the Temtres didn't seem to mind our presence – they must've known. Either they saw us as no threat or Siss vouched for us. And indeed, by the time the assembly was winding down after more than two weeks of rounds, I was half Temtre myself.

That said, I should perhaps take a minute or two to give the briefest outline of what we learned and experienced in our two weeks in the company of the Temtre Clan.

The Temtres are itinerant traders and occasional pirates. Some clans have home islands as a base for farming, shipbuilding and such, though much of that work is done by non-clan peoples. The truest Temtre clans live entirely aboard their ships. All of them trade and raid throughout a large group of islands known as the Dontas, where they are only one of dozens of similar ship-clans who ply the tens of thousands of islands that make up the Saraime Principalities. All are fierce trade rivals, occasional allies, and when the odds look good, prey.

Each ship is a family affair, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and cousins. These family ties can spread over a dozen or two sister ships to make up sort of a sub-clan within the larger Temtre Clan. The Great Assembly brings all these ships and sub-clans together celebrating and retying the clans together. Indeed, the marriageable youth of the Temtres wasted no time seeking out mates, often semi-arranged between ships and clans. Still, there was a degree of freedom as well, at least for the boldest of suitors. The final few rounds of the Assembly were devoted to formalizing the bonds formed during the Assembly – in discrete jungle and cliff side leafy bowers.

The Temtres trade primarily within the Donta Islands, the outward most group of islands that make up the Saraime Principalities. The Saraime Principalities, from which we could gather, includes several large groups of islands, some of which are technologically advanced moon-sized islands, with Saraime the most noted. This technology however, fades quickly once the large islands were left behind. The Temtres, for example used steam engines, rockets as weapons, and compressed air small arms, but we heard of large steel ships, and found their trading tables had samples of intricate clocks, and even simple electrical lights and light-charged batteries.

Dagger Island, so called because of its thin savanna half and the thicker mountainous section looked from a distance like a blade and a handle, lays nearly two weeks sailing beyond the Donta's Outer Islands, in an empty stretch of sky known as the Outward Endless Sea. It was not endless, of course, since I believe we arrived from its far edge, but for ships like the Temtre traders, it was far too vast to explore or trade across. Its empty vastness is what hid this secret island of the Temtres.

As I've mentioned, the true Temtres are of the broad-feathered race of Pela humans. Fine-feathered people are sometimes referred to as “large islanders.” make up only a small minority of the Temtre society. The fine-feathered population falls into three loose categories – skilled craftsmen like shipwrights, metal workers, jewelers and scribes employed by the Temtre to fill positions the ship's family could not fill themselves. The second, similar category, is that of family retainers, which is to say, purchased servants or slaves. The hundred or more of fine-feathered concubines of the wealthiest Clan Chiefs rather spanned both categories, skilled and servants. Because relations between the two human branches of the Pela were infertile, fine-feathered concubines are preferred by the broad-feathered Temtres for dynastic reasons, and presumably, the reverse was true as well. The third and



smallest category of fine-feathered people (and broad-feathered as well,) was the prisoners being held hostage pending the payment of their ransom, the role we adopted. This appears to be a commonly accepted practice, and the prisoners seemed to accept their fate, confident that they'd be ransomed in time. If not, they'd eventually find themselves servants of the Temtres, a fate not worse than death, I suppose.

The date of the Temtre Assembly is determined by the flowering of a tree common throughout the Saraime – the Nileana tree. Apparently all the Nileana trees blossom together, at the same time, wherever they are in the Saraime. The Nileana tree blossoms only every three thousand and some odd (official) Saraime rounds, which makes its rare blossoms special. While the technologically advanced islands may officially keep time mechanically, time is often kept in the smaller, and less advanced, islands by the known flowering of certain trees and plants that, like the Nileana tree, blossom regularly and at the same time throughout the Saraime. The Nileana tree is the most famous of these, and its long flowering period is an extended holiday for everyone in the Principalities. It sets its buds 63 rounds before it flowers and then the flowers last 31 rounds, during which very little work is done and trade comes to a standstill. The Temtres use the Nileana Festival holiday time to sail to Dagger Island and have a 15 to 17 round party of their own, returning in time to catch the great flood of trade built up during the long Principality wide festival.

And that, briefly is who we found ourselves sharing the island with and why. Because it never occurred to the Temtres that anyone other than they might be on the island, it quickly became obvious, even to me, that once we were able to speak the language, we could go about the Assembly without having to worry a great deal about discovery – as long as we kept to our place in Temtre society. And given the life, the food, the color and the information we could gather about our likely new home in the Saraime Principalities, there was no reason why we shouldn't spend our waking hours in the ship city. What little work remained undone on the gig, could wait until the Temtres departed, so even I could find no reason not to enjoy the party on the savanna.

It was made all the more enjoyable because I could enjoy the pirate's party with a Cin who was not hinting that she was going to kill me at every turn. Makes a difference. There was, however, a certain gap between us, yet to be crossed. I was pretty certain it involved Cin slowly coming to terms with her new life with me, rather than anything fundamental between us, so I left it to her to cross it at her own pace.

The rounds, save the last ones, have run together. I know that following the all-hands meeting, the amphitheater was taken over for the rest of the assembly by entertainment. We'd spend part of our time watching and trying to decipher Temtre dramas, some clearly very old and traditional, some clearly new and topical for this assembly. In addition, there were concerts, the storytelling, and sporting events, many of which consisted of martial arts bouts, all of which added to our knowledge of our new home.

Within half a dozen rounds, we'd become comfortable enough with the language and customs that we could laugh and enjoy the street theaters with pirates relating outlandish "old spaceers type" stories of their encounters with fierce dragons, the mysterious and powerful Dragon Lords, and all sorts of unlikely peoples and creatures. We could haggle with vendors of treasures and food, and carry on conversations, though mostly with fellow fine-feathered folk, since the broad-feathered Temtres didn't pay any attention to us, beyond leering wishfully at Cin. We were careful to stick to the bare outlines of our cover story, with as few details as possible whenever our presence needed to be explained.

There were two big sporting events. A ship's boat race around the island, and an assembly-long field event that took place on a wide field set aside for a version of that universal game of many names – getting a ball through some sort of goal. The Temtre version was played spaceer-style, which is to say, with the rules that could be boiled down to "Cheerfully Not (Actually) Murder Your Opponents." There was some sort of organization, some sort of officiating, and a collection of ship's boats overhead to capture the ball or players, when it, or they, were batted too high for the players to reach. Otherwise the game flowed pretty free and loose. There were two versions of the game. A small version between

individual ships, with nine or ten crew members on a side, and clan matches with several dozen on a side. Being the broad-feathered people of the smaller, low or no gravity islands, they could both run, and keep more or less to the ground – though players often jumped on teammates' shoulders to pass the ball forward, and the frequent melees would often send players flying into the air and out of bounds, hence the boats overhead. Ending up out of bounds overhead was some sort of penalty, so players were often sent flying, and needed to be snagged by their teammates, sometimes in a wavering tower before they reached the boundary.

By pure chance, we happened to catch a ship to ship game involving Captain SherKe's Darter Dragon crew, our nominal captors. We stood on the edge of a sparse band of Dragon Darter supporters and lustily – and no doubt foolishly – cheered them on. It was tough going, though, since they played a reluctant, dreary, game of dogged defense, which was, no doubt, a reflection of Captain SherKe's legendary sour disposition. They lost, though we did get a brief, secretive smile from one of the crew as he left the field for our efforts to cheer them on.

Except for “The Heritage Procession,” street life continued unabated throughout the assembly, one large, never-ending party. In addition to the great variety of foods sold at the ship-stands, a great variety of alcoholic beverages were sold and consumed as well. Compared with a spaceer on a binge, the two week Temtre party was a Unity cha social. Things could get rather loud and boisterous but we witnessed only one or two ugly scenes, when more than mere words were exchanged. Though things got wilder in the last days. Family pride had a lot to do with it, the elders making sure younger members did not make a fool of themselves and their ship in front of the rest of the clan. I suspect that inter-clan rivals also steered clear of each other. There were plenty of places to party for all. And then too, the nonstop partying likely took its toll as well after a few rounds. Even pirates have to pace themselves if they want to remain standing at the end of two plus weeks of parties.

05

There was, however, one round when we didn't go down to the ship-city.

Cin had been waiting for me on the top of our large brier of vines to go down when I joined her. She was surveying the Assembly with her glasses.

'Something's up,' she said, handing me the glasses. 'The stands are all closed and what appears to be delegates from each of the ships have gathered in the amphitheater. There's not a fine-feathered to be seen however.'

'This must be their “Heritage” ceremonial that we've been hearing about. I've only heard the term. Do you have any idea what it refers to?' I asked, as I surveyed the amphitheater with Cin's glasses.

'Some sort of tribute to their ancestors, I believe. Half a dozen of each ships' crew have been bearing boxes to the amphitheater. They could contain the remains of the honored dead. But given the great variety in their sizes, I'm thinking the boxes might contain ship's surplus loot,' she said, flashing me a rather wicked grin. 'Let's watch and see where they go. This might be Treasure Island, as well as Dagger Island.'

'Makes sense. They seem to be old-fashioned enough to collect their trinkets and consider them treasures.'

We didn't have to wait long for the ships' delegates, a thousand strong, led by the Clan-king to emerge from the amphitheater carrying their treasure. They formed a long procession that wound its way through the ship-city to the edge of the island and then over the edge and out of sight.

'Let's follow them,' exclaimed a bright eyed Cin. And before I could object, which I would've, she was off, skillfully cutting across the rough folds and gullies of the mountainside, leaving me no option but to follow.

We cut around the rough foothills, reaching the other side as the long line slowly disappeared into

the jungle. Cin cursed softly, afraid the ultimate destination would remain hidden in the jungle, but unwilling to abandon our vantage point for the thickets of the jungle. Patience rewarded – the procession emerged from the jungle and filed into a deep canyon less than a kilometer from our hiding place. We waited for them to reappear at some point further up the slope, but the long procession was swallowed up by the canyon and did not reappear.

'Let's have a look,' said Cin, patience exhausted. She set off. I followed.

We made our way towards the canyon, crawling through vines and bush until we were in a position to view what proved to be a cave entrance. There were guards at the entrance to prevent us from getting a closer look.

'Oh, how I miss night,' Cin sighed as she lowered the survey glasses. 'At night I could've walked right by them. Can you imagine what it's like in there if they haul treasure into it every assembly? Think of the treasure it must hold. They've been around for hundreds of thousands of rounds.'

'It still could just be a cemetery, you know.'

'Ha. Not likely. Pirates are pirates. Imagine the loot of two hundred boats over who knows how many centuries – it must be a treasure cave out of fantasy fiction.'

'It might be worth a look, at that. We can have a nice long look after they leave.'

She brightened up, 'True. And we will. It would be nice to start our new life in the Saraima wealthy.'

We waited for hours until they emerged once more, without boxes. Cin carefully noting what the after-guard did to lock, conceal, and booby-trap the entrance.

## 06

Life on the island returned to its bustling self after the delegates returned from the cave, though on a slightly different note. It was clear that its end was approaching and the assembly was slowly winding down. Within two rounds after the treasures were laid to rest, ships began to set sail in order to be present when the flood of trade began to flow out of the godowns. There were the many weddings and parties to wrap up successful courtships and alliances. There was also, it seemed, a growing darker undertone as well, as affronts, new and old, which had been pushed under the carpet for the bulk of the assembly, now could be settled without disrupting the assembly. Things grew rowdier.

We'd gone down to the slowly evaporating ship-city for dinner. The food definitely beat synth-food, even with Cin's personal touch, and she readily admitted that so we went every round. Now we planned to lay up a stock of food that would keep for a while against the day the Temtres would be gone since our coins had not run out. (Cin's modest haul had included enough gold to keep us well supplied with all the coins we needed day to day.)

Cin had gotten ahead of me, and was waiting at a stand “down the street” for some grilled lizard on thin sticks. I never made it a point to think further than the finished product. Feathered lizards were four legged chickens as far as I was concerned, and they knew how to fix them. I was waiting at a stall that served baked crusty rolls with a spicy savory center of what I assumed was lizard meat – when in the Pela, you eat lizard – and preserved peppers with who knows what else, when I heard a ruckus down the street – eight or nine rowdy broad-feathered Temtres, dressed entirely in black, an unusual Temtre color scheme. They were led by a tall, black feathered, fellow with the sash of a Clan Chief across his chest. They were roaring out abuse and singing a rough song, clearly well into their cups. They strode down the lane, casually overturned the tables and stalls on either side, capturing and heaving anyone who hadn't scurried out of their reach into the air. Since these scurrying folk were pirates themselves, it appeared that either these were pirates that most preferred not to tangle with, or they were merely waiting for reinforcements to quell them properly. I suspect the latter.

Cin didn't even attempt to move out of their way. A matter of pride, I suppose. Still, we'd spent our whole time scurrying out of the way of the Temtres, so why she just stood there now, well, I don't

know. Nor why, when one of the big burly fellows tried to grab her to fling her into the air for her defiance, she deftly dropped under his arms, flipped back, and grabbing hold of the tough grass, gave him a two legged kick in the gut, sending him into the air to join his victims. It wasn't out of character; it was just out of the character we had assumed in order to enjoy the Assembly.

Cursing under my breath, I hurried towards Cin. I wasn't afraid for her. She could handle any number of drunk rowdies, but doing so would attract the attention we had so successfully avoided to date. I reached for my sissy in my inner trousers, but hoped to use my tongue to talk us out of this without attracting a great crowd.

The rowdies lurched to a stop at this unexpected resistance. I recognized the leader. I'd seen him at the Darting Dragon match – EnVey himself, Clan-chief of Creas, and Captain SherKe of the Darting Dragon, who, unbeknownst to him, was said to be holding us for ransom. In short, the last people we'd want to be brawling with. The Clan-chief roared a string of abuses and ordered two of his mates to 'Break the fine-feathered wench's legs!' Prospects for settling this dispute with talk were looking extremely iffy, as were our prospects of getting out of this without expending a generous amount of darts. With the possibility of not getting out at all...

Though two of the drunken gang approached Cin on the Clan-chief's orders, I was still not too alarmed about her immediate prospects. I was certain that Cin was quite adept in martial arts, including the martial arts of low gravity or free fall. Those required a different set of moves since gravity won't keep you grounded. Any sort of move that broke contact with the ground would likely leave you in midair unless you could use your target to get you grounded again.

She chose to rely on the legs they'd been ordered to break. Moving with lightning speed, she once more flipped backwards to grab a hold on the island with her hands and swung her legs in a half circle, sweeping the thugs' legs clear of their hold on the grass. (Being broad-feathered and long toed, they just wore thin sandals to allow their long clawed toes to hold on to the ground.) She followed that up with two kicks to the gut, sending them flying upwards, howling in pain, by the time I reached her side.

The Crea Clan-chief roared in anger, and yelled, drawing his sword, 'You'll pay in blood for that, you fine-feathered wench!'

Things were quickly getting out of hand.

The remaining five cohorts, seeing three of their mates doubled up in pain floating overhead, may've quickly sobered up since they made only a halfhearted effort to draw their swords and move in Cin's direction. I doubt killing had been part of the program. And killing even a lowly fine-feathered wench, was likely something only a Clan-King might get away with.

Cin was armed with a dagger, as was I. I was certain she could've easily handled the Crea Clan-chief, but I wasn't prepared to stand by and watch. Perhaps I felt I'd something to prove.

Leaping forward, I managed to get between Cin and the raging Clan-chief before they had time meet.

'Enough of this!' I exclaimed in my best, captain-esque voice. 'Put that sword away and move along before anyone gets into more trouble than they already have.'

That stopped him for a second. He stared at me in disbelief. Who was I, a fine-feathered servant/slave, to address him, much less order him about? Who indeed?

Angrily, he turned to one of his reluctant mates. 'Give this creature your sword, Roka. I'll not desecrate mine with the blood of an unarmed fine-feathered fool.'

Roka reluctantly drew it. The Clan-chief impatiently grabbed it from him and tossed it my way, hilt first. 'Die!'

I managed to snag it, and even as I did, the Clan-chief charged.

By leaping to the side and back, I avoided his first wild charge and drew my dagger. He swung about and attacked again.

I was familiar with swordplay in free fall, having practiced it for many years aboard the Starry Shore – while wearing magnetic soled boots. I quickly found that swordplay in free fall attached to the ground

by claws on the tips of my boots was something else again. My usual style was to give ground while waiting for an opening. With magnetic boots you could slide your feet back, but with claws in the turf, well, you need to release the claws by sliding your foot forward, or tear them clear in panic, like I did in my first retreat, managing to retain a tenuous hold on the island with one foot while I met the onslaught of raging opponent's flashing blade standing, frantically parrying his first hurricane of slashing, saber-style cuts. But not quite frantically enough to parry them all.

I fell for a high feint and failed to parry a lunging thrust to my chest with my sword. I managed to dodge most of the thrust, though his blade sliced through the lizard-leather vest, and ran along my ribs under armored shirt across my chest. Not a hopeful beginning.

His angry, drunken, lunge carried us crashing together, shoulder to shoulder, both of us somewhat off balance. I brought my sword arm down across his sword arm, momentarily trapping his arm against my chest and then swung my dagger arm around to jam the dagger deep into his arm near his shoulder. Only my Unity Standardness – and my native caution – prevented me from setting it in his heart. He bellowed in anger and attempted to pull his arm free. I gave my dagger a wicked jerk, tearing more muscles. He cursed as his blade drifted free, his hold on it weakened by the damage my dagger was doing to his arm. I let him jerk his arm free of my pinning arm. He grabbed his shoulder with his free hand and roared a string of abuses at me – which I silenced with a blow to his jaw, led by the sword's hand-guard. My 500 generations of St Bleyth ancestors rather demanded that. He fell backwards and silenced by the blow.

'Anyone else anxious to die?' I asked his followers, who looked on, stunned by the turn of events. None seemed anxious to volunteer, so I tossed the sword back to Roka and stepped away to allow them to attend to their Clan-chief. In the background, another member of the entourage climbed on his mate's shoulder to drag their still floating, still groaning comrades back to the island.

Cin had stepped forward and I was afraid she'd finish the lout off, but exclaimed in wild alarm, 'Are you wounded my captain?' – her cold grey eyes laughing. She loved to playact.

'If so, only a scratch, my dear,' I replied, replying in kind, as I shifted a shoulder belt to cover the slice in my vest. By all rights, my chest should be drenched in blood, but the armored shirt had prevented the blade from cutting through. I'd not been wearing an armored shirt under my Temtre costume for nothing. I wore it for my health. I didn't know if it could stop a direct thrust, but it proved to be strong enough to prevent the Clan-chief's glancing thrust from doing much harm. I'd likely have a welt or bruise, but no more. I hoped everyone would assume the blow was more glancing than it actually was, otherwise questions would be asked. It had happened very fast, and now, if we made our escape...

'Are you alright? Those brutes didn't harm you did they? If they did, I'll finish them off,' I continued, playing my role.

'Oh, they didn't touch more than the bottom of my feet. All good clean fun.'

I'm sure it was. Then quietly to her alone, 'Let's lift while we can, my dear. I don't think this scene needs to last any longer.' The fracas had attracted a quiet crowd; who's attitude I couldn't read. They might get ugly. Even if attacked, I rather doubted that fine-feathered retainers would feel free to stick knives into clan captains.

She smiled but didn't object. We turned down the lane. A silent gap opened up in the ring of bystanders and we slipped through. Siss, who'd been off somewhere at the start of the proceedings swam up next to her and hung over her shoulder, growling menacingly at everyone.

'Where are we going?' I asked quietly, for she had set out for the opposite end of the island from our boat. 'We're heading the wrong way.'

'Remember, we're hostages of the Crea, who's chief you nearly killed. We should appear to be returning to our ship, if we're to keep to our story,' she whispered back. 'Besides I saw trouble coming from the other direction. I don't think we want to answer questions...'

'Wait up, please!' called the "trouble" behind us. Which was the last thing I wanted to do, but Cin

shrugged, stopped, and turned back, as did I.

Turning, I recognized the tall fellow who had called out – it was DeKan, the Clan-king of the Temtres himself. He was leading a dozen tough looking mates. If running for it had been an option, I would've taken it. It wasn't. And, well, catching the brightness in Cin's eyes, I'd a feeling she was rather looking forward to the challenge of meeting the Clan-king.

'I'm sorry,' DeKan exclaimed as he caught up with us, leaving his guards several discrete steps behind. 'That I arrived too late to prevent the unpleasantness. EnVey is a notoriously an ill-tempered drunk and as soon as word reached me that he was on a rampage, I set out to tame him. But it seems you've done that for me. At his cost.'

'No more than he deserved,' said Cin with a pleasant smile.

'I'm sure you're right,' said DeKan nodded his smiling agreement. 'Are you hurt at all?' He gave me a quick glance as well, but he'd only eyes for Cin.

'They laid not a hand on me,' laughed Cin, 'Though I do believe EnVey's blade has damaged my Captain's lizard vest. And I warn you, I shall demand a steep discount in my ransom for this outrageous affront to our agreement. EnVey has previously offended me with his comments, and with this outrage, I shall demand that the agreed ransom be cut in half, which I trust you will enforce. The honor of the Temtres' word is at stake in this matter.'

DeKan smiled pleasantly. He was another of these tall, lean, elegant broad-feathered fellows, cut from the same cloth as Admiral DarQue. While no doubt a dangerous fellow, he was as suave and courteous as pirates come. 'Yes, I saw how you both dealt with the gang. I rather doubt their drunkenness is much of an excuse for their rout. Still, I am very glad you were not hurt. (This solely to Cin, of course.) I assure you, such actions are not tolerated during the Assembly. I will have a word with EnVey as soon as we come to our understanding.'

'Our understanding? Oh, you mean the terms of our ransom. I'm sure I can settle that with Captains SherKe and EnVey.'

'Oh, as for the ransom, I wave that in its entirety,' said DeKan with a generous wave of his hand, adding, 'Seeing that it doesn't exist, and that you're not ransomees of anyone. I've already looked into that. I keep my ears open to all that goes on during the Assembly. Having heard word of two ransomed prisoners – of SherKe's Darter Dragon, of all ships – for which I hadn't been given my share, I made it a point to confront Captain SherKe. I found him quite unaware of any ship he captured or any prisoners he held for ransom. He was very certain he'd have remembered that,' he said with a smile, adding, 'As would I, since the Creas are traders, not fighters. So, would you care to invent another story for me? Though I'd prefer the truth, of course.'

Siss, at Cin's shoulder, who'd been watching this silently, gave a low, warning hiss.

Cin's smile, however, just widened, her eyes sparkling. These tall, broad-feathered fellows may have a great deal of charm, but when Cin isn't trying to kill you, she can be quite charming as well. Indeed, even when she is trying to kill you, she can be, well, if not charming, strikingly pretty.

I, on the other hand, slowly let my hand find the slit in my Temtre trousers, and undid the seal on the pocket of my inner trousers that held my sissy. It was beginning to look like darts were going to be flying.

'Take your time, I am eager to hear you improvise a second story to explain your presence here. I'm sure it will be an amusing one. Amuse me.'

Well, I was at a loss to invent an amusing tale. It would seem something of the truth would have to do... But then, he wasn't talking to me.

'I think, Clan-king, you must agree that we did not fly here on our own. We were brought here. I'm not sure of all the ins and outs, but I believe it would be very indiscreet of me to say by whom,' she said, with a smile and a pretty shrug. 'I'm sorry, but that is your affair, not ours. Our affair is demanding an apology from Clan-chief EnVey. We'll demand satisfaction. And not only from him, but from you as well for questioning our right to be here.'

I didn't think that line of attack was going to end well. Darts, and darts alone seemed likely to settle things.

DeKan shook his head sadly. 'Satisfaction you may have against EnVey. You're welcome to it. No tears would be shed. And if you have any right to be here, or the right to defy your Clan-king – and I can't imagine that you have that right – you'll have my sincere apology as well. All you need do is to prove that right.'

'Our presence is proof enough.'

What was she thinking? I didn't think DeKan was going to fall for any bluff.

He shrugged, showing no anger. 'Come now, the truth, please. You cannot be here unaccounted for.'

'Why not? We are here and you don't know how or why.'

'I intend to rectify that, one way or another.'

Cin, with a shrug and with a glance to me – as a warning – decided to abandon our pretense, 'As you wish. I'm afraid the truth, Clan-king, is quite mundane. We're simply shipwrecked sailors, driven to this island by a great storm. You've seen the storm's destruction so that you cannot doubt the truth. We were here when your ships arrived, and saw no reason why we shouldn't enjoy the festival. Which we have, thank you. However, being unfamiliar with the Temtre clan – we come from far, far away – we decided that it would be best not to reveal ourselves or our plight. And that, is the simple truth.'

'Where in the Saraime do you come from, that you do not to know the of Temtre?'

'We don't come from the Saraime.'

'Yet you speak our language.'

'We learned it,' she shot back.

'You learned it very fast, to speak it so fluently.'

'Have you ever heard of Cimmadar? There are many similarities in both languages that made learning it easy,' she said, adding in pure Cimmadarian, 'I'm willing to wager that you can understand the purport of what I'm saying.'

His eyes narrowed, 'So now you're claiming to be from mythical Cimmadar.'

Cin shook her head. 'No. We've crossed courses with people who claim to be from Cimmadar, and learned their language. However, we've never been there.'

DeKan closed his eyes for a moment, seeking to separate lies from truth, if he could. 'Cimmadar is spoken of in the myths and sagas. I've never believed it to be a real realm.'

'They may've been liars for all we know, but that is what they claimed. They said however, that Cimmadar lies many, many tens of thousands of rounds away. They were driven from it – in exile.'

'Fine-feathered like you?'

'Both broad and fine-feathered. You wouldn't recognize them as people out of a myth.'

'Where then is your wrecked ship?' he asked abruptly. 'The one that carried you here from tens of thousands of rounds away, in the storm. And why haven't we seen any evidence of it?'

'Oh, it is small, and well hidden in the jungle while Captain Canary makes the necessary repairs.'

'Our hunters have not reported seeing it.'

'Did I not say it's well hidden?' Cin laughed. 'If you don't believe the truth, make up your own story as to how we are here and for what reason.'

He'd no answer for that. But he wasn't prepared to give up.

'And yet you, though you claim not to come from the Saraime, you spend their coins for clothes, weapons and food. How do you explain that?'

How indeed? Cin hesitated, so I was about to say that we traded gold and silver for them...

'I borrowed a few,' said Cin with a little apologetic shrug. 'An unfortunate necessity.'

'I believe the word you're looking for in Temtre is “steal” rather than “borrow”. Though you must be good at borrowing, since I've not heard any complaints. As a rule, we're not careless with our coins,' he replied rather grimly. Clearly neither careless or especially generous.

'I believe a better Temtre word would be “looted”, but why quibble? I'm very good at stealing,

looting, or borrowing. It is my profession. As for being careless, I'll let you be the judge since I borrowed them from you.'

'Me?'

'Well, from that big chest that you keep in the small strong room just off your quarters. Oh, it was filled to the rim with all sorts of coins, jewelry and gems. I could've filled my pouch with a fortune in glittering bobbles, but no, I confined myself to just what was needed to outfit ourselves as Temtres, and a few coins for meals and such – mostly small coins so as not to attract any unwelcome attention...'

'You stole from me? How?' he demanded, growing dark and angry, losing much of his calm civility. A thief who resented being robbed. 'How could you? How dare you?'

'How dare I steal the loot of a pirate chief?' she asked archly, ignoring his growing anger. 'How did you acquire it? The opportunity presented itself and I took it, as you did before me. As to how, that is a professional secret. The why, you already know. Really, Clan-king, I should think that instead of getting angry about missing a few coins that you'd never miss, you'd stop and realize I could have taken much more if I'd chosen to. All I really did was redistribute my ill-gotten gains from your ill-gotten gains to your kinsmen and women. Nothing has left your clan.'

'And if you are really all that petty and miserly, I will send along the sum with interest to you at the first opportunity, after we set up shop in the Saraimé. No doubt we'll run into some Temtre traders in some port some time.'

'I'm neither petty or miserly. I just draw the line at stealing – from me,' he added grimly, but regaining a spark of humor in his eyes. 'I'm simply curious as to how you accomplished that feat. Were my guards asleep at their post? My locks not foolproof?'

'I think I'll keep my air of mystery. Now, I believe we've settled everything. You have your answers. If you're concerned about a few coins, extract them from your drunken Clan-chief as compensation for his shameful and cowardly assault on a lady and her captain. I'll not delay you any further. Fair sailing, Clan-king.' She made to go.

He shook his head, sadly. 'I'm afraid very little has been settled. I'll need to know much more about you, in order to decide what to do with you.'

Cin grinned coldly. 'I will freely give you my word, and that of Captain Canary, that everything we have learned here will remain a secret. We've no ill feelings against either you or the Temtre – up till now. We have enjoyed our time in your clan. I hope that won't change.'

'I'm afraid I must ask you to accompany me.'

'I think not. We're returning to our own ship.'

'You will notice that my men now surround us. I would prefer that you come peaceably, but if not...'

I could almost feel the air grow colder as Cin tapped her cold, ruthless St Bleyth heritage in her, low, slow reply. 'I doubt, Clan-king, you'll find much satisfaction in insisting on that. I hope you realize just how close you are to being dead. Please believe me when I tell you that neither you, nor your men, can prevent us from returning to our ship.'

'I'm no fool. I've seen you both in action, and have the greatest respect for your skills. Still, I wouldn't be here talking to you if I feared you,' he replied coolly, his eyes just as dangerous as Cin's. Which alarmed me greatly.

'Ah, but that was when there was only the two of us. Now that our friend has joined us, we're three, and indefatigable,' I said hoping a little humor might ease the situation. 'Siss, here, is fearless. She's already challenged a great blue dragon defending us, so I'm certain she has nothing to fear from you. Perhaps Siss, you might get into position to take a large bite out of the Clan-king where he'd most regret it should he make one wrong move. Or thinks one wrong thought.'

Finding the idea amusing, Siss gave a low barking laugh, and settled down to waist level, to stare intently at the Clan-king's crouch, her toothy jaws open for that first bite.

DeKan stared down at her for a second or two – at a loss as to just what to make of Siss. However, with Simla dragons as common in the Temtre clans as they were, he knew she could react to a thought.



And as comical as it looked – as it was intended to look – a three-meter-long Simla dragon half a meter away was a real threat, not only to his manhood, but to his life. He had little choice but to break out with a grim laugh. Which he did after considering it for several seconds.

'Now that's a risk too chancy to run. I suppose I must admit I've met my match. I see no alternative but to accept your promise to keep our secrets safe. You've enjoyed our hospitality, shared our food and fun. It would be ill-mannered of you to betray our secrets. I believe I can trust you, so go on your way. And please, continue to have the run of our Assembly while it lasts, as one of us,' he added with another laugh.

'Thank you,' I said. 'You have our word that we'll keep your secrets.'

Cin nodded when he glanced at her. 'Yes, and give my regards to EnVey. Assure him that he was lucky that Captain Canary stepped in to settle the affair. He's far more kindhearted than I.'

'I'll mention that, among other things. So if you'll excuse me, I'd best be on my way,' he said with a slight bow, and then signaling his men, continued up the lane of ships.

'This way, Wil,' said Cin as she turned aside and struck out for one of the cliff edges of the island, weaving through the anchored ships.

As we drifted cliff-wards, she'd stop and browse at the various stalls we came across.

'We're being followed,' she said as we left the last stall. We'll head over the cliff. You keep going, I'll find a place to ambush our tracker and rejoin you.'

'Dart him lightly, I trust. We don't want any more trouble.'

'Yes, Litang. I shall be very Unity Standard.'

We left the line of anchored ships behind and crossed the grassy margin and found a vine paved ravine to follow down to the jungle side. Once over the side and out of sight, we scrambled down the ravine to put some distance between us and our tracker. At a sharp turn, with a tumble of vines, Cin slipped into the leafy shadows. Siss and I kept going, making as much noise as I dared to in order to draw the tracker on, until I reached the edge of the jungle, where I stopped and awaited Cin.

She joined me about ten minutes later. 'Two of them. I hid them in the vines. They'll be out for half an hour or so, so we're clear. Back to the boat. It's been an interesting day.'

It's been an interesting life. Far too interesting.

Before we set out, Cin asked Siss to hold back and cover our retreat in the event there was a third shadow.

As we made our way along the edge of the jungle, up and down ravines, Cin said, 'Thank you for so gallantly coming to my aid. It wasn't necessary, of course. I'm capable of handling a drunk with a blade without the slightest risk of being killed.'

'I know, my dear. Still, if I'm to be more than a rounding error in our partnership, I felt that I needed to do something as well. Not to protect you, but to give you some confidence that you have a suitable partner.'

'You almost got killed.'

'Did not. It may've looked like it right at the start – I'm going to have to adjust my footwork to take into account the fact that retreating with claws on one's boots may not be as fluid as it is with magnets or gravity – but even admitting that, I certainly can handle a drunken Temtre. I did finish the duel in less than half a minute, after all, and without a scratch....'

She plucked the sliced leather jersey from my chest.

'Yes I know, but the fact remains, I wasn't scratched and he's only alive because I'm a Unity Standard fellow, by and large. Killing him wasn't either necessary nor wise, given our position.'

'Well, you did give me a little scare...' she said, and slipping her arm through mine, pulled me close and then added with a teasing smile 'Still, we're a pretty effective partnership, the three of us. You and Siss certainly make for an interesting team.'

I'd take the partnership, even if she included Siss. For now.

'Siss is one amazing dragon,' I replied lightly. 'I assume that she read my mind, though it was just a

fleeting thought as to what he'd most likely regret losing. I suppose that having been around so many amorous Temtres these last two weeks, she may've well have already appreciated its importance in a man's thought. Still, it was a stroke of genius to play it so comically. She reduced the whole potentially deadly encounter into something ridiculous, something too comic for it to be taken seriously. Do you think she knew what she was doing, or was she just being her usual, carefree, teasing self?

Before Cin could answer, there came a long dismissive hiss from behind us.

Cin and I exchanged grins.

'Thanks, Siss. You saved the day with your quick thinking... Whatever you were thinking,' I called back.

She barked a laugh.

I looked to Cin at my side and thought, "Now if only Siss would get lost..."

Which earned me another loud laughing bark.

She didn't get lost, however. I only could hope that she knew Cin's mind, and that she would get lost when she needed to.

I heard her quietly laugh. Not very encouraging.

## Chapter 09 In the Net and Out

01

The following round I found Cin getting ready to visit the Temtre encampment once again. I objected.

'Why?' she asked. 'DeKan gave us the freedom of the Assembly, didn't he?'

'I've been doing business in the Unity and drifts for several decades now, and I know that deals are finalized with a handshake, or as they do here, claspng wrists. DeKan didn't offer that form, sealing the agreement. We've only what he said to go on, and having us shadowed to find our boat is hardly a sign that he trusts us, or that he can be trusted in turn. I suspect his offer was only a tactical retreat. They're on to us, and outsiders are clearly not welcome, especially since this is their treasure island. As I know too well, the dead tell no tales. We'd be fools to return.'

Cin had her pride. 'They have hostages who will be released at some point after visiting this island. We are not any different. You don't have to go, but I'm going. I can look after myself.'

'Why in the Neb do you want to risk getting captured or killed? We've seen it all. We have all the intelligence we need. Things are getting a bit rowdy down there as we know, firsthand. There's nothing to be gained. All we have to do now is wait a round or two and we can be on our way. We're on the verge of a new life. Can't you be prudent, my dear, just this once?' I probably should've stopped one sentence short of where I did, for I saw the flash of anger in her eyes.

'Stay here and be prudent. I still want to add to my collection of recipes. And I will not be intimidated by a pack of primitive trader/pirates, drunk or sober. DeKan said we were welcome and I'm going to hold him to his word. And if he breaks it, he'll pay.'

'Are you ready, Siss? We should be on our way before they all set sail. You don't have to come along, Captain Canary. Siss and I are perfectly capable of looking after ourselves.'

Siss, ever eager for her Temtre friends, was out the hatch in a flash.

'Right. We'll go then. I'm taking my sword, since we're done pretending. Do you want yours as well?'

She smiled brightly. 'That's the spirit, Captain Canary! Yes, I'll wear mine as well. That should

protect us.'

The last was sarcastic, but I grabbed the swords along with my tricorne hat anyway. They'd be handy if we ran into any more drunken Clan-chiefs.

02

The Assembly was breaking up. The ship city was once more just clumps of ships rather than long lines of them, as the ships with the most distant trade routes left first to be in port for the resumption of trade after the long holiday. Gangs with long poles gathered under the departing ships to help launch them into the air high enough to clear the surrounding ships. Booths and stands were being dismantled and the crowds in the streets grew sparse. Most of the overheard conversations were looking ahead – talk about trading prospects, the new family alliances, and farewells.

I tagged along as Cin stopped to buy her favorite treats – sticky, savory and smoked lizard meat on sticks, and in buns, plus pickled vegetables and dried herb and put them in a pouch to bring them back with us. Having won the day's little domestic dispute, Cin was back to her confident, cheerful, and sarcastic self – a mood I tried to match. If our status had become common knowledge, no one showed any sign of it. They paid no more attention to us than they always had, which is to say, none at all. So we drifted unnoticed through the encampment as before. Nothing seemed different.

Yet I couldn't shake the feeling we shouldn't be here. Siss had drifted off to visit her own friends. I kept a wary eye on everyone around us, watching for shadows. I hoped Cin, despite her carefree attitude, was doing the same.

She had just purchased a stick of smoke blackened lizard meat, and turned back down the street when we saw, standing in the lane, a tall, dark Temtre with his arm in a sling staring intently at us. He had two kinsmen at his side, little doubt survivors from our last encounter. We'd rather forgotten about Clan-chief EnVey. He apparently hadn't forgotten about us. Having caught our gaze, he, along with his burly kinsmen, strode forward to confront us. I slipped my hand into my hidden pocket and grasped my sissy. This was not exactly what I'd warned Cin about, but it was in keeping with the spirit of my argument. She stopped and watched him approach with her coolest, collected indifference, even arrogance.

He stepped close and then stiffly bowed to Cin.

'Please allow me to extend my sincere apology for my indefensible behavior when we last met. I fear drink made me not my true self. I say that not to excuse my actions, only to explain them. I accept full responsibility for my shameful behavior. Please feel free to take whatever actions you decide is proper to make amends, without fear of any consequences. Break both my legs, as I would have seen done to you, if you choose. My friends will not object. I have been making my amends to all that I have offended, and my first mate here, TaFin, has a pouch of coins, if you would prefer coins to broken bones.'

Cin nodded coolly. 'Neither broken bones nor coins are necessary. Your apology is sufficient. I was, after all, not harmed in the least,' she added with her wicked smile.

He looked at her wondering. And then, with a smile, said, 'Which makes my apology all the more necessary. I should not care to have you as an enemy. I hope, however, that you'll accept that I sincerely regret my actions. My family has two great flaws. The first is that the men in the family become mean, angry and foolhardy when in drink. And the second is a weakness for drink when our patience is at its end, as it usually is by the end of the Assembly. They are the two black dragons I must carry on my shoulders, and sometimes they get the best of me. Again, I offer this only as an explanation, not as an excuse for my actions.'

'It is in the past Clan-chief, let us put it behind us. I, too, have dark flaws from my heritage, so I can hardly fault you for yours.'

His grin widened. "Generosity, my lady, is not something missing in your inheritance. Thank you," and turning to me, he wiped the smile off his face and said gravely. 'As for you, sir, I am willing to accept your apologies for the destruction of my arm. My healer is doubtful that I shall ever recover the full strength of it. I shall have to, at great inconvenience, learn how to shoot and wield a sword with my right hand. Still, I am willing to put revenge aside, if you are willing to sincerely apologize.'

He may've been kidding. And may not've been. Still, "safety first" being my motto, I said, 'I regret any permanent damage I may've have done to your arm. At the time, I was only concerned about defending my wife.' (Wife being a presumption on my part, but blame it on the Temtre language that had no exact equivalent of what the term "partner" covered in the Nebula. I'd a feeling I'd hear from Cin about that later.) 'And, of course, saving my own life in the most expediently way possible – without killing you,' I added with what I hoped was a bloodthirsty enough grin. 'It was however only meant to end the fight as quickly as possible, not with malice, so I can, and do apologize if it should, indeed, result in the inconvenience of learning how to fence right handed.'

He studied me for a second or two, considered what I'd said, and decided to accept it. He smiled, bowed ever so slightly, and offered his hand.

We clasped wrists, Temtre style.

'Perhaps we might even be friends,' he said. 'Your name?'

'Captain Wil Litang. Captain Canary is Naylea's little joke. And I'd prefer friendship to being enemies,' I replied. Sober, he seemed a pleasant enough fellow. Indeed, he had confounded my expectations with his attitude and actions.

He turned to Cin and with an inviting smile, offered his hand. 'I hope we are friends, as well.'

'Since both you and my husband...' this with a darting sarcastic glance at me, as she grasped his wrist, '...are willing to put the unpleasantness of the past astern, we would be delighted to count you as a friend.'

'Wonderful!' he beamed. 'The other affronts could be settled with coins, which is of no matter to me. My actions against you were of a much graver matter, ones I feared, might not be settled amicably. I'm very happy that we can put the past behind us. You can count EnVey a new and good friend. Now, however, I must leave you, for I still have many amends to make, but I hope we shall cross courses again some day, and I want to assure you that you can count on me to stand by you in any need. Fair winds my Lady, Captain,' and with this he bowed, joined his kinsmen, and went his way with a swinging stride.

I looked at Cin. 'A strange fellow.'

'As your wife, it is my duty to agree with my husband,' she said with a wicked smile, but with no malice. She knew the language as well as I.

'Somehow, my dear, I find myself skeptical of your commitment to that duty.'

'Someday, my dear. Someday. Once in a while.'

'I'm eagerly looking forward to it. But having dodged one asteroid, may I suggest you collect your samples so we can lift while we still can.'

03

It was, however, already too late to dodge the big asteroid. We had barely gotten clear of EnVey and started walking when I spied DeKan down the street through the thin crowd. He was still some distance away, but striding in our direction, with half a dozen followers in tow. I slipped my arm through Cin's and steered her off the street and between the anchored ships.

'What?'

'Our friend, the Clan-king was coming our way. Let's get clear. We've run enough risks.'

She shrugged, but didn't object as we cut across the rows of anchored ships towards the island's

nearest edge. But not fast enough.

DeKan and his followers were waiting for us, half a dozen streets across, and a dozen short of the island's edge. They must've run to cut us off when they saw us veer off, but they weren't showing any sign of it. The broad-feathered folk can travel much faster and surer on these little islands than we can with our claw toed boots.

We'd no choice but to stop and greet him. 'Ah, greetings Clan-king. We just settled things with EnVey. He made a very gracious apology which we were happy to accept. A very interesting character,' I added, hoping to temper whatever the Clan-king seemed so intent on saying to us by highlighting the graciousness of his subordinate.

'EnVey is indeed, a very fine fellow, sober. And a demon when drunk. A family trait. He is, however, rarely drunk, and always enterprising, in a commercial sort of way,' (that rather dismissively) 'and he is as dear to me as he is annoying. I am happy, though not surprised, to find, that he has so promptly set out to make amends and apologized for his unfortunate actions. I, too, have sought you out in the hope of making amends. I'm here to invite you to my ship, the Talon Hawk, where we can discuss your new roles – as members of our clan.'

That set me back for a moment, until I realized our new role as a member of the clan would likely be that of either prisoners, or slaves.

'I'm sorry – we seemed to have missed a step or two. I don't recall an invitation being extended to join the clan. I know we haven't accepted one. I'm sure it's an honor. But I'm afraid we must decline. We are but ships passing in.... well, ships passing in a storm. We intend to go our own way as soon as repairs to our boat are finished. Your secrets, however, remain safe with us. We've already given our word on that.'

'Captain Canary hopes to return to his islands and give up sailing ships to be a farmer. He has found this voyage far too exciting for him,' laughed Cin, 'so we have no interest in becoming Temtres. It would not suit him, I'm afraid. Though we thank you for your generous offer.'

Left unsaid was Cin's preferences...

DeKan gave me an amused glance. For the most part, he'd only eyes for Cin. 'I gave you the freedom of the Assembly when we last met, as members of the Clan. While my meaning might not have been as clearly expressed as perhaps it should've been, as I was not in a position to make it clearer at the time,' he replied with a suave, faux apologetic smile. 'I trust you will understand that this offer is both generous and necessary. This Assembly and this island are touchstones of our society. We have, as you may have gathered, rivals and enemies in the Principalities. This island is virtually impossible to find by chance, and is secured by the loyalty of the clan and the members of the clan that can find it. Should its existence become known to outsiders, our, well, our security would then be in jeopardy.'

By security, he meant treasure. Who knows, the treasure trove of the Temtres may be a legend in the Principalities. Keeping it a legend would be a high priority to the Temtres. A secret known only to the clan and its location known only to Temtre captains or guides. DeKan could not be sure we did not have the talent to find our way back. We hadn't had the chance to look into the Temtre treasure cave, but I'd a feeling that if generations upon generations had been accumulating treasures, it could be something worth looking for.

'Ah, yes,' I said. 'I understand your concern. However, I assure you that, as strangers, and strangers far from home, we bear no animosity towards your clan. Indeed, we've become half Temtres ourselves. We'd be more than happy to formally pledge our friendship and our assurances to keep your secrets. And I can assure you that neither Naylea nor I have the talent to find this island again. You needn't lose a minute of sleep over that prospect. I trust you will accept that, since we will, in the end, be going our own way, in our own boat,' I added, giving him my most determined look. At least I hoped I kept desperation out of it.

'The cheerful good nature of your people and the generosity of their leaders has greatly impressed us,' chimed in Cin. 'Your hospitality alone requires that we reciprocate the trust you've shown in us by

giving us the freedom of your clan. I assure you, you can trust us to keep your secrets.'

'I'm glad you've become half Temtre, it will make it all the easier for you to become all Temtre. As for allowing you to leave on your own – how can I trust you? You're a thief,' he replied giving her a hard look. 'A self-confessed thief. Why would I trust a thief?'

She laughed. 'We've already gone over that, DeKan. You're also a thief. I took a few coins out of necessity, cutting no one's throat in doing so. And, I might add, I am a thief for hire. I steal things for other people, not for myself. It is a career that I was trained for. I enjoy the challenge of it. It is the journey, not the destination that matters to me. I think, sir, that I am far, far less greedy than you, and I can assure you, however fabulous your treasures may be, it is of no interest to me.'

'Why not?'

She shrugged. 'We're wealthy enough. You might not believe this, but Captain Canary is quite wealthy in his own island. He is a very lucky man. As for your wretched coins, I took them only because we did not possess the local currency and did not seek to call attention to ourselves. It ill behooves you, as a great Clan-king, to be so petty about a few coins.'

I doubted that last remark would sit well with ol'DeKan, but I was wrong. He had eyes for only Cin. They were talking one pirate to another. And she was as at her most cheerful, charming and fearless self – taunting and tempting. She wasn't looking at me, so I couldn't tell how calculating the act was. If it was an act at all. I should've been alarmed, but knowing how Cin loved to role-play – and to have fun at my expense – I wasn't. Which is not to say I wasn't alarmed, just not on that account. I'd plenty of others to be alarmed about.

'It is not a matter of a few coins, though I'll admit it galls me that you could steal them so easily. But that is all the more reason to bring you into the clan. While I personally trust you, alas, as Clan-king, I must look after the best interests of the clan. I cannot take the chance that the wealth of ages might disappear if you are not true to your word. Not when I have other options...' He glanced at the half dozen followers behind him. Which was merely a feint.

I sensed, more than heard or saw a movement behind us, coming from behind the ships at our back. Cin reacted faster than I, drawing her dagger, but we were both engulfed in a thick rope net which was quickly, and effectively, drawn around us, pulling us together. And before she could even attempt to cut us free, my struggle, at least, was ended abruptly in blackness by a thumping crack on the side of my head. No flash of blue, but the results were the same – a dive into a bottomless blackness.

04

I couldn't have been out for long. I've a confused memory of pain, brightness and then blackness, of being tussled up, stretched out and then hung in blackness. And then left alone. I took my time, slowly gathering my wits and exploring my plight, through a veil of throbbing pain from a point above my left ear.

I found that I was hung hand and foot under the deck beams of a Temtre ship, secured by ropes and attached to hooks set in the beams. They hadn't allowed any slack – I was stretched out, clinched right up to the beams. All I could do was to twist about to survey my surroundings, which hurt my head, so I kept my survey brief.

I was in the ship's engine room. The beams, deck, and bulkheads were black from smoke and charcoal dust. On my right, towards my feet, I caught the glint of polished metal – the ship's steam engine, all iron and brass, in an intricate maze of pipes and shafts. Towards my head I could see the boiler with caged bunkers full of what I took to be charcoal bricks on either side of it. Shafts of pale light dropped through the grate in the deck above, and the lines of pipes to splash small squares of light on the black carpeted deck. There were several more grates on either side of the engine as well. I'd imagine the boiler and steam engine made for a hot place when fired up.

On my left, a couple meters away, two Temtres were playing a card game on a small table, lit by an open porthole in the hull. They didn't say much beyond calling out points or plays in the game. Cin was not to be seen. Try as I might, I was unable to come up with even a glimmer of an escape plan. Instead, I hung under the beams pondering, far, far from the first time, how it is I so often find myself, head aching, in these very iffy orbits. All I ever aspired to do was to haul boxes from one planet to the next. The mistakes were certainly mine, though the actual liftoff points of those mistakes seemed hard to pin down, making it hard to learn from them. This black study probably went on for perhaps a dozen minutes, until a wet tongue licked my nose.

I turned my head to my right and saw Siss clinging, upside down, in the dark hollow of the deck beams next to my face, her black eyes bright with carefree mischief. Of course she wasn't the one tied hand and foot to the beams of a pirate's engine room, but still, if I'm going to constantly find myself tied up hand and foot to the beams of a pirate's engine room or in some other equally unpleasant situation, I'm going to have to adopt that carefree attitude of hers towards life. I glanced back at the card players. They were paying no attention to me, and given the general darkness of the engine room and the fact that my body likely blocked a clear view of Siss, we had a chance.

I looked back at Siss, pointed with my eyes at the ropes that bound my hands and thought very hard about a Simla dragon chewing through them. Siss gave my nose another lick, and quickly shifted several beams over to grasp the rope above my hands with her narrow crocodile mouth and began to quietly chew. It took some time. Though her teeth were sharp, they were made for grasping rather than cutting. Still, I could feel the rope loosen as she severed the strands one by one. I began to hope.

I turned my head to watch the card players and began to make a plan of action. My belts, sword and dagger had been taken, but I seemed to feel that my sissy was still tucked away in the hidden pocket of the spaceer trousers. Pockets are not a feature of Temtre fashion, so having taken my weapons and pouches, they likely considered their work done.

The card game ended in a flurry of action and exclamations. Siss, quickly withdrew up into the shadows between the beams as they glanced at me. I closed my eyes to feign unconsciousness, with the hope that the strands of the frayed rope above my head weren't too evident.

But they must've been, since one of the guards let out a 'What?' and started to stand.

Siss gave a low, hissing growl, and shot under me for the standing guard, knocking him back against the hull.

I gave my bonds a great wrench drawing in my arms and legs. The ropes cut deeper into my wrists but they also started unraveling – giving. Another wrench and my hands were free of the hook, though still tied together. I swung downwards and brought my hands over my head and twisted to reach my hidden pocket.

Siss in the meanwhile had grasped the standing guard with her rear legs and tail and had the sword arm of the second guard in her mouth, and was clawing at him with her fore legs.

Awkwardly pushing through my outer pants I found my little darter. I pulled it out and twisted about to face the guards.

Siss was engaged in a frenzied struggle holding one and trying to prevent both from drawing their swords. 'Get clear, Siss! I'll deal with them!' I barked.

She barked a laugh back, and disengaged, darting up to the ceiling to give me a clear line of fire. Being able to read not only your partner's mind, but your opponent's as well, is a great advantage in a fight.

Even though I was upside down, and the guards were outside my customary range at two meters, I silenced them both with two darts. It appears that, when necessary, I can actually hit something. Seeing the blue dot of the drive beam on your target helps, as does firing when you see it. Siss and I waited in silence to see if the brief uproar attracted any attention from elsewhere in the ship. It didn't.

'Thanks, Siss. Do you think you could grab that fellow's dagger and bring it to me? I'll cut myself down, and then we can go about finding Cin.'

She deftly snatched the handle of the knife out of the unconscious guard's belt and brought it over to me. I curled myself up and cut the ropes around my feet. I then grasped the deck, pulled myself down, and hooking my boots to the rough deck carpet, stood and caught my breath as I cleared the last of the ropes from my hands. 'Great work, Siss. You're a wonder. Can you lead me to Naylea?'

She softly barked a laugh and nodded.

'Right,' I said, and looking about, spied my belts, weapons and tricorne hat hanging in the corner of the charcoal bunkers and forward bulkhead. I took a minute to strap everything back on, fit my battered hat over the painful lump on the side of my head and then said, 'Lead on Siss. Let's fetch Cin and go home.'

She led me up past the big, open framed steam engine. It was too tall to fit under the low deck so it extended up into the deckhouse overhead. I took a ladder up to a catwalk around the cylinder heads that led to a door in the deckhouse. I opened it and Siss swam out, and I followed her to stand blinking in the light. Simla dragons seemed to have a run of the Assembly, so her presence aboard ship was unremarkable. She, at least, seemed totally unconcerned about concealment and with my darter in hand, I wasn't too concerned either. I'd a pounding headache and a willingness to share it.

There was no one in the narrow gangway between the deckhouse or on the roof that I could see. I spent half a minute letting my eyes adjust to the light, while the tail of Siss hung in the air around the corner of the deckhouse waiting for me. Eyes adjusted, I took a deep breath, stood a little straighter, and saying 'Right,' followed the tail around the deckhouse. Before me stretched some 30 meters of a narrow deck with arching beams and a grid overhead, laying down a vague pattern of light squares on the deck and the sides of the deckhouse. Halfway down, two crew members were sewing on a large piece of canvas spread across the deck. Siss didn't hesitate, and I followed her. They looked up and gave me a questioning look as I carefully stepped over the red canvas sail on the deck, pulling myself along using the ship's railing so my claw tips wouldn't damage the canvas. I gave them each a dart as I passed by. I glanced around. Though I heard some talk above me from the upper deck, no one was in sight, so I pushed on.

Siss led straight down the deck to the wide forecabin set across the bow of the ship. There were two crew members –perhaps guards – standing in the gangway between this cabin and the deckhouse. They glanced at me as I rounded the corner. I expended two more darts at point blank range.

Siss had her nose on the forecabin door.

I didn't know what to expect, and we had made no plans, but with Siss's ability to read minds and my darter, I didn't think a plan was necessary. We'd just wing it. I pushed down on the latch and opened the door. It opened noiselessly, sending a shaft of light into the dim room. Siss swam in unconcerned, and I followed. It proved to be a small chart room or antechamber dimly lit by a thick glass skylight overhead. It was empty. Siss was already waiting at the next door. I closed the door behind me and crossed the room.

'Ready?' I whispered.

She gave me a low growl and a wag of her tail that put her nose to the door.

'Right,' I said, opening the door. Siss slipped through as soon as the opening was wide enough and I followed, darter in hand, closing the door behind me.

At the far end of the dim, but ornately decorated cabin, Cin and DeKan were seated at a table set before a curving built-in seat in a corner of the cabin. The table was set with drinking globes, a pot, and covered plates. They both let out exclamations of surprise when Siss swam into their midst to swirl around Cin.

'Why, Siss! What are you doing here?' exclaimed Cin.

Siss growled menacingly, and darted under the table, ready to take a bite out of DeKan's crouch should that prove necessary. DeKan looked down and then laughed, shaking his head, with Cin joining in. Which, I suspect, knowing Siss, was just what she wanted. She was having fun. Anything for a



laugh.

'Right, keep a close eye on those jewels, Siss. One wrong move and goodbye future DeKans,' I said from the shadows.

Only then did Cin look across the cabin to see me. Her eyes widened with surprise, and then unguarded delight – a look of delight went straight and true to my heart. She had never been dearer to me, nor I think I to her. It was not that I had come to save her; I don't think she ever considered herself in any danger, but that she had a partner who she didn't have to save.

'Why Captain Canary! It's so good to see you. We were just talking about you! We were negotiating your fate,' she exclaimed, and then growing very serious, she shook her head sadly and said, 'I'm afraid negotiations were not going well. Not well at all.'

'We were so far from agreement that I feared we'd never agree on terms,' added the Clan-king, with a cool smile, quickly recovering from our unexpected intrusion. 'She seemed resigned to accepting a rather unpleasant fate for you.'

'And I'm very glad to hear that,' I replied, stepping into the middle of the cabin to bring him almost within my effective range – without getting too close. 'I'm happy to know she didn't think it necessary to pay the price I suspect you were asking, since, as you can see, she need not. The Temtres are no match for Siss and I.'

He shrugged. 'Perhaps,' he said with a cold smile that clearly indicated that he rather doubted it.

'I have wonderful news, Wil. We were discussing your fate over cha. Real cha. They call it "tay" here, but it is cha. They grow it in the Principalities, so your dream of becoming a cha planter lives on!' said Cin brightly. Like Siss, she was having her fun, and was probably having her fun before we arrived as well. DeKan may've had me tied hand and foot to some deck beams, but he hadn't bothered to bind Cin in any way that I could see. A foolish piece of bravado.

'That's wonderful news, my dear. However, though I hate to interrupt your conversation with the Clan-king, I think we'd best be lifting. There's nothing more to be settled.'

There was an urgent knock on the door behind me. 'Sir, sir!' a muffled voice from beyond the door.

'Enter!' commanded DeKan without so much of a "by your leave" from me. No doubt I cut a very underwhelming figure – rumpled and battered, no sword in hand, and my sissy's potential both unknown to him, and likely unnoticed, since it is small, flat, and mostly covered by my hand.

I stepped aside as the door was flung open and large fellow rushed in, sword in hand.

'Sir, the prisoner...' he began, stopping as he caught sight of the prisoner.

I reached out, and almost touching him, gave him a dart. There was a brief flicker of pale blue light in the dark cabin and he pitched forward, his toes still clinging to the carpet. A quick glance back revealed a second crew member in the chart room. I gave him a dart as well as I slammed the door and slid the lock bar into place, without taking my eyes off of DeKan for more than a second or two. DeKan, however, hadn't moved. He was staring at the fallen crewman.

'What did you do?' he asked, looking to me, with a rather shocked look that might have been almost, if not quite, fear. 'Is he dead?'

'No, only sleeping. But sleeping only because I chose not to kill him,' I added. A slight lie, as the sissy only held non-lethal darts. 'He'll come to in a while with only a headache.'

'Is that what you did to the others?'

'The fellows you sent to follow us? Yes, we dealt with them in like manner. You see, DeKan, you've bitten the tail of a dangerous dragon. I may look to be an unimpressive dragon, but I command powers – magic, if you will, that can deal with you and your clan. Shipwrecked we may be, but powerless, we're not. I've enjoyed the clan's hospitality, but much of that good will has been lost with your treachery, the ambush, and the blow to the head. But I believe I'm too kindhearted to deal with you,' I said with a smile to Cin. 'So, I'll leave your fate in the hands of my lady. And good luck to you.'

That cheered him up. He suffered no shortage of charm, or self-confidence. Indeed, he didn't seem anywhere near as intimidated as I would have liked by my actions or words. Actually he didn't seem

intimidated at all.

He shrugged, and smiled mock-sheepishly. 'Yes. It was extremely ill mannered of me, and for that I apologize.' he said, looking to Cin. 'I have done you a great dishonor. Blame it on my foolhardy eagerness.'

'And foolhardy ego,' she added with a pleasant smile.

He returned the smile, and then turned to me. 'But since there's been no blood shed, I think we can stop playing games, however pleasant they are,' this with a nod to Cin, 'And discuss the terms of your employment.'

'Some blood has been shed,' I replied touching the damp lump on the side of my head. 'And I'm neither playing games nor seeking employment. I'm here to collect Naylea.'

'I'm afraid that is not possible. I simply cannot allow you to leave. This is the island of the Temtres – you will leave on Temtre terms or not leave at all.'

'Sorry, no deal,' I said. 'And now, before the entire clan gathers we need to be lifting off. What do you say, Cin? A dart to keep him quiet and then away?'

Cin nodded and looked to him. 'I'm sorry DeKan, but Captain Canary's right. It's time to go.'

DeKan acted with the speed of thought. The table before him flew at me, as he launched himself towards me. Had I not been pointing my sissy at him and had the thought to fire already formed, he would have beat my dart, knocked me back against the bulwark, and had me for a hostage within little more than the blink of an eye. As it was, I fired when he was too close to miss or dodge. He struck me, knocking me painfully back against the bulwark, but he was unable to follow through, as my dart had been true. The table, plates, pots and covered mugs smashed against the forward bulkhead around me. Siss had been sent tumbling as well. Recovering her equilibrium, she growled and glanced at me. "Should I take a bite out of him?" she asked with her eyes.

I pushed his limp body to one side, and said, 'Maybe later, Siss. We'll need him in one piece for a while.'

She growled again, more a matter of form than anything else.

'Such foolish pride,' said Cin, putting away her sissy. But then she sprang into action. 'Let's get him tied up. We must move fast now, before the alarm spreads beyond the Talon Hawk. Cut the hammock down, we'll use the ropes to tie his arms together in back. That'll make him easy to carry. We'll have to take him with us as a hostage.'

'Why? Our darters should see us through any resistance.'

'And they'll search the island for us. He'll not leave until we're found. Perhaps we can use him as leverage...' she said, as she dragged his limp body into position.

It took only a minute to tie his arms together. He'd be unconscious for several hours, so it was only for the convenience of lugging him along.

'There's no point negotiating now. Dart anyone you see. We need to get clear as fast as possible. Stand him here, in front of the door. Siss, you get out of the line of fire. Litang, open the door,' she ordered. Then holding the limp form of DeKan before her as a shield, she nodded. 'The door.'

I unlatched it and swung it open.

Cin didn't hesitate. She opened fire as soon as she had a target. There were three men in the small chart room, including the ship's first mate armed with a long barreled sidearm. She shot all three as they stood, before they could act, with their Clan-king square in the doorway. She used four darts – one must've hit a badge or buckle, since it exploded in blue light and another fired.

'Right,' she said as the last Temtre slumped. 'Clear a way through. Shoot anyone you see aboard the ship. They'll know.'

I stepped into the small room, and pushed the bodies aside so that Cin could get DeKan to the deck door.

'Stay behind us Siss until we're off the ship. Right, the next door, Litang.'

The door opened on the narrow deck between the deckhouses where I'd darted the two guards.

They'd been moved. The deck was empty as I cracked open the door and peered out.

'Clear,' I said, stepping out. I caught a slight shadow move on the deckhouse wall, and dived out, twisting about. I saw a Temtre on the upper deck above the door. I shot him through the grating. Cin was pushing DeKan through the door, when I peered around the corner. There was a small cluster of women around the two sail makers I'd darted, but the gangplank was before them, so I held my fire and searched the deck above. It appeared empty – the ship was either lightly manned, or the crew mostly asleep. A break for us. I grabbed DeKan's other arm and between us we drove his limp body down the deck to the gangplank gate. Two of the women looked up, saw something was wrong, and reached for their daggers. Cin gave each a dart as we rounded the corner and shot down the gangplank.

Though the Clan-king's ship had been anchored in the center of the ship-city, ships were now scarce and the crowd in the streets around it were thin. No one seemed hurrying towards the Talon Hawk, so it appeared that word of trouble on board had not spread beyond the ship, that, or that we were outracing it.

Cin glanced about, and nodded to me, 'The coast is clear. Let's lift.'

We set off for the nearest island edge with Siss now in the lead at a fast trot, our steel toes digging lightly into the matted turf. We zigzagged through the lines of ships, jogging arm in arm with the limp Clan-king, whose legs trailed behind us unmoving, gathering curious glances, but at first, no immediate challenges.

Our darters should keep us safe from anyone armed only with swords and daggers, but the Temtres also had compressed air sidearms and rifles. They weren't worn during the Assembly since it was a family gathering. The swords and daggers were traditional and worn for show. Still, if word spread beyond DeKan's Talon Hawk fast enough, we might come under fire, assuming they were marksmen enough not to hit their king.

Our initial good luck deserted us as we neared the last couple of rows of ships. There some Temtres, who had been following us at a distance, decided to challenge us, calling out for us to stop, they ran forward. Cin turned and silenced them with four shots, but not before a ruckus was raised, drawing more, and bolder responses to our stroll with DeKan. Not that it bothered Cin – she dispensed her darts freely and accurately. We had a dozen Temtre sleeping on their feet in our wake by the time we passed the last line of ships. As I mentioned, Cin didn't need rescuing.

We had, however, not put all resistance behind us. Before us, between us and the cliff, several hundred meters away, we found a gang of a dozen Temtres and several Simla dragons, with more Temtres running towards us in the distance. They stood, swords in hand, led by a massive ship's captain, blocking our way.

'Halt!' he roared. 'What are you doing with the Clan-King?'

I thought Cin would give him and his followers a dart like all the rest, but instead she stopped. 'Cover our rear, Litang. Don't let anyone get close,' she said quietly, and then in a louder voice, 'We're taking DeKan hostage, Captain DinDay. He will not be harmed as long as you, and the rest of the clan go your own way without searching for us or your Clan-king. When the Talon Hawk is the only ship left on the island, we will release him unharmed. I am willing to give you our word, as I did to the Clan-king, that the Clan secrets are safe with us. We bear you no ill will. We know you have secrets to keep, and must do what you can to keep them. But you will have to trust us.'

'Why? And why should I not stop you? And kill you?' roared Captain DinDay, a fierce and powerful clan-chief. We'd heard him speak at the general meeting, the leader of one of the oldest clans and fiercest clans.

Good questions. Cin, however had the answer. 'Because you have no choice – you can't stop us.'

With my back to DinDay, I didn't see what she did, but I suspect she put his followers asleep with dozen darts. She didn't miss at any range. And I found, that given time, I could hit things as well, picking off several Temtres following in our wake, and giving pause to the rest of them.

'You see, Captain, we've nothing to fear from you. I've only put your followers to sleep. I could've

killed them if I cared to. However, in the interest of maintaining the good will of the Temtres, I've refrained from doing so. I'm sure your Simla dragons can attest to the fact that we have no intention of harming your Clan-king or betraying the Clan. We just want our freedom. We have a boat of our own, and we intend to return to it holding your Clan-king until you have gone. Ask them.'

'The Clan-king will be your hostage, only over my dead body!' he roared, ignoring the Simla dragons.

'Let's move, Litang,' she said a second later.

I turned to find DinDay and his followers in a ragged line, all blowing gently in the breeze. We slipped through them. Several Simla dragons, who were watching us silently, did nothing to hinder our escape. It did seem strange since they were known as sentry-serpents in Cimmadar, but I've come to suspect that Simla dragons have a rather large ego and they seemed content to let us humans play this game, especially since they likely knew we had done no more harm to their shipmates than to put them to sleep and still had no intention of betraying the secrets of the Temtres. Either that, or they were males, and fools for a pretty Simla dragon...

Siss barked her laugh with that thought, as we reached the cliff and found a trail down to the jungle. We pushed our way into it and started off in the direction of the mountains and our gig, dragging DeKan rather recklessly in our haste.

'Why did you stop to talk?' I asked.

'I wanted our terms known. We don't want them searching the island for us; they still have enough manpower to do a thorough job of it and we've only darts to protect ourselves. It could get, well, messy.'

'Think DeKan as hostage will be enough?'

She gave me a wicked smile. 'I doubt it. I may have to expend some 4mm darts.'

The pirate caliber, 4mm darts, could do more than kill people, they did damage to things as well.

05

Siss growled a low warning.

I'd been working at the printer, printing the last of the plastic panels for the rudder; we'd been letting work slide these last dozen rounds. With the Temtre threat hanging overhead, I wanted to be able to launch the Phoenix and sail it if necessary. I stepped into the main compartment and glanced at DeKan. He hadn't stirred, still tied hand and foot. Siss, however, would know when he'd come to – and given the level of charge in the dart – it was about time.

'I trust you're not feeling too bad, Clan-king,' I said cheerfully. 'Your head is no doubt hurting a bit. Trust me, I've been darted enough times to know. And well, you've a few scratches and bumps perhaps. We were in a hurry. Still, take your time, collect your thoughts. We have time.'

He smiled faintly and fully opened his eyes, taking a few moments to take in the main compartment. It wasn't a very impressive sight, lockers, the synth-galley – status lights, menu screen and prep-compartment on one side of the companionway and the door to the sanitation unit and another locker on the other side. It was, however, something quite different than the largely wood-built Temtre ships. Something that I hoped was alien enough to give him pause when dealing with us.

'This is your ship, Captain Canary?' If he was impressed, he hid it well.

'It's just a ship's boat. I left my ship behind. I'm afraid this is rather humble, but it's home.'

He dismissed it, too proud to be impressed. 'What are you going to do with me?'

'At the present you're our hostage. Once every ship but yours has left, you'll be released unharmed.'

'Has my clan agreed to that?'

'Ah, there you have me. Naylea is keeping an eye on them. We'll know more when she gets back.'

'They'll never agree to it,' he said. 'I wouldn't. There's too much at stake. The life of a clan-king

doesn't outweigh the clan's heritage.'

'Sorry, but we've no interest in being your slaves.'

'Servants. It is not a bad life. You would be valued.'

'No. It won't do. We don't need you. You'll have to learn to trust us. Or learn the hard way what you're up against. We're far from helpless, DeKan. As I said, you've a dragon by the tail. And we can bite. Still, as long as the possibility exists for a peaceful settlement, we'll avoid shedding blood. But if your people give us no choice, Temtre blood will be shed. And shed in vain.'

He said nothing more, and just watched me work. It may have been a half an hour, I'd just finished printing out the last panel and set it aside when curiosity got the better of DeKan

'Where do you come from? Saraimé itself?'

I considered my reply. I didn't see any reason to lie beyond substituting "large islands" for planets and the airless region beyond the Pea for the Nebula. 'No, as we said, we're from a large island, far, far from here. This boat and my ship can travel in the airless region that you'll eventually find if you travel away from the brightest patch of the sky long enough.'

'Beyond the frozen islands.'

'Yes, that sounds right. Beyond the cold islands, the air gets thinner and thinner until you can't get enough to live. Without air, however, a ship, or boat like this, can travel very fast and go much further, much faster than any ship in the Principalities. The island I come from...' and I went on to briefly outline the events that had brought us to Dagger Island.

'The whole island blew up?'

'So I'm told. I'm afraid Naylea had put a dart in me, so I was out of it at the time...'

'And why, did she do that, Captain?'

'Well, strictly speaking, we were on the opposite side of a rebellion. A war involving Cimmadar.'

'But you claimed that you're not from Cimmadar,' he asked.

'Right. Both of us were employed by people from Cimmadar. It was a political matter, a rebellion, or counter-revolution that brought us together. And we never did get to see Cimmadar. Indeed, we don't know how all this has worked out, since our ties were broken before the opposing forces met – if they actually have met. I'm afraid the battle has passed us by, leaving us to our own resources.

'But now that your boat is repaired, will you go on to Cimmadar or back to your islands?'

'We don't know where Cimmadar lies, save that it's 100,000 rounds or more away unless we travel in the airless region. The same applies to our home islands, they are even further away and I'm not sure our repairs are good enough to get us there. In any event, I think we will stay here for a time, and see what the Donta Islands and the Principalities have to offer...'

He shook his head. 'If you would go far, far away, perhaps we would let you go. But if you stay...'

'Even if I could go home, I would not. You see, Naylea and I were on opposite sides in that war. And even back in our home islands we were reluctant enemies. Here, far, far from war and home we can put those differences aside. They don't matter anymore. We can be friends, shipmates, and live together...'

DeKan laughed. 'You choose dangerous friends, Captain. And I'm not referring to your Simla. They're fierce looking, and fierce in defense, but I think your lady is far more dangerous.'

Siss was having none of that. She hissed menacingly and slowly swam towards him.

'I take back my remark,' he laughed.

'I'm sure you're right, Clan-king, on both accounts. But we're tired of being enemies... Speaking of which,' I said, seeing Cin approach on the security screen, 'I believe my partner will be joining us.'

She dropped down into the cabin.

'You're looking mighty cheerful,' I said, seeing her bright smile and laughing eyes.

'I'm afraid Captain DinDay did not take our words to heart. I've had to teach our Temtre friends a lesson – all is not what it seems.'

I wasn't surprised. I didn't think polite threats would hold much sway with the Temtre. Not with a

treasure cave on the line. 'What were they up to? And what lesson did you teach them?'

'They were assembling ship's boats on the fringe of the encampment, a pretty clear sign that they planned to use them to search for us. I decided to put a halt to that. While the crews were gathered around DinDay getting their instructions, I sent a few 4mm darts their way – near the gathering, but not near enough to hurt anyone, yet....'

"I would imagine that created a bit of a stir."

'Aye, three plasma darts exploding on the savanna near the gathering sent them retreating pretty handsomely. You'd best not try to fight plasma darts with swords and airguns. That's how empires are won and lost,' she added as an aside to DeKan, and then continued, 'I then decided to put a more permanent end to that plan, so I proceeded to blow a big hole in each of the boats. It was so much fun! I did it just like they taught me in school – by strapping on my glasses I could see the blue guide-beam dot when I was on target and proceeded to blow the little boiler out of the boat, leaving a rather big hole in the boat as well. Neb, Litang, I wish there were more of them to blow up. Oh, so childish, and so much fun!'

She laughed again at the memory. And then grew serious. Turning to DeKan, she said, 'So far no blood has been shed. But there is a limit to my patience. I had hoped to settle this by coming to an understanding. All very Unity Standard-like,' this to me. 'But I assure you, I am every bit as ruthless as any Temtre, and if they continue to defy us, they will pay a price in blood, and gain nothing from it.'

'DinDay will not be deterred. He's clan-chief of the First Clan – the original Temtres –and they pride themselves in their allegiance to the old ways of raids and battles. I'm afraid that he'll fight to the death.'

'And you? Are you of that clan as well?'

'I am the Clan-king of the entire clan. They all owe me allegiance.'

'So what does the Clan-king say? Is there to be bloodshed?' asked Cin.

'I've been thinking. I believe that I have an honorable way for all of us to get beyond this misunderstanding.'

'Ah, yes. This misunderstanding,' said Cin.

He smiled, and continued, 'A way that will benefit all of us. I know I can trust you – Simla dragons do not hang about people with dark, twisted minds. And I'm sure Siss will vouch for me, when I say that I will now give you my word that I will neither harm you nor try to escape. I think that once you hear what I have to offer, we can quickly come to an understanding, and I would hope, a friendship.'

'Siss?' said Cin turning to her, floating between us.

With a little swimming motion, Siss moved nose to nose with DeKan and looked him in the eye – I suspect more for comic effect than necessity. She barked a laugh, that we took for an approval.

'Right, DeKan, let's talk,' said Cin. 'Captain, you can cut the Clan-king's bonds.'

DeKan stretched, and quickly found how slippery metal decks of the gig are – they did not suit his clawed toes at all. Tables were reversed, our magnetic soled boots now gave us the advantage should the Clan-king's word prove valueless. I offered him a chair and took my position against the hull. The lump on my head was gone, but not forgotten.

'Good,' said DeKan. 'Here's what I have to offer...'

The short version is that he offered to “adopt” us, not as slaves or servants, but as full members in the Temtre Clan. He said this was very rare, but not unheard of since they have detached clansmen throughout the Donta Islands to serve as trade agents, couriers, spies, and such. Most are born Temtre, some were adopted, and a few of these adopted members were large islanders, such as ourselves. We'd be given a token that would identify us to any Temtre as an agent of the Clan-king, and could call on

their assistance if needed. The value to us seemed marginal, I thought. But then, we didn't really need anything from him, but to be left alone, so it didn't matter. What he gained was our word of honor – as Temtres – to protect the secret of our clan and Dagger Island – and, unsaid, the treasure cave in the mountains. He never mentioned the cave, but I believe it was his main worry. There might be hundreds of gatherings worth of loot in that cave – doing nothing – which seemed to have a very great importance to the Temtres. I got the impression it was a physical measure of their success, and thus, needed to be guarded at all cost.

'I will, however, have to consult and gain the approval of the Clan-chiefs who are still here, including DinDay, to ratify your adoption. Given the stakes involved I don't see this as a problem. I will, however, need to meet with them in person. I could not deal with them as a captive. We have our pride,' said DeKan. And wiles.

Cin and I exchanged glances.

'Will they follow your lead?'

'I am the Clan-king. They will listen to me and follow, some reluctantly, but they will follow. That is the way of the Clan. Plus, I want you, and your magic, to be one of us – on our side, not against us.'

We sealed our understanding with a clapping of wrists.

'I trust you'll not take offense, DeKan, but I believe I must give you another dart and carry you back to your ship,' said Cin with a smile, adding, 'I'm sure our friendship will grow in time, but we must not put temptation in your path so early in our new understanding. I have not forgotten that you gave us leave to return to the Assembly, only to ambush us the next time we did.'

'But that was different...' he protested. 'The word of honor of a Temtre is accepted throughout the Saraime as something inviolable. It is also accepted throughout the Saraime as something that is very, shall we say, precisely defined. For example, say, giving someone the freedom of the Assembly, would not necessarily mean that they would not face interrogation and possible execution for being spies. It merely meant they could move about the Assembly until such time as I choose to invite them for a little chat, or an execution,' he gave a depreciating little shrug. 'One might dispute that distinction, but those that deal with the Temtre know enough to get everything settled before we agree,' he added with another little shrug. 'In your case, the heritage of the Temtres was at stake. I could not take any chances at all. I am, after all, responsible for my Clan.'

'I trust we've reached that level of understanding, but we haven't had time to parse all your words, and, well, the same considerations apply now as well. So, to be on the safe side, a small dose. You won't even have a headache,' she said. 'DeKan?'

He shrugged. 'As you will, though I hope you will protect Temtre secrets with as much vigilance.'

'We will,' she said and gave him a dart.

We waited for DeKan to revive in the jungle before releasing him. Siss would hang around the encampment, in order to take word of the results back to us.

As we watched DeKan walk up the cliff, accompanied by Siss, I said to Cin. 'I hope we're right. Word of honor or not, I have to wonder how many loopholes we left in our understanding.'

'Oh, don't worry, we have Siss to look after us.'

'Well, I worry about her, too. I'd think the Simlas are Temtre too, push come to shove.'

'Siss can look after herself,' Cin said simply.

I hoped so. It was a minor mystery why the Temtres' many Simla dragons didn't seem to play any role in this affair. Given their abilities, any of them should have been able to lead the Temtres directly to our hiding place, yet they seemed to stay clear of the whole affair. Perhaps they weren't called on by the Temtres, or perhaps they were convinced, telepathically, that we were no threat to the Temtres or their treasure, and so were content to let us humans settle the silly affair between us.

We returned to the gig to await the results of DeKan's consultations.

## Chapter 10 Departures

01

A round later, we left the encampment publicly proclaimed adopted Temtres, with a fond farewell from the Clan-king and the tokens marking us his agents in our pouches, as well a written pardon for any crimes we may have committed and forgiveness of all damages we may have inflicted against the Temtres prior to our adoption. This, at my insistence. I'd taken his words about sticking to the letter of the agreement to heart. Trust will come with time. DeKan laughed at this, saying that I'd all the makings of a true Temtre. I told him I was a tramp ship captain by trade, and so I understood the importance of words in a contract.

DeKan was cheerful and friendly, the other Clan-chiefs and captains, more guarded, but also less involved in the affair, so we got along well, especially after Cin once more demonstrated the power of the darters we wore on a distant downed tree in a brilliant flash of blue flame that sent a shower of smoking splinters flying in all directions. The clan-chiefs decided we'd be best on their side.

Yet even with all this new trust, we took our usual winding way home, trailing a chest of tay in a small net, a gift from DeKan for the bump on the head. Neither DeKan's easy charm, nor the tokens marking us agents of the Clan-king, nor our formal adoption into the clan, nor the signed pardon, nor formal grasping of wrists to seal our membership on the deck of his ship, the Talon Hawk, had inspired complete confidence in me. I've traded in the drifts too long, I guess. But then, I've always been a cautious fellow. I also sent Siss back to make certain we weren't followed again, but she'd returned in good spirits, and indicated that everything was as it should be.

Cin was also in bright spirits, walking arm in arm with me as we wound our way up and down the ravines towards the Phoenix while Siss dodged about ahead of us, looking for things to eat.

'I didn't have a chance to say it before, Wil, but I was delighted when you showed up to rescue me.'

'I would've been very much surprised if I found you in any need of rescuing, my dear. I simply didn't want you to feel the need to rescue me. Siss did it.'

Siss barked a loud laugh from the foliage ahead.

'You're quite a pair,' said Cin. 'Still, once freed you marched through the ship remorselessly darting everyone you came across. I would've thought you'd have taken a more cautious approach. But then, just as I think I know you, you put a dart in me...' she laughed. 'How could I help but love you?'

I pulled her close and kissed her and said, after a while, 'You can't.'

'See! Another dart,' she said, after she had reluctantly, it seemed, pushed me slightly away.

'It wasn't a dart.'

'It was, in its own way. Its target my heart.'

'Aye.' And I pulled her close and kissed her again.

'You're getting bold,' she whispered in my ear, after a while.

'And I can be bolder still,' I said, and looking about, I found a deep hollow in a thick bramble of vines close at hand, I pulled her along with me into it. She did not resist.

We held each other close. I had lived for the better part of three decades in the small world of an interplanetary ship. During those decades, I was hardly ever alone, but now I realized how alone I'd been. I drew back to look at her. She was happy, her cool grey eyes soft and inviting, her smile less sarcastic, or perhaps even not sarcastic at all. We seemed to be in love.

'I am in love with you, you know,' I said.

She sighed, and with some reluctance said, 'And I have been in love with you since Lontria. Even



before our night together...'

'Was it wonderful? Our night together?'

She smiled, lazily. 'There's one way to find out.'

I looked into her eyes. There did, indeed, seem to be love in them. I'd seen shadows of that before, but now it wasn't half hidden. And there was more in her gaze as well. There was passion. I'd seen that look before, as well. And it dredged up some rather painful memories. Had I been my old cautious self, I might have hesitated, but I was beyond thought, beyond caution. I was in love.

'Get lost Siss,' I said. 'Go hunt some mice or something.'

She barked her laugh and wagged the tip of her tail, but she went.

Cin was watching me with her cool smile, but eager eyes. One last chance to come to my senses. But no. "Rockets away!" I thought, and kissed her again, determined to make this our Temtre wedding, certain her present mood wouldn't have lasted until we reached the gig. And, well I wasn't prepared to wait that long, even if it did.

Later, in a clothes-lined nest of vines, we floated, still entangled with each other.

'I wouldn't have forgotten,' I whispered softly. 'I'm forced to believe you.'

'I'm glad,' she whispered, and then rearing back a bit, ran her finger along the few scars I kept from my duel. 'It is nice that you kept them...'

'They always reminded me of you,' I said with what I hoped was a wicked grin.

She could smile a wicked smile effortlessly, and did so too. 'It is nice that you like scars.'

It was imperative that I put an end to that chain of thought, so I pulled her slim, nearly naked body close and kissed her passionately. It had been awhile. For both of us.

Later, as we reluctantly collected items of clothing entangled in the surrounding vines to wiggle into them again, she said, 'Yes, you can be bold, Captain Litang, when you care to be.'

'When I'm motivated.'

She smiled.

'You mustn't forget my grandmother from the drifts. And a grandfather too, for that matter, though I've never met him. And I do come from a long line of spaceers, so it's not beyond explanation. I am, by default, Unity Standard, but a little danger, occasionally, in moderation, is neither dust nor gas.'

'A little danger?'

'Hopefully, at least now...'

'You seem capable of handling more than a little danger.'

I smiled at her, 'It seems I am – with caution.'

She laughed, 'We'll see about that.'

'I fear we will, Still, I have my 500 generations...' I began and paused.

'500 generations?' she asked. 'Of what?'

Was the time right? I glanced at her. Best not start out with a lie.

'Of ancestors. The fact is, I believe you've likely met one of them, my grandmother.'

She gave me a puzzled look. 'I have? How? Where?'

'As far as I knew, my mother's mother ran a spacer dive on Constina, called the Wandering Star. Zilantha V'Ran is her name. I'd only met her once, when I was a teenager. Now it happened that some years after we had escaped from Despar, we were in Constina orbit refitting the Starry Shore for several weeks. I would have like to pay her a visit, but we had all agreed to keep our survival secret so I didn't think it was proper for me to do so. However, I did receive a message from the managing director of Jardinn Export Services, a shipping agency we had done a lot of business with, one M'Risha Drea. She said she had a business proposal she wanted to talk to me about in person. At the time I was determined to get out of the drift world trade, and Jardinn was almost exclusively in the drift world trade, so I wasn't very likely to fall in with her plans, but I always try to please my customers, so I agreed to meet her.

Our meeting came as a great shock to both of us, since we were both sailing under false names, she, my ship, and I...

'You recognized her as your grandmother, the spaceers' dive owner,' said Cin, now watching me closely, her grey no longer soft.

'Yes, even though we'd only met that once, and that thirty years before. She's a hard boiled version of my mother, so I had little doubt as to her identity. However, since I much older, had my whiskers, and was sailing under the name of Wilcrofter, she may've had a few. To establish my identity, she mentioned that she had a grandson, the captain of the Lost Star, who was lost in the Despar Drifts.' I gave Naylea a significant look.

'And?'

'The Lost Star was never listed as lost. To explain the lack of communication from the Lost Star we had told everyone we were trading in the deep drift. Only the Despar Navy and St Bleyth knew that the Lost Star was likely destroyed in the Despar Reef and Grandmama was not likely an agent of Despar. An agent of St Bleyth, well that was another matter. So it was that I discovered that my grandmother was the Abbess of St Bleyth's Amdia Monastery. Rather a shock, as you can imagine.'

'And she betrayed you,' she said, harshly.

'No. I don't think so anyway, though I suppose it's possible. I'm sure I don't have to tell you, families matter in St Bleyth. If my connections to the Order – I gather that my grandfather is even higher up in the order than Grandmama – had been known, you would never have been given the order to kill me. Grandmama had hoped to get that order rescinded. However, with the Lost Star considered wrecked in the Despar Reef, there was no immediate need to do so as long as we remained undiscovered. She also hoped to recruit my grandfather to press my case, and he needed to be approached carefully. All in all, she felt it was safe for her to turn a blind eye to me and my ship. Until Min turned up. And then she couldn't. And as you know, she had her story of a tethered goat set to go under those circumstances.'

'And you believe her? That you weren't a tethered goat all along.'

'Yes. Though, of course, having had some dealings with St Bleyth, I realize that either interpretation could be valid, or both together – the most likely one. Still, Grandmama and I got along quite well. It seems I have a strange affinity for the dangerous women of St Bleyth,' I added with a smile, pulling her close again.

She started dressing again, giving me a cold look, she asked, 'Why didn't you mention this to me before now?'

Ah, a tricky orbit. Still, we were in love. Better now than later.

'For one thing, I can't prove it. Beyond knowing that Zilantha V'Ran or M'Risha Drea is the Abbess of Amdia, which I may've found out in some other way, I can tell you nothing more about St Bleyth. There was a very definite limit to what Grandmama would share about the Order, which was next to nothing. She never even told me who my grandfather is or what position he holds in the Order, save that it was of some importance. So if you care to, you could, or can easily dismiss my claim to be half St Bleyth. And well, bringing it up in most circumstances, would've come across as, I don't know... begging? Boasting? Being an oily snake? And well, my 500 generations of St Bleyth ancestors wouldn't allow me to beg, boast, or be an oily snake. And besides, I'm Wil Litang, Unity Standard. My ancestors are neither dust nor gas when it comes to lift. Perhaps they add a certain access to ruthlessness that I wouldn't possess if I had only a Unity Standard ancestry, but who's to say?'

She finished dressing in silence, as did I. This wasn't going as I had hoped. Already I regretted mentioning it. 'Is something wrong?'

She shook her head and tried to smile. 'No, I'm just taking it all in...' Her glance too fleeting to get a good read on her thoughts. Still I felt she was telling me less than the truth.

'Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it at all. It doesn't really matter. We've put that life behind us. I just didn't want to start our life together with a secret between us. And, well, we're really two sides of the same coin. We both share a mixed Unity Standard and St Bleyth heritage. The difference is that I

was raised Unity Standard and you were raised in the St Bleyth tradition. All the easier to find common ground. How can we fail? In many ways it explains everything, including, perhaps, our attraction to each other.'

'Yes, it does,' she said, flashing me a rather sad smile as she left the brier arbor. I followed her back into the sunlight. She was very quiet during the rest of our journey back to the gig.

02

Cin insisted on returning yet again to what little was left of the Temtre Assembly the next round with Siss. I stayed back in reserve. Ships were departing for their trading ports almost hourly, the ship-city had all but evaporated by the time I climbed to our lookout to search for her and Siss. I had declined, half afraid DeKan would use some Temtre custom to capture us once again – and this time, be far less careless. I doubt Temtres are shy when it comes to revenge, and while DeKan may've come to take the whole affair with resigned good humor, I didn't care to take any chances. I told Siss that if anything went wrong, she was to come and get me. I'd go down with my standard darter, if not with the gig itself, and I wouldn't be taking prisoners. Cin dismissed my concerns and returned to the Assembly one last time.

I, in the meanwhile, spent my time putting the last finishing touches to the gig. It was all but ready to launch. With the rendezvous with Tenry and the Rift Raven abandoned, we wouldn't need to install the rocket steering motors in the bow since we wouldn't be going into space – we'd use the steering wings and rudders to maneuver. Instead, I could install them as extra drive motors on the engine room bulkhead. Making the fittings and adding the fuel lines kept me busy while Cin was gone. Once the Temtre had departed, we'd clear away the vines, launch the gig and then run some trials near the island to make certain everything was working satisfactorily. After that we could decide where to go.

Cin and Siss returned hours later. Neither were very talkative. She said the Temtres would be gone when we next awoke, and retired soon after her return to her hammock. There was still a certain sadness about her that I could not place, but chose not to pursue. Once we had the island to ourselves, we could explore our new relationship far more comfortably.

I woke up with a sharp headache. Alone. Cin and Siss must've gone down to see the last of the Temtre ships off. I climbed up through the vines to our lookout, only to find the savanna completely deserted. Only the grid of trampled grasses where the streets had run and the indents where the ships had been anchored remained. I searched the sky. It was empty. The Temtres had been gone some time then, for it often took a watch for the ships and their trailing plumes of smoke to disappear completely. The birds and lizards sang, screeched, and soared overhead and through the waving vines, but the island still seemed very, very quiet. Dead. Its life carried away in the boats of the Temtres.

I called out to Cin several times, but only the birds and lizards replied.

She must've gone for a long walk. Having lived my life in the tiny world of a space ship I was used to the confined life. She wasn't.

Returning to the gig for a quick session with the med-unit and then breakfast, I discovered a light blinking on the remaining control console. It indicated a vid message. I stared at it for several seconds before I realized what it meant. The headache I'd woken up with now seemed to tell me all I really needed to know. And perhaps all I wanted to know. I noted the time for the first time – I had slept too long to have slept unaided.

I made myself one of Cin's dishes and brewed a mug of real, Unity cha, and took them up to the lookout ledge, just to get away from the blinking light. And I wondered, over and over again, if it could've ever been different. Was it DeKan? I'd seen Min's reaction to DarQue, and DeKan was cut from the same pattern. I was sure the blinking light would tell me, but I found I was in no hurry to find

out.

But I did, eventually, press it, of course.

The screen popped to life with the image of Naylea Cin. Siss was hanging off her shoulder.

'Good morning, Wil,' she said. 'I'm sorry to do this this way. But I think it best, for all of us. The first thing I want to tell you is that I love you. And only you. And if this was about you, I wouldn't be talking to this machine. But it's about me.'

'I told you that I'd need some time to work through my anger. Well, it seemed manageable, at the time. Love conquers all, and all of that. And love did conquer my anger at you. But now it's not just about you, but who you are, or more precisely who your relatives are – the nameless families you're a member of, whether you know them or not. I find that we're in a story as old as the stars themselves. Lovers doomed by ties that can't be broken, forever divided by a hundred generations of rivalry and hate.'

'You indeed come from a branch of the oldest, and most powerful families in St Bleyth and like my own, from the martial arts arm of the Order. Your grandmother's real name is Tivea Reeven and your grandfather is Sil'den Qing. The Reeves and the Qings are two of the oldest stealth families in the Order. They've been the chief rivals of the Cins since the Cins became a family and began to challenge their leadership in the martial arts branch of the Order. They've hated the Cins for a hundred generations or more, even as they hate each other. Your grandmother should serve as a warning. I'm certain your grandparents did not last long together because of their families' histories and no doubt great displeasure at their pairing. The pressure must have been intense.'

'In any event, I discovered that I had, somehow, fallen in love with both a Reeven and a Qing. It came as a great, and very unpleasant, shock to me. I realize all this means absolutely nothing to you, and that you might even find it humorous. But having been raised in the Order, and having had to deal with the hate and meanness from my generation of Reeves and Qings, the very idea of making love to a man, a strange and unlikely product of both families, brings forth anger, not love or tenderness. I realize that you're unlikely to believe this. You're too Unity Standard to understand the emotional depth of these hatreds. And perhaps, if it was just the family ties, I might conquer them. But it is more.'

'You see, your grandfather is the official in the Ministry who had my father reassigned from the Amdia system, where he was uniquely useful, to the drifts where almost any stealth of any talent could operate. And not only that, he then assigned my father an impossible task deep in the darkest drifts, where he died, where no questions could be answered. It was your grandfather who, one way or another, had my father killed.'

'I wear the raw scars of the Reeves and Qings too close to my heart to bring you close to me again without, in the end, squeezing that trigger just a little harder.'

'You are dear to me. I love you. And I don't wish to harm you. But I cannot trust myself. So I free you of your promises. Go, save Min, with my blessing. Find your way home to the Unity where you belong. Grow cha. Whatever you do, grow cha. You were born to grow cha.'

'I have explained my problem to DeKan. All of it, and the reason I need to leave you. I have booked passage on the Talon Hawk to any island in the Pela that catches my fancy. I am paying for my passage with my survey glasses, which Kin covets greatly after seeing what they can do. However, he repeatedly reminded me to assure you that the passage is being paid for entirely by the glasses, and nothing else. And that he understands and sympathizes with your plight. I can assure you that he did seem quite reluctant to agree to my request, and was troubled by the implications of me seemingly running off with him after he'd sworn kinship with you. I assured him that I would make you understand my actions. To do this, I'll ask Siss, who knows my heart, and loves you too, to confirm that it is you and only you that I love. And hate.'

Siss swam up to the camera, nose to lens, and gave a low mournful hiss to confirm it. Which was good enough for me, though perhaps I imagined seeing it in Cin's eyes as well, though I don't think the display could really capture that.

'I'll simply add that since Siss cannot speak for herself, I assure you, this is breaking her poor Simla dragon's heart. I explained to her that where you're going you can't take her with you. Spaceships and the Unity are no place for a Simla dragon. And that I was sure your heart would be broken twice by losing both of us. She cried, wrapped herself around your sleeping body one last time, kissed you with her tongue – yuck – and then shot out of the boat only to return an hour later with a parting gift for you. She's placed it carefully in your gear bag and stared at it for some time before breaking out with her barking laughter. She's been alternating between sad, sad moans and laughing ever since then.'

She then leaned closer to the lens and whispered, 'If I were you, I'd have it for breakfast....'

Siss gave a menacing hiss behind her.

'Oh, he knows I'm only kidding,' she said, shaking her head "No". 'Really, I am...'

Deep growls...

'And that, I think is all I need say... Look, I'm crying. I told you I could cry on demand way back when we first met,' she laughed, whipping a tear away. 'You didn't believe me. So take care, my dear. Save your friends. And don't worry about us. You know we can look out for ourselves. Fair orbits, Wil. I love you. We love you,' she added as Siss gave out a long low and sorrowful hiss.

'The Talon Hawk is waiting, so I'm going to give you another dart to keep you asleep for a while longer. Another dart. That is how we do things, isn't it Wil?'

The message ended.

03

I waited too long to have Siss's gift for breakfast. "She" had already hatched, her tiny Simla dragon head was poking out of the egg nestled in my clothes when I opened my gear bag. Her little black eyes stared into mine, and then she extended her tongue and hissed dismissively at me.

'I'm going to take that as an introduction. You're Hissi. I'm Wil. How do you do?'

A yawn. and as I picked the egg up, she wiggled out and stretched herself along my arm, anchoring herself on my shirt sleeve with her tiny claws to dry her tiny, downy feathers. She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

The island was just as lonely as I feared it would be. I didn't even bother to watch the sky for dragons when I went out to sit and stare at the sky. The island was too deep in the endless sea for any living creature, other than the permanent inhabitants to live here – so I had little to fear, and no great reason to fear anything, if I had.

In the timelessness of the Pela, it is hard to say precisely how long I moped about, lost, very lonely, feeling very sorry for myself. I had initially toyed with the idea of chasing after her in the gig. The sky-sea is wide, but I had radar. In the end, I knew Cin well enough to know it wouldn't do. It was her choice, not mine. And I was feeling too sorry for myself, to lift a finger. I'd no sense of urgency to do anything or any reason to do it. Perhaps there was a thin vein of relief in my grief as well, not enough to notice, just enough to sap any desire for pursuit.

Eventually, I set to work reinstalling the steering rockets in the nose of the gig and making sure every system was working. When I was ready to sail, I hacked a hole through the vines to get the boat free and maneuvered it down to the savanna to give its new wings one last look over in full light.

I rather doubt Hissi is Siss's offspring since her coloring is quite different. Siss must have struck some sort of deal with one of her Temtre friends or simply stole the egg. In any event, I suspect that she very carefully selected – telepathically – and then telepathically briefed young Hissi in the egg to be a constant reminder of herself, which is to say, to be annoying. I've no idea how one tells one sex of a just hatched Simla dragon, but knowing Siss as well as I think I do, I rather doubt that she'd entrust this mission of annoying me to anything but another female, seeing how alike she and Cin are in their fierce pride.

It seems that Simla dragons grow pretty fast, so that by the time I had gotten the Phoenix ready to sail – say two weeks – Hissi had grown to be about half a meter long. I fed her pellets of food from the synth-galley for a little while, but she soon took to chasing beetles and butterflies, and seemed to grow without any further food subsidy. Simlas are pretty self-reliant, except when it comes to their feathers. But then, I found that I had few better things to do than to pet her soft baby feathers when she'd come and curl up on my lap. She'd also sleep on my chest, and I swear, would, after I fell asleep, creep up to my chin so that her tail could accidentally brush across my chin, which is one reason why I came to suspect Siss had briefed her while still in the egg. She also developed a trick of her own. When she got tired of chasing beetles, she'd come and drape herself over my shoulder, and then when she got bored with that, would nip my ear lobe for fun.

Though I was in no frantic hurry to get the gig into shape, I did spend most of the last dozen days I was on Dagger Island working. Controls had to be modified to control the motors that adjusted the rudder and wing flaps, and I had to learn how to fly the gig with them. I didn't stray far from Dagger Island while I put the Phoenix through its paces. I also had to build up a supply of fuel – water – by running foliage through the synth-galley converter since I didn't know how far I would have to go, or how many islands I would encounter where I could refuel, so I printed out a few extra fuel tanks. But at last the day came when everything seemed in order. I had to put the island and its bitter-sweet memories astern, and sail towards the rest of my life.

The Phoenix was floating in the gentle air currents, a kilometer off of Dagger Island – which from the air did look like a dagger. I was standing on its upper hull with a safety line attached, just to be safe, and was looking about the brassy blue-green sky to locate the brightest spot in it. My journey to the inner outer space, and hopefully on to the Unity and a high green peak overlooking the Belbanian blue seas, would start with turning the nose of the gig directly away from the hidden Tenth Star and heading out beyond the frozen islands.

'Right,' I said to Hissi. 'Let's go below and see what this rocket can do. We've got a mission and its high time we get it lifted. I've been feeling sorry for myself for too long.'

I climbed back down, closed the hatch, and headed back to the control room and fired up the control panel and view screens. Hissi settled herself on my shoulder. I fired up the rockets and felt the little thrust of inertia push me back slightly into my chair. I grasped the rudder and wing levers to set our course, brushing Hissi tail out of my face.

'Oh, alright,' I said, and set my course.

## Part Two – The Outward Islands

### Chapter 11 The Perils of the Outward Islands

01

The soft brassy blue-green sky wrapped around us, airily remote. And yet, it toyed with me – playing about me with a feathery touch. Its immensity and intimacy seemed almost smothering as I stood, magnetically attached to the hull of the Phoenix, my breakfast mug of cha in hand. Hissi was forward, breakfasting off 5,000 kilometers' worth of smashed bugs on the gig's bow. Even in this desert

of air, there were bugs, though you'd never know it, standing in its immense silence.

I sucked down the last of the warm cha and called out, 'Come along, Hissi. Time to get underway.'

I waited while she leisurely swam up alongside of me, and then followed her down to the small, dim lit control compartment. I fired up the controls, and then the drive rockets, carefully setting our course for the brightest spot in the sky – inwards, towards the islands of the Saraime Principalities.

As I may've remarked before, there may be bigger fools than I in the Nine Star Nebula. Anything is possible. But it takes a very rare one to follow a half meter long, pea brained, Simla dragon [an objecting hiss from behind me] into the endless Archipelago of the Tenth Star. But I'm one of 'em. All it took was Hissi, accidentally-on-purpose, brushing her tail across my face – the old Siss joke – at the very moment I was making my final decision on what course to follow. I took it as an omen. A telepathic Siss might well know Cin's mind well enough to believe we could be reconciled, in time. And she might've charged Hissi, still in the egg, with the task of leading me to her – somehow. Or so it seemed to me, in that moment. And, so delicate was the balance, that it was enough for me to point the Phoenix inwards instead of outwards and fire its rockets.

It certainly seems foolish enough, but, Neb help me, I had fallen in love with a girl who had fallen in love with me. In a life two centuries long, (that was looking iffy) love can come and go, but she was the first one to love me. I wasn't prepared to accept that love had come and gone in a few weeks. And, well, I'd also come to suspect that my original mission was a folly that would likely end badly. Vinden was too central to the movement to be dislodged, especially since he could simply claim that it was Cin, not he, who had installed the trigger to destroy the Starry Shore – which was certainly possible. She hadn't mentioned setting any such device, but then, she might have chosen not to. In any event, neither Vynnia or Tenry were fools, so I could trust them to look after Min – better than I could.

So, Blade Island was now two ship days astern by the gig's clock. So far we'd encountered only sky and more sky. Blade Island was truly a dust mote in this sea of soft sunlight. The Phoenix, with its blunt, battered bow and makeshift rudders was far from aerodynamic, and even at half its former size, it was still a substantial object to be driven by three landing jets through an atmosphere. Judging from the radar data I recorded leaving Blade Island, we could reach a cruising speed of around 200 kph, so plus or minus any air currents, we may've covered something like 5,000 kilometers during my waking hours. I shut down the rockets and drifted during my short naps, so I may've given a few back to the unseen currents. At any rate, the islands of the Saraime Principalities were still unseen, but (hopefully) somewhere ahead. I'd not encountered any Temtre ships, but they had a good head start and would likely be widely scattered on their way to their usual trade islands, so I wasn't too concerned by the lack of islands. Yet.

02

As it turned out, we reached islands two watches later. The radar scan showed a deep archipelago of islands, ranging in size from tumbleweed rocks to islands 10 to 50 kilometers long, that stretched out of radar range. Countless smaller specks were moving amongst them – flocks of birds, lizards, dragons, and a few small boats.

I had not settled on how to enter the Saraime, so I approached the islands very carefully, hoping to avoid calling attention to the gig. While the hull of the Phoenix would likely withstand most attacks, the outer fixtures – its rockets and steering vanes – would not, so it paid to be cautious. Neither radar nor the ship's cameras showed anything more than a wilderness of islands, lots of drifting birds and lizards, and an occasional native boat – cage-enclosed crafts propelled (slowly) by broad, wing-like oars that may have been hunting them. I saw no farms or villages on the larger islands.

Steering well clear of the hunters, I edged the Phoenix into the archipelago until I found a tiny tumble weed island with a trailing fringe of flowering vines long enough to conceal the gig. Radar indicated a deep crevasse in its rocky core, so I carefully edged the boat into the trailing vines and nosed it into the crevasse where the floating vines easily concealed it. Since the outer hull cameras had showed nothing more than birds and lizards about, I strapped on my darter, and grabbed a plasma machete, and went out to anchor the gig to the island with a line around a large trunk of a vine. Then, with Hissi swimming safely behind me, I hacked a narrow path up through the vines to reach the bald spot of the island. Hissi took off after butterflies while I found a protected nook in the rocks to observe life in the Saraime. Using one of the ship's cameras with an attached screen, I discovered no signs of civilization. I decided that these must be the "Outward Islands" of which I vaguely recalled hearing talk of. I gathered that they were uncivilized islands populated by savage people on the outward fringe of the Saraime. And even if they were not, there was nothing here for me. I'd have to sail on. They did, however, give me an incentive to finalize my plans – as far as I could – before pressing on.

To find Cin, I needed to find DeKan's Talon-Hawk. And to find it, I'd likely need to use my clan-token to get that information from a Temtre ship trading in a civilized port, all preferably without drawing attention to myself. Getting into a civilized region and finding a port without drawing unwanted attention to my strange boat was going to be a problem. I had a good supply of local coins so I could either hire workers on a remote island to build a bamboo hull around the Phoenix or buy a native boat and stash the gig as I'd just done. With coins and my experience with the Temtres, I was fairly confident that I could slip into Saraime society, at least into its port enclaves. I suspected that they were much the same as the spaceer rows I've known, where strangers are the norm.

Eventually Hissi returned stuffed to the gills with bugs and butterflies. I climbed to my feet and we headed back to the gig. I made myself a meal – one of Cin's dishes – a sweet and sour one – but then, they all were these days, and took a nap before setting off for the true Saraime Principalities.

On awakening, I had a bite to eat, brewed a mug of real cha and, after checking the radar to see that the area was clear of both boats and large dragons, Hissi and I climbed back to the knoll to enjoy my cha in the fresh air before setting out.

I was, however, anxious to sail so I didn't linger long. I had just taken my last sip of cha and called for Hissi, who was off hunting, when I heard movement behind me. Turning I discovered three men grinning cheerfully at me.

They were tall, broad-feathered chaps, each wearing an intricate headdress of beads and slim, shimmering dragon feathers which flowed behind them in the gentle breeze. Their own feathered manes were colored in deep blue and green with yellow highlights. Their bodies were just as colorful, with bright, geometric patterns painted across their chests, which wound around their arms and even their legs. They wore a knee length dragon feathered skirt. Very artsy fellows. And, as I said, very happy to meet me. Only the long, wicked, large-bore, compressed air rifles they were pointing at me, gave me cause for concern.

Still, I returned their broad smile and said 'Hello, mates!' as I rapidly weighed my chances.

I was dressed as any sharp, successful tramp ship captain in the drifts would be dressed, which is to say that I was wearing three layers of armored clothing. I had no real idea how powerful these compressed air weapons were, and though I suspected that my armored clothing might prevent the slugs from penetrating, their impact would probably send me flying and do me no good. The clothing was, after all, mainly designed for protection from tiny darts, not big slugs. On the other hand, they were well within my optimal range, so if I wanted to chance a hit or two, I might be able to put them out of commission before they could send more than three slugs my way since the air rifles, known as "springers" amongst the Temtre, needed to be pump-charged after each shot.

Caution is my default response, however, and though it was probably a mistake in this case, I decided to see if I could talk my way out of any difficulties. I grinned back at them and waited to see how it all lifted.



The apparent chief of the crew directed a few words towards me in a language that my com link could not translate.

I just shrugged, smiled and replied in Saraime, how happy I was to run into them.

He growled and stepping closer, indicated with a jerk of his weapon, that I should raise my hands.

With everything still in flux, I decided, I'd comply.

The chief turned to called back out in a loud voice to an unseen mate, and then rapped something to one of the lads beside him. He left his rifle floating and stepped over to me to grab my darter holster belt and attempt to pull it off, jerking me forward in the process. I thought... but didn't act. Again. He stared at it for a moment, and not understanding the purpose of the belt's clasp, reached for a long knife in his belt.

'You can just unbuckle it,' I said, trying to indicate the clasp with a quick movement of one of my upheld arms. 'I can do it if you like,' I added, waving one hand.

He stepped back and I took that as an invite to unbuckle the belt, lowered one hand to release the clasp, drawing it off and carefully handing it to him. Since the darter was keyed to my palm, it was not a threat to me in their hands. I still had my sissy in my jacket pocket, so the odds were now two gents with guns to one, but I was still content to await an even better chance.

The chief barked another command. His junior tossed the darter and holster to him, and stepped closer to search me for other treasures. As I mentioned, pockets were not in style in the Saraime, so that the only other thing that caught his eye was my com link. He reached up and tried pulling it off, only to jerk me around with the effort. He grinned and made to draw his long knife again, giving me a meaningful look and cheerful smile.

I hated to give it up, since it was my only link to the gig, but, I unlatched it anyway, and handed it over to him with my most friendly smile. I was still optimistic, and still remarkably calm, though I was beginning to fear that I'd let my best opportunities slip away.

At this point the fourth fellow appeared from below the curve of the knoll, calling out something and getting everyone's instinctive attention.

"Now," I thought, and leaped off to one side, reaching for my jacket pocket and my sissy.

The chief, catching my movement out of the corner of his eye, responded instantly, twirling about and diving forward while swinging his rifle as a club. I managed to partially block the first blow aimed at my head with my forearm, but I still felt an explosion of pain as the force of the blow lifted me off the island and sent me tumbling. Blocking his follow-up blow and snagging my cap, left me no time to pull the sissy out of its inner pocket before I was tackled by the other two, and driven to the ground. They added a few blows of their own, before twisting my arms behind my back and tied my wrists together with a leather strap. I was then dragged upright and, with a savage shove, was led around the curve of the small island to their boat tied up on the fringe of vines. Clearly they wanted me alive. I didn't think it was out of Unity Standardness.

Their boat was floating, half hidden in the vines, on the other side of the little island. A smoking, two-chambered covered cooking pot was anchored to the vines. No doubt they had been here long before I ran my radar scan and so I'd missed them.

They shoved me through the hatch in the open-framed boat and pushed me forward to the bow where I lay against the frame, nursing a painful bump above my ear, that pounded with every heartbeat and cursed silently. The chief was content to sit in the stern of the boat, air rifle near at hand, and keep an eye on me while his crew broke camp, attaching the still hot cooking pot to open frame of the boat by its handles.

The boat was perhaps five meters long, constructed of wood, bamboo and vines. It had four arching wooden keels hewed from tree trunks, top and bottom, and on each side. Set in the space between them were curved, narrow-spaced bamboo ribs, with four short outriggers on each side with wide-bladed oars attached. There were also two masts with furled sails folded down on the keels, top and bottom. The interior consisted of a seat in the stern looking forward with the steering levers for the vanes and

wings before it, and four back facing seats for the oarsmen.

With the camp broken, the crew climbed on board and took their places. The oars had wide leather paddles which they twisted flat when swinging them forward, and then broadside when they pulled them back, propelling the boat forward. Pushing off from the island, we set out. The chief steered and kept an eye on me while the crew, chatting cheerfully, rowed. Wedged in the narrow bow, I divided my attention between my captors and the islands we passed, in the hopes of being able to find my way back. My artistic captors seemed to have lots to say, and would give me a cheerful glance back every now and again. I'd a feeling that they were working up an appetite.

With my hands tied behind me, the odds certainly had not gotten any better, but I'd not yet abandoned hope. Even tied as I was, all I needed was an unobserved minute to twist about and work my sissy out of my inner jacket pocket. The chief, however, facing forward, had me always in sight the whole time and I didn't care to give him any cause for concern by trying to twist about to reach my sissy. I had to believe that sooner or later I'd have a chance to get at it unobserved, and with a sissy in hand and a bit of luck, I could still get the upper hand on these bright spirited artists.

I should mention, here and now, that I'm relating this yarn in my best old spaceer style – turning a blind eye on the fear I felt. And I felt fear, for if Glen Colin wasn't spinning his yarns out of lies, my intended fate was not going to be pleasant despite their cheerful demure. And after they'd had their fun, they'd likely dine on what was left of me. That being the case, I could only hope they'd make a special feast of it and I'd have a chance to get my sissy in hand. I could put a small village to sleep with the darts in its clip.

We soared through the maze of islands, large and small for what seemed like several hours – my hands grew quite numb. I was now going to need my com link to find my way back to the gig. Every once in a while we'd sail through a dense cloud, but the chief never hesitated, steering us onward until we cleared a large island, half hidden in a cloud. Here the chief roared an exclamation and pointed below us. The crew ceased rowing, and looking down, broke out in a chorus of eager talk and laughter. Leaning over, I found a large, elongated teardrop shaped ship, perhaps half a kilometer below, with several small native boats floating around it. The leader shoved the steering bars up, and the eager crew returned to their oars with renewed enthusiasm, sweeping us down towards the ship.

From above, the ship could have been some 60 meters long with a blunt nose that gradually tapered back, ending with two large enclosed propellers set on short wings at its stern. It boasted a complex array of masts and rigging for sails and an array of steering wings and rudders. Like the Temtre ships, it had a semi-enclosed deck with deckhouses running down the center. What appeared to be large missile launchers were mounted on the forward and aft deckhouses.

Unlike the Temtre ships, this one had a rusty iron hull, which I initially hoped was evidence of a more advanced and civilized society than present company. A long gangplank extended from its lower deck to a large, wide-beamed iron and wood cutter. Tied up alongside the cutter was a single native boat, similar to ours, along with half a dozen other ones floating nearby, apparently a'waiting their turn to come alongside. We joined these idling boats and watched the proceedings through the cutter's grating.

Seen from the side, the black-hulled ship had three decks, not counting the deckhouses. It had one enclosed deck above, pierced by open ports, including four large missile launching ports and below, a double tall deck behind the iron bow which turned into a series of grated cages open to the air, populated by native Outward Islanders. Even at this distance, one could smell that certain miasma of human misery that made it impossible to mistake it for what it was. A slaver.

It appeared that I was about to escape the pot for slavery. My spirits rose.

The cutter, like all boats of the Pela, was entirely enclosed, the upper half by a high arching iron cage which allowed me to observe the proceedings taking place on its deck.

A rough standing desk made of crates was anchored on the broad deck of the cutter, manned by three of the slaver's black uniformed officers. Half a dozen crew members armed with swords and side arms lounged about behind them. Two of the officers stood by the desk – the first mate, in charge of the proceedings, and the purser, who was doing the bookkeeping. The third officer, the ship's doctor, was casually inspecting the captives the natives were offering to sell. These captives, both men and women, were examined, graded, and if accepted, an armed crew member would accompany the seller around the cutter, as they inspected and selected various items of merchandise – knives and swords, tools, cooking utensils, and all sorts of bright trinkets and cloth – up to the agreed value of their captives. The newly purchased slave or slaves, in the meanwhile, were escorted up the gangplank by two of the armed guards and down a narrow companionway between two sets of cages, to be shoved into one of them. I counted a dozen on a side. I also noted that the crew was keeping an eye on the proceedings from the ship's open ports – the rocket launchers were trained on the boats alongside. They were taking no chances.

As we approached the cutter's open access port for our turn, the first mate must have seen me and realized that the next item up for sale wasn't a native. He snapped an order to one of guards, who hurried up the gangplank likely to summon the captain.

'Well, well, well, what have the savages brought us?' sneered the doctor, a short, stocky, and seemingly tipsy broad-feathered man, as we tied up alongside. I recognized the language as Saraimé, with a slightly different accent than the Temtres used. He went on, 'My, my, it looks like we've a fine-feathered item in parade dress uniform being offered for sale. How in the Infernal Islands did one of these get here? This should make for an entertaining story at the very least.'

My captors certainly agreed, since even before we had tied up alongside, they were excitedly explaining, in their own language, the circumstances of their capture, and, I gathered, the vast price they expected to receive from their rare, fine-feathered, find. We tied up and I was dragged out to stand on the cutter's deck between my colorful captors.

I didn't share their excitement. Looking at the cages, I rather suspected that this was a case of escaping the pot (literally) for the fire. The crew looked to be hard men, all but a few of them, broad-feathered. No surprise on either account. We were still in the small islands and I rather doubted that slaving as an occupation appealed to the kindhearted. This was the Pela, after all, so I wasn't expecting to be greeted with open arms.

'Give us your story, mate,' the doctor leered, stepping close, whiskey on his breath.

I decided to say nothing until the expected arrival of the captain.

'Can you talk?' asked the tipsy doctor, peering at me crossly.

'Aye,' I allowed.

He grinned, 'Well, my stoic friend, this is your lucky day. You might not be the main course at a savage feast after all. Though given the price your friends are demanding, you may not be out of the pot yet. What brings you to these savage islands? Adventure? Fortune? Ill fortune? Give us a reason to buy you.'

I considered my answer. I glanced over to the old, greyish officer at the makeshift desk who was watching the proceedings listlessly. 'I think I'll save my story until your captain's arrival, if you don't mind. No point telling it twice,' I said, deciding to reclaim a little dignity by refusing to banter with a half-drunk ship's doctor.

He laughed, 'Come now, don't be shy. You have a lot riding on making a good impression!'

But even as he said it, I caught sight of a tall, dark, broad-feathered female in black trousers, blouse and a wide brimmed rather shapeless hat emerging from the shadows of the ship. She sauntered slowly down the gangplank, hands clasped behind her back, a long barreled sidearm in a holster on her hip. She wore a lazy smile as she studied me as she approached.

Catching the shift in my gaze, my now rather sulky interrogator stepped aside and muttered, 'Ah, Captain, it seems we have a very rare bird wanting passage to Tyrina.'

Stepping on to the cutter's deck, she stopped and casually looked me up and down without comment for a moment or two.

'How do you do, Captain?' I said with a smile and a little bow. My future depended upon this slaver Captain, so I'd decided that I best pour on what "oily" charm I possessed.

She nodded. 'Oh, I'm getting by. Nice weather we're having,' she remarked looking about with a satirically lazy smile. 'So what brings you to these plague islands and in the company of a brace of Rin'ti warriors?'

'A great storm. A shipwreck. Ill luck, and carelessness,' I replied, trying to keep my replies in the same laconic vein as hers.

She laughed. 'Ill luck and carelessness are what brings us all to the Outward Islands. And drink,' she added with a cheerful smile cast in the Doctor's direction.

'Cause or effect?' he replied, not intimidated. 'Who knows? Or cares?'

'In any case, here we all are. Care to elaborate?'

'It is a rather long story, and my friends here are rather anxious to strike a deal, so I trust it can wait until we've settled things with my friends here.'

'Haven't had the time to invent one yet, I suspect. Well, we all have our stories, so no matter. Do you have a name?'

'Wil Litang,' I paused, debated, and added, 'Captain, Wil Litang.'

She smiled. 'Oh Captain Wilitang, is it? You must have a very interesting story to tell. The question is whether we can afford to hear it. What do they want for him?' she asked, turning to her first mate.

He shrugged. 'Some outrageous sum. Ten number one items, each. More a ransom than a passage price. We could probably get him for two number one items apiece.'

She sighed and looked at the grinning, eager painted men beside me. She gave them a smile and said to me, 'We're in the business of providing passage to potential workers who cannot afford the passage price. Passengers-on-speculation, so to speak. We're not in the business of ransoming careless captains. I have owners who examine every outlay very, very closely, they're well aware of the types of people they employ in this trade. And they're very frugal chaps, these owners, so you see, I must be prudent in my outlays. And just so you understand my dilemma, we've had a very unfortunate voyage to date. They're not going to be in a happy mood when they see my cargo and books. Long story short, I don't know how much I can spring for you. Fine-feathered prospective workers are rather rare in our trade. I'm not sure what the market is for your kind – without any particularly useful skills to speak of.'

I smiled. 'I'm familiar with owners, Captain, so I understand your concern. However, I will do everything in my power to compensate you for any outlay you make on my account.'

She leaned back, and put her hand to her chin to studied me. I suspected that she was just playing the game with my artistic companions. They eagerly grinned back as their leader once more eagerly expounded on my sterling qualities – Litang, a bargain at any price.

'I can't follow what he's saying, but I'm certain I'm worth it,' I added.

She nodded, smiled sagely, and said a few encouraging words to him before turning to me. 'Sorry, I can't accept their asking price. However, if I don't take you, you'll end up amusing them for a while, and then feeding them. These Rin'ti are very cheerful, but like all Outward Islanders, guests are usually their main course. My dilemma is that I've no idea what you'll fetch for my owners on Tyrina. To be perfectly honest, my customers, to date, have all been Outward Islanders looking to improve their lot in the mines and fields. Still, you'd likely fetch something... I suppose.

'However, if I were to take you on as a passenger, I doubt you'd last long in our passenger accommodations. You know how it is, everyone distrusts an outsider and these Outward Islanders distrust anyone not of their tribe. So, if I take you on, I'd have to make other arrangements which would involve extra expenses and more work for my crew, which is already severely understaffed...' She

paused, shaking her head sadly, and studying me.

I thought she was just having her fun, so I just smiled and shrugged. 'What can I do to help?'

'Willing to help, are you? Well, we are short several stokers... Ever done any stoking?'

I shook my head. 'But I'm willing to learn.'

She sighed, 'Oh, I'm too kindhearted for this trade. If you're willing to learn and work hard, I'll see what I can do about your price and sign you on as crew.'

'I am,' I hastened to assure her. 'And I would greatly appreciate any efforts you make on my behalf.'

'I'm sure you would. I would, however, have to subtract the price we pay for you from your wages of five coppers a round. Still, it wouldn't take more than several thousand rounds for you to pay your passage fee back, though the actual time would depend on what your friends are willing to settle for. So, Captain Wilitang, what do you say? Are you willing to sign on to the Bird of Passage as a stoker at five coppers a round, and to pay your purchase price out of your wages, or would you prefer to take your chances with your new friends?'

As a would-be revolutionary, would-be murderer, would-be lover of a mercenary stealth of St Bleyth, and a new friend of pirates, it would seem that my moral compass has been captured by a very dark lodestar. Still, I hesitated before agreeing to sign on as a stoker aboard a slaver – for a second – before saying, 'I'd be very grateful if you'd allow me to sign on as one of your crew.'

She smiled. 'Good. Let's see if we can strike a reasonable deal with your friends. Cley, see what you can get him for.'

'I'll try, Cap'n. An additional stoker would be welcomed by the deck crew. We should be able to get him for something reasonable. You know how they are. Wild demands, but I think they'll settle for eight no.1 items,' the old officer at the desk replied glumly.

She gave me a lazy, measuring look. 'Rather steep for a stoker. Still we need a stoker, and the price will be coming out of his wages, see what you can do.'

I doubt the islanders understood more than a word or two of what we said, but they could catch drift of the conversation, and now they all spoke up boldly demanding their price.

Cley let'em go on for a while, grimly shaking his head and repeating a phrase in their tongue. My price.

There was a sudden stir amongst my two captors to my right. They leaped back. I looked to see Hissi – who must have hitched a ride hidden on the outer hull of the boat – shot over to me and settle on my shoulder, wrapping herself tightly around my neck with a rather frightened hiss. Her sudden appearance sent my captors leaping away from me with a loud volley of exclamations and strange gyrations. They stared at me in wild alarm. I would've thought they'd seen Simla dragons before. Given all the ones the Temtre had, I'd have thought them to be very common in these islands.

'Hi, Hissi,' I said, 'You shouldn't be here, I think we're in a rather iffy spot. You needn't have followed me.'

She gave me a low, low hiss, as if to say, "You said it, brother."

The Captain observed all this with a brief puzzled look, and then she put on an angry face, barking something sharply to my captors in their own language. She then turned to me, and with her hands and manner seemed to be apologizing and blaming my captors for something, but said, 'My, my, Captain Wilitang we are full of surprises, aren't we? Your little friend has put your new friends in quite a funk. They now fear that they've captured, and no doubt greatly offended, a witch-man, a sorcerer, a powerful man who will no doubt extract his revenge on them, their family and tribe.'

'How so?'

'You have a Simla dragon as a familiar.'

'Certainly Simla dragons are not unknown in these islands.'

'Aye, but not friendly ones. These islanders eat everything, including Simla dragons. As a result, the local Simla dragons are not known for their tameness. Only magic, evil magic, can tame them, and only powerful witches have them as familiars. So, commanding even a young one confers evil powers to

you. Oh my, you're now a fellow to be feared. Give then a hard, angry glare, and we'll drive your price way down.'

'I'd do more than that.'

I turned to them and roared in my best comic-opera captain's voice, 'Now cut these straps!' and swung back around, holding out my arms.

When I felt the straps loosening, I roared again, 'My things, I want the things you took from me!' and indicated what I wanted with pantomime my com link and darter with my newly freed arms.

They stood, stock still for a moment, until Hissi hissed and I roared again.

This sent one of the lads diving back into their boat to fetch my gear. As he emerged from the bamboo shell, I held out my hand but he wouldn't come near me. He tossed them to me and joined his friends, who had all stepped back to the edge of the cutter.

'Oh, my, that looks to be a springer, Captain Wilitang, I believe I'll take it for now. I don't allow my crew to go about with more than a knife. They're a hot-tempered lot. Carelessness may've gotten me this berth, but I'm resolved to be much more responsible going forward,' she said, watching me warily while holding out her hand.

'Of course, Captain,' I said, handing over my darter and holster. I was going to have to get used to taking orders rather than giving them, and this seemed to be a good time to start. 'This,' I indicated the com link, 'Is harmless, a talisman, worn on my arm.'

She shrugged, 'You might want to get your money back on it, 'she said with an arched look, but let me keep it.

Turning to her first mate. 'Carry on, Cley. One number one trade item, each.'

'Each, Captain?' objected Cley. 'They'll now settle for just one and no curses.'

'Each. We want our customers to be happy. Still, I suppose we should leave it to Captain Wilitang here, since he's footing the bill,' she asked turning back to me.

'I believe I'm well worth four number one items.'

'Not as a stoker. You're going to be with us for quite a while at a stoker's pay. But if you do your duty, perhaps you can move up and buy your life back sooner. Now try to indicate that you've forgiven them, and then we'll sign you on.'

I nodded to them and smiled, which didn't seem to go over very well, they backed away, bowed, and hurried to collect their price.

'Carry on Cley,' she said with a nod, and turned up the gangplank towards the banks of slave cages. With Hissi clinging quietly on my shoulder, I followed her.

04

'By the way, my name is KaRaya.' she said, glancing back as we walked up the gangplank.

'Very happy to meet you, Captain KaRaya. Thank you for rescuing me. It is more than my carelessness deserves.'

'Oh, I'd save the meanest fu-dragon from these savages' pots. Their savagery to one and all makes my job much easier to swallow,' she said as we reached the ship.

The gangplank entered the ship at its lowest deck. To my left, within the solid hull of the bow was the slaves' galley and storeroom. To my right, two dozen tall cages separated by a long companionway that ran the length of the ship.

'We keep the various island tribal groups in separate compartments just to keep most of them alive. They'd kill each other if we mixed them together. And even so, there's blood feuds and rivalries running through each tribe, so we lose some anyway.'

There were dozens of captives perched about in each of the first six compartments on each side of the companionway, females to the right, males to the left. Some of the newest captives in the back

cages were howling in anger, some crying in fear. Most of those in the first ranks of cages, perched on shelves that crisscrossed the cages, merely stared vacantly into space.

'Their meal-cakes are soaked in drava, a local fermented drink. Keeps them semi-drunk and quiet,' she said casually, and grabbing hold of a metal ladder amidships that lead up to an open hatch in the high deck ceiling, shot upwards.

I followed her up to the enclosed deck. It was illuminated by the light pouring through the open rocket launcher ports and some gratings above. Crew members slouched next to cannon-like launchers poking out of the portals. Wooden walled storerooms filled the center of the deck. We swung around to a second ladder that opened on the main deck, crisscrossed with the vague shadows of the overhead grating. Like the deck below, it had a series of deckhouses running down the center of the deck – the crew galley, officer cabins and crew bunk rooms. She led me across the rough, carpeted deck to a deckhouse that spanned the bow of the ship and then into a chart-room lit by squares of thick glass set in the ceiling. The centerpiece of the room was a large table holding a three-dimensional chart of the islands – a series of small beads strung along a complex web of different colored wires. I paused to examine it, as she slipped around to a standing desk on the far side. On closer inspection, each bead was shaped differently, apparently an approximation of the island it represented. The wires connecting each bead to its neighboring bead had labels which I couldn't read – I was now an illiterate in the Saraime Principalities.

'I assume these labels tell you time or distance between the major islands,' I said.

She looked up from her rummaging of drawers. 'Never seen a chart like that before, Captain?'

'No. Can't say I have...' And looking up and seeing her expression, I added, 'I'm not from these islands...'

She looked at my uniform and the darter that she had drawn from its holster. 'Yes, I might believe that. We'll get to that in a minute. First, step over and put your mark in my book.'

She clicked on a primitive electric lamp to illuminate the top of the desk and slid the ship's book across the metal top of the desk, held in on the desk by a magnet under its leather cover.

'I see you have electricity on this ship.'

'Oh, we're very up-to-date, by Tyrina standards. Of course, by core islands' standards, I suppose we're pretty primitive. You don't need to be very up-to-date in this trade. But I suppose, I'm not telling you anything you don't already know,' she added with a glance at my darter with its synthetic fabric holster and belt.

'I'm not from the Principalities. You'll find that I don't know a lot.'

She gave me a searching look, and then shrugged. 'Seeing how you came aboard, I might believe that.' And then, placing her finger on a line in the book, 'Here's where you put your mark. Just for the record, you're signing on as stoker, third class with an Outward Island bonus. The berth pays five coppers a round, with board. If you work hard, I'll only deduct the wholesale rather than retail price of the four number one items we paid to acquire your services. I'll have PerLain, the purser, take you around to the slop chest where you can buy an appropriate kit for stoking. You're in luck as far as kit. We recently lost several stokers to the Green Spot Fever that's been thinning these islands of their savage populations, so you'll have a fine selection to choose from at reasonable prices. The cost of your kit will also be deducted from your wages.'

I sighed and signed my name on the spot where she indicated, though I'd no idea what I'd actually agreed to. I'd become unscrupulous enough not to care what a piece of paper said.

She glanced at it, shrugged again at my "mark," and said, 'Welcome aboard the Bird of Passage. No qualms about signing on to a ship like ours?'

'Many qualms, Captain. But I find they don't stack up to being the main entree at the village banquet. And as I'm obliged to you for offering me a chance to escape that fate, there may be some good karma in the bad in agreeing to serve you.'

She nodded, closed the book and shoved it back into a drawer. Then leaning back against the stool

and the bulkhead behind her, she picked my darter again and carefully examined it.

'Compressed air?'

'Electricity. It shoots a charged dart.'

'A very small one by the look of it. Do you merely sting your enemies, Captain Wilitang?' she asked, noting the 2mm aperture at its business end.

'Given a chance, yes. I can sting 'em or kill them as I please. The small dart can hold a lethal electric charge. It releases the electricity when it strikes the target, rendering them either unconscious for a time or, if charged with enough electricity, kills them forever. I can decide on how much electricity to put in each dart, and so I can choose to either stun or kill my target.'

'And you say it sends it on electricity as well?'

'Aye, it sends the darts along a beam of...' I found I hadn't the proper words, so I said, 'Of electrical energy.'

'It's a new one on me. So, where do you come from? The truth would be best,' she added, casually pointing the darter my way. 'I'm familiar with a trigger, in any event.'

Since it needed my palm to activate it, I remained cool and collected.

I closed my eyes, trying to decide what to say. And how to say it without appearing to be either a madman or an obvious liar. It seemed rather hard to be ordinary with a young Simla dragon draped around my neck and as the owner of an unknown weapon.

'Take your time. I would prefer the truth, but I do enjoy a well-crafted lie,' she said after a while.

I smiled. 'If I told you the full truth, you'd never believe me. I was simply deciding how to convey the essential truth in a way that you could not think me mad or making a fool of you.'

She waved my darter at me. 'The "essential" truth, is it? That's a new one. Go on, you've made me very curious.'

'Right. I'm not from the Saraime. I come from far, far away. I was born on the large island of Faelrain. Grew up to be a sailor, and eventually the captain of a trading vessel that plied the islands of the Azminn and Amdia. Unlike traders in these islands, my ship was merely a trader, a cargo carrier. Trade wasn't just something to do when there was a lull in piracy.'

'You expect me to believe that?'

'Does it matter?'

'Well, I seem to detect a bit of Temtre in your accent. An honest Temtre trader? Care to illuminate me?'

'I'll get to that, if you'll let me spin my yarn...'

'Go on, then.'

'My ship's owner, as it turned out, has a claim to the throne of a distant empire – Cimmadar. Ever heard of it?'

'A mythical island. I was quite fond of fairy tales, in my youth. This is getting interesting.'

'Well, Cimmadar could be a fairy tale for all I know, since I never reached Cimmadar. The ship I commanded could only take my owner to an island where she joined a small navy that had been awaiting her return. This navy was to restore her to the Cloud Throne of Cimmadar. I was set to go along with this expedition, but before the fleet set sail, it was decided that I would return to command my old ship and continue trading instead.'

'Why?'

'I was deemed too kindhearted for the type of struggle they expected.'

'Too kindhearted, or too, shall we say, shy?'

'I objected to killing a prisoner out of hand. Which, I suppose, suggests that I'm not ruthless enough, and perhaps not foolish enough to think that a ruler who has been on the throne of a great empire for tens of thousands of rounds can be overthrown with three hundred sailors and three battleships...' I paused. 'I am cautious by nature. Perhaps that makes me "shy." Still, I've dealt with pirates and assassins when required, so it may not matter in practice. In any event, I was sent packing, and then,



because this adventure was supposed to be a great secret, the leader of the rebellion decided to keep it a secret by destroying my ship and my crew. We managed to avoid that fate, and I returned in one of the ship's boats to warn my former owner of the ruthless treachery that her uncle was capable of. Unfortunately, my boat was damaged before I reached them, and then carried a vast distance in a great storm, coming to rest on an island that soon hosted a gathering of the Temtre Clan.' I paused to consider what I needed to say, and not say. 'Which is where I learned the local language. And why I speak it now with a Temtre accent.'

'Is this island near here?'

'Ah, that I cannot say. If you know the Temtres, you'll understand that I'm still alive only because I gave them my word to reveal no more to anyone.'

'Knowing the Temtres, the fact that you're alive suggests that you're lying. Care to give any names to these Temtres you met?'

'DeKan is the clan-king, and his ship is the Talon Hawk. I also met Captains EnVey and DinDay. And yes, I probably should be dead, but I had a couple of formidable companions and weapons like the one before you, so we came to terms.'

She just smiled and slowly shook her head. 'I appreciate the little details, like DeKan and the Talon Hawk. They lend your tale substance. It is the mark of a great liar...'

'And my darter in your hand? Is that a lie too?'

She looked at it, and sighed. 'I suppose it doesn't matter. Tell me, where are your companions and how did you meet your savage friends?'

'There was, well, a parting of the ways with my companions. They sailed with the Temtres, and I was left with my damaged boat. I set sail for where I was told the Saraime lay and reached a small island not far from here about a round ago. I hid the boat amongst the vines to give me time to consider how to approach the Saraime proper without attracting attention. The natives stopped for a meal on my island while I slept, and when I went topside for a bit of fresh air, we ran into each other. They had three weapons pointing at me before I noticed them, and I decided it wasn't time to test their aim or mine. I didn't think I'd survive three holes in me. I thought I'd have a slightly better chance later. And, as it turned out, I was right, since here I am,' I added brightly.

'And so you are. This boat, can you take me to it?'

'Certainly. It has a radio beacon,' – another word I found I (or the AI) knew in the Temtre language – 'so that I could lead you right to it using this bracelet.'

'Would you be willing to?'

I considered that for a moment or two. 'Yes. I don't see why not. Tyrina is as good a place as any to get to know the Saraime. So yes, if you want to collect my boat for your owners, I'd be glad to show you where it is. It has some interesting features that might well impress your owners, though they are locked and can only be operated by me. I could perhaps make a deal with them, and have the best of two worlds, my ship, and a foot in the door of the Saraime Principalities, and, I should add, I believe I have enough coins to pay for my ransom.'

I was careful to emphasize the owners' role in affair. If I read my Captain KaRaya right, involving the owners in this affair might not settle well with her.

She must've read my thoughts, and smiled. 'Yes. Owners. You see, I'm unlikely to be the golden feathered captain of their greedy dreams. As I said, Green Spot Fever has swept through these islands, drastically reducing the available supply of passengers. I've lost half my passengers, and six crew members because Doc Til failed to catch the early symptoms of the fever in one of our passengers. As a result, I'm not likely to make expenses. I rather think I'm not long for this berth. Of course, your boat, if it is what you say it is, might change that.'

'I'm sure it would. And, I could make it worth your while as well.'

'And yet... Between you and me, being a captain in this business is about as low as you can fly,' she continued. 'Unfortunately, I needed the coins that came with the berth. I have, until now, been rather

carefree, or perhaps careless in my life, but I'm determined to change. To become responsible. I intend to be the responsible captain of a slaver and work my way up. There was a time, not long ago, when your boat with its various interesting things, and hints of personal gain, might've tempted me. But I'm no longer young and foolish. I've become responsible...' And then leaning closer, she asked, 'Could you still use your radio thing to find your boat, a hundred rounds from now?'

'I'm getting its signal here, and perhaps for another round or two of sailing. My com link has a limited range, but the beacon should last our lifetime. If I can find my way back here in a hundred or even a thousand rounds from now, I'd have no problem locating it.'

She leaned back, studied me, and considered that for a minute. As did I. Captain KaRaya struck me as someone I could, well, if not quite trust, deal with. Slave ship owners, and indeed, slave ship crews, less so, if I had a choice.

'I'm a stranger here, Captain, and I'd rather keep a low profile until I know more about the Saraime. And well, I don't really think this needs to concern owners...' I said.

'Not my owners, in any event. But I'm honor bound... At the moment. But I'm not likely to have owners for long, and may well need coins. There are native traders that could be hired in Tyrina anchorage who would take you – and me – back here, with only a small amount of danger. Once I am no longer employed, that is.'

'I'll have to trust someone... And I owe you a debt, so I would be happy to form some sort of partnership with you to recover my boat and share the benefits that can be derived from it. I believe they could be substantial, but I can't guarantee that. You see my darter in front of you. Take that as my proof that I have things of interest. Turning them into coins, well, that might take some doing...'

She sighed. 'It is tempting. If I was, like I used to be...' She struck the desk with her fist. 'I don't want to know more. Not now. It can wait until Tyrina. My current job is to provide passage to migrant workers, not chasing a dragon's dream. So, until we arrive back in Tyrina, Captain Wilitang, I would earnestly advise you to say as little of your past as you can and nothing of your boat. Everyone on board has dark secrets to keep, so we're not a curious bunch. The black gang is very short-handed, so if you pitch in, they'll treat you kindly enough. Nevertheless, I wouldn't trust anyone. This business doesn't attract feathered folk with many scruples. Savvy?'

'Aye. I've dealt with enough pirates to know how it plays. And remember, I'm a cautious fellow.'

'Stay cautious. We won't have a chance to talk again. I'd have no reason to talk to a stoker. Even bulwarks have ears when they're curious enough. I'll see what I can do to get you free on landing, but you may have to run. We'll cross that island gap when we come to it. Do we have an understanding?'

'Aye. I pay my debts. We'll talk on Tyrina. I need a responsible guide, and I believe I can make it worth your while.'

'Just so, Captain,' she said extending her hand. We sealed the deal Temtre style, grasping wrists. 'And now, if the last of our customers has arrived, you'll have work to do.'

I followed Captain KaRaya out to the deck, and as I waited for the purser to make his way from the cutter to the deck, I said softly to Hissi, 'I'm sorry, we seem to have fallen into rather bad company. Please don't pick up any bad habits from them.'

She gave a dismissive hiss, apparently hatched hard-boiled.

'Well, I'm glad you're so confident. I wish I was. We're on our own now.'

She hissed again, and wrapped her hanging tail around my neck.

'Aye, we'll see it through together. Never fear. I'm a lucky man...'

A low hiss.

'And I've a Simla dragon for companion.'

## Chapter 12 The Bird of Passage

PerLain solemnly assured me the late stokers, Tzi and MetsGive, did not die in the soot and sweat stained, spark-holed jumpsuits I purchased. They had been soaked in oil, lit, and set adrift – smoldering corpses – in the sweat and soot stained, spark-holed jumpsuits they died in. Stoking is not a skilled position – the only requirement for the job is poverty. Poverty usually as a result of drink. And the threadbare wardrobes of the late stokers reflected this poverty, this life. He then led me aft and down into the engine room, a very hot and cluttered compartment crowded with iron and brass machines linked by pipes snaking through a mist of steam and the thick aroma of hot oil. We followed the narrow foot paths around the machinery and under the pipes, until we found its boss, Chief Engineer DeJan working on a condenser.

'Your new stoker,' PerLain said, adding with a look – “and good luck with that,” before he hurried off.

The Chief proved to be a rumpled mountain of man and the only other fine-feathered man aboard the ship.

'Chief,' I said with a respectful nod as he looked up from his work to give me a long, hard look, slowly taking in my trim, tramp ship captain's rig with a disdainful eye. He blinked and stared harder when he realized I was wearing a small Simla dragon around my neck. Hissi gave him a low hiss of greeting.

'So you're “Captain” Wilitang are you?' he muttered, slowly wiping his hands on a rag. It doesn't take long for word to get around a ship.

'It's stoker Wilitang, Chief,' I replied with a smile and a shrug. 'I've got my stoking kit right here,' I added, hold up my newly purchased bundle. I was hoping that the “captain” title would be quickly forgotten, though of course, it wasn't. I remained “Cap'n Stoker” throughout my time aboard the Bird of Passage.

He grunted, 'This way,' as he climbed to his feet.

'Ever stoked before?' he called back as we passed through a narrow passage through the black cake bunkers to the boiler room.

'No,' I admitted.

'I thought not,' he muttered, and on entering the steamy boiler room added 'Your new mate, Fret. Show him the ropes.'

Fret, who had paused with a shovel of black cake in hand, looked me over without enthusiasm. 'Right, Chief,' he muttered, and shoved this black cake into the furnace.

The Chief grunted and left, and I, eager to get on the right side of my new mates, began to strip off the clothes of my old life and shoved them into a canvas satchel I'd also purchased from the slop chest. After I had donned one of the grimy jumpsuits of my dead predecessors, I turned to Fret. 'What do I do?'

Fret nodded to one of the shovels latched to the bulkhead alongside the boiler. 'Grab a shovel and do what I do.'

Which pretty much said all you need to know about stoking. Still, for the sake of completeness – a stoker's job is to shovel black-cake – pressed charcoal bricks – from the bunker into the fire box beneath the boiler which produces the steam to drive the ship's twin triple expansion engines. The stoke hole was a hot, soot-black compartment, just forward of the ship's engine room surrounded by the black-cake bunkers. It was lit and kept slightly cooler than the boiler it served by two grated openings in the ceiling and in good weather, by keeping the bunker access hatches located on either side of the hull partially open. The shovel was a mesh tube that, if you swung it carefully, you could keep the black-cakes in it until you stepped on a plate that opened the firebox gate and shoved the black-cakes

into the glowing hot furnace. Opening the firebox gate released a cloud of hot embers and a blast of heat, meaning that a stoker needed to work deftly to dodge the glowing embers. In the weightless conditions of the Pela, the black-cakes themselves were not heavy, but they needed to be managed skillfully to get and keep them in the enclosed shovel, carried to the boiler, and shoveled in fast enough to keep the steam pressure up and the engines going. Fret was the only surviving stoker, so we worked alternating watches, doubling up when two shovels were needed to get the pressure up. Fret knew his job and was resigned to teaching it to me. He was resigned to just about anything. A willing, if untrained, hand, to help him did little to brighten his dreary outlook on life. Still, as KaRaya indicated, a new stoker was welcomed by the engine room gang who'd been filling in for the dead ones. They were all hard-bitten, broad-feathered men and women, save the Chief. Still, once they saw that I was willing to pitch in, they accepted the fine-feathered Captain Stoker readily enough – treating me gruffly as due my lowly status as the newest stoker, but without malice.

Whenever I wasn't sleeping or shoveling black-cake, the Chief would have me tearing down, cleaning or rebuilding some element of the engine, boiler or generators that filled the engine room. The Chief was rarely, if ever, completely sober, but knew his job, and loved his engines above everything, save his bottles of whiskey. Everyone aboard loved whiskey. It was that kind of a ship. As the Captain implied, you had to fall pretty low to take a berth aboard an Outward Island slaver. In any event, the Chief lavished his love on his machines and expected his gang to love them as well. I readily fell in with his desire, since I didn't view stoking as a career, but did think acquiring a ship-borne skill would be a wise investment for my mission. And, well, having spent most of my life aboard a ship, all this was merely an adjustment in details. I knew the life and fell in with it quickly enough. There was little else to do in what little idle time I had aboard the Bird of Passage, so I used it to learn what I could about the engine room.

Hissi loved the heat of the black hole, and would cling to the bunker, though well out of the way of the sparks, and soak it in while she slept. She didn't mind the galley food, and since Simla dragons grow fast, she grew to be over a meter long by the time we parted company with the Bird of Passage. The crew was not quite as superstitious as the natives, but treated her cautiously, letting her do what she wanted to. Besides soaking in the heat, she like to hang on the bunk room ceiling when we were off duty, watching the off-duty gang play cards for hours on end. Only the engine room, with all the moving cylinders shafts, pumps, and gears, was out of bounds for her.

I can't say much about the Outward Islands. While on duty, the boiler generally demanded my constant attention to keep enough steam at pressure to drive the two engines. Once up to pressure, I could take brief breaks – a minute or two – to cool off in the air wafting through the open access ports and watch the lush green islands drift by. Still, these were just glimpses, too short to allow any time to study them – though every one seemed just like every other.

The ship always kept the engine running, but when the air currents served, would fly sails as well. Unlike the sailing ships that sailed the seas using their keels and water to sail close to the wind direction, the Bird of Passage could only use its sails when it was going the same general direction as the current. They used free standing kite-sails and rigged large fore-and-aft sails that acted as keels and rudders, allowing the ship to sail at slight angles from the current. We followed those wires I saw on the chart, island to island – but never sailed very close to any of the larger ones. I gathered that the ship's safety depended on keeping the natives well away from the ship. While the Outward Islands were lush with life – floating, flying, and growing green and rainbow colored – I saw no sign of villages or farms. From what my shipmates told me, the natives lived mostly by hunting, gathering and raiding, and that the villages were hidden in the trees or in caves as protection from other raiders.

When we did stop to conduct our business, we did so well away from any island to give us a clear field of fire. And we were instructed to keep any large native boat well away, using rockets, if our steam whistle was ignored. Only the small, four to six man boats were allowed to close, and only so many of those.

I soon lost radio contact with the Phoenix. As much as I hated giving up the security of the gig, I realized that it was inevitable – for a while. I'd made up my mind to make the Saraima my new home, and though being introduced to my new life as a slave, or rather an indentured worker, may not have been the ideal way of entering it, it served its purpose. Becoming a sailor seemed the best way to get about the islands. And signing aboard the Bird of Passage was as good an entryway as any, more or less. In any event, I intended to use my time aboard to learn my new trade and be on my way as soon as I could pay my ransom.

Leaving the Phoenix hidden in the Outward Islands was far from ideal. Still, I was likely going to have to ditch it somewhere, and as hidden as it was, it served that purpose. The natives would be unlikely to find it, and they'd never get in if they did. The alternative – taking it aboard the Bird of Passage – did not appeal to me. While I might have contrived to escape the Bird of Passage in it, I'd still have to start over again. And if I allowed it to be carried to Tyrina, then I'd likely have to deal with salvage rights. I don't know how the Saraima law works, but I'm sure I'd have to share more than I cared to with the slave ship owners.

Captain KaRaya, on the other hand, was another matter. My impression of our Captain was that, as long as I kept an eye on her, we might be able to do business and keep it quiet. I was far from sure she was trustworthy, or from her remarks, reliable, but I gathered from the crew's gossip that she was an old hand in the Outward Island trade, so that I was pretty sure we could recover the Phoenix when the time came. And after all my dealings with drifteers I believed I could look after myself when dealing with her.

As she had warned me, I hadn't seen a lot of her from the stoke hole. I was in the Chief's realm, not hers. I only spoke to her once in the following few weeks.

'The Chief says you're not completely useless,' remarked Captain KaRaya lightly, as she walked by while I, and most of the off-duty crew bathed and did our laundry, on the bunkhouse deck. We were passing through a thick rain cloud at the time so the off-duty crew took the opportunity to strip down to basics and wash both our bodies and wardrobe in the rain-like mist. She was the only one fully dressed on the deck – in an oiled cloak. 'For a former deck officer, that's quite an accomplishment,' she added.

'Thank you, Captain. I'm working hard to live down the fact that I was once a mere ornament.'

'Getting the black-cake in your blood, are you?'

'Just about everywhere, but at least, I'll no longer have to negotiate with Chief Engineers. Just following their orders makes life so much simpler.'

'So you had Chief Engineers in your faraway skies as well?'

'The Entirety is run by Chief Engineers, Captain. You can't escape them.'

'Well, you won't for a long time,' she replied with a bright smile, and moved on.

I've crossed orbits with more pirates and general all-around cut-throats than I would've chosen to, had I any choice in the matter, so I'm qualified to say that on that scale, Fret was a very benign sort of cut-throat. His resigned acceptance of what fate had handed him – a stoker on a slaver – made him easy to get along with. Seeing that I was willing to learn and work, and was not a broken down wreck of a man, the usual stoker candidate, made him willing to share the few tricks of the trade, so that within a half a dozen watches, we had settled into a comfortable working relationship centered on shoveling black-cake. When I wasn't shoveling black-cake or sleeping, I was helping in the steamy hot engine room, tending the noisy, chugging, and spinning machines as directed by the gruff Chief. Still, as part of the engine room crew, I was free of deck work. When the engines were not needed, and all the repairs Chief DeJan could think of were done, we were free to lounge about – though this usually meant lounging near the two rocket launchers that the black gang were in charge of while taking on

“passengers.” Only small boats were allowed to come near the Bird of Passage. We kept a casual eye on them with a loaded rocket launcher. This was, however, more of a ritual than a necessity, since this business had been going on time out of hand and everyone knew the rules. Still, in the Outward Islands, you could ill afford to grow careless – the islanders watched us like hawks to make sure we were still playing the game.

The way the Bird of Passage collected its passengers was to steam from one cluster of large islands to the next. We'd stop and blow the steam whistle to announce our presence and then wait for the passengers to arrive along with their “friends” who were “volunteering” them. As I mentioned, we stayed well clear of the islands, in order to provide a wide range of fire for our rockets. Given the warlike attitude of the Outward Islanders, our safety in this savage archipelago rested on the fact that our rockets flew further and straighter than the ones we sold them, so Captain KaRaya made sure we had all the air space we needed to keep the natives from surprising us.

Having announced our arrival, the deck crew would rig the gangplank and launch the cutter to greet our customers. The crew on watch were issued long barreled, spring-pump charged, air rifles, and then we'd open the rocket launching ports in the hull and swing the rocket launchers out. Rockets are used because they don't have the recoil canons do, which, in free fall, could set the ship swinging wildly, making aiming impossible.

While standing guard during our first island of call – that is to say, lounging about the rocket launcher in our charge – I told Fret about my first encounter with a Pela slaver – the one we saw while on the tumbleweed island.

'So why don't we go out and collect our own slaves?' I asked as we watched the native boats arriving with their cargo of men, women and children.

'Well, we're not really a slaver,' he replied. 'Ignorant people call us that, but that's not what we are. Slavery is outlawed in the Principalities.'

I gave him a look. He was serious. 'What exactly are we, then?'

'We're transporting immigrant workers to Tyrina. The farm owners, mine owners, even ship owners who hire them, reimburse us for their advances and passage.'

'Seeing that they're bound, often beaten, crying in rage, and we have to pay to get them, I find it hard to believe that they're actually immigrating looking for work. Especially seeing that women and children are taken aboard as well.'

He shrugged. 'Who's to say what goes on in these infernal islands? Oh, I'll admit it looks a little snaky. But I don't know their lingo, so I can't say they're not volunteering, with a portion of their wages being paid up front to their families.'

I gave him a long, skeptical look.

'Oh, no doubt most of them are really prisoners taken in raids or victims of the many feuds within the tribes,' he said with a sigh. 'Still, better to work on a civilized island like Tyrina than ending up the main course at a feast, wouldn't you say?'

'There is that.'

'And they'll be paid for the work they do once they get to Tyrina. Their employers pay us a transportation fee that covers all our expenses and more, which is how our owners make their coins. The employers dock the immigrants' wages to pay for that passage fee, and perhaps a bit of interest as well. Indentured workers, is what I think they're called. Still, once they've paid their bills, they're free men and women. So, you see they ain't exactly slaves.'

'Well...'

'They ain't no different than you. Are you a slave? Them trade goods the Cap'n bought you with ain't going to be paid off anytime soon at five coppers a round, mate. Not at the prices in the book.'

I grinned. 'Which makes it mighty hard to tell the difference.'

'But there is a difference. Once you've paid your debt, you're free to walk. You ain't no different than them passengers we're carrying,' he insisted. 'Except that you're working for your passage and they're

just lounging about. And just like you, they're aboard because they made enemies, they offended someone they shouldn't have had, or got careless and got themselves captured. I gather some of 'em aren't even prisoners, they're just ungrateful sons or unfaithful wives, and the likes. They get a new life instead of being served in the stew. Why, you'll see plenty of Outward Islanders walking about free in Tyrina. Plenty of them aboard ships too. We don't employ them in our trade 'cause they're not to be trusted out here. Not to be really trusted anywhere, but a few here and there can be dealt with...'

Well, whatever their ultimate fate was on the big islands, they were no different than slaves aboard the Bird of Passage. And I wasn't in a cage – well, not exactly.

Being part of the engine room crew, I didn't have to deal with our passengers. They were, in fact, entirely out of sight below the slight bulge of the hull and had a separate crew to look after them, which mostly involved seeing that they were fed. They survived on a dried cake of some grain and cabbage soaked in drava, the fermented pulp of a cactus like tree found everywhere in the islands. The Captain would also buy fresh fruit now and again from the islanders for them and the crew. And every so often we'd stand off a large island and send the cutter ashore with a crew to gather a boatload of drava trunks. Once aboard they'd be chopped and pounded into mush, and then allowed to ferment in vats for a few rounds before soaking the dried cabbage and grain cakes in it and fed to our passengers. No doubt the mild intoxication drava produced contributed to the resigned acceptance most of the passengers displayed in time.

The Outward Islands were a moist clime, with clouds often hiding islands. Nearly every round we sailed through clouds dense enough to be called rain. The deck crew would rig a large, funnel shaped sail to collect and direct the floating water into the ship's water tanks to keep both the crew, passengers, and the boiler supplied with water. And, as I've mentioned, the off-watch crew stripped down to wash and do laundry when the opportunity arose. Like Simla dragons, broad-feathered humans were particular about their feathers and hygiene in general, even on a slaver.

The rounds rolled on until it seemed like the only life I'd ever known. I shoveled black-cake, dodged glowing embers, oiled the great cylinders of the engine, ate, slept, and very occasionally, watched the islands go by. And I looked after Hissi – not that she seemed to need or want looking after. She gave me to understand that she could look after herself quite well. Simla dragons have a big ego, even the little ones.

## Chapter 13 The Serrata

The timelessness of the Pela soon asserted itself – only the steam whistle noted the ceaseless march of watches. I got on well with the Chief once he found that I'd some knowledge of not only mechanical devices – a pump is a pump aboard a space ship as well as an iron steam ship, but of electricity as well. The electrical system of the Bird of Passage was very basic. It consisted of a generator run off the main engines and a simple system of wires run to provide lighting in the darker spaces of the ships. Lights in the Pela's eternal day are rarely needed – windows usually do the job. However, outside of the Chief, who didn't like playing with it in any event, the engine room crew would have nothing to do with it. I gathered that it was a specialized trade on the bigger, more modern ships. By the time it came to part company with the Bird of Passage, I was the ship's official electrician – not that it actually involved a lot of work, or an increase in wages. I also set out to learn everything I could about running a ship's engine room, since this seemed far easier to master than acquiring the knowledge needed to navigate the trackless sky-sea of the Pela.

Hissi and I must've been aboard the Bird of Passage for nearly twenty rounds, since we were bound

for our last island of call before turning towards the bright sky and Tyrina, when the “serrata” struck. Serrata is the local name for the powerful windstorms like the one that carried us to Assembly Island.

I'd no warning of its arrival in the stoke hole, and the deck crew had next to none as well, since it struck while the Bird of Passage was traveling through a thick cloud bank. It had the ship firmly in its howling jaws before anything could be done to mitigate its effects.

The initial blow rolled the ship over, sending me flying into the black cake bunker. I managed to grab hold of the slats and clung to them as the black cake flying out of the bunkers pummeled me. The ship shuddered and the hull resounded as the debris, borne by the storm, slammed into the hull, while branches and leaves swirled into the stoke hole through the open ports. The serrata, tearing through the islands, had collected everything from a blizzard of leaves to whole trees, beetles, birds, dragons, people and boats. Sparks and glowing ash escaping from the banging gate of the firebox mingled with the leaves and branches about the stoke hole.

Seconds later, I heard screeching and then the engine came to a clattering halt beyond the boilers. I waited for the end to come, as it seemed it surely must, for if the winds did not tear the ship apart, there were plenty of islands about to be smashed against.

Our luck, however, held. The ship's tumbling settled down within minutes, once the leading wall of wind had swept past. By the time Fret tumbled down from the bunk room, I had managed to close the windward fuel hatch and had just started catching and shoveling the leaves and glowing embers of charcoal out of the leeward one.

'The steam valve!' he exclaimed, reaching for the emergency release lever.

I looked up to see the that steam pressure dial was creeping into the red zone with the engines stopped. I should've thought of that...

As the steam from the boiler escaped I yelled, 'What's the damage?'

'Don't know how many who were on deck were blown away. Masts looked to be snapped off, and there's rigging wrapped all around the ship. Looks like a big tree is in the propeller cowlings. Control vanes damaged – we're at the mercy of the winds!' he yelled back.

'Any hope?' I yelled back.

'Could be worse!' he shot back, showing a spark of optimism I didn't think he had in him. Then he added, 'But it will likely get worse. We're bound to find an island sooner or later.'

He clung to the lever until the steam pressure dropped to half pressure – enough to run the small steam engines we'd need to clear away the debris. We then made our way to the steamy chaos of the engine room to help put it into some sort of order under the bellowing direction of the Chief. Only when everything was secured did we venture on to the deck. The wind was still howling – we had to cling to the bulwark handrails to move along the deck. The ship was being driven along, out of control by the wind, but the sky had cleared and there were no islands downwind in sight.

The whole crew was already hard at work clearing the entangled spars and rigging that the tumbling ship had wrapped itself in. The masts had been reduced to stumps and the steering rudders and vanes were bent and riddled with holes. The black gang's main concern was the propellers, and they weren't in any better shape.

A great tree had smashed and entangled itself in the port propeller cowling, stripping the propeller of its blades. The abrupt stopping of the propellers had bent a drive shaft and damaged the gearing. The starboard propeller had fared slightly better, lighter branches had bent some of the blades, and damaged the cowling.

Word from the deck crew was that the hull was shoved in at several places and the cages below had several holes punched in them as well, with many casualties. Our passengers, however, were too stunned to take advantage of these holes, and, well, they had no place to escape to if they chose to venture out. Luckily, the cutter, secured on the deckhouse deck, though buried under a tangle of rigging, had survived with only minor damage.

The winds continued to slowly subside over the next two rounds, allowing repairs to get underway,



under the very energetic direction of Captain KaRaya. The tangle of rigging was cleared and salvaged. Sails were rigged on the stumps of the masts to act as makeshift rudders. The cages were patched and the dead thrown overboard while Doc Til patched up the survivors. Our crew worked out on the wings, clearing the debris out of the propeller housings, resetting the drive shafts and gear, while DeJan and the carpenter carved make-shift propeller blades out of spars to replace the ones destroyed by the tree trunk.

The timelessness of the Pela came to our aid, since we worked on and on, until the Captain came around to order us to the galley for a hot meal. Afterward, we were given a little time to nap before returning to work. I can't say how long this went on, but by the time an island, too large to steer clear off, loomed out of the haze downwind we'd made much progress, but not enough to avoid being driven into it. Our landing, however, was without any great violence. The injured Bird of Passage just drifted into a natural harbor and came to a creaking rest amongst the tangle of storm twisted tree branches, stumps, and tangled vines.

Work continued unabated, the holes in the rudder and steering vanes were patched with canvas, while we replaced a bent section of the drive shaft and removed the stubs of the old propellers in preparation to set the makeshift replacements in place.

Again, I have no clear concept of time. We were likely on the island for only a watch or two. Everyone continued to work with great urgency, under the tireless direction of the Captain. Sore and exhausted, I could not quite understand the urgency, but worked on and on like the rest, earning my five coppers a round.

The urgency, unfortunately, became very clear when a rocket sizzled past, not five meters from where I was working on the propeller cowling. Looking up, I found myself looking "down" on a crowded deck of a long, narrow, 15-meter-long boat perhaps 200 meters above us. It must've just sailed over the tree line of the island. We hadn't heard the thumping of its small steam engine over the pounding and chatter of our repairs and the lookout likely had his back to the island. True to its Outer Island heritage, this small boat did not hesitate to send a rocket from its single rocket launcher down towards us, which seemed a bit optimistic since our rocket launchers were undamaged.

'Break out the weapons, Cley! Crews to the rocket launchers!' bellowed the Captain from the deckhouse deck, and turning, led the charge to the forward rocket launcher. Those of us on the propeller cowling frantically hauled ourselves back to the ship proper.

Fret, scrambling next to me rattled off an unusually long string of curses.

'What's up, mate?' I panted. 'It's only one small boat.'

'It's a Vantra dragon-boat,' he replied grimly as we reached the deck. 'Merciless raiders. They sail as a tribe. If we're lucky the tribe was scattered by the serrata. But if not, it's Inferno Island for us, mate, right proper.'

Cley, standing by the arms chest, was handing out the air rifles, ammunition pouches, and cutlasses as we joined the line. By the time the rifle and sheathed cutlass were thrust into my hands, the crew was already pumping and firing at the dragon boat through the overhead grating. The Vantra had also taken up arms – cross bows – and were sending down a shower of bolts, a few of which made it through the grating to twang into the deck or one of us. By the time I stuck my rifle through the grating to send a slug their way, I could see their rocket crew shoving another rocket into their launch tube. The first rocket must have been in the launcher, and the delay in launching their second one was likely the result of having to dig them out of storage. In any event, they were now even closer, too close to miss again.

There was a flash and a streak of light as our stern rocket launcher sent a rocket flying – just clipping the stern of the dragon boat and exploding beyond. The bow rocket followed a few seconds later, and the Captain didn't miss – striking the dragon boat's bow in a flash of flame that sent pieces of the Vantra boat flying and swinging it wildly about so that its rocket launcher was no longer facing us. As the boom echoed off the island, the boat managed to turn and limp back, behind the loom of the

island before the stern launcher got off another rocket.

'Cley, take ten volunteers and go after that boat. Burn it. Report back if you see more of them,' KaRaya called out as she ran back from the rocket launcher. 'We need to get clear of the island! Let's see if the stumps of our starboard propellers will get us off! Get us a head of steam, Chief!'

Fret and I dove down the ladder to stoke the boiler up as Cley's crew scrambled across to the cutter tied up alongside the ship.

'Why the panic?' I asked Fret as we grabbed our shovels to get the bank fire going. 'We can out fight them, even a pack of them. Can't we?'

'In the clear they're no great threat, depending on the size of the tribe. They can number in the dozens,' he replied as he opened the firebox gate, stirring the banked charcoals to life. 'Our rockets have twice the range and four times the accuracy so we can keep dozens at bay – in the open air. But hidden by the island, they can get close enough for their rockets to reach us. They use fire-setting powder rather than explosive charges in their rockets so they'd only have to hit us a couple of times to set the ship on fire – and we're cooked. And unless we can get off the island, we've only our bow and stern rocket launchers plus the cutter's to keep'em at bay.'

He stopped and looked at me, 'Hopefully, the storm scattered the infernal-island-tribe to the endless sea and it's just a lone ship. If not, Wilitang, we're a savage's meal, no two ways about it.'

We hadn't even begun to build a fire when we heard more shouting. We climbed the ladder to learn what was up. The cutter had barely gotten above the tree line before it turned about and headed back down to the ship.

'The whole tribe! Twenty or more, heading this way!' Cley bellowed down between cupped hands.

'Right! Come alongside!' yelled Captain KaRaya and then looked over her ship and armed crew. We all looked at her. She sighed and shaking her head, said, 'As soon as the cutter's alongside, everyone get aboard her – no panic – by seniority. No panic, mind you, I'll shoot anyone who panics. Quickly now. We've only a few minutes before they'll be on top of us. We'll wait for no one.'

The crew scattered for the bunkroom to grab their kit bags while the cutter maneuvered to come alongside.

Fret glanced at me and sadly shook his head. 'The jig's up mate.'

'My kit's down below. See you on deck,' I said.

I shot down into the dark hole. Hissi hissed an urgent greeting. 'I'm going to change into my own gear. You ride in the satchel,' I said, stripping off my jumpsuit. I pulled out the satchel I kept hidden in a dark corner of the stoke hole, and donned my spaceer's uniform, adding the cutlass belt for good measure. Having the least seniority, I'd be the last to board the cutter, so I had time. And, well, donning my old uniform wasn't just a matter of pride, I'd hopes it would keep cross bow bolts from penetrating – at least not too far. I'd a strong feeling that might be important. Hissi climbed into the now empty satchel. 'Keep your head down. Things are going to be a bit wild, I fear,' I said as I slung it over my shoulder and pulled my jacket on over the satchel to give her some protection as well. Pulling my cap down hard, I climbed to the deck to join the line boarding the cutter. Looking down, I could see her little crocodile head was sticking out, unwilling to miss anything, no matter how frightening.

The crew was lining up and jumping across to the cutter floating alongside in roughly “senior hands” first order. No one was waiting for anyone to arrive, though all had found time to grab their kit bag and sling it over their shoulder. They all had their air rifles in hand as well. Captain KaRaya was on the deck-house roof deck directing two crewmen who were wielding axes to shatter an oil barrel. The oil was already a spreading pool of blackness, dripping down to the main deck. Apparently, she wasn't going to give the Vantras anything to loot.

A rocket streaked by with a whoosh and a tail of smoke, followed by another, as the first two dragon-boats drifted overhead. They just missed us in their exuberance. The cutter's small rocket launcher replied, sending a rocket into one of the boats with a flash and a boom. The entire crew sent a nearly silent volley up a well, since the boats were drifting "upside down" in order to fire their rockets.

A patter of cross bow bolts swept the deck. Someone yelled and another moaned, as they took a bolt.

The remaining crew, after taking their shots, began to push their mates forward.

KaRaya and the two crewmen who'd been spreading oil scrambled down to the main deck to join the line. Being the last to board the cutter I was still waiting on my turn when Captain KaRaya, arrived. Even though she was breathing hard, she looked very cool and level-headed as ever. She glanced about, one last time.

'Everyone aboard?' she asked Cley aboard the cutter.

'Aye, everyone alive, is here.'

Another rocket flashed down, clipping the port propeller wing, bursting into a shower of floating flames as the powder burned itself out.

'I think we can trust the Vantras to set fire to the oil,' she said to no one in particular as quivering bolts sprouted on the grating above and deck around us as the last of the crew members jumped the gap to the cutter.

My spacer fatalism had set in as I had awaited my turn, so I had at least the appearance of being calm when the Captain turned to me. 'Get aboard. Don't worry your debt, Wilitang, Alas, the books are going to be burned with the ship, so we'll say nothing about it when we reach Tyrina. Go. I'm right behind you.'

'Thanks, Captain, much appreciated,' I replied, stepping into the opening in the bulwark behind the penultimate crew member.

'Blast!' she cursed, behind me.

I turned back, expecting to see a bolt in her.

'Our blasted passengers!' she muttered, and then called out, Cley! I need to free our passengers. Drop down and pick me up on the lower gangplank.'

Another rocket crashed down, hitting the stump of one of our masts and burst into flames shooting sparks down to the deck. The oil would be aflame in seconds.

'Save the crew, Cley! Run for it if you can't reach me! Don't wait if it gets too hot! That's an order,' she added as she took off down the deck towards the bow of the ship and access ladders to the lower deck.

I can't say why I took off after her. Guilt, I suppose played its part. I hadn't given a lot of thought to our trade – slavery in everything but name – during these last few weeks, but I should've. Helping free the passengers might go some ways towards healing my karma. And well, I admired KaRaya's gesture. They were, after all, savage people who would cut her throat given half a chance, even if they hadn't been caged up, so there was something noble in her act. And well, they still might cut her throat even as she freed them. I'd best go along to cover her. In my fatalism, I didn't pause to calculate the odds.

The broad-feathered race navigate much faster and more sure-footed than we fine-feathered folk in weightlessness, so she had already shot down the ladder when I pulled up. I abandoned my useless rifle, and plunged down head first after her. She was emerging from the galley with the keys when I swung around and landed on my feet.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, surprised.

'I'll cover you as you open the doors,' I replied. 'I had qualms about this trade, you know.'

She nodded, and roaring out a string of commands in the islands' trade-lingo, hurried down the companionway between the cages, waving her springer pistol as a warning and keys as a promise. I followed her, drawing the cutlass I'd been issued – and my little darter from my jacket pocket. The cutlass was for show, the sissy, my real defense. She quickly unlocked the door of the farthest cage on the female side and then the male side and hurried back to do the next one before they could pour out. The occupants of the compartments, still storm-battered and semi-drunk, did not immediately surge out of their cages. This allowed the Captain to open the doors of the next four compartments before the captives, slowly and tentatively, began filing into the companionway. She finished unlocking all of them without incident, and stepping aside, ordered them to the island side gangplank with words and

gestures.

As we retreated to the outside gangplank gate, we felt the ship lurch and saw a ball of flames expand overhead. It had taken a while, but sparks, or more likely a rocket, had ignited the oil. Looking up through the smoke overhead, I saw two Vantra dragon boats poring a rain of bolts down on the cutter as it awkwardly maneuvered to come back around to the ship to pick us up. Dimly seen through the haze of smoke, half a dozen more dragon boats were emerging from the behind the island.

KaRaya shook her head. 'This won't do.'

Climbing onto the bulwark she cupped her hands and yelled 'Go! Get away while you can!' And pointed away from the ship.

Cley, standing in the open access port of the cutter, looked up and about. 'Captain?' he yelled.

'Go!' she commanded, and pointed again. 'Escape! Outrun them! That's an order!'

Cley saluted, snapped an order to DeJan manning the cutters small steam engine, and the second mate at the tiller. The cutter swung about and picked up speed as the idling propeller spun into invisibility. The Captain stood on the bulwark watching for several seconds as the cutter surged away, sending a rocket up into one of the overhead dragon boats.

'They've got a chance,' she muttered, before turning to me. 'Sorry.' The weariness of more than two rounds of non-stop work, suddenly took its toll.

I was very exhausted and rather emotionally numb as well with my old spacer fatalism. I could see for myself that by the time they'd have maneuvered the cutter close enough in to pick us up, we'd never have been able to escape, so it didn't matter. It had all been settled when I'd taken after the Captain.

I glanced back to see that the captives were now streaming out of the companionway – most were racing for the island side gangplank gate and the shattered trees of the island beyond it, only to disappear into the tangle of underbrush. A few bolder, or angrier, ones, were standing, eyeing us with revenge in their eyes.

'Captain,' I said.

She glanced back. 'Right,' she sighed. 'We should be going as well. We'll go this way, though,' she added, dragging me through a nearby door that opened to the galley's storeroom. She slammed it shut and turned the lock, adding, 'Let's get topside.'

There was a series of ladders stretching upwards through the storerooms to the upper deck. The Captain lead the way. I pocketed my sissy, and pulled myself up after her, one handed –keeping my cutlass in hand. I'd a feeling I was going to need it.

Halfway up, she stopped.

'I acted responsibly, didn't I, Wilitang?'

I stopped and stared up at her. 'Huh?'

'I acted like a responsible, sensible ship's captain through all of this, didn't I?' she repeated, looking down at me. 'Captain to captain. Honest appraisal. We don't have time for verbal fencing.'

No we didn't. I didn't think we had time even for this, but...

'Of course you did. You acted energetically and decisively. You did everything you could to save your ship, your crew, and passengers. No one could find any fault in anything you did. Nothing more could've been done. Can we get a move on it now?'

'Honestly?'

'Yes, Captain. Honestly.'

She smiled and started up again. 'I promised myself that I'd do nothing careless, nothing foolhardy. Nose to duty, and nothing else. And look what a disaster it turned out to be. It doesn't seem to matter what I do.'

'What exactly are we doing?' I asked, more to the point.

'We're going to make our way to the island like everyone else. I'm hoping our passengers will attract the Vantras' attention so we can slip ashore topside without being noticed.'

'Ah,' I said, as we reached a small closet-like compartment, and opening its door, found ourselves in

the chart room.

'This way.' she said indicating the door beyond the tall desk. 'We'll go up and make our way to the island.'

Hissi must have sensed the Vantra, and squawked a startled warning from under my open coat as the chart-room door swung open and a wild eyed, broad-feathered native plunged in. He stopped, startled to find the cabin occupied. I took a wild backhand slice at him with my cutlass. There was a thump and a cloud of blood as my blade struck his arm and chest. He screeched in surprise and pain, which KaRaya cut short with a silent shot to his heart with her springer – as she lunged past him to slam and bolt the door.

'Hurry up, Wilitang. It looks like they're going to try to loot the ship while they can. They won't have a lot of time. The fire is bound to reach the rocket magazine sooner or later. We'll want to be somewhere else when it does.'

I followed her through the door and into her quarters, closing and bolting the cabin door. She stepped over to the built-in drawers in one of the walls and began to dig through them. Pulling out my holstered darter, she tossed it to me. 'Here. I didn't have time to learn how to use it.'

She pumped her springer and climbed up a step or two on a ladder set in the forward bulkhead and carefully pushed open a hatch, letting in sunlight, and smoke. As she looked around, I shoved my cutlass back into its scabbard and slipped the darter's belt over my shoulder drawing the darter out.

'Follow me,' she said, and pushing the hatch fully open, disappeared upwards.

I followed her, and scrambled across a short section of deck to join her crouching behind the large winch set in the upper forecastle deck. The air was filled with eddies of smoke from the burning oil and rockets. Even with the fire amid-ship, two of the dragon boats had landed on the upper deck, their crews jumping off to grab what they could, while they could. The nearest boat was only five meters away, but the Vantras were so focused on the fire amidships, that they weren't looking our way. The boldest ones had already gone down to the deck and were now likely breaking down the doors of the deckhouses and the chart room below. Several of the more prudent ones hung back, ready to get clear if the smoky blaze 20 meters beyond should suddenly spread this way.

KaRaya ducked down and turned to me. 'Can you clear those fellows hanging about the boat without drawing attention?'

'Aye, they're close enough and the darter's silent.'

'Right. Take care of them and get aboard. I'll cut the anchor line and join you. You take the engine; I'll take the steering levers. Be careful, there may be more still on board,' she said, holstering her springer pistol and drawing her cutlass.

I nodded, and drawing a breath, rose, steadied my darter on the winch, armed the darter and took aim. With the smoke drifting across the bow, the drive beam showed up as a thin blue line in the smoke, making targeting easy. I dispatched the three fellows standing on the deck and the two still on the boat without them even noticing something was amiss. They just grew quiet.

KaRaya grinned, slapped my back, and set off in a low crouch to where they'd set a grappling hook into the deck. I raced to the open hatch of the dragon boat's cage, pushing the sleeping Vantra aside to climb on board. I wasn't wasting the darter's precious energy cell on killing charges. Minimum stun was all that was needed.

The dragon boat's arching cage covered a single deck that ran around its circumference. There was an open, shallow hold in the center of the boat filled with cargo. The rocket launcher was centered above the cage while the small boiler and steam engine were located in the shallow hold. There were two women in the hold, forward. I gave them each a dart and turned to find an old man emerging from under the deck aft with a bright sword. He had the look of a chief engineer. I gave him a dart as well. It appears that Litang can hit something when his life depended on it. Good to know.

'You okay, Hissi?' I asked, looking down at the satchel. Her little crocodile head looked up at me, eyes bright, and gave a long low hiss.'

'Aye, we need to find another line of work.'

KaRaya bounded aboard, slammed the portal grating shut and waved her cutlass triumphantly. 'We're clear. Full steam ahead, Wilitang!' she cried as she raced to the steering tillers on a slightly raised platform, aft.

I pushed off and landed in the hold, spinning around to see if there was anyone else awake in the hold. I could see no one in the piles of netted goods and supplies, so I ducked under the deck and crouching, made my way to the small boiler and engine aft. There was an opening in the deck over the engine through which I could see KaRaya standing by the tillers. I located the lever to release the steam and the lever to engage the propellers. 'Ready!' I called up.

'Full steam. They haven't noticed us yet...' A bolt landed quivering in the grating next to her. She grinned and duck down behind the bulwark. 'They have now. Let's get clear.'

I closed the escape valve on the boiler and opened the steam valve to the engine, pushing the gear lever to engage the propeller. With a tentative chug or two, we started off, slowly at first as the steam pressure built up, but it continued to chug faster and faster, so everything seemed in order. I reached down and found some clumps of fuel – it looked to be dried peat moss – and shoved a few into the small fire box by hand.

I stood up through the open hatchway and looked around. KaRaya was crouched behind the bulwark, but grinning happily. There was smoke everywhere, and I doubt our escape was noted by many aboard the burning Bird of Passage. Looking ahead through the smoke, I could see the cutter being chased by three dragon boats.

'Will the cutter get away?'

'Unless the savages can disable the engine, they'll shake them in less than a watch. I doubt the savages will stay on their tail that long. The cutter has twice the engine these dragon boats have. They'll do no damage with their cross bows and they aim their rockets pretty wildly. They'd have to get very lucky to disable the cutter. They'll be fine. Cley will see them through. Still, I think we'll head on a slightly divergent course. I don't relish running into the returning dragon boats.'

We sailed in silence for perhaps three minutes, both of us peering over the low bulwark frequently to see if we were being pursued. It seemed too easy. I noted that there were now three boats being tied up below the burning Bird of Passage, no doubt to chase our fleeing passengers, but no one seemed to be paying attention to us. No reason, I suppose. That meant that I could account for six boats between them and ones pursuing the cutter. Our boat made seven, and there may've been another two or three looting the Bird of Passage.

'I can account for nine or ten boats. How many more are there?'

'Plenty, but they're still beyond the island. I think we'll make our escape unnoticed in the smoke and looting. And if they see us they'll think we're pursuing the cutter. Or maybe not.'

I glanced back again to see the bow of a dragon boat emerging from the bright pall of smoke and fire, heading for us. Even with my darter, I doubted we'd be any match for a full ship of Vantra savages and cross bows at close range. I was about to go down and add some more fuel to the fire when there was a great flash of light, followed almost immediately by a shock wave that pushed and tumbled us as it swept by in a deafening boom.

Looking back, I could see a vast cloud of black smoke and smoking pieces of the ship tumbling away in all directions with dozens of rockets shooting out of the explosion. Several went hissing by us. The dragon boats anchored below the ship were shattered and alight.

KaRaya was grinning, and when we could hear again, she shouted, 'We carried a lot of rockets in our magazine. I think we should clear the ship of our dead.'

They weren't dead and would be coming to life shortly, so something would have to be done with them. I thought about it for a moment as I scurried forward and decided that they'd just have to swim for it. I grabbed hold of the old engineer, steered his limp body to the gate in the cage and shoved him out. The other two men and two women followed him into the bright sky. I don't know how much

karma that cost me, but when they came to, they could hail one of the surviving dragon boats. I didn't see any more humane way of dealing with them. In these islands where everyone not of their tribe was considered fair game for slavery, torture, and/or the pot, I think they got the best deal they could've expected.

The Pela seems to be quite toxic to my Unity Standard morality. Nothing I could do about it, it seemed. If I wanted to live, anyway.

## Chapter 14 The Voyage to Daeri

01

Either the explosion or the hopelessness of catching the more powerfully engined cutter brought the four pursuing Vantra dragon boats about. They were now more or less heading for us.

'I think it would be wise to steer for that cloud bank...' muttered the Captain as she swung the tillers sharply about and pointed the boat for a cloud shrouded island off to starboard.

Our strange change of course was noted by the Vantra boats, two of which altered course with the clear intent of intercepting us.

On a converging course, the Vantra boats closed in on us quickly. We soon could hear the Vantras hailing us. Captain KaRaya waved reassuringly – but it didn't seem to fool them, and they continued to close.

'How many darts do you have in that weapon of your?' she asked.

'Enough, if they don't put a quiver in me first,' I replied, watching the Vantra boat get ever closer. They may've been less than a half a kilometer away.

'Good to know...' But even as she said that, things began to grow vague as the first tendrils of the cloud bank began to swirl around us. She altered course slightly, sending us deeper into the mists, and then again when even the vague shadow of the Vantra ship was hidden in the whiteness. 'Full stop, Chief,' she whispered. 'Not a sound.'

I slipped down and cut the steam flow to the engine, while opening the escape valve. As the propeller slowed to a stop, I climbed back to the deck and drew my darter. Silently, I stared into the whiteness all around us, waiting for a large shadow to emerge. In the silence I caught the beating of a propeller, but no shadow of a ship emerged from the mists, and then, it was gone. We waited. And waited. They could be playing the same game as us.

Finally, the Captain gave a nod, 'Slow ahead.'

I slipped back down under the deck and eased the steam valve to the engine open, as I closed the escape valve and added some fuel to the boiler, and then pulled myself back up to the deck.

With the propeller whooshing softly astern, the tendrils of the cloud streamed by us, while we both strained our ears to hear the beat of another propeller, and our eyes to see its shadow-form.

What we saw, eventually, was a dark shadow ahead – the island wrapped in the mist, which the Captain steered us around at tree top level, startling the birds and lizards resting in the branches.

On reaching the far side, she nodded and said, 'Full speed. I think we've given them a miss.'

'Aye.' I slipped back down, opened the engine valve, tended to the firebox, and watched my engine work until I was satisfied that everything was running smoothly.

KaRaya, lounging against the ornate stern, the tillers before her, gave me a weary smile when I

climbed out of my low, little engine room and settled on the stern edge of the hatch where I could keep an eye on the steam gauge and the little, puffing steam engine. Hissi was off, exploring the nooks and crannies of the boat's holds, no doubt hunting for bugs, which, from what I'd seen below, she'd have no trouble finding. I'd given her a stern warning, with a suitably vivid picture in my mind, to be careful and not to get caught in a draft that would carry her overboard and into the whirling propeller. She had replied with a dismissive hiss and a disdainful flick of her tail. Kids.

'You're looking happy,' I said softly. I didn't say, but thought, "For a Captain who's just lost her ship." Still, I know too well the exhilaration of escaping certain death. I was feeling a touch of it myself. It overlaid the sore weariness that was creeping through my body, now that the press of events had slackened. Still, being alive instead of dead trumps all. 'It's good to be alive, isn't it?'

'It is indeed, Wilitang. Though I'm dead tired,' she laughed softly, adding, 'Still, I'm alive and free. I saw my crew safely off, gave my passengers a chance of freedom, killed a few deserving Vantra, and rid myself of the great and unrewarding burden of responsibility of captaining a worker recruitment ship. Perhaps I should be more concerned about the owners' loss, but, between you and me, they're not pleasant people. I'm sure they have the Bird of Passage insured for twice its worth, so they'll have nothing to kick about – not that I'm planning to call on them for my wages, and references. They're the type of people who'd kick regardless. I'll write it all off to experience. Besides, I have this fine dragon boat as a prize. It'll more than cover my wages when I sell it on Tyrina. Aye, we've made out alright, you and I.'

'So it seems. What now, Captain? Do we have a course?'

'Oh, I'm just KaRaya now. Captain KaRaya is a creature of the past. Fair sailing and good riddance. I'll confess to you, my dear Wilitang, that I find being responsible a great, and largely unrewarding burden. And it always seems to end, ironically, in a disaster, differing only in its scale when compared to the disasters I experience when I'm carefree and irresponsible. It seems my fate is to go from one blazing disaster to the next. It doesn't matter if it comes about by being happily carefree or serious and responsible. So, if I can't avoid trouble, I might as well enjoy getting into trouble. To the Inferno Island with responsibility! What are your orders, "Captain" Wilitang?'

'Oh, that's just an honorary title these days. I resigned my berth before I returned to find my friends, and like you, it's been one disaster after another since then. I have neither the wish nor the qualifications to assume command. I know nothing of the Principalities, or indeed, of this sort of sailing, so I'm afraid you cannot shed all your responsibilities yet, Captain. You're in command of this boat.'

She shook her head. 'No, no, As I said, to the Inferno Island with responsibility! I've learned my lesson.'

'It'll be Inferno Island indeed, if you insist on depending on me. I'll tell you what, I'll take on the role of Chief Engineer, if you'll remain Captain. A partnership of equals...'

'Equals!' she laughed.

'Well, that's how my chief engineers always seemed to look on it, outside of dealing with the owners.'

'Saints and sinners! All I need is a Chief Engineer,' she exclaimed with another laugh, but leaning forward over the tillers, offered her hand. 'But a partnership I'll accept, Wilitang. Share and share alike – the spoils and the burden of responsibility equally.'

I grasped her wrist as was the local custom. 'Fair enough, Captain. That is most generous of you,' I said and we sealed our partnership.

She settled back against the bulwark with a sigh, closed her eyes for a while, and then opening, gave me a sly look. 'That settled, can you find your boat with your bracelet?'

"Ah!" I thought. Still that was a rock in the drift. 'Yes. But not from here. I've long since lost the signal. But if you could find our way back to within a couple of rounds from where you signed me on, I could pick up the signal, and point you right to it.'



'Huumm... That far... I'm out of reckoning because of the serrata... and this boat is much slower than the Bird of Passage, so it could be 40 rounds or more sailing through the islands...' she sighed.

'I'm born and raised on an Outward Island trader, so I know my way around these islands. That's how I came to be captain of the Bird of Passage, even though I'm so young and beautiful...' she added with a glance at me and a carefree smile.

'I was wondering how someone so young and beautiful found herself captain of a slaver.'

'I became captain of a – a recruitment ship – because I needed coins and a change of scenery,' she replied archly. 'A plain Outward Island trader is my usual ship of choice, when I have one.'

'Oh, I believe you. I'm hardly in a position to criticize anyone, having signed on as a five-copper a round stoker to a "recruitment ship" myself.'

'No you're not, but getting back to this boat of yours. Are we in agreement that we're equal partners in that as well?'

I considered that question – for several seconds. 'If you can get me to my boat, I'd be happy to extend our partnership understanding to my boat as well. I'll need someone like you to recover it, and I like what I've seen in you, so yes, you're in. But just so everything is clear between us – that partnership begins when we find my boat and not before.'

She shrugged and extended her hand again. 'Fair enough.'

We shook on that again.

'So how eager are you to find your boat?' she asked warily, or wearily. Hard to say at this point.

'I'm not all eager if it means providing the main course of a village feast, if that's what you're suggesting. I'm a cautious fellow. What are our alternatives?'

'I'm thinking we should postpone that project until we can reach one of the big islands. With the profits from selling our dragon boat we can hire a reliable, well-armed island trader that'll take us to your boat. I know where to look for it. I know the trade, and I know the reliable traders, which is important in the Outward Island trade. Reliable traders are kinda rare.'

'Sounds like a plan. So, we sail to the Saraime?'

'Right. If we sail towards the brightest sky – once we clear this cloud bank – we should strike the Donta Islands – they're not that far and the island chain is wide and deep enough that we'll not miss it, though I can't say exactly where in the islands we'd strike. Between the serrata, and currents we're likely to encounter in this little boat, it's beyond my ability to predict. Still, that's of no great matter. Most likely we'll find ourselves in the region of Tyrina, Daeri, or Krizar. They're the major islands in this part of the Dontas. I've sailed out of all of them. It'll take maybe eight to ten rounds to clear these Outward Islands and then another 20 or so to cross the Donta Sea in this little boat. The Donta Sea itself has few islands, and no native population, so once we're clear of the islands, it's just a matter of sailing on and waiting for the Dontas to appear, assuming my chief engineer can keep his charge running.'

'And how likely is that? You realize I've no real knowledge of this type of engine except what I've picked up aboard the Bird of Passage.'

She roused herself off the bulwark. 'Let's have a look.'

She followed me down into the dim recess of the low deck and examined the hissing, thumping boiler and engine.

'Ah, an Akino. Good. They're reliable machines. Traders who wanted to avoid finding themselves in the pot don't sell shoddy goods to the Vantra. I'm sure if you keep it oiled and the steam pressure up, we'd need not worry too much. But then,' she smiled, 'I'm not going to worry about anything anymore.'

'And just to be clear. Even with this reliable engine, it's still too dangerous to search for my boat?'

She shrugged. 'I've given up being responsible, but I'll not go back to being thoughtless and foolish... I've sailed these islands my whole life, in one capacity or another, and I'm not anxious to do it in a small boat – with a crew of two. A dragon boat might send any hunting party scurrying for the clouds – if they didn't wait to see how thinly it's manned. However, if we were to spend 50 rounds making our

way back to your boat, well, we'd have to be mighty lucky not to cross courses with some tribal raiding party appearing from around an island that would be large enough to challenge even a fully manned dragon boat. The bigger islands have tribes who range far and wide to hunt, and when in the mood, raid. And none have any love for the Vantra. The longer it takes to find your ship; the more war bands we'd have to fight off. Care to chance it?"

'No. I think not. As I said, I'm a cautious fellow. And, well, I've no great need for my boat at present. I'd like to get my bearings before I... Well, I'm on a bit of a quest. But there's no point going off ill-prepared. I'm fine with giving these islands a miss and heading for the Donta Islands.'

'A quest, Wilitang?'

I gave her a glance. 'We'll have time enough for that tale, KaRaya. Let's just say I'm looking for a girl, a Simla dragon and a Temtre pirate and leave it at that for now. I think we both need to get some sleep, and the tale's a long one.'

She grinned at me. 'If you weren't so right – about needing some sleep – I'd not let you off that easily. But it must wait. So, we're agreed to head inwards?'

'Aye. If we can. If we have enough fuel and supplies.'

'This boat had a crew of 20 or more, so food should not be a problem, though I'll tell you straight out, I'm tossing any meat that I can't clearly identify...' she said with her carefree laugh, that even on our short acquaintance, I suspected hinted as to how she found herself a captain of a slaver. 'We can survey our prize's supplies and cargo. We can toss out what we don't want, divide what we keep, and see where we stand with food and fuel.'

'Ah, it looks like we're clearing the cloud bank. I'm about at the end of my tether, Wilitang. What do you say I set a course and then grab a nap? You should be able to keep an eye on both the tillers and the engine.'

'I'll certainly have to learn,' I admitted.

'Aye, you will, if you want to see the Dontas, your ship, that girl, the dragon, and the pirate.'

As we cleared the clouds, she showed me how to use the two tillers, one to steer "up" and "down" the other starboard and port. 'You can use these straps here to tie the tillers in position. You should have plenty of time to attend to the engine, since the only reason to move the tillers will be to avoid an island, or their inhabitants in boats.'

She set our course for the brightest spot in the milky blue-green sky. 'There are instruments to find that spot, but the Vantras wouldn't have any use for them since they just steered by the islands,' she said, and then, after a long yawn, added. 'Right. Just keep her on this course. Wake me if you see trouble, or can't keep awake yourself. I just need a quick nap, so don't hesitate.'

'Aye, Cap'n.'

And as she went forward and down into the open hold to look for a hammock, I took the helm, suddenly realizing how tired I was as well. Oh, well, I could always have Hissi nip my ear to keep me awake, though now, she'd probably take the whole ear off. She'd grown.

A 15-meter-long dragon boat has a beam and height of some 5 meter amid-ship, narrowing fore and aft. An open cargo/living hold runs down the middle of it circled by a meter-wide deck next to its bulwark, widening to a full deck in the stern. Supplies are stored under the deck. It has a platform above the cage amidships for the simple rocket launcher. It is driven by a single propeller aft, with a rudder and two steering wings controlled by tillers. The small boiler, condensers and steam engine, are set under the after deck, with bunkers on either side for the peat moss fuel burned in the boiler's hot box.

Once she was asleep I took the opportunity to use the tillers to get a feel for how the boat steered

and kept a close eye on the engine and boiler. With everything so new and different, I'd enough to worry about and to do to keep me awake, though I was pretty much a zombie by the time she emerged from the hold, with a jug of a bitter beer and a jar of preserved cabbage which she shared. 'A funny breakfast, but I know what these are.'

I found the hammock she'd slung under the deck, and the world blinked out almost before I had settled in.

When I awoke, we ate again and then, with the tillers tied, we set out tossing overboard the useless personal effects and questionable food of its late owners, keeping the known food, drink, and fuel while dividing the potential trade goods and the contents of the boat's treasure chest equally. KaRaya insisted on that.

'We'll not be falling out over our fair share of the loot. I've seen knives drawn and blood spilled in arguments over a few dragon disks' worth of spoils. Half and half is fair, isn't it?'

'Aye,' I agreed.

The treasure chest held mainly trade trinkets of little value, dragon disks – actual thin slices of glistening dragon vertebrae, which are used as money in the Outward Islands, and a handful of gold and silver coins, all of which were counted out and evenly divided. It also held an assortment of odds and ends, and much to KaRaya's delight, a deck of almost new playing cards. The Saraime version of cards consisted of six colored sets, each color with three dragon cards and six bird flocks.

Watches were set Pela fashion – in a pattern of three, one common watch and a solo watch for each of us, but no set duration. KaRaya spent her first solo watch crafting a card playing surface where you could place the cards played under a fabric band to prevent them from floating off. And then during our common watch she began to teach me the local games of chance.

'I'm not much of a lad for games of chance,' I said.

'No matter. You'll soon be bored enough to learn. Besides, we'll only play for dragon disks, so you needn't fear I'll win your share of your boat. I've seen knives drawn and blood spilled over stakes in gold and silver.'

'You seem to have seen a lot of knives drawn and blood spilled.'

'I like dangerous men. But I'll make an exception for you, Wilitang, this once.'

We steered well clear of most islands. Though you wouldn't know it by looking at them, many of the larger islands are home to one tribe or another, none of them friendly to strangers. We'd often see their hunting boats in the distance, but everyone seemed willing to let us alone. A Vantra boat will do that, I guess. The sky-sea was filled with the usual birds and flying lizards, plus the occasional larger dragons as well. We saw several that looked to be as large as our boat, but they steered clear of us as well, perhaps familiar with rockets. The exception was one bright red and yellow feathered three-meter-long dragon that swooped past – startling the Neb out of me at the tiller – and settled, bird-like on the boat's forward grating. It gave me a long, challenging look with its black and yellow eyes.

'Hello, mate,' I called out softly so as not to awake KaRaya. 'Take a load off your wings and rest a spell.' I've always made it a point to be congenial to my superiors, and I was treating all the Dragons of the Pela as its masters just to be on the safe side. The young dragon sleeping on my shoulder, who, opened an eye, gave the red dragon a look, a low hiss, and went back to sleep. If even my young, little walnut-brained dragon could run me out of dragon disks at Dragon's Luck, (more of that in a moment) I had to assume that the big dragons were indeed, intelligent.

When KaRaya began to stir in the hammock slung we'd slung between the decks, I called out, 'Watch your head! We've company.'

Opening her eyes to see a red dragon on the grating overhead, got her wide awake fast, with a string of startled curses. She rolled out of the hammock and keeping low (the dragon may've been able to stick his snout through the cage if it cared to but wouldn't have reached her even if she had stood up on

the keel deck) scurried forward.

'What in the Blue Islands are you doing letting a Flame Dragon hang about?'

'He's just resting, I think. No harm in that.'

'Just resting, you think?'

'Can't think of anything else he'd be doing just sitting there half the watch, unless he thought you were dead and was waiting patiently to be fed. He was sort of eyeing you.'

'You and your dragons.'

'Well, what exactly should I have done to shoo him away?'

'You got that darter of yours...'

'Aye, and a limited supply of darts and charges that I'm hoping to last a long lifetime by not having to use them to shoo away harmless dragons.'

'He wouldn't be so harmless if he was on this side of the cage.'

I shrugged. 'I believe you, but he's not, so I believe he'd doing us no harm by hitching a ride. I intend to stay on the right side of the Pela's dragons.'

'I doubt that'll prevent them from eating you at the first opportunity.'

'I hope to keep that question open for a long, long time. But this one has no opportunity, so I can afford to be hospitable.'

She shook her head and said again, 'You and your dragons.'

We made several landfalls on several smaller, uninhabited islands before we left them behind. One was to collect a supply of cabbage-greens to supplement the rice and dried fruit which were the Vantras' main non-meat food. We found a grove of coconuts on another. It seems that the humans of the Pela brought a lot of crops from the Nebula, who brought them from a very distant Terra. We had jettisoned all the dried meat we found on board, just to be on the safe side. We did, however, surprise several hunters in a large canoe, and purchased, with some trinkets, two large lizards they had killed. We left them just staring at the trinkets, in wonderment – they'd have been very lucky escape this close of an encounter with a Vantra dragon boat alive. KaRaya butchered the lizards. She cooked the legs for dinner in the ship's cast iron peat moss fired stove. We smoked the meat of one lizard in a tin box that could be set over the boiler's smoke stack, and air dried the other one, fending off the birds who circled the boat, swooping and diving to nab bits and pieces of the thin slices of flesh we had stitched to the grating.

Our second landfall was a small island with a bamboo forest. I had mentioned, during one of our rambling conversations, that I was somewhat adept with a sword. This excited KaRaya. 'I love a good sword fight! We'd must practice,' she exclaimed. However, a few exercises with the cutlasses convinced me that both of would not survive the voyage, using real blades, so when we spied the bamboo grove, we stopped to cut a large bundle of young blades to use as practice swords.

Our final landfall in the Outward Islands was on the peak of a large island whose surface was scarred by cuts where its highly compacted peat moss – the partially composted remains of eons of dead moss and vines – had been harvested. This peat moss was commonly burnt for fuel when charcoal wasn't available. We laid in a good supply before setting out to cross the barren sky-sea of the Donta Sea, well supplied with food and fuel.

By the time we'd put the Outward Islands behind us, the three of us had settled into a comfortable routine and an easy friendship. We told yarns of our lives and adventures, and in the telling of them, came to know the other well. I decided to tell her the truth of my origins, with a suitable warning that she could consider me a great liar, if she cared to. Telling the truth and still being considered a great liar seems to be my fate. She semi-believed me – there were myths in the Saraime of human origin arising from beyond the Pela – so she could believe me, if she cared to. We both agreed, however, that it would be better if my worlds beyond the Pela were replaced with very distant large islands in the Pela when talking about my origins. The inner-outer space of the Pela was known in the Saraime Principalities,

and so the possibility of traveling great distances through it in a short amount of time might be believable – and could be used to explain my great ignorance of the Saraime Principalities. And since rockets were common, a ship powered by rockets would be nearly believable as well. (Though Pela rockets were solid fueled, a liquid fueled one, much less a plasma rocket, was again pushing up against believably.) KaRaya's career was not unlike many carefree spaceers. She was literally born on an Outward Island trading ship that her parents owned, and grew up in the trade. She'd gone off on her own, rising in rank and responsibility only to fall with some ill-considered scheme or another.

'Wilitang?' she asked, early in the voyage. In the Principalities, or at least in the Dontas, names are made of the family name coming first – usually one syllable, and then the personal name, so that “Wil” was considered my family name and “Litang” my personal one. She, however like the sound of “Wilitang” and so called me by that name. Having sailed under a made-up name for a decade, I didn't bother to correct her, and if we reached the Dontas, everyone else could as well. I could live as Wilitang, at least it was my real name. When in the Principalities, be a Principalian.

'Raya?'

'I know you have a girl in your heart, Wilitang, and my heart has been broken many times by men who also had girls in the offing – ones they either failed to mention, or found when I was away – so we'll be as brother and sister. No hearts to break.'

'That suits me. I've sailed with mixed crews all my life, so sailing with you is the way I've always known. And I do have only room in my heart for one love, so I'd be delighted to be your older, wiser brother.'

She grinned. 'We'll be twins.'

03

Our course, inwards to the brightest part of the sky, was so imprecise that it allowed the tillers to be lashed most of the time, with slight adjustments made every so often to account for air currents or to avoid islands and such. We kept our watches, taking turns sleeping when we grew sleepy, but otherwise, all we needed to do was to feed the firebox and oil the chugging little steam engine every so often. To pass the watch when we were all awake, we'd “exercise” with our bamboo swords and then sit around yarning and/or playing Dragon's Luck, or one of the half a dozen card games KaRaya was trying to teach me.

This education was slowly draining my pouch of my share of the dragon disks, much to Hissi's hissing disgust, which quickly turned to exacerbation, and finally action.

'Alright, if you're so smart, what card should I play?' I snapped, as Hissi, draped over my shoulder, her head at my chin, gave a loud, dismissive snort as I selected my card.

She slipped down a little and touched her nose to the Green Serpent Dragon card.

'Right,' I muttered and replacing my card, played the Green Serpent. 'You play this hand.'

She did. And won. Apparently she had not been wasting her time all those watches when she was observing the card games in the bunkhouse aboard the Bird of Passage.

So, with little to lose, I let Hissi play for me. She didn't win every hand, but she was winning many of them until KaRaya tossed down the last card in a losing hand, and angrily sneered, 'Whom am I playing here? Hissi or Wilitang?'

'Does it matter?'

'Three hand's a better game. Hissi can play her own hand, she's won her stake...'

Hissi gave a little bark of laughter and shot off my shoulder to take her position between us on the deck. She reached over and, grabbing the thin leather pouch I had my dragon disks in, pulled it over to her side.

'Hey, those aren't all yours!'

'Most of 'em are,' said KaRaya with a grin as she shuffled the cards. 'We need to come up with something to hold her cards. I don't think she can hold them herself, and well, we don't want little claw

holes in the cards... Let me think...'

She thought for a moment, and stood and wandered off to root around in the remaining junk below deck. Hissi sat tall on her rear legs, tail behind her, grinning proudly at me. Of course, she was always grinning, since her crocodile jaws always gives the impression of a grin, so her grin was in her little glittering black eyes and angle of her head.

'So you know how to play cards, do you?'

She snorted dismissively.

'Or are you just reading our minds?'

She gave her barking laugh, and then hissed dismissively. Even as a pea-brained newly hatched dragon she never had a great respect for my mind. Her walnut sized brain now, had no more respect for it either.

KaRaya returned with a small wooden chest which she set down on its side before Hissi. 'We can stick the cards between the box and the lid. You,' this to Hissi, 'just point to the card you want to play, as you have been doing, and we'll play it. Teeth and claws would soon make our deck a tattered wreck and we wouldn't like that, would we?'

Hissi agreed with a shake of her head and a long, low hiss.

'And, oh, give Wilitang some of those disks. We'll see who wins more of them, you or I.'

It was a close-run affair, but Hissi, I think, won more of them and a fair amount of KaRaya's as well, since I was often out before the game ended.

At last KaRaya exploded, 'How in Inferno Island can I be losing to a Simla dragon?'

'Blame it on that crew of yours.'

I'd been asking the same question myself. Of course, she'd been watching us play for some time and perhaps following the instructions KaRaya was giving me on how to play, but I had a feeling she knew it all already. 'She spent a lot of time while I slept in the bunk room watching the off-duty crew play cards. She must've picked up the idea of how the game works from them and perhaps your instructions.'

'I think it takes more than just watching card playing to learn how to play cards. DaJon's ginki-bird was watching too, but I doubt it would clean me out of dragon disks.'

'Simla dragons and ginki-birds are beasts of different feathers. I've known only one other Simla dragon, but they're clearly intelligent, and likely telepathic as well. She's probably reading our minds as we play. I don't know if she can see our cards through our eyes, but I'm certain she can sense our thoughts on the hand.'

'I suppose... the Simla dragons I encountered in the stories I read as a kid were pretty wise, but I'm not sure they're really telepathic. Dragons are considered intelligent creatures in the Saraime, while lizards are considered animals, though how the line is drawn, I'm not sure. But Simla dragons are dragons in that sense, but I never heard of them being card sharks.'

'Blame it on the company she keeps. That, and reading your mind...'

'Still...'

'How else do you explain how she's not only playing the game as it should be played, but winning, even against you?'

A shrug. A dark look at the little dragon. 'Luck.'

A dismissive hiss from the little dragon.

'Oh, there's luck in the cards,' I said to keep the peace. 'But luck doesn't explain it all. She knows how the game works and I've no doubt that she may be cheating a little...' A hiss from the little dragon. 'Well, you could be... But why am I telling you all this? I gather Simlas are familiar in the Saraime. Every Temtres ship seemed to have at least one of them aboard. You should know more about them than I. I was told that all the great dragons are intelligent and are the true rulers of the Pela.'

Hissi barked her approval.

KaRaya put the cards away. 'There's no end to the islands. And there's no end to the stories about the islands. You hear all sorts of stories about all sorts of dragons, Simlas included. I'm tired now, the

watch is yours, Wilitang.'

'Aye, it's mine,' I acknowledged formally, mostly out of habit.

As KaRaya went forwards to her hammock strung between the two decks, I said to Hissi softly, 'She doesn't like to lose.'

Hissi agreed, with a soft hiss.

'Best remember that, if you like playing cards.'

She gave me a long look with her black eyes, gathered my meaning, and hissed her agreement.

When I awoke from my nap, I found KaRaya and Hissi playing Dragon's Luck on deck before the tiller. Hissi resting on her hind legs, her tail behind her, was hunched over, examining her cards and KaRaya's play with great intensity. She had a new card holder – a nice, thick section of bamboo with a slit on top to slip the cards in, and her own pouch to hold her winnings in.

'I'm teaching her DuDan's Folly. You can make a lot of coins with DuDan's Folly, if you know how to play it properly,' said KaRaya looking up as I approached.

Hissi gave an eager, barking laugh.

'The question is, what are you going to do with all coins you win?' I asked Hissi.

It didn't take long to find out, since between the two girls, I soon ran out of dragon disks to wager. KaRaya suggested that perhaps I might trade some of my share of the trade trinkets for some of Hissi's dragon disk winnings. 'Charge her retail price,' she added.

Hissi hissed dismissively.

However, it proved easy to convince Hissi that she looked dashing with a bright, colorful scarf around her neck. It only took one long look in a shard of a mirror with a bright scarf to convince her that Simla dragons looked even more beautiful with a scarf – and bright broaches to pin on it. This passion for style kept me in dragon disks until almost the end of the voyage. And though, by the end of the voyage she had ended up with both my supply of trinkets, and dragon disks – I did manage to retain my share of the ship and its major assets, by refusing to play every time KaRaya and Hissi played. And I did charge that young, arrogant slip of a dragon, full retail.

Card playing was not enough to keep KaRaya amused. We hadn't stopped on that island to cut bamboo blades for our health.

'Are you any good with a blade?' she had asked on the second or third round of watches, after growing restless.

'I believe so. Though, having to use claw-toed boots to stay attached to land has put a crimp in my style,' I replied.

'We can't have that,' she exclaimed at once, and went off, to return shortly with two bamboo poles she'd found under the deck, which she split and strapped to the edge of our cutlasses. 'I don't want you getting too cut up.'

That done, we cleared a space on the deck and set out to practice our fencing. Or at least that's what I thought we were doing.

Neither of us got maimed, but it was a close-run affair. I was a better fencer, but she was far more agile with her articulated and clawed feet, so she could fight from every odd angle, even clinging to the grating overhead effortlessly. If she would've been content to practice forms and routines, the sheathed cutlasses would have sufficed. But she wasn't. Practice for her was fighting off pirates on the deck of the ship – which is to say, anything goes. I feared that her anything goes style, with wild attacks from all angles would have me – or her – accidentally poking an eye out or some such thing. One such thing was the low attack she favored – her laughter telling me that she was just doing it just to alarm me. Which it did.

'Enough. I've no intention of losing an eye to practice sword play.' I panted after a while.

'I'm keeping my attacks well away from your eyes, Wilitang.' She grinned.

'I noticed. However, I thought we were going to practice, to work on form, not conduct some freewheeling bout.'

'But this is how we fight. Maybe on your islands you step and stomp, but we broad-feathered folk fight far more freely than that. And it's the broad-feathered folk you're likely to be fighting with a sword.'

'As long as my darter has darts and is charged, I'll not be fighting anyone, broad or fine-feathered with a sword,' I replied.

'As long as your darter has darts. And when it doesn't?'

'I intend to live a safe and sane life, one that I'll not need darts.'

She grinned, waving her cutlass about to encompass the dragon boat and sky-sea. 'Nice start.'

'Live and learn.'

She shook her head. 'I think, Wilitang, you're doomed to run out of darts. Remember, you have a boat to collect in the Outward Islands and a girl to find on a Temtre ship somewhere in the Donta Islands. You'd best learn how to wield a sword and move about broad-feathered – island – style. I'll tell you what. We'll keep an eye out for a bamboo forest, and we'll cut a bundle of young reeds. That's how we learned as kids. They're light and supple enough so that I can poke you...

'The Neb you can...'

'...without hurting you. And we'll make leather masks to protect our eyes. I'll leave you to come up with something to protect your jewels...'

Shortly after that we found the bamboo grove island I mentioned. We tied up alongside and cut a large bundle of young, green blades of a certain size. We then spent several watches crafting handles and guards that could be attached to the bamboo blades since the reeds had only a limited lifespan, especially with KaRaya "island" style sword fighting. I also fashioned a bamboo dagger as well. With KaRaya capable of coming at me at all angles, I figured I'd be needing a second blade. We also crafted leather masks that were tied tightly around our heads and necks with a bowed bamboo piece for a nose guard to keep the mask far enough away from our eyes to provide a cushion in the event of a hit. We punched small holes in the leather to see through. They allowing a rather dim and limited view, but gave me a much more comfortable feeling when facing KaRaya's carefree attacks. And I did fashion a coconut shell to protect my jewels – though my armored clothing protected me from even the sharp point of a splintered blade. And thus, equipped, we fenced for hours each round with only bruises to show for it. I slowly evolved a style of footwork that kept one claw-toed boot lightly attached to the carpeted deck and capable of being easily ripped free, as needed. KaRaya, after whining about me cheating with a second blade, crafted her own, and I began to teach her how to use it.

04

With the Outward Islands behind, all that remained was the bright, endless sky-sea and the bright endless day – solitude measured by the steady beating of the propeller and the rhythmic thumping of the little steam engine.

It was not all brightness. My inner outlook could grow dark at times while standing my solo. With nothing to do but sit on the edge of the engine hatch, keeping an eye on the steam pressure gauge and on the boat's bow to see that we were still heading towards the brightness, I could find myself very lonely. I was further from Faerlain, further from everything and everyone I'd ever known and cared for than I ever had been, or could ever have imagined I'd be. I could see no course back to my old life, friends, and family. Given a chance, and seeing how things had turned out, I'd have chosen not to return to the Pela – at least that was how my thoughts sometime ran in those lonely watches. Useless even to think about that. But I did anyway.

It was not so much that I regretted my decision, but that it had carried me so far out of my orbit that



I was lost in a trackless universe that wasn't my own. It seemed at times that it may've been wiser to have turned outwards and tried my luck contacting Min, Tenry and Vynnia first, turning inwards only if I was unable to contact them, or they were unable to rescue me. Who's to say that I'd not now be aboard the Rift Raven, starting a long voyage back to the Unity? Of course, how I'd have felt about that was an open question.

I may love Naylea, but I'm not blind to her sharp, dangerous edges, except, I guess, when it mattered most. Like when I gave her my heart. She could be cold, hard and cruel, even to me. I put those traits down to the requirements of her job, and yet she'd come within a millimeter of sending a lethal dart into me. Still, our time together had taken on such a golden glow that I had turned the gig inwards with little misgivings, certain that if I could find her – and if our pasts could be forgotten – things could be very right between us. This loneliness would be a forgotten price paid for a long, loving partnership. But I also knew that if I could find her – and remarkably enough, that was almost a given in my head, so great is my faith in Siss and Hissi – it would be wise not to find her too soon. However little my ancestors meant to me, they meant a great deal to her. She may have abandoned St Bleyth in her conscious loyalties, but the Order in all its ramifications, including family feuds, still had its hold on her. She would need a thousand rounds, or perhaps ten thousand rounds for those ties to become the memory of the person she once was. And in those thousands of rounds, if I survived them, the Unity and the life I'd left behind, would've faded to myth as well. In those dark watches, I regretted that.

I have tried, in this account, to avoid making it a "dear diary" – however, I've also tried to keep it honest as well. I've learned to relate the dangers in the best "old spaceer" style, overlooking or understating the fears that accompanied them, but in this case, I do think honesty required me to set out my doubts and regrets. Hissi and I may've survived capture, the stoke hole, and the attack of savages, but not without fear and dark regrets at times.

And yet, as dark as my brooding may have grown, Hissi would silently wiggle up from the lower deck with her treasure pouch in her jaws. She'd give me a brief dart of her tongue on my nose, and then settle on my lap where we'd select the scarves and broaches from the pouch that she'd wear this round while I straightened out any of her feathers. After that, she'd find her card holder and we'd play cards – without keeping score, for I had no intention of ending this voyage, or our partnership as her indentured servant – until KaRaya awoke. We'd make a meal, and then attack each other with our bamboo swords until I grew tired. After that, we'd talk until I felt like taking a nap. I'd awake to a bright day, fence some more, play cards, exchange stories and perhaps, explore with the ever cheerful and carefree KaRaya, various schemes to retrieve my boat and get fantastically rich. And for a while those plans would drive away the dark clouds of regrets that would sometimes gather in the lonely watches.

Leaving the Outward Islands behind left only two worries – encountering another serrata that would carry us off, if not tearing the boat apart, and engine failure. We did lose steam pressure once that required us to shut the engine down and tear apart the condenser system to find the blockage, but we managed to accomplish that and put it back together again without a problem. However primitive the engine's design seemed, it was built to be durable and reliable and it carried us safely to the Donta Islands of the Saraim Principalities.

05

Our passage across the islandless Donata Sea was uneventful – some 22 "days" by my com link. On the far end, we began to encounter clouds – a sure sign of islands. The clouds quickly grew into a pall of dense, dark, rain-thick clouds that wrapped their cool, wet greyness around us.

'I can smell the islands, Wilitang. We're likely amongst the smaller ones already, so keep a sharp lookout ahead,' said KaRaya as I came aft after my watch below.

The air was cool and streaming with floating rain drops that did smell of vegetation. 'It's certainly

thick enough. Will they clear soon?'

She shrugged. 'Hard to tell. Cloud banks this thick were likely formed by a recent serrata. The serrata winds can carry off whole lakes on the islands large enough to have them, so I'm thinking we could be close to one of the larger islands. You might even see some fish about if the birds and lizards haven't found them yet.'

'Carry off lakes?'

'It doesn't take all that strong of a serrata to blow half a lake into the sky, even on the biggest of the Donta islands.'

'I suppose it wouldn't...' I nodded, thinking of the wave action on the low grav lakes on the moons.

'Call me if you see or even sense an island. In this part of the Dontas, we've nothing to fear from the inhabitants, so we can lay up and wait on any island for the clouds to clear before we set our final course.'

'Right,' I said, exchanging places with KaRaya who went below for her nap.

I turned up the collar of my jacket and pulled down my cap low over my eyes, and squinted to keep the floating raindrops from drifting into my eyes. The chug of the steam engine under the deck and the whooshing of the propeller behind me were almost silenced by the thick clouds that we were pushing through. Occasionally the grey shadow-form of a bird or winged lizard would flash in and out of the gloom, so we were indeed close to islands. I may've even caught a glimpse of a small fish, still wiggling amongst the drops of the floating lake.

We found our island later in my watch. We had approached it so gradually that I never noticed either the deepening darkness as the dragon boat sailed into the shadow of a great island, dead ahead, nor the fact that I needed a foot against the cowl of the engine room hatch to keep my place at the tillers. It was only after the boat emerged from the thick cloud bank and I found myself facing, or rather, looking down on a dim-lit forest as far as the eye could see, that I realized we'd made our landfall. The island was still 10 kilometers off, but when I stood up to get a better look at it and found that I had to hold on to the tillers to keep my place. I suddenly realized – too late – that we were already within the gravitational well of a large island.

I swung the boat parallel to the island and called to KaRaya.

She scrambled up to the deck, and looking at the island ahead – or rather below us – rattled off a long string of curses which greatly alarmed me. She pushed past me to the tillers and swung the boat around to stand it on its tail in order to sail directly away from the island which had us standing on the stern bulkhead, though the gravity seemed lighter than any of the inhabited moons I'd visited.

'Sorry. I called you as soon as I saw the island. I guess I didn't notice the light touch of gravity.'

'Never mind. Couldn't be helped.'

'So why the curses? Isn't this one of those large islands we were looking to find?'

'Aye, it looks and feels like one all right. And we're likely too close to escape it.'

'And we want to escape it?'

'Aye, we do. You may've noticed, our dragon boat only has steering rudders. This boat wasn't designed to sail over large islands. It lacks the wings a boat needs to keep aloft over an island large enough to keep people on the ground. We're likely already falling towards it, and I suspect, we'll continue to fall despite the best efforts of our little engine to push us away.'

I considered that. I'd landed enough boats on worlds and moons, that landing even an under-powered boat on an island with perhaps .05 standard gravity, did not greatly alarm me.

'The engine should make our descent very gradual even if we can't escape. If need be, we can set the sail and use it as a parachute to slow us down even further. I don't think we're in any great danger of crashing.'

'Oh, we can land safe enough, Wilitang. That's not my concern. Where we land is. We don't want to land down there, if we can help it,' she said with a sweep of her hand.

'It does look rather wild, but still, aren't these big islands well populated?'

'Yes. But not in the shadow lands. And from the look of the land below, we're in the middle of the shadow lands.'

'The shadow lands?'

'On these big islands it gets rather dark and a bit cooler on the side facing away from the bright sky. Farming in the shadows doesn't pay, so the deepest shadow lands are lightly inhabited. Some big ranches on the prairies and primitive, rather unfriendly people in the woods and mountains.'

'I thought we'd left the unfriendly people behind in the Outward Islands.'

'For the most part, we have. But in the deep shadow lands and on the smaller fringe islands of the Dontas you might find some less than friendly people. Not like the savage people of the Outward Islands, but let's say, not very welcoming people. Nothing we can't deal with... My main concern is that if we're forced to land here, we'll have a very long walk ahead of us to reach civilization.'

I gave her a hard look. 'Well, how did you expect this voyage to end? Arriving from the Outward Islands, we'd always be arriving at these islands from their shadow side.'

'Aye. But I had expected to see them in the distance and steer first for one of the smaller islands that we could land on. And then after we'd gotten our bearings, we'd sail for the offshore island port of the nearest of the larger islands – big ships don't land on the big islands themselves, but offload their cargo and passengers on the big islands' nearby small island port, which are then carried down on winged boats. We never needed to go down to the big island. We could've sold this authentic Vantra boat for enough coins to charter an Outward Island trader to take us back to your boat. I wasn't expecting the serrata clouds, nor striking one of the large islands dead center.'

'Your typical disaster.'

She gave me a bright smile, 'Yes, it is. Amazing, isn't it? Still, we've made it safely to the Dontas, so my luck of surviving them is still intact. We'll get out of this disaster as well, we may just have to take a long trek through the wilds of the shadow lands. And after the Outward Islands, that would be a walk in the park.'

'Any reason to suspect that that won't be a disaster as well...'

She shrugged. 'We'll get clear of it, if it is. But what we need to do now is stop talking and start working to keep aloft long enough to make the bright side of the island before we land.'

'How?'

'We'll rig the sail to act like a wing – it should keep us aloft for quite a while. Hopefully long enough to make the bright side, and then insure a soft landing when the time come. Let's get working. We haven't time to waste,' she said, lashing the rudders and springing the hatch in the cage to get at rolled up sail and mast that was secured along the top of the grating. I followed her through the hatch and climbed along the grating. Even in the slight gravity, this was a bit trickier now. We brought the sail inside and quickly tied lines to it so that it could be deployed flat between the two light spars the Vantra boat carried to form a fabric wing – a crude version of the fabric wings I'd seen used on personal fliers over the blue seas of Belbania. We lashed two spars to the rigging, attached a sail to each, and tied their back edge to the grating where we could adjust the angle of the sail to get a bit of lift out of it. When we were done, I glanced down at the island below us. I didn't think we'd gained any altitude, but we hadn't lost much either. Once we had the sail wing set to deploy we climbed back down to the deck.

'Take the tiller, Wilitang and pick a horizon to steer for, and set her nose a little above it. I'll look after the sail-wing.'

'You know these islands and I don't. Tell me what direction to steer to.'

'I've no idea what island this is. I've not seen its full shape or characteristic landmark. Pick the brightest looking horizon and trust your luck. Then get that bucket of bolts of yours working at full steam – we need to build some velocity to set this sail properly.'

'Right.' I wasn't eager to rely on my luck – it was proving to have a mind of its own. But I wasn't about to waste even a second arguing about it. I looked down and around, seeing nothing but dark forests and rugged hills rising like mountains – and good sized ones at that. There was no distinct edge

in sight – the forests and hills faded to grey in the mists and no horizon looked brighter, so I choose one that seemed to have fewer mountain peaks, and Neb, help me, swung the bow of the boat down and around, pointing it towards the horizon I'd chosen. No longer standing on our whirling tail, the boat lurched forward as KaRaya struggled to get the sail-wing drawing right, adjusting the lines to set it at an angle that provided some lift to the boat as we drove it ahead.

Several hours later – by my com link – found us sailing over a broad mountain valley with a lake at its center, surrounded by dark green and mauve forests and bordered by a wide margin of reeds and mud. Hundreds of little streams were flowing into it from the surrounding woods. Off to starboard, the higher peaks of the mountains now towered above us, and ahead, a line of foothills loomed, nearly level with us. We were aiming for a notch in these hills, still some kilometers away. Clearing that notch looked to be a close-run affair, even with our engine racing and our boat's nose pointed up to maintain as much altitude as possible.

'The serrata must have emptied half the lake,' said KaRaya, peering over the bulkhead. 'What wasn't carried off as clouds is now flowing back into it.'

I nodded absently. I was far more concerned about what lay ahead, and the height of what lay ahead, to find much interest in local meteorological phenomena. There didn't seem to be another range of mountains beyond the notch, but that didn't mean anything. It could just be hidden around the island's uncertain horizon. According to KaRaya, none of the Donta Islands were ball-shaped. They were all long, broad, but rather thin islands – perhaps large shards of an inner shell-reef. We'd no way of knowing if we were traveling parallel or perpendicular to this island's longest length. Nor would we know when we landed, unless a definite brighter horizon could be found. It did seem vaguely brighter beyond the notch, but that might have been only wishful thinking on my part.

'Think we're going to make the notch?'

KaRaya peered ahead. 'We might.' She gave me a grin. 'I'm doing everything I know how to keep us aloft. Any suggestions?'

I shook my head. 'Should we try to lighten the boat? You're the expert.'

She shook her head. 'Not enough to matter at this point. Just give me all the power you can.'

'Right.' I stepped forward and added some more peat moss chunks to the fire. We were at the red line for pressure and the little engine was giving its all.

The island's gravity wasn't much, less than half an average moon's gravity, but still you weren't going to achieve escape velocity by jumping. Gravity came as a great shock to Hissi. She could no longer just float to wherever she cared to go, which annoyed her greatly. She quickly floated down unless she worked at flying. Unlike many dragons, her arms and legs did not have an attached membrane to act as a wing, though she did have long feathers on them that served somewhat of the same purpose. She usually used her arms merely to steer, relying on her long tail for propulsion. Now, she needed to flap her feathered limbs and work her tail eel-like just to maintain altitude. This was far more work than what she was used to. She landed heavily and draped herself over my shoulder and looking up at me, complained bitterly in sharp hisses and angry barks, as if I was to blame.

'Nothing to be done,' I explained. 'You'll have to get used to flying in gravity, what little of it there is, or you'll just have to learn to walk. That's the way things are now.'

She gave me a dark look with her small black eyes, and a low menacing hiss.

'It's only for a while. I'm a free-fall sailor, with places to go, so we'll be back to where you can float sooner or later.'

'Sooner,' she seemed to say with a sharp hiss and dark, dangerous look.

'I realize young lady, that so far you've grown up in some rather iffy company. I'm sorry about that. But I'm not going to put up with a sulky, demanding, egotistical Simla dragon as a companion. The Pela doesn't revolve around you, and right now, if things don't go just right, you might end up with no one to hiss at. And no one to play cards with. Think about that.'

She gave me another dark look, but said nothing more. I'm sure it was the cards remark that got to her. I'd a feeling Simla dragons only came in egotistical.

The notch in the ridge line lay just ahead. On either side, the hills were now rising above us, so it was the notch or nothing. Below us, the tops of the trees marched past, the next one a little closer than the last. It did, however, seem definitely brighter beyond the notch. KaRaya, now at the helm, was cheerfully optimistic about finding our way to civilization, assuming we survived our eventual land fall. There were times that KaRaya could be too cheerful and optimistic.

'If we get too deeply into the trees, kill the propeller. We should have enough momentum to carry us over. We'll need the propeller on the far side,' she said as the top edge of the notch approached. It looked to be a close-run affair.

'Right.' And with one last glance at the approaching tall, pine-like trees, I slipped deeper into the engine room hatch to grab the lever that engaged the propeller. 'Tell me when.'

A moment later I could hear a sibilant rustling and smell the scent of pines as the bottom hull brushed over the tops of the pines. The propeller, as was customary, was enclosed in some cowl, I suppose to protect it from getting entangled in trailing vines and such, so that as long as we didn't get too deep into the trees, it should be safe. We were, however, in the trees – I could see the wispy tops of them over the bulwark – they were dark green or mauve, with needle leaves. I could smell their sharp perfume as the propeller chopped through these small branches. I turned to KaRaya at the tiller expecting to get the order when she broke into a smile, as the tree tops disappeared from my view.

'We're past the heights,' she exclaimed.

I stood and climbed back onto the deck to look out. We had reached another broad, forested valley. Several kilometers ahead, stretched another line of foothills. KaRaya was already steering for the lowest point in that ridge line.

'See if you can get a few more revs out of your engines, Chief. Don't worry about the red line.'

'Right,' I said, slipped back down to my engines. I'd leave the navigation to the deck crew.

But I did worry about the red line on the pressure valve, but pushed it beyond anyways. The emergency release valve should kick in before the boiler blew. Or so I told myself. It was brighter ahead, and I'd rather fly than walk. With the steam valve to the engine wide open, the engine whined a little louder, its cylinders pounded up and down a little faster, the propeller whirled a little faster, the boat sped up, and settled a little slower.

I stayed at my post nursing my engine as we approached the next ridge line, out of my sight beyond the bulwark. It is the fate of every engineer, to man his or her engines heedless of things becoming undone all around them. I only knew when we reached the next ridge line when I heard the branches brushing against the hull. And within moments I could hear branches snapping and breaking...

'Just a little longer, Chief It looks clear ahead. I think we can still push through these trees...' KaRaya said as the tree tops began to tower over the bulkhead. 'If I can avoid going over the main trunks...'

The bow struck a trunk that didn't bend or break. We swerved sharply. 'Kill it!' KaRaya yelled.

I did, even as I saw the engine jump as the propeller came to a grinding, unexpected stop. I hit the steam release valve sending up a cloud of hot steam – we'd no longer be needing steam.

'Finished with engines,' KaRaya called out with a laugh, as the boat started to slow down and sink, grinding deeper into the trees.

I stood and climbed up to stand beside KaRaya by the tillers. We must've passed the ridge line's high point, since by the time I reached the deck we were once more sliding over the tops of the trees, bending, cracking and snapping beneath the boat's hull, down toward a broad valley with green meadows sloping down to a wide river with stands of mauve and green trees scattered about. It stretched port and starboard out of sight. The horizon was definitely brighter beyond the next ridge. If all went well, thanks to the light gravity, we'd just brush along the tops of the trees until we'd reach the

meadow – alive and intact.

The trees ended abruptly, long before we reached the meadow. Suddenly we found ourselves in the air, half a kilometer or so above it, teetering over a tall, perpendicular cliff with piles of rocks and debris at its foot. Without power, the boat lurched downwards towards the rubble.

'Hold on!' yelled KaRaya, needlessly. 'Brace yourself on the hatch cowling, Wilitang! We'll ride her down.'

Not that we had any choice.

I dug my boot's talons into the deck carpet to avoid being flung into the boat's bow and lifted Hissi off my shoulder – pushing her out of the grating. 'Fly, Hissi and stay clear of the boat. See you at the bottom,' I said. Like it or not, she'd have to fly. I'd have to take my chances with the boat. I grabbed hold of the cage and watched the valley floor get closer and calculated the odds of survival.

On any regular planet those chances of surviving the crash would be nil, but with the light gravity of this island, I figured we had a fair chance of surviving. It'd be a matter of luck, good or bad.

As the dragon boat plunged bow-first downwards, trailing a cloud of steam, I had more than enough time to anticipate the impact as the meadow rushed up at us. The bow hit a protruding rock column with a crunch that twisted the keel, displacing the engine and boiler and breaking a steam line or two. A cloud of hot steam exploded from the engine room hatch, along with a shower of burning sparks and embers which flew past us from the firebox door jarred open by the impact. With the bow snagged on a rock, the boat's stern began to swing down, so that it, or the upper grating above us, seemed to be the likely point of impact.

'To the bow!' I yelled, launching myself forward.

In low gee this was all happening in relative slow motion, allowing us a few seconds to react, though being thrown about, even in low grav, made reacting more or less the same thing as falling forward. I buried my face in the crook of my arm to try to keep it from being scalded by the hot steam as I pushed off for the boat's bow, KaRaya at my side. The impact sent all the unattached fixings and cargo forward with us. The boat, inside the cage, was a slow-motion hurricane of burning embers, fittings and cargo. My plan was to duck under the deck forward and I may've made it before the second impact sent everything crashing to the stern, pelting me with debris. Clinging to the cage, I waited for everything to settle, one way or the other.

## Part Three – The Shadow Marches

### Chapter 15 The Magistrate's Lieutenants

01

We slowly limped around the twisted and scattered remains of the dragon boat, nursing our aches and bruises, congratulating ourselves on our luck – such as it was. The flocks of birds the crash had stirred up settled down and Hissi had set out to acquire the skill of flying in gravity by fruitlessly chasing beetles and butterflies.

I found myself merely banged up and limping a bit, after digging myself out of the debris. KaRaya had survived largely intact as well. Had this been any sort of real world, with real gravity, we'd not

have been so fortunate.

'As disasters go, I've survived worse,' said KaRaya, 'Why, if we could've just gotten over the trees with the propeller intact we could've made this valley intact, landed, stripped the boat down to a platform and the engine, made a proper kite-sail and continued on our way...' She shook her head and added, 'We only missed that by a long pace or two. I think, seeing that it was your propeller that failed us, Captain Wilitang, we'll record this as your wreck. I already have one to my credit. Share and share alike.'

'That's Chief Engineer Wilitang, Captain KaRaya,' I corrected her gravely. 'I was at my station performing my duties faultlessly. You had the helm. And while I'm sure you did the best you could – well, here we are.'

'Still, it was your propeller's malfunction that precipitated the crash.'

'Come now, Captain, I know the duties of the bridge officer as well you do. One needs to steer the ship over trees,' I illustrated that with a hand gesture – I was dealing with a bridge officer, after all, and needed to keep explanations simple. 'Rather than through them, as you evidently opted to do. I'm responsible for my machinery. You are responsible for navigation of the ship. I would've thought that forests are best avoided with a boat, but I'm willing to ascribe the wreck to your talent for disaster rather than your lack of talent as a sailor.'

She sighed. 'Fine. What's one more wreck, anyway? Now I have a matching set. Besides, it is said that any landing you can walk away from is considered good enough.'

'Well, Captain, I'll cut you enough slack to admit that.'

'Well, Chief,' she sneered back, 'how soon can you get your engine back in operation. We don't need even half of this ship, now, just something to skim over the trees. Those stubs of a propeller might do.'

'As an engineer, I'll not admit to ever being incapable of repairing my machinery. However, given the shape of the boiler, even on a casual inspection, I have to say that we'd likely die of old age before I could get it to hold enough steam to drive the engine, once I got around to fixing the engine. How far do you think we'll have to walk before we can find some sort of civilization?'

She glanced at the ridge line behind us. 'Hard to say. But if we started now, we'd likely reach it before we died of old age.'

'Are we agreed that is our best option?'

'It appears to be our only option.'

We didn't start right away. For all her claims of being too carefree, KaRaya was meticulous in her duties. We spent two rounds alongside the wreck, collecting all the food and supplies worth carrying with us. The simple, rustic life had been a dream of mine, but I must confess, I'd never actually gotten around to acquiring any skills or experience in it. I know that if left to my own devices, I'd have gone off very ill-prepared. KaRaya, however, took her time and salvaged everything we might need before setting out.

'Your task, Chief, is to construct a sled to haul our supplies. I'll start stitching backpacks and sleeping bags from the sail cloth. I don't know how far or long we'll be able to drag all our supplies.'

We determined that all we needed was a simple sled consisting of two long poles as handles lashed to a platform made from a small section of the boat's surviving cage. The boat's former owners had a primitive set of tools aboard which allowed me to drill holes and use salvaged dowels, and together, with leather straps, I built the sled, lashing the section of cage to the saplings we cut. I then lashed a pair of meter long legs to saplings, angled back, in lieu of wheels to keep the gear clear of the ground while being pulled. Leather loops at the tips of the poles, as harnesses for KaRaya and me, completed the rig. She kept busy cutting and stitching the sail into two large backpacks to store our most critical supplies in the event we came upon a dense forest and had to abandon our sled. The rest of the sail she made into a cover for our gear, and a tent that used the sled to sleep under plus, two canvas sleeping bags.

'Why do you say you're too careless? You've been anything but careless, as far as I can see.' I asked, as we stood, inspecting our packed sled, our supplies secured in a neat pile under canvas. Hissi was guarding them by napping on top of the canvas. Our plan was to follow the river downstream, which KaRaya was confident would lead us, eventually, to civilization – or what passed for it on the Marches of the Margins, the edge of the Shadow Lands.

'It's people I'm too careless of. I'm just too trusting, too innocent,' this with a leering look, 'and I can't seem to distinguish trustworthy males from rakes and rogues. And as a result, I generally end up on the beach, broke and in disgrace. By the Inferno Island, here I am again, stranded with an outlandish liar, staring at a wreck, lost in the margin lands of some unknown island, and I've not seen the end of it yet. See what I mean? I never learn.'

I grinned. 'And you're having the time of your life.'

She grinned back, 'Yes, though it'll likely be the death of me.'

'You've forgotten how lucky we are.'

She made a show of looking slowly around, the wilderness, the jumble of the wreck, the makeshift sled, and then said, 'On the whole, I think I could do with a little less of our luck. Let's be on our way.'

We slipped into the harnesses, and grabbing a pole to keep it from upsetting or overturning, we set out at an easy pace down the meadow toward the river bank. It took an effort to get the loaded sled moving, even in the low gravity, but once it was, we quickly settled into an easy, long, low loping stride that covered great distances rapidly. Once in motion, every bounce sent the sled flying into the air, where it mostly stayed, touching down only occasionally, which made pulling it easy. Stopping took some work, however.

'We should've equipped it with wings and made it into a kite,' I said, glancing back at it soaring behind us.

'I considered doing it, but we're bound to come to forests that we can't avoid. Still, we have canvas left, and I can cut some saplings, so we can try it, if we feel like it.'

The river wound its way through a string of valleys – one or two of the smaller ones were forests down to the river's edge, but the river was wide and shallow so we just took to the river. The slippery rocks kept our pace down, but did not stop us. The valleys usually ended in a narrow gorge, often in a series of slow rapids – water flows very leisurely in low grav. Despite the slippery boulders, we managed to drag or float the sled down these rapids, so we found no insurmountable barriers. Hissi traveled on the sled, no doubt imagining herself being drawn by two human slaves. She had continued to grow apace during our passage, and was now, nose to tail's tip, nearly as long as I was tall, so that her days of riding on my shoulder had pretty much come to an end, especially now that she weighed something.

After being on the ground for the better part of a week, I'd almost forgotten that this was still the Pela. I'm uncertain if it was the sudden quiet – all the birds and even the insects seemed to have suddenly decided to hold their collective breath – or Hissi's seemingly loud and alarmed bark behind us in that hollow silence, that spun me around. In the sky, and coming in low, was a large, dark feathered bird with a wing span twice that of a talon-hawk. It was less than a hundred meters off. I'd my darter out in an instant, and switched to lethal darts as I raised and aimed it. I waited a heartbeat until I could see the blue dot of the drive field on its feathered chest and let fly two darts. I saw the blue flash as the darts discharged their lethal energy. I waited no longer, before diving under the poles of the sled for what little cover it offered. Hissi was already there and KaRaya landed next to me, her spring charged air pistol in hand. The creature struck the ground just behind the sled, bounced, and landed on the sled, upsetting it and covering us in a smothering blanket of feathers. We all rolled out, my darter and KaRaya's springer aimed squarely at the slowly settling heap of feathers. It didn't seem to be moving on



its own, but we still backed away, keeping our weapons aimed at it. The meadow still held its breath as a little breeze stirred the dark feathers, which shimmered in a dim rainbow of blues, greens and violet.

'A shadow-hawk,' said KaRaya, holstering her weapon. 'A rather rare bird. Its long tail feathers are in great demand. We'll be able to sell them for a nice heavy bag of silver coins,' she added, looking up with a rather wan smile. 'I'm beginning to believe you are, indeed, a lucky man, Wilitang. You seem to be able to attract coins out of the sky, though you might want to warn me when you do.'

I bit back an angry retort. I'd been as guilty as she was in failing to keep a skyward watch. We hadn't seen any large dragons since our arrival and I had assumed that they stayed clear of these larger islands, if only because they'd have to fight gravity. This dragon-sized shadow-hawk, however, was clearly designed to fly in gravity.

'We seem to have grown rather careless. We'll have to be more watchful.' I might have added more, but Hissi landed on my shoulder and gave me a frightened look. 'Thanks for the warning.'

She gave me a low hiss that was, for once, subdued and un-sarcastic.

'Right. Keep an occasional eye on the sky, they might hunt in pairs,' said KaRaya. 'I'll pluck its tail feathers and rig up a sailcloth envelope to keep them nice and neat. You repair the sled. We'll need to work fast, since the remains may attract other beasties...'

I let out a long breath, holstered my darter and helped KaRaya pull the sled free, and then set out restowing our supplies and repairing one of the legs, while she carefully plucked the meter-long tail-feathers, their rich colors shimmering in and out of blackness as the light struck them. We carefully wrapped most of them in canvas, stiffened with a few saplings to keep them from getting bent. KaRaya stuck two in her hat, that trailed behind her. And then we headed off before any beasties arrived.

02

We slept four times during our journey downstream before we reached the road. I'd have never recognized it as a road, until KaRaya pointed out the narrow, unnaturally straight gap in the trees, as it crossed the top of the ridge line and traced its course down to the valley floor. Even when we halted at the shallow ford where the road crossed the river, I'd have had a hard time identifying it as a road, were it not for the figure, a hundred yards distant, casually loping towards us. The road itself was simply a narrow clearing cut through the trees and brush, maybe four meters wide – just wide enough to accommodate wagons and riders two abreast. Other than that, it was just a grassy lane – its slightly shorter and more threadbare grass marked it from the surrounding non-road grass and wildflowers. In the light gravity, even wheeled wagons or mounted riders, not to mention loping foot travelers, did not wear ruts in the turf, at least in lightly traveled roads, which, I gathered this was.

The figure loping towards us proved to be a young, rather short and broad chested broad-feathered fellow. He was dressed in loose, sky blue pants and shirt, under a dark blue jacket. He wore a yellow sash around his waist and the customary pouches on belts worn over his shoulder, with a large pack on his back. A low, wide brimmed hat of dark blue and a long wooden staff completed the picture.

'A Laezan. An Outer Order one, from the color of his sash. This could be a very lucky break,' said KaRaya softly, casting me a quick grin.

'How so? Other than telling us where we are and directing us to the nearest town, what else can he do? And what is a Laezan?'

'Teachers of the Way. Laezans are welcomed everywhere. If we can contrive to travel with him, we'll likely be welcomed as well.'

'Is being welcomed going to be a problem? I thought these islands were civilized.'

She shrugged. 'We're on the margin of the Margin Marches. I've no personal experience in the Marches – I know them only from old stories, which often portray them as being only a step or two up from the shadow-landers, with strange laws and customs of their own. I'm not certain just how welcome strangers might be around here. Still, nothing to worry about – I'm sure we can handle it. Outlaws do it all the time. But in the company of a Laezan, our welcome would be certain. Follow my

lead.'

I would've asked more questions, but the Laezan was already carefully crossing the slow, shallow river by leaping from one flat rock to the next – the pedestrian crossing, apparently. In a moment, he landed on our side of the river and stood eagerly, almost expectantly, beaming at us.

KaRaya cupped her hands before her chin and bowed, 'Greetings Teacher.'

I imitated her.

Letting his staff stand by itself beside him, he followed suit, greeting us as "sister and brother" as well, before grasping his staff again. 'I am LinPy.'

'The Way has been generous in arranging this meeting, Teacher. My companion and friend is Captain Wilitang, and I, Captain KaRaya.'

'What brings two captains to this lonely valley?' he asked.

'Would you believe, Teacher, a boat,' laughed KaRaya. 'We're shipwrecked wide-sky sailors. We got lost in the clouds in a small boat and when we cleared the clouds we found that we were too close to this island to avoid falling. We crashed in the mountains and have been traveling for four rounds seeking civilization. This is the first road we've come upon, and happily, you are the first person we've met. May we beg your help? We do not know what island we've landed upon, much less the directions to a city where we might find our way back to a wide-sky port.'

'You were so lost, that you don't know the skies you were sailing?' he asked with a smile, taking KaRaya's story as a joke.

'It is a long story that I hope to share with you, if you would be so kind as to allow us to accompany you for a while. Suffice it to say that we sailed from the Outward Islands, having escaped Vantra savages in a small boat, and are now completely out of reckoning.'

'Come now, the truth. If you are bandits, just say so. There is no need to lie about it,' he said, still with his beaming, smile. 'The Way can be found only in truth.'

'Oh, no, Teacher. We are, indeed, merely shipwrecked sailors. We've no need to resort to banditry. We have coins and supplies,' exclaimed KaRaya with a wave of her hand to indicate our sled all but hidden in the tall grass alongside the road.

Surprisingly his face fell, his smile faded.

Seeing this, KaRaya hurried on. 'I am sorry, Teacher, that we are not bandits, yet. The truth is that we are neither hungry enough nor greedy enough to resort to banditry. Not yet, anyway. And certainly, we would never make such a demand on a Teacher of Laeza. We are not that foolish. We are very sorry and beg your forgiveness if we have disappointed you.'

He sighed and then smiled sadly shaking his head. 'It is I who must beg your forgiveness. It is I who should be sorry. You see, I am young and still foolish. A Laezan who still dreams his boyhood dreams. When I saw you emerge from alongside the road I thought, "Bandits!" which, I'm afraid, gave me a jolt of joy. "Now," I thought, "With my martial arts skills" – in which I must sadly confess, I take far too much pride in – "I will defeat these bandits, and then take them on as servants to begin to lead them back to the sure path of the Way." All of which, comes straight from my boyhood dreams, daydreams that I should have put well behind me by now.'

'Then, Teacher, we will not disappoint you!' exclaimed KaRaya drawing the cutlass she wore on her back. 'If you wish to lead us to the Way by skill of your arm, we shall gladly oblige. Draw your sword, Bandit Wilitang. We shall show this young Laezan the errors of his thinking. Leading us to the Way by his staff, we'll see about that!'

I stared at her. 'You're not serious, are you?'

'Of course I am. I'm more than willing to oblige the worthy Laezan. Draw your cutlass Wilitang and let's play his bandits!'

I shook my head. 'There are limits, KaRaya...' And taking two steps back, added, 'But far be it from me to spoil your fun. I shall let you show him the error of his ways. It's hardly fair, two against one. I shall pick up your pieces, when he's done with you.'

'This is hardly necessary,' said LinPy, yet, with an eager grin that gave lie to what he said. 'But if you care to try, I promise I shall not strike you, I shall only defend myself.'

'See, you needn't fear, Wilitang. Don't sulk and spoil this fortuitous encounter,' said KaRaya. 'We shall make the young Teacher happy and at the same time show him how valuable we are as an escort should we run into a real band of bandits.'

Seeing the eagerness in the young adept's face, I relented, unable to break his heart. I drew my sword. 'If I kill him, it's on your karma, KaRaya.'

She just smiled and sprang to attack.

What followed was a pretty amazing demonstration of LinPy's skill with his iron-vine staff. I quickly gave up merely playacting swordplay. It was clear that he could handle the two of us with his iron-vine staff, so I tried to give him a workout, only to come within a centimeter of getting whacked with his shaft countless times, and only because he'd promised not to hit us. Neither KaRaya and I working together, came close to penetrating his defense. Out of breath, I pulled back and leaning on my sword, watched KaRaya make a few last tries before she too gave up, panting.

LinPy was beaming, and if he was short of breath, he had a way of concealing it. As we stood leaning on our swords and trying to catch our breath, he stepped close to us and putting his arms around us said, 'Thank you, thank you both. You are far better than bandits. You are good with the sword, and, with practice, we will all get far better if you still care to travel with me. I would be delighted with your company.'

'And we would be delighted with your company as well, would we not, Wilitang?'

'Aye. The sense of safety alone will make it a pleasure to travel with this Laezan teacher,' I said between pants.

'And not only can we spar with you each round, but we're far more interesting than hedgerow bandits. The stories my companion tells elevates lying to a whole new level. He will certainly stagger your imagination with his tall tales. And trust me, we are every bit in need of being led back to the Way as any starving...' She stopped when she saw his eyes widened.

I felt Hissi land on my back with a thump, and looking over my shoulder, greeted the Laezan with a low hiss.

'Ah, yes. Allow me to introduce the third member of our gang, Hissi. She's young and sassy, and needs to be instructed in the Way as well,' said KaRaya with a smile.

Hissi barked an indignant denial.

'You do too,' I said, and turning to the young Teacher, added, 'She's spent her youth amongst a rather rough lot. Still, I'm sure there's some good in her that can be cultivated...' Which brought the expected angry, menacing hiss. It seems Simla dragons love to play-act from birth.

'A dragon-talker!' exclaimed LinPy.

'Hardly. I talk to her, but she just hisses, barks, and ignores me. Still, we understand each other, don't we, Hissi, my dear?'

She barked and swung her tail up to brush it over my face.

'The Teachers of Laeza, like LinPy, are known for their ability to communicate and transmit the wisdom of dragons,' said KaRaya.

'Only the most accomplished sages,' said LinPy. 'I am many tens of thousands of rounds from that level.'

'Trust me, it doesn't take that long to talk to Hissi. She is a very friendly, outgoing dragon. If you play your cards right...' Hissi gave a loud barking laugh... 'I'm sure you'll be talking to dragons within this round, not in tens of thousands.'

'We are well met,' he exclaimed, and cupping his hands, he greeted, 'Sister Hissi.'

She barked another careless laugh, which he accepted with a smile.

'I am on my way to the Dondar March, which is still a round or two distant. Walk with me until then, at least. It is the nearest settlement, though still far from a city where you might reach Quandadar

directly.'

'Ah, so we've landed on Daeri, not too far out of reckoning after all,' said KaRaya, with a nod to me, and then back to the adept. 'We'd be honored to travel in your company. Truth be told, we were uncertain of our welcome, and would be grateful for your company. Shall we add your backpack to our sled? It'll hardly add to our burden, but will make your travels a little lighter.'

LinPy, or rather "Py" as he insisted we call him, shed his backpack and iron vine shaft, but kept the sword which he also carried belted on his back. Not that he needed it with us, but I suppose he was just being cautious. I know I wouldn't have trusted the look of us, so I couldn't blame him. We set out with the long, leisurely loping strides, or soaring skips that low grav allowed, and talked as we went.

'What is your business in Dondar, if I may ask?' said KaRaya. 'Teaching?'

'I am the Magistrate,' he said, shyly. 'Believe it or not.'

'And you're on your circuit?' asked KaRaya, impressed.

He laughed. 'My first, and Dondar March will be my first court. I have, of course, spent three thousand rounds as Magistrate Din's pupil and lieutenant, but this will be my first circuit on my own.'

'Circuit?' I asked.

'Some of the Teachers of Laeza study the law, to serve as judges in the outlying areas of the Donta principalities, and indeed throughout the Saraime,' said KaRaya. 'Wilitang here, comes from islands more distant than legends – I will let him tell his own lies – so he is unfamiliar with our customs. I'm a simple wide-sky sailor who grew up in the Outward Islands and amongst sailors in various ports, and only know the margin lands from stories, so perhaps it would benefit both of us if you briefly explained your present mission.'

He nodded. 'Let me clear my mind. I have lived this life for three thousand rounds, so I must concentrate to make it brief, or I shall go on until we reach Dondar.'

03

'The law of Daeri,' he began, 'extends out to the margins of the shadow lands from Quandadar. But like everything else, the further from Quandadar one goes, the more the new ways fade and the old ones stand untouched. The Marches and Rides of the Margins have, since time unrecorded, been feudal estates, ruled by the Masters of the Marches and inhabited by their tenant herders and farmers. Each, masters and tenants, have time honored rights and privileges independent of the laws of Daeri proper. In addition, there are 111 powerful clans living on the Marches, and both the Masters and the tenants come from those clans. Each clan has time honored rivalries. These days, they're mostly friendly rivals, but rivals nonetheless. In the past, they had many blood feuds, and the memory of these still linger throughout the margin lands. So, you see, when conflicts arise between certain clans, an impartial judge is needed to settle them.

'The Master of the March is the chief legal officer of his or her march, but because of the clan structure and history, and the desire to keep the peace amongst the various powerful clans that reside in his march, the Master usually confines his judicial duties to routine police work, trying the minor criminal cases and civil cases which don't involve the rights and rivalries of the major clans. Conflicts and even criminal cases involving only members of a single major clan are often settled by the Clan Chiefs themselves. Capital crimes, appeals, and disputes between the major clans within the march are usually left to be resolved by the Magistrates of Laeza, at least in Daeri, and in most of the smaller Principalities, as well.

'As I mentioned, I have traveled with Magistrate Din, studying the law in words, and watching Din practice it in court. Over time, I came to act as his lieutenant and detective, a second pair of eyes and ears. My task was to interview people who were unable or unwilling to appear in court, examining the

locales in dispute – many disputes arise out of land and grazing customs – and listening to what the community says outside of court. In time, he let me hear some cases on my own.

'Magistrate Din and the elders of my Community believe that I have now mastered the law to the point where I can administer it on my own. A journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step, and though I lack the deep knowledge and experience of Magistrate Din, you find me taking my first step.

'When I arrive in Dondar, I shall go through the docket of cases that have been awaiting my arrival, and send out word throughout the Dondar March that the cases awaiting trial will now be heard. There is always a great deal of confusion as to who is able to appear and when, but eventually, each pending case gets a hearing, and I shall have to decide which side of the argument prevails and what should be done to restore balance and harmony in the community. It is a grave responsibility, and though I have sat and heard thousands of cases at the side of Magistrate Din, who explained the law and his reasoning to me for each decision, and though I've been reading the written laws of the land, over and over again, so that I can understand the common and peculiar customs of marches I'm to serve, I must confess the responsibility weighs on me.'

'I'm sure that the sages of the Order have not sent someone out who's not prepared,' said KaRaya. 'And I'm certain that Wilitang will agree with me when I say that we're willing to stand by you as your servants, in Dondar and perhaps beyond, so that you don't have to take your first step alone – if you care to keep us around. We'll gladly fill the shoes of your subdued bandits, lending to your youth and good nature a certain air of, what shall we say? Authority? Strength? Danger? For I fear, Magistrate, that your youth, your cheerfulness, and obvious kindness might tempt some to take liberties with the truth. Arriving with two ruffians as Wilitang and myself, will suggest that your cheerful kindness hides an iron fist that can bend even the most wicked of people into the Way. Captain Wilitang is very savage looking, is he not?'

He gave her a sidelong look, (according to KaRaya) that suggested that despite his youth and cheerfulness, he did, indeed, hide an iron fist. So much so, in fact that KaRaya felt compelled to add, 'Of course, I am sure your need of us is far less pressing than our need of your company. As strangers in the marches, I'm uncertain as to how readily we will be accepted, and though we are not without coins, that might prove a liability as well.'

He laughed. 'Oh, I welcome your company. I have only been on the road alone for two rounds and find that I've meditated all I can meditate. I fall all too readily into daydreaming of bandits, which earns me no spiritual reward.'

'I rather doubt our company will earn you many spiritual rewards either. But I'm sure we'll all enjoy some laughter.'

With neither night nor day, we stopped to rest in a pleasant, forest fringed glen alongside a little, clear stream that slowly tumbled and danced over its bed of rocks and gravel. KaRaya and I gathered wood to make a fire while Py went deeper into the woods to gather mushrooms and fungi to add to our rice and the dried fruit and vegetables we carried as rations. It was still strange to be able to cook in pans over an open fire rather than with metal canisters in an enclosed fire box used in weightless cooking.

After we ate, Py took out a clay pot, added some "tey" leaves, and after adding boiling water to the pot, I enjoyed my first cup of cha in a very long time. It is these little touches that reconcile you to your fate.

Hissi took to Py at once. She was a pretty tolerant dragon when it came to company and whoever would arrange her feathers as a friend. Not that she had much choice in friends, so far. Her easy acceptance delighted young Py. Associating with dragons, even little ones, was usually the domain of very rare, Inner Order sages of a few famous Laezan communities. He said he was still ten of thousands of rounds away from being able to take up the white sash of the Inner Order, having to serve his time in

the less rigorous Outer Order.

After our cup of tey and the utensils were cleaned in the stream and put away, Hissi sat upright on her hind legs and tail and barked expectantly. KaRaya and I shared a look – we knew what she expected next. Dare we?

'I'm sorry, Magistrate, but our young dragon friend has lived her life amongst rough sailors and their bad habits. She now expects to play a few rounds of Dragon's Luck. I hope you don't mind...' KaRaya said, as she pulled our well-worn deck from her pouch, along with Hissi's card holder. 'We'll not play for stakes.'

'She plays cards?'

'And quite well. Wilitang believes she can peer into our heads, which is cheating, of course.'

Hissi barked a dismissive laugh and wiggled the tip of her tail.

'You're welcome to join us. As I said, we'll not play for stakes. But if games of chance are against your rules, we'll move away to allow you to meditate or rest.'

'Games of chance, for stakes, are forbidden while wearing the blues of the Order. But this I must see. We are, after all, transmitters of Dragon Wisdom.'

'You'll find little wisdom in this dragon,' laughed KaRaya over Hissi's mock-menacing growl. 'Hopefully you'll instill some Dragon Wisdom in her, if only by your company.'

'I fear I have little more wisdom than your young dragon. I've not had the time yet to accumulate a great store of the wisdom which comes only with age.'

Py watched, and then apparently seeing no harm in it, joined us in playing Dragon's Luck with a cheerful smile until we, save Hissi, grew sleepy.

'Do we need someone to keep watch?' I asked Py. KaRaya and I had slept watch on watch off during our journey.

'I think not. I sleep light, and these margins have been hunted clear of any dangerous beasts beyond memory.'

KaRaya and I made breakfast while Py performed his morning rituals – slow shadow boxing. After breakfast, he took his sword and began to go through the forms, shadow fencing.

KaRaya glanced at me, 'Shall we show him our true skills?'

I shrugged, 'Bring them out, We're in gravity now. You don't stand a chance.'

We donned our masks, took up our bamboo swords and went at it. KaRaya was always too impatient to practice any routine, so we just carried on like we usually did, save that KaRaya was stuck to the ground. Even so, her feet allowed her to move more confidently and quickly than I, so I still had my hands full.

Py, who had finished his forms and had been watching us, clapped and laughed. 'I am sorry I started my forms alone. I will wait for you next time. In the future, we must practice together. My boyhood love of swordplay is far too alive for my spiritual well being. Yet, I still have my youth, so I'll indulge it. I shall let age and wisdom cure my weaknesses. As for now, if either of you are willing, I should be delighted to rattle the bamboo with you.'

'Oh, you must give Wilitang a go. He cheats by using a second blade, so I'm sure you'll find him far more challenging than I. He has been trained by a master and, I suspect, will give you something of a work out, when he doesn't have to hold back, like he did during our first encounter,' said KaRaya with a grin and handed him her practice sword. 'I don't know if you'll need the mask. Wilitang was afraid of losing an eye in our practice, since I'm so undisciplined and unconventional.'

'Oh, I think I can do without. We'll just begin to explore our skills with this round.'

Which we did in a more orderly manner than fencing with KaRaya would've allowed, content to test our opponent's responses on defense feints and attacks, none pressed with any determination, this time.

Py was delighted with the exercise, much more the boy than the Magistrate. 'When we get to Dondar we shall have access to the armory and will be able to fence with real practice swords and masks. Then

we can truly test our skills. I'm looking forward to the opportunity of learning how to use a dagger as well as a sword. I suspect Wilitang here might be a dangerous fellow, if we fought for real.'

'Oh, he is a dangerous fellow when desperate, Magistrate, 'He's as ruthless as he looks.'

The broad-feathered people don't have whiskers, so perhaps I do look sinister to them, though I suspect KaRaya was just being sarcastic.

We packed up our camp and started out down the road to Dondar at a rather leisurely pace that allowed us to spin yarns all the way to our next camp.

'We shall arrive in Dondar tomorrow. I shall introduce you as my followers. I'm afraid that you will be treated as servants rather than companions, but I'm sure you'll be treated well. The Master of Dondar is a kindly man. If you want, you can attend the trials as observers, just to see what they involve. I suggest that only if you are considering accompanying me on my circuit. My one condition is that you put away your springers. Springers are a bandit's weapon. Your swords should be sufficient for any circumstances you'd encounter in my service.'

'Thank you Magistrate. While we have not talked amongst ourselves, we are, at the moment, at loose ends, and though I cannot speak for Wilitang, I would welcome the chance to travel with you. I've many missteps to atone for, and perhaps in serving you, I'll have made a good beginning.'

'That sounds fine with me. I must learn the ways of my new land, and what better way or with better company?' I said.

'Excellent. However, consider your choice carefully as we go along. You will be acting as novice members of the Order, and will be expected to maintain a certain decorum,' he said, uncharacteristically serious. 'No drunkenness, gambling, carousing, or sleeping with partners. If you believe you'll find this too wearisome, we can just travel in company rather than as a party, if you like.'

And before we could reply, he added, 'I'll go and search for some mushrooms for our meal. Talk it over while I am gone.'

KaRaya glanced at me as Py and Hissi wandered off to seek mushrooms and hunt bugs. 'No drunkenness, gambling, carousing or laying with partners for hundreds of rounds. A tall order,' she sighed.

'For some, no doubt,' I admitted.

She grinned. 'But not for one on a noble quest. So, are you really in no hurry, Wilitang, to find your boat and your girl?'

'I think not. The boat can wait and as for the girl, I believe she needs time to forget some of her past life.'

'Py seems like a jolly fellow, and as his assistants, we could travel with ease and safety, if a bit slowly, since it will take some 200 to 250 rounds to reach the city of Linjyn where there's a monorail link to Quandadar. Still, I'd like to stay on that long, if you're willing.'

'We'll give it a try. If we find it doesn't suit us, we can always push on ahead to Linjyn.'

And so, we agreed to accompany LinPy as his servants, with the understanding that if he found our service acceptable and we liked the work, we might become his assisting lieutenants, on a trial basis, until we reached at least Linjyn – the half way point of his circuit.

From the top of the pass and through the lane of trees, the Dondar March spread out before us under a pale twilight sky. Glowing high-piled white clouds caught the light of the bright sky over the horizon, while the lower clouds were pink and soft orange from the edge light. A wide valley, forever on the brink of twilight, stretched away to indistinctness, lost in the haze of a trailing skirt of a small, low rain cloud. Mauve and green forests clung to the steep ridge lines that encircled the valley. The grassy road

we were following ran down the steep hill and along the center of the valley to a smudge of a town and a tower perhaps half a dozen kilometers' distance. A string of stone towers set in a patchwork of green, gold and brown fields lined the road, as did scattered grey cottages, sheds, and barns. It was clear from the closest one, that each compound was surrounded by a combination of a tall stone curtain wall and deep moat.

'Those are the Clan Towers. Each of the major clans in every march have a refuge tower that can shelter the clan's members and livestock.'

'Raiders from the shadow lands?'

Py laughed. 'No, not in these marches. The extensive ranches of the great plain ranches may still suffer the occasional cattle raid by one of the nomad tribes of the shadows, but these forests hold few tribes and most of them are peacefully settled. We could travel through these shadow lands with little fear. No, the towers are protection from the winds of the serratas. We're on the high horn of Daeri, and the windstorms can be fierce. As for the high walls, they just keep the livestock that are grazed on the common land out of the cultivated fields.'

'What sort of livestock do they raise?' I asked, picturing virtual dinosaurs. I could see several large herds, but they were too distant to make out what type of animals they were. 'Those walls look to be all of ten meters high from the bottom of the moats.'

'Lopemounts for riding, Dindar sheep for wool and meat, March cattle for meat and leather, and Fimi lizards for eggs and meat,' said Py, with a laugh. 'None of them are large nor dangerous. However, the lopemounts and sheep are nimble, and if they set their mind to it, they could clear any lower fence. Food crops grow slowly in the margin and shadow lands, so you don't risk sheep or lopes grazing in your gardens.'

'That's reassuring,' I said. The lopemounts, Dindar sheep and March cattle proved to be fine-feathered livestock, clearly introduced from the Nebula, local variations of livestock that originally evolved on old Terra itself, many eons ago. However, the Fimi lizards, were pure Pela. Standing a meter high on two legs, they could be viewed as either a cross between a chicken and a lizard, or a miniature predictor dinosaur. They are omnivores, eating bugs, grass and grains, and considered mostly harmless – though once you've been around the marches long enough, you'll hear tales of docile herds of laying Fimi "hens" turning on their masters, attacking them in mass. They'll even show you the scars to prove it. Of course, you can't believe everything you hear in the marches, and despite those stories, they're treated pretty much like chickens. Their eggs are tasty, if a little oily, but spaceers have a tough digestive system, so what the Neb, I've acquired a taste for Fimi eggs.

'Let's be on our way. I'm beginning to grow hungry, and I suspect we won't have to travel long before we'll be invited to one of the clan towers for a meal and a bed. They inevitably feel that it pays to be nice to the traveling magistrate, and Magistrate Din says that we shouldn't discourage that idea. A fine meal and a soft bed at the end of a long road is not something to be sneered at.'

'Lead on, my dear Py,' exclaimed KaRaya. 'We didn't waylay you for nothing.'

We left the chattering of the unseen birds of the forest behind for the singing and soaring birds, and buzzing beetles of the grasslands. The flying lizards of the small islands were noticeably absent on this bigger island.

We had not gone half the distance to the first tower, when a rider on the large deer-like lopemount appeared from its gate, and in long, graceful bounds, raced towards us, covering the distance in a twinkling.

The young man of perhaps Py's age, alighted his mount in a bound, and seeing who it was, beamed, cupped his hands as KaRaya had done, and exclaimed, 'Greetings Teacher Py! It is grand to see you again! Alone? Can it be Magistrate Py now?'

'Greetings, my dear NaRen. It is indeed, Magistrate LinPy,' he said with mock dignity, adding with a smile. 'And may the Great Dragon of the Way help us all! By which I mean, may the Dragon of the Way give us wisdom and guidance, for wisdom and guidance is sorely needed, I'm afraid.'



They gave each other a hug. 'You needn't wear your Magistrate's face in our house, Py. We have nothing to bring before you this time. We have been good and have rigorously followed the Way with diligence,' said NaRen.

'You've simply not been caught,' replied Py. 'And lying, I must tell you, is well off the beaten path of the Way.'

'Then I'll say nothing more, other than my father invites you and your servants to the meal we are even now preparing.'

'These are my companions, KaRaya, Wilitang, and the little dragon behind us in the sled is Hissi. I have met them along the way...'

'Bandits, just as you dreamed of!'

He shook his head sadly. 'Alas, no. Not this time, though they do look the part,' he added with laugh. 'They are something even more interesting. Shipwrecked sailors direct from the Outward Islands. They are good companions, and wonderful swords masters. We shall take them on after the meal, and you shall see.'

'Sailors from the Outward Islands, swords masters, and a Simla dragon – oh, you are so very welcome. My father will have you staying for many rounds – it is too quiet in this march for him. Still, I know how serious and conscientious Py is in pursuit of his duties, so we mustn't be greedy,' NaRen laughed, as he grasped our wrists in greeting.

'Are there many cases for me?' Py asked as we started for the tower

NaRen walking beside us, leading his mount, said, 'Oh, the usual, I suppose. I've not heard of any serious crimes.' He went on to relate the gossip of the valley and clans as we made our way to the gatehouse and up through the cultivated fields and shed towards the old, grey stoned tower of the Dondar Marches' Quinda Clan.

KaRaya, Hissi and I were served a fine feast, heavy on meat and root crops, in the kitchen, with the staff while Py ate with the clan chief's family. As promised, we were invited to the armory after our meal, offered a selection of practice weapons and masks, and then led outside to the courtyard to spar with Py, NaRen, and then some of the youth of the clan until we were exhausted.

And then, for the first time since that week or two on Redoubt Island, I slept in a room that didn't move and on a bed rather than a hammock. I'd been sleeping rough, of course, on our journey here, but this was the first room I'd laid down to sleep in that wasn't a vessel of some sort, space ship, zep, ship's boat, slaver or dragon boat since Redoubt island, and for decades before that. Not exactly how I envisioned it, when I dreamed of retiring from space. It would take some getting used to.

The next round, we pushed on to Dondar, the town and tower of the Master of the Dondar March, where we were welcomed again with much laughter and talk. As before, KaRaya Hissi and I were given a small room in the tower's servants' quarters. Py stayed in the upper stories in the Master's quarters. A round was spent drawing up a trial schedule, and then sending out the word, though by then, it was common knowledge that it was now Magistrate LinPy, along with two, possibly ex-pirate, servants who had arrived to hold court.

While the inhabitants of the margin marches use the Saraiime style spring charged air guns, for hunting, they still take great pride in swords and swordplay – a relic of countless thousands of rounds of living on the edge of civilization. Py, while sharing this love, also knew that it played well with peoples of the marches, so it became our custom to begin each new round exercising with swords before an interested audience in the courtyard of the Master's tower that hosted us. Py would take on both KaRaya and me in a set of swordplay sequences, lighthearted, athletic, flashy routine – falls and tumbles, climbing the walls and long leaps and lunges – each of us getting a turn to play the star. And then, after having warmed up, he'd invite any of the crowd who wanted to match their skills with us to don a mask and take up a sword. We'd spar and instruct until both KaRaya and I were exhausted. Py seemed to have unlimited energy.

After the swordplay show, Py would meditate for perhaps an hour, while KaRaya and I caught our breath, and then emerge as Magistrate LinPy to hold court. Court was held in the great hall of each of tower we visited. This tower was always adjacent to or surrounded by the only town of each march. Half of the inhabitants of the march, the skilled trades people and the people of clans without a major presence in that particular march, lived in town. The other half lived in stone cottages, in or near the compound of their clan tower. There wasn't much to these towns – a few taverns, shops and inns, plus tanneries, spinning mills, canning factories for preserving meat, and warehouses to hold the valley's products until they could be shipped to either the bright side or to the shadow lands mining towns. Beyond admiring their quaint, well-worn and weather beaten beauty, there was little to do. As Magistrate LinPy's lieutenants in training we were to steer clear of the taverns, unless on assignment, which left only the marketplace to find some life. However, we were expected to attend court when it was in session, to observe and act as Magistrate Py's rather mysterious assistants – Captain KaRaya and Captain Wilitang – so we soon had plenty of duties to keep us busy.

'How serious are you? About this Magistrate's lieutenant berth?' I asked KaRaya as we were looking at the small pile of our trade goods near the end of the Dondar March court session.

'I think, Wilitang, it is a good berth. Truth be told, Daeri is the last island I would've chosen to land on. My former owners are here in Quandadar, and I'm well known in the anchorage island of Daedora. All things considered, I'd rather stay dead for a while longer. And you can't be much deader without being actually dead than drifting through the margin marches. At least, I hope not. Of course, we'll not make any coins, but then, we live as guests, so we won't spend any either. Besides, I think it will repair my poor, battered karma. So, I'm content, but, we're partners. What do you say?'

I considered my reply. The idea of paying for, or paying back, my luck or karma (I was pretty confused as to which and what) did appeal to the superstitions I harbored. And as I had decided to give Naylea time to forget her old life for both our sakes, a year or two with Py would not be too long. In the meanwhile, I could learn about my new home – including how to read again.

'I agree. Let's make the circuit with young Py, if he'll have us. Four hundred rounds as a magistrate's lieutenant seems as good a berth as any, and I suspect, better than most. After that we'll decide what to do next.'

'Good. From the tales Py has told us of his adventures, I'm sure we'll find it interesting work.'

With that decision, we sold our trade goods in Dondar, all except the Shadow Hawk feathers which would bring many more coins in Linjyn, and took to the road carrying our life on our backs like Py – confident of our welcome everywhere we went.

And for the better part of 500 rounds, nearly two years, Unity Standard, we gradually grew to become Magistrate Py's trusted lieutenants in the marches and his good friends and companions on the grassy road.

As march followed march, the pattern of lives became set. Magistrate LinPy heard the cases awaiting trial. Each March Master's tower would have a large room where he would patiently hear each side of a dispute, ask questions, view the subject in question – it was often cases of land rights and such – and then, he would seek a compromise solution. Failing that, he would study the law texts that each Master had copies of, after which he would issue his judgment. He was, with his youth and outlook, nearly incapable of looking dour or stern, and realizing the foolishness of even trying, did so only in the two capital crime cases he tried. He knew the people of the marches, and many of them knew him as well. So, despite his youthful appearance, he was respected, and widely loved from his previous visits, so his transition from assistant to magistrate was smooth, and welcomed. And being wise beyond his looks, knowledgeable, and kind, few left his court angry. Resigned, disappointed, perhaps, but not

angry.

Magistrate LinPy's two capital cases involved unresolved deaths. In those cases, Py did much of the field investigation and interrogation along with KaRaya, Hissi and me. Magistrate LinPy was uncharacteristically grave during these trials, feeling the great responsibility of determining life and death. While there was no death penalty, the usual penalty involved forced labor in the shadow land mines for what could be many thousands of rounds – often a death penalty in everything but name. Still, serious crimes trials seemed rare in the marches, though I gather from the gossip that many crimes, no matter how serious, that involve only one clan, were often tried by the clan's chief. It also seemed that the rival clans within a march tended to keep to themselves, or associate only with long allied clans, to avoid serious conflicts that could end up in court.

Our job, as we grew into it under Py's direction, was to do much of the foot work. For example, we would visit the scene of land disputes, interview witnesses, and collect local gossip. In short, act as detectives. Py loved to do it himself – it was his old job – and at first, he did this work with us in tow, instructing us as he went along, until, over the course of several courts, he came to trust us to do this job. We would make our reports, stating the facts as we found them, but never offering our opinions unless asked. Py, despite his youth, was not insecure and felt that it was his duty to determine what was true.

Hissi, however, wasn't afraid to offer hers to either Py or us – usually a low, very menacing growl whenever she detected a falsehood in a witness. I, of course, trusted her judgment, since I was convinced she was reading the falsehood directly from the speaker's mind. Magistrate LinPy, however, could not, and had to find the truth himself, though a dragon growling menacingly and staring at you with her bright black eyes had a way of sometimes getting to the truth quicker than Py's clever questions. He may have also benefited by the false rumor that KaRaya and I were ex-pirates. We certainly attracted a great deal of cautious attention wherever we went. I had the curious experience of seeing fear in the eyes of some of the people we interviewed as detectives, at least in the eyes of the guilty.

In addition to acting as detectives, we acted as his clerks during the actual court hearings, taking notes, recording documents, and such. Sitting silently off to one side, we could observe Magistrate LinPy in court.

Being illiterate in the written language of the Saraim, I had to learn to read and write it if I was to be a court clerk. I did so by the time we reached Linjyn with help from Py, KaRaya and my com link which made learning the written language easier – though it took time to master.

Besides acting as magistrate, the Teachers of the Way were often advocates for the common people in the courts of those in power. The most powerful clans in each march, the ones with the towers, could take their cases directly to the Master of March, but at least half of the population were of clans without a great presence or power in the march, and would traditionally appeal to the Teachers of Laeza to make their appeals directly to the Masters of the Marches which Py gladly did.

In court, we were Py's assistants, but on the road, we were just his friends and companions. There was usually at least one round spent on the road between the valleys of the marches, which we'd spend swapping tales. KaRaya was almost always cheerful, with plenty of stories to tell from her voyages through the Outward Islands, and the various ports of call. Yet for all her careless ways, she always seemed to land on her feet, if a little worse for wear. Which I think explains her easy adoption to this new life. Having escaped her fate as a slave ship captain, Vantra savages, and a crash landing, she had found good friends, an easy and rather interesting berth, so she was content to see where it led.

I had all my "old spaceer" stories to tell, mine as well as ones I had heard – and though I had told both KaRaya and Py the truth in my origins, I fell into telling these tales Pela style – which is to say, the planets and drifts became islands and island groups, and the distinction between space and the Pela became blurred. It was how I was going to have to tell my stories anyway, so I thought I might as well

get accustomed to it.

Py had stories to tell of his own – stories of his youth and training in the order, as well as an endless supply of stories and fables of the Laezan Order. His parents worked on the Cloud Home Community's farms, and so he had grown up in the community. The Laezan's teaching had much in common with my Unity Standard mindset. They actively fought against unchecked greed and advocated that the wealth produced should be fairly shared by the people who produced it. Other than that, they taught kindness to all and a comfortable, but simple life. It was very easy to follow the Way, once you conquered the desire for wealth and power. Seeing that at one time I had both authority – a tin god of a tramp ship – and the wealth of a tiny salvage share of a gold ship, and still ended up as a slave, that is to say, an indentured laborer, the lessons of Laeza were not lost on me. Not that I had to change too much, since the Unity Standard society I had grown up in also emphasized fairness, tolerance, friendliness, safety, and limited ambitions.

I took to dressing as a march-man. I packed away my spaceer uniform jacket, boots and cap, keeping only my trousers, shirt, and underwear for their advanced qualities – armor, ease of washing and quick drying. Over them I added belts, vests, the local boots and spats, and a tricorne hat with a Shadow Hawk feather. I remained, however, the only one in the marches of the margin who had pockets. I packed away my darter as directed, but kept my sissy in my trouser pocket. Just in case.

Hissi grew to her full of 2 1/2 meters' length on our slow journey to Linjyn, the turnaround point of Py's circuit. She no longer bothered to fly, but bounded along upright on her hind legs or when she wanted speed, loped along on all four like a giant squirrel. For the most part, she seemed to consider herself human, abandoning hunting for her food, eating at our table and generally going about as one of us. She made it quite clear that she not only considered herself our equals (as she had since birth) but that she had no intention of being left out of our work.

Most surprisingly though, was how she loved playing with children, and they with her. Perhaps it was the fact that their thoughts were simple and innocent that appealed to her. I would imagine anyone would get weary of the thoughts of grown-ups. Or perhaps she wasn't as mature as she appeared to act. What was even more surprising was how the children took to this feathered crocodile. Most were fearless around her. Perhaps the answer lay in stories and books – books I knew from reading them as I learned to read. Simla dragons, or very similar dragons are often characters in them – friendly, comical, and/or magical companions. Indeed, even in grown-up stories, they appeared as characters in their own right. In any event, whenever we were off duty, Hissi could be found playing with the children of the tower or town – playing tag, hide and seek, and, of course, card and board games – she loved to rattle the dice in her clawed hands and now could pick up and play cards with her claws so delicately that they never left a mark. She also loved to play dress up with the girls, who wrapped her in scarves and broaches and loved to arrange her crown feathers as they did theirs.

The first half of Py's circuit ended at the Community of Little Steps outside of the city of Linjyn. This was my first introduction to a Laezan community. Set in a lush valley, it was composed of a rambling collection of dormitories, halls, classrooms, sheds and barns. Nearby was a village where the lay workers of the community lived, all of which was surrounded by farm fields, orchards, and woods. The centerpiece of many Laezan communities are their schools – universities, really – where youths to young men and women study not only the Way but the law, sciences, and the classic teachings of the Order. Py tells me that placement in their communities was eagerly sought after for the quality of the education to be had – which, I should add, serves the Order and the Way as well, since the elites send their sons and daughters to these communities where they are exposed to think in terms of the Way, hopefully to apply it when they reach positions of authority themselves. In this way, as with teaching in village schools and traveling teachers, the Laezans sought to spread the practice of the Way – of kindness to all.

It must be admitted that by the time we reached Linjyn, Magistrate LinPy and his entourage had

become quite famous, or perhaps more accurately, infamous, at least in the eyes of the sages of Little Steps. Our arrival in a march had taken on the appearance of something like the arrival of a circus. Magistrates are always welcomed, but a young, very popular one, with two ex-pirates and a Simla dragon, created, like any sort of traveling entertainment in these isolated valleys, quite a stir. Word of this preceded us, and we may have been met with a bit of wary coolness by the elders of the community.

Py was unconcerned by this initial coolness, and told us not to worry, any blame would be his. I gathered from amused comments of the younger students of the Community of Little Steps outside of Linjyn, that Py had some pretty adept explaining to do upon our arrival. Indeed, KaRaya and I were interviewed as well, but gently. Still, young Py could charm his way out of any sort of official disapproval since it is nearly impossible not to like him, and did so easily. Later, I gathered from a quiet talk with the Senior Sage of Little Steps, that they recognized the seed of greatness in Py and so decided to overlook the flamboyance of his entourage. As she said, 'He's destined to be a legend in the Order.' I rather suspect she's right.

To formalize our lieutenant status, KaRaya, I, and Hissi as well – at her insistence, (and since dragons have a special place in the Order of Laeza, the Laezans were delighted to welcome her) all took the minor vows of the novice in the order and were given the narrow yellow belt – Hissi got a yellow scarf – which allowed us to officially act as Magistrate LinPy's lieutenants.

After that, we left the little valley that enclosed the pale golden stoned and moss stained buildings of Little Steps behind. We followed the Linjyn river, one valley to the next, that was leading us back to Cloud Home Community set high in the Horn Mountains, administering the law, taking up the causes of the people, and spreading, if only by example, the way of the Way.

## Chapter 16 The Bandits of Grimdar March

01

Linjyn lay some 170 rounds behind us as we made our way towards the penultimate valley of Py's first circuit. We were nearing the end of a long, two-day trek across a low mountain range via a narrow road – more a trail than a road – that ran alongside the ever-younger Linjyn River. On either side of us towered the moss and rock walls of the river gorge. Twisted, weather-wrought mauve and green pine trees clung in the cracks and arched overhead, allowing only a cool, deep twilight light to filter down. Alongside us, the river plunged and danced over and around rocks in slow motion. On Daeri, where water flows slowly and reacts to impediments with exaggerated leaps and bounds, smoothed out by the water's surface tension, rivers look like sleek, but lumpy lakes. We could see its rock and gravel bed as if we were looking through pure ice. Only the occasional darting of a bright fish gave life to its depths. We stopped for a meal and a cup of tey in a little hollow created by a rivulet slowly tumbling from the heights. In the dimness of the narrow gorge, we didn't notice that it was growing ever darker above the arching trees and rocks.

When we emerged from the river gorge, we discovered a sky covered with racing, violet tinted clouds – not the usual rain clouds. These were too high, to be anything but the harbingers of a big storm.

'A serrata!' exclaimed KaRaya, adding as she bounded ahead to look down the valley, 'Can we reach the march and the nearest cottage?'

Looking down through the trees and down the road to the march valley below, it seemed that the

nearest shelter – a tower – was some four or five kilometers away, unless the hill was hiding a cottage at its foot. From our heights, I could just make out the herd and herders pushing through the gates of the compound and tower. A close-run affair...

'Too close, I'd say. We'd best find shelter now – in the rocks,' said Py looking back at the mossy cliff and steep sides of the ridge we'd just cut through. 'Spread out – we haven't much time.'

The purple clouds were already noticeably lower, as I turned back and started to scramble up the steep, boulder strewn slope towards the cliffs, searching for shelter. Hissi was already loping ahead.

We fanned out amongst the fallen boulders looking for a cave or a crevasse between some large boulders. We'd no luck until Hissi barked from the shadows of the pine trees at the edge of the cliffs, now stirring uneasily in the strengthening wind.

'Hissi's found something,' I called out, waiting only to see that others had heard before bounding towards her barking.

It wasn't much of a shelter, two large flat boulders tumbled together, one half on top of the other, but there was a shallow space under them to huddle. We swung our backpacks off, pulled on our hooded ponchos and squeezed in, setting our packs in front of us for some protection from the wind, rain, and debris that would accompany the storm. Hissi, her tail around my neck, lay across our collective laps and back again. We'd barely settled in when the serrata struck – the trees groaned and cracked as their branches were snapped off and swept away in the first wall of wind. The winds shrieked and tore at us, trying to pull us out and fling us about. We dug our feet into the soft earth and held our packs before us as leaves, rocks and branches swirled around us. These first fierce moments lasted for what seemed like forever, but in reality, only for a minute or two before it settled down to a howling gale, and a driving rain collected from the rivers and lakes in its path that it had carried off. It didn't take more than five minutes before we were wet and cold, but guardedly optimistic that we'd live. Which was something.

We huddled together under that boulder for a long, timeless time, until the winds and rain settled down enough for us to emerge, stiff, cold, and wet to take to the road again. Along the way Py inquired at every cottage to see if everyone was safe and accounted for. The march natives take these serratas in stride, their low stone cottages built to weather them.

We reached the March Master's little town and tower, weary and hungry and were greeted with kind concern, but no ceremony. Everyone was engaged in assessing, and if possible putting to right, the damage the storm had wrought. We were given a meal, a fire to warm ourselves by, and assured that everything was fine – considering – and were shown to our rooms to sleep.

02

We spent eleven rounds in that valley, wrapping up the pending cases before pushing on to the last valley, with growing eagerness to reach an end, and home – at least on Py's part. We were still a day's march away from the last valley when it looked as if Magistrate Py's boyhood dreams would come true.

'Do nothing. But we are being watched,' Py said softly as we made our way up through a long stretch of wild, thickly wooded country. Our journey's way had been growing ever wilder, with the marches further apart, the deeper and higher into the Horn Mountains we traveled and the closer we were to the Cloud Home Community itself.

KaRaya and I both resisted staring about, but we both stared intently ahead, into the black green shadows of the grassy lane we were following through the dark woods.

'A feeling, or have you seen someone?' whispered KaRaya.

'Moving shadows in the woods pacing us. On either side, ever since we entered this ravine.'

'Bandits?'

Py allowed a little smile. And then shrugged. 'Perhaps. But we're safe enough. Few are bold enough

to challenge a Magistrate of Laezan,' he replied in a whisper, trying and failing to keep his unsaid regrets hidden.

'Maybe you'll be lucky this time, my dear Py,' whispered KaRaya. 'Captain Wilitang is reputed to be a very lucky fellow.'

He sighed. 'They only watch.'

Whether I'd have ever noticed them or not is an open question. But once Py mentioned them, I seemed to feel their eyes on the back of my head. I couldn't help but remember Py saying that air rifles and pistols are the bandits' weapons. Our swords would be pretty ornamental if they decided to ambush us. I let my hand slip into my trouser pocket and grabbed my trusty little sissy. Not that it would likely do me any good unless they came within sword fighting range...

We reached the forested top of the ravine, and saw a line of men across the narrow trail before us. I counted a dozen, roughly dressed and armed, waiting in the deep shadows of the pines for us. They were less than fifty paces ahead.

'I'll go ahead, wait here,' said Py, almost eagerly.

'Our job is to be at your side, Magistrate,' said KaRaya. 'However, if it comes to a fight, we will let you lead as many of them to the Way as you care to handle, but at your side, we shall be.'

He smiled. 'Yes, yes, yes. Please forgive my foolishness.'

'Still, as I said, Wilitang here is a walking lucky talisman. Your boyhood dream of a band of bandits to lead back to the Way may well be at hand.'

'Tease me if you will. No doubt they're merely a welcoming committee...'

'This far from the valley? No, they don't have the look of a welcoming committee, of which we've yet to meet in all our travels,' said KaRaya, who, in her carefree way, was having as much fun as Py imagining those men to be bandits. 'They are no doubt seeking guidance back to the Way, one way or another.'

I wasn't having quite as much fun, and couldn't imagine them to be anything but bandits that would have to be dealt with.

'Have your fun, my friend. But bandits are simply a childhood romantic idea of mine that I've outgrown...'

'The truth,' said KaRaya in mock seriousness, 'is the true Way.'

Py may've blushed a little, but continued, '... in the course of this circuit. Besides, bandits arise out of poverty. Poverty arises out of either natural disasters, or the greed of the powerful. All the Masters of the Marches of these parts are good men and women, as are most of the tenants. Everyone knows their rights and obligations, and follows them – at least in great matters,' he added, since we'd just spent the last year settling disputes concerning rights and obligations amongst the tenants and occasionally between the Masters and tenants.

'The serratas?' I asked. Py had not altered his pace and so we were rapidly approaching the awaiting party.

He shrugged. 'Perhaps. As you know, the granaries and cellars of towers of the clan and master store are kept filled. Still, crop failures are not uncommon in these Horn Mountain marches. We'll know soon enough.'

True enough.

We pulled up ten paces before the line of men – dressed in leather pants and jerkins, belts and pouches, with riding boots and wide brimmed hats with flowing feathers – all typical march riders, all slightly worse for wear, likely from living rough. They also carried long barreled springer air rifles, which were, however, still slung over their backs, and their swords still sheathed on their hips. All to the good. So far. Perhaps they were indeed, some sort of a welcoming committee. At the center was a tall, young man, with an air of command. He bowed, cupping his hands, 'Greetings Magistrate LinPy. We've been awaiting your arrival with all the patience we could muster.'

'Your patience now bears fruit, brother. Greetings,' replied Py cupping his hands and bowing in turn.

'My lieutenants, Captains KaRaya and Wilitang, and the dragon Hissi.'

'I am DereDen. My father is DereKin, Chief of the Dere Clan in the Grimdar March. He has sent me to beg that you accompany us to our camp where you can meet with my father and he will tell you of our troubles.'

I still had my hands in my pockets, sissy in hand, as I surveyed the woods on either side of us. I could see more figures, and lopemounts in the shadows on either side of us. There could've been as many as two dozen of them. Everything looked peaceful at the moment. As far as I could make out, no one, even those in the woods, had their springer rifles in hand. I caught KaRaya's eye as she was doing her own survey and she flashed me a wide wink. I don't know if she had childhood dreams of bandits and pirates. If she did, I doubt leading them to the Way would have been a feature of them. But from her tales, she'd never gone greatly out of her course to avoid them either. I suspect that having followed the quiet Way for a year and more, she was rather missing the rush of adrenaline that being outnumbered three or four to one brings, sword in hand.

I, on the other hand, planned on settling my opponents with darts if this meeting got turbulent. I could hit 'em far enough outside of sword range to be pretty safe. And if past events were any guide, I seemed to be able to hit things far beyond my usual effective range when pressed. I wasn't all that scared. My 500 generations of St Bleyth mercenaries were rather enjoying this.

'Why does your father wish to talk to me? Grimdar is not in my circuit.'

'We've come to you to plead for justice,' replied DereDen.

'Then it is Magistrate VanDian you should be seeking, not me.'

'My father will explain all. We have mounts for you. It is not a long ride on lopes to our camp.'

'But, as I said, Grimdar is not part of my circuit. If you have grievances, they should be taken up with Magistrate VanDian when she next visits.'

'The affairs of Grimdar will not wait on Magistrate VanDian. Blood has been shed, and more will be shed to right the wrongs, unless justice is restored soon. My father, however, does not wish to shed blood, if it can be avoided. He has heard of your wisdom and courage, and is determined to lay his case before you so that it can be resolved peacefully. My father assures me, that a Magistrate of Laeza would not turn his back on our plight.'

There was a hint of challenge in DereDen's voice. And a hint of pleading as well. He was, after all, merely the messenger, though given the number of men he'd brought with him, I rather suspected he was told not to accept "No" for an answer.

Magistrate Py nodded. 'You are right. I cannot fail to hear what your father has to say, and give him my advice – pending Magistrate VanDian determinations. Lead on.'

'Bring up the mounts for the Magistrate and his followers,' ordered DereDen.

Now I was scared. Though built along the lines of antelopes, lopemounts were built on a different scale entirely. Their backs were head high, and how anyone managed to stay in the saddle as the Neb-blasted beasts looped along covering a kilometer in a dozen landings was anyone's guess.

'Thanks anyway, but I believe I'll walk,' I said.

KaRaya laughed. 'Frightened of lopemounts, are we?'

'As truth is the true Way, yes. I've never rode any beast in my life.'

DereDen laughed. 'You must learn. We'll be traveling too fast for you to keep up on foot. I'll have one of my men lead your mount. All you must do is hold on. He'll show you how.'

'And what about Hissi?'

'The dragon can ride with you.'

'And the lopemount won't mind that?'

He shrugged. 'It'll get used to it. DereLa, see to Captain Wilitang and his dragon. Perhaps one of the pack lopes might be best... They're steady beasties. You'll be fine,' this last to me.

Well, they found a pretty gloomy and resigned lopemount for me and Hissi, who didn't put up much of a fuss when Hissi jumped up behind me on the saddle. It did the minimum bucking and dancing



before falling back into its brown study and bounded grimly behind the leading rider.

DereDen rode alongside Magistrate Py, talking of this and that, but not why we were summoned. 'My father will explain that when you see him,' was all that he would say.

KaRaya, Hissi and I rode through the dark pine woods, mostly in silence, as our escorts were not talkative, and had ears. The trail, such as it was – I couldn't make it out at all – led up and over the first ridge and over the grazing land of the Dondar March. One of the riders watching over a flock of those large sheep, rode up to investigate our band. He had a few words with DereDen and Magistrate Py and then rode off with a cheery wave. We left Dondar behind and after many kilometers of bounding mostly through woods, we wound through a narrow pass to reach some large caves carved in a tall cliff where an even larger band of march-men were camped out under old, towering, and storm twisted pines in dark green and mauve.

'This is our temporary clan headquarters, Magistrate,' said DereDen with a wave of his hand at the smoky encampment. 'I see that they have summoned my father, so I will turn you over to him. Thank you for accompanying me,' he added, cupping his hands, with a look of relief, glad to have carried off his assignment.

As we gingerly slipped off the tall mounts and stood, stiff and sore, a large man strode towards us briefly cupping his hands in salute.

'Greetings Magistrate LinPy! I am DereKin, Chief of the Dere Clan of the Grimdar March. Thank you for coming. I would not dare take you out of your way as I have, if it were not that a dire fate hangs in the balance,' he said in a rough voice, full of authority, and himself.

'Certainly Magistrate VanDian can handle even the direst of fates. She has ten thousand rounds of experience,' said Py after he had acknowledged DereKin's greeting.

'Ha!' a mirthless laugh. 'Old VanDian will not be around again for two hundred rounds. Justice cannot wait that long. And in any event, she is too close to the new Master of Grimdar March, and so cannot be relied on to administer proper justice for us, the age-old tenants of the Grimdar.'

'I am absolutely certain Magistrate VanDian will see that justice serves everyone, March Master and ancient tenants alike.'

The Clan Chief shook his head. 'It does not matter. Events have come to a head since her last visit. Blood has been shed. My youngest son lies wounded in the Master's Tower; my clan's herds have been taken by the Master and his band of mercenaries and sold for his profit. I'm asking you to join with me in the cause of justice that cannot be postponed. You must prevent more blood from being shed by holding this new Master – with all his arrogant ways, who stomps on the age-old prerogatives of the Grimdar tenants – to account. You and your lieutenants are the only ones standing between more blood-troubles. For, as you can see...' he swept his hands to indicate his band, 'I and my clansmen have been driven into the forests by the hired swords of the Master. But we will not stay driven. We will not let our land, our herds, nor our rights be taken from us without a bitter fight.... But come, you must be very hungry. I will tell you my plight over our rough meal.'

He led us to a circle of flat rocks and had his kinsmen serve us a hot, thick stew of game, forest mushrooms and root crops.

'It seems, Chief, that things have gotten badly out of hand. How is it that you have allowed this to happen?' asked Py between spoonfuls of stew, as we sat in circles around a large campfire. Py and the Chief with his sons and elders in the inner circle, KaRaya and I along with the rest of the gang in the larger outer one.

'They have indeed, though through no fault of my own. Our ancient rights have been trampled on, and Magistrate VanDian has turned a blind eye to the new Master's breach of trust. That is why I have summoned you. Having heard of your great love for the common people of the marches and your ability to find peaceful settlements between the squabbling of the clans, I could not let you pass so closely by without appealing to your sense of duty, your sense of justice. As the Clan Chief of the

Deres of Grimdar, I believe I have the duty to call on the Magistrates of Laeza to settle this conflict before lives are lost – especially as the matter is pressing.'

Py bowed his head. 'I am sworn to administer the laws and customs of these lands. And in a case, such as you describe, I am indeed obliged to try to settle this misunderstanding by those laws and customs when appealed to. But you must understand that I will settle them by the same laws and customs that Magistrate VanDian would use as well. I doubt very much that she gives the Master of Grimdar any special favors, so that I doubt that my findings will differ from those of hers, who has much wisdom and experience.'

'Be that as it may, the events of the last hundred rounds have progressed far beyond what she knew when she was last here. The time of action is now at hand, and so are you. The spilling of blood can only be avoided if you are brave enough to stand up against the Master of Grimdar with a mercenary band at his back. We must rely on you, here and now, to see that all of Grimdar and Clan Dere has the justice it deserves,' said DereKin gravely.

I am unsure of the precedents that control a situation like the one DereKin presented. Magistrate Py had a duty to prevent bloodshed, if he could. He also had a duty to protect the common people from the abuse of power. But could he interfere in the events of another Magistrate's territory? Still, knowing Py pretty well by now, I knew this was straight out of his boyhood dreams – bandits, hired mercenaries, and perhaps an overreaching Master of the March to be put in his place. He would not turn it down.

'I will expect you and your clan to agree to submit to my judgment in this matter, if I'm to proceed with this,' Py said, gravely.

'We will submit, if the Master of the March does,' replied DereKin.

Py nodded. 'Your story, then.' Looking back, he caught me yawning, 'But first, I see my lieutenants are weary from the ride. Since I fear this will be a long story, it might be best if they were given a place to sleep...'

The Chieftain nodded, and gave the orders. I didn't object. I'd sat through enough cases to know that Py would summarize the case in a tiny fraction of the time DereKin would use to tell it. And I was weary, and very sore. I'd no qualms about abandoning young Py with his seemingly boundless energy to DereKin's narration of wrongs.

### 03

We breakfasted on cold meat and rough textured bread before mounting the lopemounts once again. KaRaya and I were blindfolded, with apologies, though I believe Py was not, and led on the tethered lopemounts for what seemed more than an hour before our blindfolds were taken off on the edge of the Grimdar valley. We dismounted and continued on our way afoot across the rolling valley of the Grimdar March spreading out before us between the low peaks of the Horn Mountains. Here, the twilight in the shadows of the mountains was even dimmer than any of the other valleys we had called on. Ahead of us, beyond Grimdar Valley, the higher mountains and forests of the Daeri's Horn End began in earnest.

As we set out on foot, Py set out Clan Dere's case.

'It seems,' began Py, 'that the old Master of the Grimdar March was indeed, old, and had been old for ten thousand rounds and more, and died without any living offspring. A distant nephew, a merchant from Quandadar inherited Grimdar and has proceeded to instigate sweeping changes, including enclosing a large section of the common land to make, of all things, a vineyard, which is the main point of contention.'

'DereKin claims that enclosing this common grazing land means that less livestock can be raised on the land, limiting the Grimdar clans' ability to earn income from the sale of wool, leather and meat to support themselves. He feels that as head of the march's leading clan, it is his duty to object to and

resist this change in the ancient established order.

'One does not create a vineyard in a round or two, so this issue has been simmering for some time. I gather that Magistrate VanDian sided with the new Master, one BreyAntor, ruling that he was within his rights to enclose part of the common for his vineyard. DereKin disagrees, citing the ancient rights of the tenants to graze their livestock on the common without hindrance or imposed fees. He sees the vineyard as a hindrance to the tenant's right of grazing, and that it will reduce the livelihood of all the tenant clans.'

'Is he right?' I asked. 'About the law and the livelihood issue?'

'Without having the word of the law at hand to consult, I cannot say with absolute certainty. I told him, repeatedly, that Magistrate VanDian would've had the words at hand and would have decided the case based on those words, so that if she ruled in favor of the new Master, then he likely has the law on his side. DereKin insisted that VanDian interpreted the law in the new Master's favor, wishing to curry his favor. I told him that this could not've been the case, but I made no headway on that point, or indeed, on any point,' he added with a grin.

'So things don't look promising for DereKin,' I said, with a glance to him.

He shrugged. 'Our mission is to find a fair way to settle this dispute, within the law before more blood is shed or any lives lost.'

'How was blood shed?' asked KaRaya. 'What foolish action did DereKin take and what in the Name of the Great Way did he hope to achieve?'

'He was rather vague on the details. He said that in the lawful exercise of his grazing rights, he met with opposition from some of the Master's men. I gather a fight ensued in which wounds were inflicted, and DereKin's youngest son, a mere boy, was captured and is now being held captive in the Master's Tower. In response to this incident – I'll leave it to your imagination what exercising grazing rights means in regards to a vineyard – the Master has brought in mercenaries. They not only guard his "unlawful" vineyard, but seized the livestock of Clan Dere in another running battle. Part of this herd has already been sold, I assume to cover the cost of the damages to the vineyard, and the remainder is being kept under guard by these mercenaries. The clan's riders have taken to the woods to avoid more bloodshed, DereKin claims. But they have not given up the fight. Not by any means. He seems determined to take to the field against the Master, if need be.'

'If we're to trust Magistrate VanDian's rulings, it sounds like you'll have your hands full preventing that,' I said, 'DereKin struck me as a man who was quite full of himself and his position, and that having made up his mind, he's unlikely to change it. Though it sounds like he's up against an equally determined Master.'

'Who likely has the law behind him as well. The Master of the March owns the entire march, in theory, and I'm all but certain that the Master of the March has the right to enclose any part of the common area for his or her use. I questioned DereKin very closely on whether the Master seized any leasehold of the clans since the long-time tenants would have rights to those lands, so that seizing any of the clans' leasehold lands would be far more problematical...'

'And?'

'He was evasive, but I gather, not. All that was enclosed was a part of the common grazing land. And I suspect, not a large part either. DereKin talked more of principle – that this was only the beginning of the enclosures, and if not resisted, would eventually drive the herds and clans out of Grimdar.'

'And why are we doing this, if the outcome is so predictably inevitable?'

'Outside of the marches, and throughout the Saraime, the Teachers of Laeza are known as advocates for the common people. As I said before, poverty is the result of either natural disasters, or the greed of the powerful. It is the mission of the Order of Laeza that all people live with the bounty that the Way provides for the use of all. Sometimes that means resisting the powerful and greedy, be they owners of plantations, mills, factories, criminal gangs that prey on the meek, or the rulers of principalities, large and small. Not only do we advocate for them, but if necessary we fight for them as well. If this new

Master of Grimdar is, as DereKin says, greedy and intent on taking for himself what should be shared, I have an obligation to convince him otherwise, and, if necessary, take the case to my masters in Cloud Home. On the other hand, if it is DereKin who is greedy, then I must convince him to abandon his opposition. What course I will take depends on what we find in Grimdar...'

'Which we are likely to discover, shortly,' said KaRaya, pointing to a band of riders, emerging from a shallow valley and bounding towards us on their lopemounts.

We stopped to await their arrival. There were a dozen riders, all neatly turned out in dark red jerkins and rich brown leather pants, with the usual belts, pouches, swords and long spring-charged air rifles slung across their backs. As they slowed to approach, the leader of the band, a lanky, pale feathered fellow deftly leaped from his mount and landing gracefully, hurried forward, cupping his hands and bowing, the customary greeting of a follower of the Way.

'Greetings, Teacher!' he cried.

'Greetings, brother. I am Magistrate LinPy.'

'Indeed! Why then we are well met! We have heard many good things about Magistrate Py. Grimdar is in need of your services, I fear.'

Magistrate Py bowed in return. 'So, I have heard. I have, in fact, been sought out and asked by Chief DereKin to try to settle the unfortunate affairs of this March.'

'I am BreyWeatin, the Master's cousin, come to help him with his troubles. So, the old rascal kidnapped you, did he, and sent you along to see us?' he laughed.

'He directed us here,' allowed Py.

'Well, I believe that is the first wise thing ol'DereKin has ever done in this matter. If you will excuse me for a moment, I'll contact my cousin and inform him of your arrival. I'm certain he will be delighted.'

He stepped over to his mount, and somewhat to my surprise, took out a small, boxy radio from his saddle pouch and after a minute or two, conversed with the Master. I'd known, of course, such technology existed within the Saraime. I'd seen samples of it in the Temtre trade goods – though they were no better than trinkets in their hands. It's just that I'd never seen much working evidence of it beyond the electric lights of the old Bird of Passage. But then, the new master was from Quandadar, so I suppose he'd brought familiar technology with him to these backward, twilight marches. That, in itself, might be some cause for resistance by the tenants who seemed to have been insulated from change for ages.

'He'll be here shortly,' said BreyWeatin, as he returned to us.

As we waited the March Master's arrival, BreyWeatin's riders dismounted and gathered around us to take in the, perhaps, too famous, Magistrate Py and his peculiar band of followers. Hissi, with that cheerful egotism of Simla dragons, was in her glory, greeting each of the riders with a gracious touch of her talons to their hands – grasping her forearm would disarrange her feathers. We then told them about our encounter with Chief DereKin.

BreyWeatin shook his head as we related our story. 'I think you will find, Magistrate, that the faults lie with DereKin. But that is neither here nor there. Your task will be to find a way to smooth his feathers, and accept that the future will be slightly different from the past. No small task, I'm afraid, but you'll find that my cousin is also not one to be deterred. I'll say no more, since you must make your own judgment. I assure you, however, he is no tyrant and though he comes here from Quandadar, he and his family have been Masters of the LeBrey Marches on the far side of the island for as long as there have been Deres. He knows the marches, he knows the march people, and he knows the laws and customs of the marches. In short, Magistrate, he knows what he is doing.'

I had to admit, I had a feeling BreyWeatin was right.

More evidence of Master BreyAntor's up to date approach became evident when he arrived in a low flying vehicle, the first vehicle I'd seen in the marches that wasn't lopemount powered. It was what is called locally, a fan-car. It had four pitch adjustable enclosed fans on its corners and an enclosed

passenger compartment. BreyAntor's model was a large one, with an open cargo deck in back as well. The fan-car's propellers were driven by electric motors powered by a bio-oil powered generator. In the light gravity, the fans provided both the lift, and when angled, the motive power as well. They are generally flown only several meters off the ground, but can be flown much higher for longer runs.

He jumped out of his fan-car as it settled to the ground, and hurried to join the gathering, beaming and greeting Py and the rest of us with great enthusiasm.

'You are very welcome here! I have considered appealing to Cloud Home directly to settle this, but I thought it might reflect badly on Magistrate VanDian. However, now that you are here, perhaps you can find a way to smooth things over. I'll call a formal hearing to discuss all that has occurred since Magistrate VanDian's last visit,' he quickly assured us. 'Chieftain DereKin and any who wish to accompany him will be free to attend and leave the hearing so that they might formally present their case, as I will mine.'

He smiled, and hurried on enthusiastically, 'I know change is hard for everyone, and for the marchmen, steeped in tradition, harder still. It is, sometimes, necessary. And I can assure you, it is necessary for Grimdar. I'm afraid that my great uncle allowed the finances of Grimdar to deteriorate, and this touches all the clans of the march, though the Deres don't see it that way – which, between you and me, is why old Kin resists so hard. He and his clan had come to rule this march as its master, due to the weakness and inattention of my uncle, and he now resents a new Master with ideas, and a backbone. But enough of that. I have absolute confidence in the magistrates of Laeza, and in my case. I know what I can and cannot do, and I've done only what I can do, and only what is right for the long term good of my march,' he added with a smile, but with steel in his eyes.

Py smiled and nodded. 'I shall do my best.'

'Of course. Now, if you will allow me, I'll give you a lift to town. I think it best that you stay in the inn rather than in the Tower as customary, since old Kin would take residing in the Master's Tower as a sign of you taking my side right from the get-go.'

'I think that would be best. I must hear what everyone has to say if I'm to find a way to settle this to everyone's satisfaction.'

'Yes. Exactly. Climb on board,' he said with a wave of his hand towards the fan-car. And then turning to his cousin. 'Do you think, Weatin, you can find someone to take a message to dear ol'Kin that a truce has been declared and that he and his band are free to return without fearing molestation until a settlement has been reached?'

'I'll ask around town. I'm sure someone can find them. I'd rather not go to Dere Tower, they rather resent any approach by your people.'

'Exactly. We must do nothing to annoy the Deres. We must have a peaceful settlement.'

04

We were sitting in the garden of the Grimdar Arms Hotel. While it was the middle of the sleep watch in Grimdar, the rare traveler could always get a bite to eat and a drink in the march hotels. The valleys did not sync their rounds with the neighboring valleys or Daeri in general, since there was little trade, so the hotels, however sleepy they were at any time, were always open. Still, KaRaya and I had the garden to ourselves while I sipped a mug tey and she a tankard of the house's beer.

'What do they make this out of? Radishes?' KaRaya wondered. 'Still, I've had worse.'

'I expect you have.'

'Do you expect DereKin to show up for the hearing?' she asked after taking another little swig and grimacing.

'I haven't heard anything about him coming down from the woods. I don't blame him. It isn't likely to go well for the Dere Clan.'

'What is he thinking? He must realize that the Dere Clan is cordially hated by every other clan in the march. I gather they pretty much ran this march, and ran it for their exclusive profit before Brey arrived. It's payback time now. No one will support his claims, no matter how they feel about the vineyards.'

'Aye, I don't know how much credit to give the rumors that they re-branded the cattle of the other clans – that may be just sour grapes, but clearly the Dere's day of riding high over this march is over. BreyAntor seems to have everything well in hand,' I said.

'I'm quite impressed with BreyAntor. If he wasn't already married he'd be quite a catch,' she said with a wishful sigh. 'He knows what he's doing and has a lot of drive. When you consider that half the old, conservative march-men we talked to were either willing to get involved in his wine making venture, or curious enough to see how it turns out – that's some sort of triumph.'

'And even the other half that thinks it's foolish, and will fail, are willing to wait and see how everything turns out. Only DereKin's Clan actively opposes it.'

'Think this vineyard idea will work?' she asked, and taking a sip, made another sour face and added, 'Judging from their local beer, one has to wonder what their wine would taste like.'

'Well, the Breys have been wine growers for generations. They've developed this grape that not only does well in the dim light of the margin lands, but produces a distinctive wine. BreyAntor says that their Brey Wine is sold throughout the Daeri and has a rapidly growing export business as well. And he should know since he was managing that export business in Quandadar, before inheriting the Grimdar. According to him, they can sell all the wine they can produce, and more. Seem like a good bet to me,' I said, adding, 'Especially since the Breys are footing the bill for the vineyards. What can the clans lose?'

'Their old way of life, according to the DereKin, anyway,' replied KaRaya.

'Well, the old way, selling hides, wool, and meat, provides little more than subsistence for the Grimdar clans.'

'Except the Dere Clan.'

'True. But even so, if these vineyards are half as successful as the Brey's vineyards, every clan in this march will share in the new prosperity, including the Deres. You'd think you'd want to give it a chance, anyway.'

'Apparently the Deres were doing well enough in hides, wool and meat, that they decided otherwise, and drove their cattle through the young vineyards to prove their point. Rather bold of them,' said KaRaya.

'Stupid.'

'Well that too. It certainly didn't go well for them.'

Without any night, there is an essential honesty to life in the Pela. Things like breaking down a gate and driving a large herd of march cattle into the vineyard to trample it flat cannot be done in the dead of the night. You do it in broad twilight, and everyone sees you doing it. This didn't bother DereKin, and when some of the vineyard workers objected, he treated them roughly. The Master's small police guard chased them off and managed to wound and capture DereKin's youngest son, who they now hold in the Tower.

The raid prompted Master Brey to call in some of his family's riders from their extensive home march. These were DereKin's so-called mercenaries. The Brey march borders on some sweeping shadow land plains, on which their numerous livestock herds and flocks graze, so he had plenty of riders to call on, with many more in reserve, if need be.

'If Brey hadn't seized their cattle, the Deres might be a bit more cooperative,' KaRaya said. 'Its not like the Brey's couldn't afford the damage.'

'I suppose. But I suspect all this is mostly about establishing who's running this march. I gather Brey is well within his rights to seize and sell the cattle to pay for the damages to his vineyard. No doubt that has put a deep dent in the wealth of the Dere clan, and certainly outraged DereKin. You have to wonder if Py will be able to reconcile ol'DereKin to the new order. For as far as I can see that's what he must

do,' I added.

'I'd not underestimate Py. He'll find some sort of face-saving way for DereKin to surrender.'

'At least Brey is making that easy, offering full amnesty to all the Deres that took part in that raid, including DereKin. The longer they hold out in the woods, the poorer the clan will be, and they'll have only themselves to blame, since they can't win.'

'Well with that thoughtful observation, my dear Wilitang, I think I'm going to call it a round,' she said, lifting her mug, paused, and shaking her head, set it back down. 'I'm certain they brew this from radishes...'

## 05

DereKin wisely sent his eldest son DereDen down from the woods to argue the clan's case in court. Court was held in the common room of the Grimdar Arms, to allow any of the Deres to attend without putting themselves under the roof of their hated Master of the March. Unlike his father, DereDen was a calm, thoughtful person, who, I'm certain, knew he hadn't a legal leg to stand on, though he doggedly argued that the tenants right to use the common grazing lands trumped the Master's right to enclose it, if not in the law, at least morally, and that alone justified the raid and the clan's continued resistance to the new Master's plans to enclose the commons.

Master Brey brought forth witness not only to the incursion, but to all his previous efforts to explain his plans and include all of the clans in them – and Clan Dere's unwavering opposition to these plans, and indeed, to Master Brey's right to rule his march.

Magistrate Py then went over each of the laws that applied, and explained how DereKin was wrong in his interpretation of the rights and obligations of master and tenants. He then proposed the various compromises, including an amnesty, and enlarging the commons by carving out grazing land from the surrounding forests. Master Brey agreed that any further expansion of the vineyards would depend on a majority of the clans agreeing to it. He also agreed that the clans could expand their own vineyards into the common land adjacent to their current holdings. Given the rights of the tenants, this expansion would essentially expand their virtual ownership of land in the march, not a small concession, and not one many clans would turn their nose up on either.

DereDen could not commit the clan to anything without consulting his father, but admitted, at least in private, that he hoped his father would agree, and urged Py to accompany him back to the woods to help him persuade his father to call off his little war.

Magistrate Py readily agreed. It was the only way, really. He drafted two copies of the agreements for DereKin to sign. KaRaya and I would accompany Py back to the Dere encampment.

It was a cool, dim, and damp round on the Grimdar March, and so we were in our quarters dressing for the weather – and trouble. At least I was.

'What do you think, Raya?' I asked, holding up my holstered darter. 'Care to learn how to use it? I can set it up so it would only fire non-lethal darts.'

'Keep it. You know how Py feels about springers.'

'I believe Py said that springers are a bandit's weapon. A darter is not a springer. And when dealing with bandits... Besides, it can be set just to sting, not kill, like a springer.'

'What about you?'

'Oh, I have another one,' I said, bringing out my sissy from my pocket. 'It only fires non-lethal darts, but it will do for me. Besides, I'm used to it.'

She wagged a finger at me. 'You've had that along with you all along? Even knowing Py's attitude to springers? Why you must have had it when you were aboard the Bird of Passage!'

'Well, yes. Better safe than sorry is my motto. But, as I said, it's not an outlawed springer.'

'But you never mentioned it, did you?'

'Well, no...'

She shook her head, sadly. 'It's your loss of karma, brother. But I think I'll pass on your darter. It would be showing a lack of faith in Magistrate Py – and his boyhood dream,' she added with a taunting laugh, the old careless, carefree KaRaya.

'My boyhood dreams did not include subduing bandit bands with words of wisdom and an iron-vine staff. Besides, a darter's far more humane than an iron-vine staff or a blade since, unlike blades and springers, no one ends up with holes in them or broken bones, just a headache. Trust me, I know.'

'No. I've not served Magistrate Py, given up gambling, carousing, and all those handsome herders for the last four hundred rounds only to lose all of my store of accumulated karma by having anything to do with weapons other than my trusty blade. On your head, brother.'

I considered the darter in my hand for a second, and then slipped its belt over my head and settled it under my arm, and then held up my spaceer jacket. 'Even if you won't take the darter, put this on. I've shown you how indestructible it is. Wear it. My shirt and trousers are made of the same material, so I don't need it.'

She sighed. 'You're beginning to annoy me, brother. Why have we been practicing every round with our blades and iron vine staffs, if not to be able to stare down and, if necessary, take on a soggy gang of farmers?'

'I'd argue that we've been demonstrating our skills in order to deter any saggy band of herders from trying to take us on. But that's not the point. Accidents happen. Even a soggy herder can get lucky. Besides, you're assuming that they're stupid enough to take us on with blades. They all had the springer rifles that I'm certain they know how to use. How good are you at dodging slugs?'

'Brother, you are one gloomy fellow this watch. One would think you've never faced all the dangers you've said you've faced. What about all those pirates and assassins, were they just – made up – stories?'

'It's because I have faced pirates and assassins that I'm trying to minimize the chances of losing my twin sister – who tells stories of having been too carefree and careless in the past – should she get unlucky again. Wear the jacket,' I said tossing it to her. 'If only as a favor to your brother. And just remember, DereKin likely knows the results of the hearing. If he's serious about resisting Brey, he doesn't need to hear what Py has to say. We could well be riding into an ambush. Your blade won't do you any good when they're shooting slugs at you from the trees and rocks. It may well keep them from putting holes in you.'

'Oh, if it will make you happy,' she replied, with her careless smile. 'I never could resist a masterful man.'

She slipped into the jacket and added her belts and pouches over it. We donned our oil-cloth ponchos and then our sword belts over that, and headed out to the lopemount stable where Hissi was waiting for us, and making the lopemounts nervous.

The drifts had taught me too well. I wasn't about to give up any advantage for Py's boyhood dream. If things got nasty, I wanted to be well protected and well-armed. Py, I knew, would frown on the darters, and dismiss the armored clothing. But perhaps he could dodge slugs. I knew I couldn't.

As soon as Py and DereDen hurried out with the signed documents in a watertight pouch, we mounted the borrowed lopemounts, and headed for the wooded ridges in a steady, cool, and slowly falling rain. They'd found an old and stoically resigned mount for me, so we got along well. Hissi rode perched behind me with her head resting on my shoulder. Py was, I thought, rather too cheerfully optimistic, if only because he believed that anyone with a brain in his head, and an eye to the future would know that resistance was not only futile but fatal to the clan in the Grimdar March. Either that, or he was simply relishing the prospect of converting this band of would-be bandits by the force of his words or the speed of iron-vine staff. He spent most of the ride talking to DereDen about the prospects for peace and prosperity, forgetting, perhaps, that the Deres had been prosperous before the arrival of Master Brey. It was with his arrival that they'd lost their dominate position, likely forever. If my time in



courts of the margin lands had taught me anything, it was that march-men did not forget affronts. Ever.

06

Py declined the Brey's offer of an escort, so it was just the four of us who rode up the grassy road and into the forests of the foothills. These were old pine forests with great trees that covered the sky above the road, plunging the road into almost night. Big drops drifted down from the trees. Livestock grazed and woodcutters harvested dead-fall well into the forest, so the pines marched away to darkness clear of underbrush, for the first kilometer or two. But as we traveled deeper into the pines, the underbrush closed in around us and the road became no more than a faint trail. Indeed, at some point we must have left the road without me noticing it, for we were soon picking our way around mossy rock outcroppings and through dark, damp canyons. I let my wise old lopemount find his own way – he was probably just following the tail of the lopemount ahead – and kept my eyes on the darkness surrounding us. If it had been me in DereKin's position and I had been dumb enough to decide to resist, as I feared DereKin had, I'd not have let Py or his fearsome lieutenants within several kilometers of my camp. I rode warily, half expecting that we were being led into an ambush. Our course, with cliffs on either side of us seemed to be designed for one... Thus, I was surprised to smell the campfire smoke wafting out of the damp darkness, and rounding a rocky mound, we came upon the Dere Clan's camp, dim under the tall pines – without one. DereKin and his clansmen stood a'waiting us before a large, smoky campfire.

After guarded greetings were exchanged, Magistrate Py took a seat on a large log on one side of the fire, DereKin with his two sons on the other side, with the soggy band of his clansmen arrayed behind their leader to hear the news. I noted that they had brought their spring charged air rifles to the meeting. They had no doubt been alerted to our pending arrival, and likely the verdict we were delivering as well. It didn't look like it was going to be graciously accepted.

KaRaya and I held back, content to lounge against a large pine tree, twenty paces behind Py where we could keep an eye on things unobtrusively, as had been our practice since we had taken on the role of Py's lieutenants. It was, after all, Magistrate Py who administered justice on his authority, not by the blades of his assistants. Still, sinister figures lurking in the background can sometimes be more, well, dramatic, than in plain sight. And given that Magistrate Py was going to essentially demand the surrender of DereKin, he might well need his trusty blades, if not a dart or two, at his back. Though whether, in his mind, he needed us at all was an open question, since I rather suspected, it was the boy Py, rather than Magistrate Py, who was facing the bandits with the papers of justice on one hand and his iron-vine staff in the other.

'Since they didn't ambush us like I feared, do you think that means that DereKin will accept the terms,' I asked KaRaya in a whisper as we lounged, shoulder to shoulder against the trunk of the dripping pine, as the conference got underway with Py reading the verdict.

'We broad-feathered folk don't like to be forced to change our old ways. So no, I doubt it. He'll have to be forced into any agreement – and not with mere threats. I expect he'll force Py into resorting to physical force to enforce the agreement – if only to save face. Our young friend knows that, which is why he's so cheerful. It's a dream come true. We may earn our keep, this round, Brother.'

'DereKin isn't a fellow to play such games. You've noted that everyone has their springers at hand, haven't you?'

'I have.'

'I'm thinking DereKin thinks he can win by making too much trouble. He's gone almost too far already. He means to have his way, and will stop at nothing to get it.'

'Killing a Magistrate of Laeza would put him beyond the pale.'

'But it would bind his clansmen to the cause – they'd have gone too far to surrender. It'd be the mines

for them. They'd never see their families again.'

'Your point, brother?'

I shrugged. 'This isn't a game. At least not a game I'm inclined to play anymore than you and I were willing to play with the Vantras. I didn't bring my darter for nothing.'

'Oh, come now, Wil. Don't be like that. Don't spoil our fun. I've been very responsible, all these rounds, haven't I?' she sighed.

'You've been responsible ever since I've known you,' I allowed, 'But what does that have to do with anything?'

'I'm thinking that I've earned a chance for a little foolish fun – in a good cause, mind you, in a good cause. Taking on six or eight clumsy farm boys is not an especially dangerous challenge. Why, they'll be so many of them trying to get at us that they'd have to take turns. And between you and me, they don't look all that eager. Really, brother, we haven't been practicing each round just for exercise.'

'I have.'

Hissi, who was curled up on a low branch overhead, barked a laugh, as did KaRaya. 'Oh, come now, Wilitang. You're not that old and wise.'

'I'm old enough and wise enough to nip trouble in the bud.'

As if on cue, DereKin's voice grew louder and angrier. He stood and gestured at Py across the fire. 'I'll not surrender. I can raise sixty men and boys, and half as many women if needed. Brey has twenty...'

Magistrate Py replied calmly, 'With better weapons and communications. And it'd not be just them. Brey can call on a hundred retainers. Or on the authorities in Quandadar if he chose to. It would be rebellion, DereKin. Rebellion pure and simple. That's a capital crime. It'll be the mines for you, likely for life.'

'Better the mines than surrendering our rights,' DereKin exclaimed, standing up. 'From the age of legend, down through this present age, the Deres have been known throughout the marches as a proud and fighting clan.'

'Do you want the darter now?' I asked softly.

'Keep your weapon. The jacket's enough. Why I'm even more eager for a little sword play now.'

Turning to his band, DereKin continued. 'Lads, make no mistake. We're not fighting for a piece of land. We're fighting for our way of life. That vineyard is only the first blow on our blade. Others will follow in rapid succession. He intends to change Grimdar forever. Vineyards and wineries are only the first of many changes. More new ways will follow, and if we fail to fight now, we'll be powerless to prevent our way of life from disappearing from this march and the Deres will be lost to memory.'

'I tell you lads, Brey is not a march-man. He's a businessman. If we can make him realize that his business here will not pay and will never pay, he'll go away and leave us to our old ways. Why, those guards will cost him more than the grapes he may or may not be able to grow. If we stand firm, he'll toss in his hand and go back to Quandadar. But only if we stand firm. Now. Are you with me lads?'

They gave him a somewhat sodden, halfhearted cheer of approval. I would imagine sitting around a smoky campfire under the dripping pines was not a great inducement for a career in banditry.

DereKin wasn't about to accept that halfhearted reply, and continued to rally them in an ever louder and impassioned voice, with ever more urgent appeals to their pride, their clan, their future, their questionable manhood.

As he harangued them, I counted 27 men and boys. Nine a'piece. They would indeed be getting in each others way – if they came at us with blades instead of springers. Still, I'd not take on a Magistrate of Laeza and his two ex-pirates with a blade, not even 27 blades, not when I had a springer rifle at hand. The drifts had taught me well. March-men might think differently, but the fact that they had their springers at hand argued otherwise.

I glanced at KaRaya. She grinned back, every bit as confident as Py as to the eventual outcome. I suppose I was too, but only because I didn't plan on letting things get as far as a sword fight. I had my

trusty sissy in hand and intended to put a quick end to the festivities, should – or rather when – things got to the break point. It might be cheating, but better safe than sorry.

Py sat calmly on his log before the fire as DereKin's oratory slowly stirred some desperate life into his clansmen. As their responses to his calls became louder and angrier, KaRaya and I exchanged glances, and pushed off from the tree and spread out under the pines. Py did not glance back. He may've even forgotten we were there. This was his dream come to life. And I intended to disappoint him. We all have to grow up.

'Are you with me, brothers, or against me?' demanded DereKin, one last time of his clansmen.

He had apparently put enough fire and backbone into his band, that they rose as one with a ragged cheer.

DereKin turned to Py. 'You have our answer, Magistrate. Take that back to Brey.'

Collecting his staff, Py slowly rose to his feet. 'I have heard your answer. Now here is my reply. DereKin, if you do not agree to the terms I will confirm the warrant of banditry that Master Brey has issued on your head. As a bandit, your title and rights as clan chief would be forfeited. And DereDen appointed Chieftain of the Clan of Dere of Grimdar.'

'I am chief of the Deres. Neither you nor the Brey can take that from me!' DereKin roared.

'You've talked enough, Kin,' continued Py. 'I'll give you one last chance to accept the terms. If you resist, it is banditry which means the mines – or death. And that applies to all who resist.'

'It is not banditry to fight for our age-old rights! As for my weapons, aye, I'll give it to you!' DereKin yelled, in a great passion, drawing his springer pistol. A great fool he may be, but not foolish enough, even in his rage, to take on Magistrate Py with a sword.

'Py's mine! Take his lackeys, lads!' DereKin yelled leveling his springer at Py. 'Dere advance!'

By this time, I had my sissy out, in hand, and activated, so I aimed it at DereKin and fired as soon as I spied the little blue dot of the drive field on his chest. His battle cry abruptly ceased as he began to slowly twist and settle to the ground. I lowered my hand a little and put a second dart into the fire, hoping to add a little more magic to the scene.

My expectations were exceeded as the dart exploded on one of the rocks in a blue flash of flame, sending a spray of sparks, glowing embers and smoke into the air, driving the Dere band back in alarm. Py stood unmoved in the swirling sparks.

With the band staggered, scared, and leaderless, now was the time to end this – whispered 500 generations of St Bleyth ancestors. They should know, so I bellowed in my best Captain Fen Miccall voice, 'The fun is over. Go back to your wives and children! And mothers!' I added, pointing at some of the mere boys in the band.

'One more step forward and you'll all end up slaving in the mines, while your women and children live in poverty, cursing you for being a fool. It's time to grow up. Magistrate LinPy has, in his kindness, merely rendered DereKin unconscious. He is our prisoner. The rest of you go back to your herds and fields. Be march-men once more. Or grow grapes if it shows promise. But whatever you do, never, ever challenge the authority of a Magistrate of Laeza again. Gather your gear and go home. Did you not hear me? Move!'

Amazingly enough, they moved, shuffling off to gather their gear, leaving DereDen and DereBaen, DereKin's second son to look after their unconscious father, collapsed in a heap at the edge of the fire.

I glanced at KaRaya. She had her hands on her hips and gave me a sour look. She wagged her finger at me, with a glance at Py.

Py, who had stood, staff in hand during my speech, turned to give me a rather unreadable, but not a very thankful look, and then turned back and stepped around the fire towards the Dere boys and their father. I hadn't expected to be thanked – I knew Py and his boyhood dream too well – so my feelings weren't hurt. However, I also knew I had exceeded my authority, not only by sending that dart on its way without his orders, but by my speech as well. It was not my place, as a magistrate's lieutenant, to act without orders. But I wasn't about to play with sharp swords with a pack of herders if I could help

it. I had 27 more darts should the situation have needed them. The Way would be best served by not spilling needless blood.

Hissi, however, found it all very amusing, barking softly from her branch overhead. I'm not quite sure why, but I decided that she had appreciated the streak of ruthlessness I'd displayed in my eagerness not to get involved in a sword wielding fray.

KaRaya stepped over to me. 'I'm not wanting to be in your boots, brother. Swords and shafts are noble weapons, suitable for an outer member of the Order in the margin lands. I rather doubt Py will consider a fancy, little springer quite as noble, especially when you used it to deny him his childhood dream. And I'm not even mentioning how you stole his scene... Though it was quite masterful. You still surprised me, brother.'

'Everything I did was to prevent violence. I was following the Peaceful Way.'

'Save your sweet-talking charm for Py. You're going to need all you have in you. He's never going to fight a bandit band at this rate.'

'He just needs to be patient,' I replied softly. 'He's destined to fight one, sooner or later.'

She smiled. 'Well if not, it won't be for a lack of trying.'

While we talked in the background, Py took charge as DereKin slowly came around.

'We will go back to the tower and then on to Cloud Home Community where, as I said, you will be tried by the Masters. Now, DereDen, you must sign the agreements as the new Chief of the Deres,' he added, turning to DereDen, who nodded glumly.

'KaRaya, please bind the hands of our prisoner.' he said, glancing across the fire to us.

She gave me a quick smirk and started forward.

In the hour or so it took for the clansmen to break camp and mount up, ex-chief DereKin revived. He spent the time loudly and bitterly expressing his contempt for his clansmen, who let three men overcome them. According to him, this was the saddest day of the Dere Clan – the whole Dere Clan of the Daeri Marches. Well, he hadn't had a very good day, and I'm sure his head was pounding, so I excused his rantings. His clansmen went about breaking camp, never looking his way.

KaRaya and I got him mounted and tied to the saddle when the time came. KaRaya led his mount, while I rode behind to keep an eye on him. The clan rode ahead of us, hurrying ahead to escape his constant belittling outrage and was soon out of sight.

## Chapter 17 Cloud Home

01

On reaching the Master's Tower, the guards took charge of DereKin. A subdued Py gave us a brief order to collect our gear. We'd be setting off for Cloud Home Community just as soon as we'd collected our gear and supplies for the three-round journey.

As it turned out, we left within the hour – aboard Brey's fan car, at his insistence, with Py in the front seat next to Weatin, since he, unlike KaRaya and I, had never flown a flier or sailed the sky-sea. KaRaya, Hissi and I sat in the back seat with the still bound DereKin, now silently contemplating his fate. It took four hours flying over the black-green and mauve treetops, and between the moss and lichen covered ridges of the mountain range to reach the long, narrow valley of Cloud Home, nestled in the folds of the mountains. The community itself clung to a rocky spire in the center of the valley carpeted with small farm fields. We had risen above the clouds by this time, so that the valley lay lushly green, fading to blue in the distance, under the twilight sky. We landed on the largest terrace of the

community – creating quite a quiet stir. Py hurried off with his prisoner after a few quick words to us, saying that he'd see us as soon as he could, and then asked the gathered Laezans to look after us.

We were each shown to small cells with little more than a bed and a stand with a bowl, a mug, and pitcher of water. We were told that we would be called for the next meal. KaRaya drifted in as soon as our hosts had departed.

'Well here we are. So, what's next, brother?' asked KaRaya quietly, standing at the large window letting in the twilight.

'Well, I would imagine that after making our report, we'd backtrack to Cairn March to finish our circuit,' I replied, somewhat evasively. I knew the thrust of her question. I just didn't know my mind on the answer.

'And then? I believe we agreed to follow Py for one circuit. What do we do next? Stay on or move on?'

'What are you thinking, Raya? My thoughts, I'll admit, are rather confused.'

'You're the one on a quest. We've dallied in the marches for four hundred rounds now. How impatient are you to find your girl and dragon – or that boat of yours in the Outward Islands?'

'How impatient are you? The girl and the dragon are mine, of course, but my boat, and the coins it might bring are part of our partnership. How anxious are you to get back to the Outward Islands and find it?'

She shrugged. 'It's an island on the chart, not one in sight. Coins have a way of falling through my fingers.'

'So you're saying you're having second thoughts?'

'Oh, I'm still in on it. But I'm not sure we can get to the Outward Islands as things stand now.'

'A matter of coins?'

She shrugged. 'Tickets to Quandadar from Mountain Vale, the closest city with a link to Quandadar, plus lodging, meals and sundry expenses would likely consume one of our gold coins. After that it would depend on how long it took to find an island trader we could trust. That might take a hundred rounds – reliable Outward Island traders are fairly rare, and we'd be fools for settling for one we couldn't trust – since once we sail, anything could happen. Still, we could sign on some ships for a while to get to ports I know better than Quandadar, while earning coins until the right trader turned up. But I think that's up to you. It's your quest. I'm just along for the fun – and the chance of coins.'

'Are you restless for gambling, carousing and handsome men?'

She smiled. 'To be honest, no. I'm just too full of karma and the Way to miss gambling, carousing and handsome men...'

'Ha!'

'Besides, I've grown very fond of Py. And I like our job. I like the respect we're held in. And I find being a magistrate's lieutenant interesting work. So, I'm not opposed to another circuit. But I would not hold you back if you wish to be on your way.'

That was the answer I was afraid she'd give. I considered my reply, until she said. 'Still with us?'

I gave her a sidelong glance and said, 'I'd be willing to serve the Magistrate for another circuit. As you said, it is interesting berth. And, well, in some ways it is the life I'm suited for – restless in a way, moving from place to place. But settled as well – moving in a known and orderly manner. And I think we'd both feel bad abandoning Py after he's put so much effort into molding us into his lieutenants. We owe him at least another round, now that we know the job.'

'And your quest?'

I sighed. 'You're not the only one who is subject to romantic fits, Raya. I'm not saying Naylea isn't worth finding, nor that I've given up... It's just that I've a much clearer understanding of the task before me, and if I'm to be honest with you, a less clear of an idea of how to go about it. I'd foolishly believed that Hissi could, through some telepathic link to Siss, lead me to Naylea. If this was the case, if Hissi seemed to be on a mission to lead me somewhere, things would be different. But she seems as content

with this life as we are. And the islands of the Principalities are too numerous to find a girl and a dragon, except by wild chance.'

'So you're giving up?'

'No... Not exactly. We do have one link – the Temtres and our gold-tokens. If I don't make any more foolish mistakes – like ending up in an Outward Island stew – I'll follow that link. But not too soon. I'm thinking that the longer Naylea lives this new life, the better our chances will be to put the past behind us. Several thousand rounds may not too long to forget an age-old blood feud.'

'Several thousand generations may still not be long enough for some, judging from what we've seen here...'

'Aye. There's that possibility. Still, my dear twin sister, if you're willing to serve young Py for another go about, I'm willing as well.'

'I think we owe him at least that much.'

02

I knew I had to apologize to Magistrate Py for my intervention – but I had to patiently wait for my chance to talk to him alone. We were treated politely, but cautiously, by the Laezans of Cloud Home. Polite words, but little conversation. Still, we got the impression that the stir we created extended beyond the method of our arrival. Bandits and rebellions are very rare in the margin marches, and Magistrate Py's involvement was out of the ordinary, to say the least. It was hard to get a read on Py's standing. We saw him only once, briefly, in our first two rounds in the Cloud Home Community and he seemed preoccupied and had little to say. He inquired after our treatment, and we after his. He replied with a rather weary smile that there were many things that needed to be attended to, which was keeping him very busy at the moment. He hoped, however, that we'd soon be free to finish his circuit.

Late in the second round of our stay, I found him at the parapet of the large, shady, Orchard Terrace overlooking the valley, hundreds of meters below. I hesitated to interrupt his quiet time, but I was anxious to reestablish our past relationship, which I had at least dented with my intervention, so I walked over to stand beside him.

'Ah, Wilitang,' he said quietly. 'I regret that I've been so busy with the Dere affair – setting out the facts and setting up a trial – that I've not had the time to talk with you and Raya.'

'We understand. I would have left you to your quiet contemplation, but I feel that I need to beg your forgiveness, Magistrate, for my actions in the Dere camp.'

He started to protest, but I continued, 'I knew that I was overstepping your authority by taking the action I did. But with DereKin seeming willing to use his drawn springer, I was concerned for your safety. Though I am very familiar with your martial skills, I hope you will forgive me for doubting your ability to dodge slugs. Was I worrying needlessly, Master?'

He smiled, 'I cannot move fast enough to avoid a flying slug. But I believe I can move fast enough not to be where the slug is heading just before it's sent on its way. It is a matter of movement just prior to the twitch of a finger. But I cannot say this for certain since I have been saved from actually attempting it.'

'Forgive me for doubting you, Magistrate,' I replied, with a smile. 'Blame it on my regard and affection for you, and Raya. You see, I felt that I might be able to settle the issue – with my weapon that only stuns rather than kills – without violence. I believe I could've put the entire band to sleep, if it had proved necessary. No heads or bones broken, no wounds to patch – no one dead. Even knowing your dream, Master, I felt that if the issue could be settled without anyone being hurt, I was obliged to try...'

'And you were in the right to do so. I was angry, and I was wrong. It is I who is sorry. I was, I admit, too eager for the fray – my old failing. People could have been hurt, even my trusted lieutenants and friends, for as you say, they had springers at hand. You acted in accordance with the Way even as I

eagerly embraced a violent way. I am ashamed of my desires.'

'You did all you could to avoid violence. You could do no more, but I could, and did. But there was more than just a dart. I stepped out of line and took charge as well. I am sorry for this breach of proper etiquette, especially if it gave you the idea that I doubted your ability to handle the situation. In the moment, it just seemed right that I should bellow orders to stand down. To treat them roughly in the moment of crisis so as to remove the pot from the fire before it boiled over. And I hoped that since no one noticed my actions, your wordless authority would be recognized and perhaps enhanced.'

'You were acting in accord with the Way. Wu wei – a little action in the right moment is all that is needed to make great changes.'

I nodded. 'It seemed to be the moment, Master. I acted.'

'It is well you did. I take it that DereKin's collapse and the fire effect were a result of your electric dart weapon you have told us about.'

'Aye, my little non-lethal darter. I've carried it for 10,000 rounds mostly for my peace of mind. I regret the necessity – and the dangers, real or imagined. In any event, I doubt anyone noticed that I was pointing my hand at DereKin or the fire. They all were focused on you and DereKin and I gathered from their talk that they believe you used some power of the Greater Way to knock out DereKin and create that fuss with the campfire. I don't think a reputation for such power can hurt, do you?'

He shook his head. 'I'd rather a reputation for wisdom. But that will take several tens of thousands of rounds at this rate, if ever.'

'How do the sages of the Community look on the affair, if I may ask?'

He sighed. 'It is an unusual affair. Some, I suspect, would like to find fault in my actions, if only because I acted without consulting them. The matter could have been brought to the attention of the sages of the Community with a messenger within a half dozen rounds, or a half a dozen hours by fan-car, if anyone thought to do so. Master Brey was content to deal with the matter himself, since his position had already been approved by Magistrate VanDian, and DereKin, I believe, felt that I might well be more sympathetic to his cause from my reputation for having two ex-pirates as lieutenants. And even after I had been summoned by DereKin, I should have consulted them before acting. I acted rashly,' he added with a sidelong glance. 'Blame it on my youth.'

'Not that it would've made any difference,' I said.

'I think not, but that can't be proven. Still, what has been done, is done. The affair was settled without violence. DereDen is not the fool his father is, so hopefully peace will return to the Grimdar March. It is hard to see what more the sages here could've done – save that now they must deal with DereKin's fate. Some are unhappy about that.'

'How serious is all this. Are you worried about your status?'

'Oh, I am not without supporters. I am a magistrate after all, and my actions were well within my power as a magistrate. And though my intervention was somewhat extraordinary, it can be argued that the affair was well within my duties as a magistrate. So, no. I will continue to follow the Way where it leads. We must stay until DereKin's trial to give evidence, and then we shall finish our circuit.'

'Good. And just so you know, Master, Raya and I would like to stay on as your lieutenants for at least another circuit. We enjoy the job and feel that it would be very unfair to you to have spent so much effort in training us, to abandon you so soon. You can count on your lieutenants, your friends, to stand by you. Assuming, of course, you still want us. I fear our reputation, however false may do you no good.'

He nodded, 'Thank you. You needn't worry about your reputation. I have vouched for you with the elders. And in the marches, being known as ex-pirates does you no harm.'

DereKin's trial was held six rounds after our arrival. KaRaya and I were required to attend, to answer a few questions about our involvement in the case – I, more than KaRaya, as I had my intervention to explain. Once again, DereKin's defense rested on the ancient right and customs, and once more failed, since the ancient rights and customs he cited did not, in fact, exist. He was exiled to serve as a laborer in a community on the far side of Daeri for three thousand rounds – roughly a decade.

KaRaya and I were on the Orchard Terrace clearing our heads in the fresh mountain air after the trial when Py joined us.

'Ah, my friends, it is good that I find you both here,' he said. 'I must tell you that the elders have decided to send Magistrate Din to Cairn March to complete our circuit. They have also decided to reassign me to other duties, so I fear your services as my lieutenants are no longer needed. The new magistrate will want his own, though you are both more than welcome to stay in Cloud Home to begin to follow the way as novice teachers of the Way, if you so choose.'

'Why that's so unfair!' exclaimed KaRaya. 'Why you only did your duty – and no one, no old Magistrate, could've done it any better!'

'Are you being punished for employing us?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'I am not being punished. 'Oh, my style did not suit some of the elders, but they can find no fault in my judgments. No, I am not being punished. The elders have decided that my talents in the Way point in other directions and I shall require further training, to develop them.'

It sounded like punishment to me, but I said, 'And what directions do they think your talents point to?'

'They have not said, directly. But my mentor has hinted I may be trained as an advocate. As you know, the Order is dedicated to the peoples of the Saraime. When people are oppressed and exploited, they can call on the Order of Laeza to intercede for them. Sometimes this involves reaching out to the exploiters, sometimes it means taking the people's case to the Principality's officials. Sometimes, however, when dealing with the greed of powerful people or criminals, more direct action is needed to stop their exploitation and bring their actions into accordance the Way.' He paused and smiled. 'My mentor knows me too well. He has taught me the words of justice and how to apply them. Next, I hope that I might take what I have learned, use what little wisdom I may have acquired, to fight, if necessary, for justice on behalf of the people deprived of it. That, at least is my hope.'

'That sounds like fun!' exclaimed KaRaya. 'Will you need lieutenants?'

He laughed. 'I would like nothing better than to have you at my side. But I must tell you that it may be many hundreds of rounds before I would need my own lieutenants – if indeed, I am right in my guess. Even after my training, I will be an advocate's lieutenant for many rounds as I learn the ways of bringing the powerful and greedy back to the Way. You can, of course, stay on here, and study with me. Or perhaps the new magistrate might choose to employ you in your old roles, but I can make no promises... Or you are free to go on your way, to continue your quest.'

KaRaya looked at me. I didn't know what to say, so she said it, 'I think, brother Py, we shall be on our way. Though we are travelers of the Way, the truth is that we served you and then the Order. And I think your sages will let out a silent sigh of relief when they hear that.'

He smiled, 'Some will. Others will be disappointed. Having two ex-pirates in our ranks would give Cloud Home bragging rights.' He then gave us each a hearty hug, 'Thank you both for your friendship and help. You have helped to make my career as Magistrate one that will be talked about for many, many rounds.'

'I feel renewed,' exclaimed KaRaya as we made our way down the narrow track from the community



after a sad final farewell to Magistrate Py. 'We've done well, haven't we Hissi?'

She barked her agreement.

'Well, we've mostly kept you out of trouble for over four hundred rounds – I guess, that's an accomplishment of sorts,' I said.

'Indeed. A new record.'

'Let's see if we can extend it, shall we?'

'Who knows where the winds will take us? Are you still content to linger longer on the road to your love?'

I considered that question. 'What do you say, Hissi? Are you ready to lead me to my love?'

She barked another carefree laugh, wagging her head "no."

'Well, in that case, I think I'll give her a little longer to forget her old life. What do you suggest we do?'

'The fare to Quandadar from Mountain Vale, where this road will take us, as passengers will likely put a dent in our treasury with meals and all. If you're in no hurry, I'd suggest we work our way to Quandadar, or some city on the bright side, where we can get a lift up to the wide-sky port of Daedora.'

'What type of work do you have in mind?'

'Well, I've never been to Mountain Vale, but I gather it is a sizable mining and milling town. Gyro-barges are used to bring ore in from the remoter mines and then the refined ore out to Quandadar and even up to Daedora for export.'

'Gyro-barges?'

'Large fliers with several masts topped by lift propellers that are driven by the forward motion of the barge provided by a steam driven propeller or two. There's a fair chance of finding suitable work for a couple of down on their luck, but sober wide-sky sailors. Sober stokers are always rare birds, so I don't think if push comes to shove, we'd have a problem getting a berth in Mountain Vale, though it might be a while before we'd make our way to some place civilized.'

'Well, getting some place civilized is a pretty high priority for me, but I guess I'd not mind getting paid a few coins to get there. If your ports are anything like the ones I know, I'd rather arrive with coins in my pockets – or money pouch – than broke.'

'That's my thinking, brother. Being coin-less in port, is how I landed the slaver berth. So, we're agreed, Mountain Vale and a gyro-barge berth if one's to be had?'

'Aye. We're agreed.'

## Part Four – The Mountain of Gold

### Chapter 18 The Shadow Bird

01

It was a five-round walk from Cloud Home to Mountain Vale. As we neared our destination we came upon deforested or young forested valleys and foothills and several large smoldering charcoal kilns along the way, which explained the lack of forests, charcoal being the fuel of choice, at least in the margins. Ahead lay what appeared to be a smoldering volcano, with a faint plume of blue smoke

rising in the twilit distance above a wide, flat topped ridge. When we reached this ridge and looked down into the valley of Mountain Vale, it all became clear. Or as clear as the smoke allowed.

Half a mountain side had been dug out and half of that converted to slag piles. There were half a dozen smelters or mills in the valley, all powered one way or another by charcoal. The valley floor was a hodgepodge of ore refineries, slag heaps, and a commercial center, woven together with rail lines from the mountainside diggings. At the edge of the town was a wide paved landing field to accommodate the gyro-barges that carried out the processed iron, nickel, silver and gold that the mountain produced. The residential city itself, in a rather futile effort to escape the smoke and ash, had crawled up the ridge line in a series of terraces and winding roads.

'The first thing we need to do is find some lodgings,' said KaRaya. 'And preferably before we reach the bottom. We'll work our way down. You take your side of the street, I'll take mine. We're looking for a sign in a window or on a gate that says "R&M", which tells us some enterprising homeowner rents out a room with a meal to travelers.'

'How likely is that? This doesn't look to be a tourist hot spot.'

'Aye, but it attracts people like us. Keep a sharp lookout. We don't want to end up in a flop house at the bottom if we can help it.'

We found a grey stone cottage (all the stone cottages were grey – smoke stained and sooty) amongst a stand of stunted pines about half way down. We entered through a clean, bright green gate and presented ourselves at the cottage door – KaRaya and I, with Hissi, standing straight and tall between us, decked out in her ribbons and broaches, with her naturally smiling mouth closed to mostly hide her teeth. It's amazing how prim, proper and mild looking a Simla dragon can look, if she sets her mind to it. Still, the poor housewife looked rather startled when she opened the door to the three of us. But she was made of sterner stuff, and asked, 'Yes?' in a quiet, vaguely wary voice.

'Greetings, Ma'am. We're looking for a room while we seek employment below.'

'I have only one room...'

'That would be no problem. We'll be out for much of the time searching for a berth, and can either sleep in shifts or Captain Wilitang here can sleep on the floor. We're five rounds from the Cloud Home Community and are used to sleeping rough,' and seeing her hesitate, KaRaya continued, 'We'll pay three rounds in advance, and for two extra meals as well, and a bit extra for hot water to bathe in.'

'You say you've come from the community?'

'Aye. We've spent the last four hundred rounds as the assistants of a Magistrate...'

Her eyes widened and she shot Hissi a renewed glance. 'Not Magistrate LinPy?'

'The very. You've heard of Magistrate LinPy, have you?'

'All sorts of accounts from my regular commercial travelers. Then, you'd be...'

'Gossip had us ex-pirates. But we're actually plain, ordinary wide-sky sailors.'

'But why are you here?'

'Magistrate LinPy is to be an advocate now, so our services were not needed. So we're here to find a berth that will eventually lead us back to the wide-skies. Being both experienced hands and sober, I expect we'll find one in short order.'

She seemed a bit skeptical, but let it pass. She glanced again at the smiling dragon, with her bright, carefully tied ribbons and scarves, and smiled. 'Yes, you must be who you say you are, so I'll take you in for a week. I expect one of my regulars to be back in a week, but until then, you're welcome to stay.' She stepped back and invited us in and showed us a small, but prim bedroom.

We spent the next several hours, washing the dirt and soot of travel off of us, and then enjoying a substantial meal ('Hissi will eat anything we can, no special diet is required.').

Our host proved quite cheerful and helpful. I suspect that hosting the famous ex-pirates and the Simla dragon of Magistrate LinPy would be a new feather in her crown of feathers once word got around the neighborhood.

'You and Hissi get some sleep. I'll go down and have a look around to get a feel for our prospects,'

said KaRaya, brightly, having bathed and eaten.

I gave her a hard look, but she just flashed back an innocent smile. I suppose I had to trust her. Still, 'Don't do anything I wouldn't do.'

'I have no intention of sullyng the virtue we've worked so long to build. I've more character than that. Indeed, I've character up to my feathery crown. My only weak link is that I, all too easily, fall into bad company, of the male type.'

'Then stay away from all males...'

'Easier said than done,' she replied with an airy wave, and set out down the hazy lane for the smoky factories below.

## 02

As it turned out, landing a berth was indeed easy. The big, steel-built gyro-barges of the mining companies were a lot like the Chartered Trading Company ships of the Unity – good berths, hard to break into. However, there were many small tramp trading barges in Mountain Vale as well, and we found one which was not only two hands short, missing and presumed drunk, but we had a special in, as well.

We were walking along the line of barges on the landing field's tarmac between the paved takeoff field and half a dozen large loading docks that banged and roared as the ore was transferred from the refineries to the barges by spidery overhead tram lines. We called at each barge in turn to inquire if they needed any hands, and had come up blank until we reached the Shadow Bird.

The Shadow Bird was a typical, if well worn, small, general purpose gyro-barge. It consisted of a steel platform, about eight meters wide and twenty-some meters long. It had a metal bow forward to break the wind and house two large, slightly steerable wheels. It had four more, two on each side under the after deckhouse which allowed it to travel on the ground until it gained enough speed to get airborne. Only the fact that the island's gravity field was so minor allowed it to fly. It was lifted aloft by three horizontal, helicopter-blades that were spun by the barge's forward motion. The forward motion was provided by a large propeller right aft, which in turn was driven by a modest sized steam engine. The engine and boiler were housed in an aluminum sided two-story deck-house. Just forward of the boiler were eight tiny cabins for passengers, four up four down which opened on to the cargo deck. A bridge house sat on top of these cabins behind it and above the engine room were small cabins for the captain, mate, chief engineer, a small mess room with a small galley, a table and a few chairs, and a small bunk room for the rest of the crew. The Shadow Bird carried a crew consisting of her captain, a mate, an engineer, and a cook, along with two general hands to serve as stokers, cargo handlers, and whatever else needed doing. Her cargo was lashed to the open deck under canvas shrouds. Removable railing for bulwarks allowed the cargo to be handled without much fuss. There was a small crane on the central propeller shaft to unload any cargo that could not be loaded by hand.

As I said, we'd been working our way down the line of barges when Hissi, who'd been loping alongside of us suddenly stopped and froze. We walked past her, and then stopped and turned back, when she hadn't moved to keep up with us.

'What's up?' I asked, but she wasn't paying any attention to me. I asked again, without a response at all. Somewhat alarmed, I started back, but she started to hop, very tentatively forward, past us and around the stern of the next barge in line. We followed her.

On the deck of the barge, alongside the tarp covered cargo lay a Simla dragon, slowly unrolling himself to stand on his hind legs. It was perhaps the largest Simla dragon I'd seen, fully four meters in length and rather fat, making it look more like a giant crocodile than a tall, slim Simla dragon. I was struck by his age, his once bright feather colors were muted into a grey-green, and lusterless. On the deck and standing on his hind legs he towered over Hissi, who on reaching the low edge of the barge's

deck, stood and stared up at this ancient Simla dragon, without a sound. Neither dragon made a sound or hardly any motion, though the old dragon may've swayed a bit – more accustomed to laying than standing. This was the first Simla dragon Hissi encountered since leaving her shell.

I had to assume Hissi knew what she was doing, though I had my hand in my pocket and my sissy in hand. We all stood like statues for perhaps a minute, when the side door of the bridge opened unseen above us and voices could be heard.

'...Yes Mom. I'll roust them out, or find some warm bodies to replace them. It's not like they were any good.'

Glancing up I saw a young man swing open a gate in the bridge deck railing to climb down a ladder set in the side of the deck house. A second figure, a woman, presumably Mom, appeared as well.

'Try and find some sober ones, this time,' she snapped.

'Easier said than done, Mom,' her son replied wearily, more to himself than her.

'We're sober and looking for a berth,' KaRaya called up boldly. 'And we're right here.'

They both stopped to look down at us – and then at the two dragons who continued to stare at each other. If I ever had any doubt that they were telepathic, their performance would've erased any I had. You could almost catch their thoughts, or at least the fact that thoughts were being passed back and forth, in their undivided attention and concentration on each other.

'That your dragon?' asked "Mom" leaning over the railing to look down on KaRaya.

'She travels with my friend Wilitang, here,' she replied carefully.

'Your dragon?' she asked, surprised.

'I make no claim of ownership. Just friendship,' I replied, equally carefully, though Hissi was clearly not paying any attention to us. She and the big Simla were just staring at each other like statues.

'Pardon me, but this is the first Simla dragon we've encountered since she hatched. Should we be concerned about how they'll get along?'

'Naw. Ol'King is too old for anything – he's all wheeze and bark, no bite. No, your little dragon is in no danger. They're just getting to know each other. Ain't many of their kind on this island, so meeting one is a rare treat. How'd you cross course with yours?'

'She was a gift as an egg from another Simla dragon with a sense of humor. I think she's supposed to either look after me, or just annoy me.'

'Ain't seen that coloring. What island does she come from?'

'No idea. Her parents traveled aboard Temtre ships.'

'What do you have to do with the Temtres?'

'I was shipwrecked on an island with a couple of Temtre boats on it,' I replied. My standard lie.

'How come you ain't a slave of theirs? Or dead?'

'Oh, we came to an amiable understanding, part of which is, being that I can't say any more about it.'

'And now you're looking for a berth on a broken down shadow-side barge?'

'Aye, we are, Captain,' said KaRaya.

'What brings you to Mountain Vale?'

'We've been traveling the marches, Captain.'

'Pretty far from sailing the wide-sky, ain't you?'

'It's a long story, but briefly...' KaRaya replied, and gave a quick version of our tale, ending with, 'We're sober, competent, and would like to earn a heavy coin pouch before we start looking for a wide-sky berth.'

'I think you're big liars, but for what I pay, I can't be too fussy. And you've got a dragon with you. We're ready to sail, are you?'

'All we have to do is fetch our gear from the R&M and we're yours to command.'

'I'm hiring deck hands, at two coppers a round to start until I see what you're worth.'

KaRaya glanced at me. Three coppers a round less than being a slave. I shrugged. It was all the same to me. We weren't likely to find much better in Mountain Vale anytime soon.

'Right, we'll sign on. Two coppers are better than no coppers.'

'You'd be amazed at the number of sailors who can't do that math. So what do you say, King. Should I sign 'em on? The pretty little dragon and all?'

King broke his trance and looking up, gave a wheezing bark. Hissi glanced over to me and gave me her young eager bark as well. She needed to get to know one of her own kind. She needed some Simla dragon lore, though how much ol'King could provide was an open question. He looked to have been living amongst humans for a very long time. Hopefully he hadn't forgotten all the Simla heritage he may've known in his youth. But what do I know of Simlas?

'Right, Snap to it and get your gear. By the way, I'm Captain and owner of the Shadow Bird. DenMons, is my name. DenOrn, here, is my son and chief mate. I've another one, DenBarn getting up steam. They and Cookie, our cook, are the semi-reliable crew of the Shadow Bird. At two coppers a round, deck hands come and go.'

03

Captain DenMons proved to be a sharp-tongued, no nonsense captain. She clearly told you exactly what she wanted done and you snapped to it, with an "Aye, Cap'n". Her boys seemed to have leave to mutter and whine just as long as they snapped to it. We didn't. Or if we did, we didn't test it.

The Shadow Bird was a family barge. Both DenOrn and DenBarn had spent most of their lives aboard her, only getting away for some schooling in their youth. DenMons's mate, the "Old Man" was mentioned only in passing by the boys. I never did learn anything of his whereabouts or fate. It was not a happy subject. I generally steered well clear of Cap'n DenMons at the beginning of my time aboard the Shadow Bird, when I could – which I could if I stayed in the engine room, save for meals and sleep. KaRaya, who served under some pretty hard boiled captains, said DenMons wasn't very social, but was mostly bark, not bite.

The boys, however, were friendly enough, and eager to hear all of our adventures in the wide-sky – the wide-sky they dreamed of sailing one day. But only over their mother's dead body, which looked to be some tens of thousands of rounds in the future. The cook, known only as "Cookie" was a fine-feathered man of some undetermined age. Small, lean, but built of leather, and full of energy. He'd been aboard the Shadow Bird for some 20,000 rounds or more, and was considered family.

The Shadow Bird's usual voyage consisted of a call on Mountain Vale, followed by two to four mining or lumber towns, a half a round's sailing or less apart. The exact destination depended on the cargo.

These small towns, deep in the forested shadow-side were collections of log buildings with slate roofs. They reeked of wood smoke from the stoves and power plants that provided the electricity needed to constantly light the interiors of the buildings and mines in the dim lit shadow lands. Every mining town had a mine at one end, and a short landing field for the ore barges at the other, with one main street linking them, with a few short streets branching out to access the workers' houses. They all had a trading post that traded with the native shadow-land natives. These natives traded furs and feathers, plus hand crafted wooden knickknacks, and the occasional gold or silver nugget for industrial products.

The lumber towns were smaller than the mining towns, and built to be moved when the local lumber supply was exhausted. They were set in park-like forests, with flowering meadows under the massive, storm-twisted deep green and mauve pines. The forests were far too slow growing to be clear cut. Ancient wars with the shadow-land natives had settled that question back in the era of legends. Natives selected and the lumber companies harvested the storm downed and damaged trees within reach of the mill and charcoal kilns. What could be used for lumber was cut to size and exported. Everything else was ground up, pressed into cakes and slowly carbonized into charcoal.

The ore, lumber, charcoal, and crew rotations were carried out on company barges. General supplies were brought in by small tramp barges like ours, along with the odd commercial traveler, visitors or returning resident which we carried in those tiny cabins. It didn't strike me as a very lucrative business, but it was steady enough, with not a lot of competition.

The Shadow Bird's second to the last stop was always on the gravel strand between the a long, deep lake known as Chasm Lake, and the small fishing village of the same name. Here we'd find a dozen big boxes of smoked Chasm Lake trout waiting for us. Then, once we arrived, the fishermen would switch to fresh fish. We'd spend an idle round or two, depending on the fishermen' luck, waiting to load dozen or so barrel's worth of fresh trout, which were shipped live in the water filled barrels.

'Don't let King get at those fish,' said Cap'n DenMons as the cart with the barrels filled with fish started to arrived. 'He likes to go fishing in those barrels, if you don't keep an eye on him.'

Sure enough, ol'King with Hissi in tow, wandered down from the bridge as we were lugging the barrels into place.

Now King may have been old, but he was a big Simla dragon, especially when he's standing next to you. And he still had most of his teeth. So when he looked down to gave me a deep, suggestive growl, I said to KaRaya, 'We might want to have a little accident while loading that last barrel...'

She looked at King and said thoughtfully, 'It's been known to happen that barrels occasionally get tipped, covers come off, things get lost.'

King grunted.

'The fish count is going to come out a bit short,' I said, as I watched the dragons slink off with their fish.

'Spoilage,' replied KaRaya with a shrug.

'Spoilage?'

'Dockside corruption. Trout cannibalism, take your pick.'

'I doubt they'll buy either cannibalism or spoilage. That leaves dockside corruption, and a rather short list of suspects, especially since Ma counted them herself as they were barreled.'

'Well,' she sighed, 'ol'King still has more teeth than Ma. That sort of figures into my calculations.'

'Yeah, mine too.'

So, occasionally, a barrel of live trout got tipped too far and its covers, not properly attached, flew off, sending a few squirming trout sloshing out onto the deck – when DenMons wasn't looking. Looking back, this seemed to have happened on every trip. Still, nothing was said about it. Teeth count, I guess.

The voyage from Chasm Lake to Bindare, our light side home port, was the longest flight in the Shadow Bird's voyage, taking a full round to complete. Everyone was worn out by the time we arrived, as sleep aboard the Shadow Bird in flight was a rare occurrence.

04

While flying I was the assistant engineer, oiler, and stoker. KaRaya stood her watches on the bridge.

'Do you know who steers this crazy barge?' she whispered to me, coming off her first bridge watch.

'You?'

'Ol'King,' she exclaimed softly.

'Well, that's a relief. I thought you'd say you were.'

'Very humorous. I kid you not. He stands at the helm and steers the blasted barge through the river valleys and gorges. Skipper told me just to leave him be. Been doing it since before I was born,' she said.

'And you let him.'

'He may be ancient, but he's twice as long as I am and still has most of his teeth. Yes, I let him.'

'Well, I suppose, he does know his way around, which is more than you can claim. Besides, if Hissi can play Dragon's Luck and DuDan's Folly, I don't see why a Simla dragon couldn't con a barge. He's just a bridge officer, after all. It's not like he's trying to be an engineer.'

She shook her head. 'Whoever taught you how to act like an engineer, made a mighty fine job of it. Why, if I didn't know you to be a coin-less stoker, I'd swear you were an engineer.'

'I've got coins.'

'Only because you stopped playing cards with a Simla dragon. Speaking of which, I sure hope that having a young female dragon alongside doesn't distract him or make him want to show off. I don't want to end up in a mountain side. At least not on my watch.'

'If we do end up in a mountainside, it will most certainly be on your watch.'

She sighed. 'I can't argue that. It seems to be my fate.'

05

I leaned out of the open upper half of the engine room door and let the mild air streaming by at perhaps 50 kilometers an hour, cool my face. It was hot in the little engine room. Hot, noisy, dim and dusty with black charcoal dust to be exact. I pulled a rag out of my chest pocket and after searching for a grime-free section of it, wiped the sweat and charcoal dust from my face. We were on the last stretch of our first voyage, the long Chasm Lake to Bindare stretch.

With a few minutes before the boiler needed feeding, I had time for a breather, time to watch the tree-covered mountainside that rose up and over us slip by. Leaning out and looking ahead, I could see we were approaching a cliff-lined gorge. Looking back, through the whirling propeller, the river valley we were following twisted away into the dark, twilight haze of the deep shadow land – the river, a looping strand of silver reflecting the pale sky overhead.

'Slacking off, are we?' KaRaya said, joining me at the door.

'Bugger off. What are you doing polluting my engine room anyway? Get back on deck where you belong.'

'Oh, so it's your engine room now, is it?'

'Young Barn has generously allowed me to take effective ownership of it, at least part of it that involves work.'

'Are you complaining?'

'Not at all. He's also generously showed me how to keep the old engine running – no doubt because, as chief, Mom will blame him if things go "thud" down here. Still, I'd rather be learning and running the engine than just shoveling black-cake, or standing around on the bridge watching a dragon do my job.'

'Aye, it's a might cushy berth. Which is why I've risked getting black cake dust on my uniform. Are we staying? We'll be in Bindare within the round, so we'll need to make a decision soon.'

I gave KaRaya a questioning look. 'Well, we're partners, so it's not for me to say. Tell me, what will our coins buy us in Bindare?'

'Oh, a room, a bath, then a monorail ticket to Quandadar, a ferry ride up to Daedora, and maybe 20 rounds in a clean boarding house and meals. 50 in a dive.'

'And our prospects of a ship?'

She shrugged. 'Fair. Good, if you're not choosy.'

I considered that for a moment, watching the moss and vine covered cliffs slowly approach. 'I'm in no hurry. I'd like some more coins in my pocket, for a cushion. And I'd like to feel that I can find some sort of berth as an engineer, not a stoker, when it comes time to sail the wide-sky. However, if you're in a hurry to get back to the wide-sky, I'll not say no.'

She laughed. 'I'm in no hurry at all. I don't mind a cushy berth. We ain't getting rich, but I ain't in any

more of a hurry to get back to the wide skies than you. You're the one on a quest, so if you aren't in a hurry, we're not.'

'Then it's settled. We'll stay on until one of us gets restless. I guess the boiler needs another shovel of black-cake...' I said, turning back to the dim noisy engine room.

'Right. Now I've got another watch to stand before we get back to Bindare, so I'm going to try and get a nap in.'

I laughed. 'Good luck with that.' The voyages between the little towns usually did not last more than half a round, and after the cargo was cleared, we could get some sleep with the barge silent on the ground. However, KaRaya and I, as the lowest members of the crew, had to take turns guarding the barge and any deck cargo while the others slept. We'd usually spend a full round at each stop, as each community kept its own rounds, so you never knew where in the local round you'd be arriving at. If you arrived too near the sleep watch, we'd wait for the next round to unload. And well, everyone needed their sleep, and as I've mentioned, sleeping on the Shadow Bird in flight was nearly impossible. Between the beating of the three big blades overhead, and the drive propeller, the thumping and grumbling of the steam engine and the rattling of just about everything on the barge – the thin aluminum deck house siding, the doors in their frames, the windows in theirs, the barge made quite a racket. It lacked that ghosting along like a cloud one enjoyed traveling in an electric powered zep.

I wondered if they have zeps in the Principalities... I knew one zep builder. He tried to kill me. Still, there might be a market for them. Something to think about.

06

Bindare proved to be a surprisingly modern city of some 50,000 people with wide, tree-lined streets filled with electric vehicles. Serrata-proof houses and businesses stood in orderly rows beyond the trees. They all had solar panel roofs to collect the always available solar energy. With everlasting daylight, skylights, and only a few electric appliances, their power requirements were modest as well. Mostly it was used to charge their vehicles.

'How can such a modern looking city, be just hours away from the feudal stone towers and cottages of the marches?'

'We're on the bright side now, so electricity can be harvested from the light far more efficiently. But I think it's more a matter of culture. You fine-feathered people bring all the, what you call, advanced technology with you from the core Saraimé principalities, where the fine-feathered people dominate. We broad-feathered folk are content to live the way we always have, adopting from the fine-feathered only what we decide we really need. There's a lot more of your kind in the cities, so you'll see a lot more core-island technology. Each to his own.'

'And everyone gets along? It would seem a source of conflict – old ways and new ways.'

She laughed. 'They're all the old ways. What you see here is the way it's always been, at least for all practical purposes. I suppose the fine-feathers weren't always here, but that's nearly forgotten.'

After we'd unloaded our cargo, Captain DenMons gave us a round's leave. 'I expect you back in a round, reasonably sober. I'll be making my calls and the cargo will be arriving as soon as you're back on board, so you'll need to be in good enough shape to load it.'

'Right,' said KaRaya. 'You can count on us.'

'I'll not. Surprise me,' she snapped. Mostly bark, but not without a bite I'd not care to test. Hissi stayed on board with her new mentor.

We got some rooms, took a long shower, opened up a bank account so as not to have to carry our wealth with us. There was something about the mining and lumber towns we'd called on deep in the twilight – and the rough and rather dark humored people, both bright and shadow-siders – that



reminded me of driftee rocks and drifteers. Most weren't menacing, but you had the feeling, well, this wasn't the Unity. I felt a lot more comfortable with my few gold and silver coins in a bank rather than in my inner pocket. Darter or no darter, those deep shadow land towns, brooding on the edge of night had their share of dark corners and, I suspected, desperate men as well. I also picked up a couple of heavy duty jumpsuits, suitable for the oil and black charcoal dust of the engine room.

We arrived back in good time, in good shape, and got a two copper a day raise. I guess Cap'n Mons wanted to keep us.

## Chapter 19 The Rush

01

Life aboard the Shadow Bird followed an unchanging pattern. Between each voyage we'd spend four or five rounds in Bindare while Captain DenMons along with DenOrn in tow would make the rounds of their usual customers, collecting boxes and pallets of cargo for our usual ports of call. I gather that the Shadow Bird was not the only barge calling on these towns – five or six others were mentioned in passing – but even so, it was often five to ten rounds before they saw anything more than a company ore barge arriving or leaving. Lonely places. After we had our round off ship, KaRaya and I would return and oversee stowing of the cargo as it arrived in electric lorries. When Captain DenMons completed her rounds and the cargo was secured, we'd get steam up and take off in a whirl of blades for Mountain Vale, where we always had a dozen pallets or more to deliver, and then into the deep shadows, for two or three stops before ending up at Chasm Lake for the smoked and fresh trout.

Chasm Lake was a rare deep lake in Daeri, narrow, long and surrounded by steep ridge lines and mountains that sheltered it from the brunt of serrata winds, winds that could lift half the water of the shallower lakes into the air and scatter their finny inhabitants to the clouds and surrounding countryside. Because this didn't happen in Chasm Lake, it had a great population of large, deep water trout. Most of the catch was caught by native fishermen in small boats and then smoked at the small smoke house down the strand. We weren't the only barge to call on Chasm Lake, but with no scheduled service, the fresh fish were caught and put in barrels only on the arrival of a barge to carry them to Bindare. That, and indeed, the never changing pattern of the Shadow Bird was about to change.

We'd been sailing aboard the Shadow Bird long enough to – almost – call Captain DenMons "Mom" with some hope of getting away with it. KaRaya may've, but, "safety first" being my motto, I hadn't risked it. This would be something like 150 rounds since we signed on. We'd arrived in Chasm Lake the round before, and were preparing to depart when two broad-feathered men in rugged and rather dirty clothing, springer rifles slung over their back and carrying several bulky bags hurried on board to take passage to Bindare just as we were raising steam to leave. They paid passage with some coins and as few words as possible, settled into their tiny cabins, and stayed there for the whole voyage, having their meals brought to them. They alighted without so much as a word upon arrival in Bindare.

The Skipper shook her head. 'Not very social folk, were they?'

'And in a great hurry.'

She watched them disappear beyond the line of barges, rather thoughtfully. 'Not fishermen. Or fish cleaners at the smoke house – we would've smelled that. Save for a few shopkeepers, all of whom I know, there's only fishermen and fish cleaners in Chasm Lake City. Interesting. I think, lads, I smell something fishy that isn't fish.'

'And what would that be, Mom?' asked Orn standing beside her on the deck, as KaRaya and I started undoing the tarps over the fresh fish barrels.

She stood staring off into space for a moment, and then said, 'Not a word of this to anyone. Understand? I'm talking to all of you. No mention of passengers at all.'

'Why Mom?'

'Well, I could be wrong, and if I am, we would be in trouble should the wrong word got out,' and then lowering her voice, she continued, 'But I've seen this before. I smell gold. They had the look of prospectors. They'd been in the woods a long time, and given their shyness, I'd say that they're prospectors who've struck it rich and are now in a hurry to get their dust and nuggets safely salted away in a bank.'

'Gold in Chasm Lake?'

'In the hills or the little mountains above it. As likely a place as any in the shadows. There are big strikes every 10,000 rounds. Still, this is just a feeling I have in my bones. If we start spreading false rumors, we'd be in big trouble, so not a word, or even a hint of a word. If they brought back gold, word will surely get out when they deposit it. You don't keep gold strikes secret for long. And then lads, there'll be a stampede to Chasm Lake as the fools rush in. If anyone comes asking, our passenger fee to Chasm Lake is now ten silvers, and that for a deck passage. Two silver coins extra for a cabin, if available. Got that? Ten silvers. No discounts. Baggage is only what they can carry aboard with them. Anything more, ten silvers extra. This may be our lucky wind and I intend to ride it full tilt. But one last time. You know nothing. I'll not be made a fool of if I'm wrong. We'll see what develops in the next round or two. No shore leaves until we know. I want all of you on board and out of trouble.'

02

"Early" the next round Bindare time, a brisk man in a great hurry, presented himself and asked to speak to the captain. I had the deck watch, and showed him to the small mess room above the engine room where the Skipper was having her breakfast. They went to the bridge to talk. I could hear them talking from my post on the deck until he angrily stalked out through the side door of the bridge and flung himself down the ladder to the deck. Looking back up at the Skipper who'd followed him out, he said, 'There are other barges, you know.'

'Aye,' she said, and pointing to several in a line, not far off, 'You can start with them.'

He stalked off without a word for those other barges.

She cracked a knowing smile as she watched him go. 'Wanted to charter us. Wouldn't say why or where to. But offered a lot of money. But not a thousand silver coins' worth. I think me and the boys will go into town. We'll have to set our sailing time. Let's make it during the first watch, on the 607th round. I'll get Raya set up to issue tickets and collect the money. They'll be arriving soon enough.'

"Today" was the 605th round. As I may've mentioned, official time is kept in the Principalities based on flowering of the Nileana tree. The duration between flowerings is around 3,000 standard rounds. This might be considered a "decade" in the Saraimé with the rounds numbered from the day the flowers officially fall, ending the Nileana Festival until the first flowering of the next buds. We were now 605 rounds into that cycle.

Several other eager fellows arrived shortly after the captain and her boys left, seeking passage to Chasm Lake for some "fishing". They left discouraged by the rather drastic jump in fares, but they were back a few hours later, 10 silver coins in hand, happy to exchange them for tickets. They didn't bother to bring fishing rods with them then. Nor did the hundred other young, and old, men and women, who started arriving within hours of the skipper and the boys leaving, each hoping to land a ticket. The word was certainly out, and these folk were impatient to be on their way to pluck their own gold nuggets out of the creek beds in the hills and mountains behind Chasm Lake's one street.

Indeed, we had our 120 passengers (several doubled up in a cabin) before the last watch of the 605th, and all were eager to leave. The Captain, however, didn't budge from her announced sailing time.

She stood on the wing of the bridge looking down on the gathered mob on the deck. 'You have your tickets; you've got your passage. Now, go home and go through your pack again. Make sure you have everything you'll need. I've posted what the experts say you'll need. You'd be a fool to skimp on anything. Once we lift off, you'll be on your own, and I can assure you, you'll not find what you're missing in Chasm Lake. And if you're having second thoughts, I'm sure you can sell your ticket for a hundred silvers – a nice profit for no work...'

Part of the reason for the passengers' concern was that by the following round, there were scores of small aircraft, gyro-planes and even a gyro-barge taking off and heading towards the shadow lands, no doubt for Chasm Lake. Captain DenMons wasn't concerned.

'They'll be flocking to Chasm Lake by the thousands, if not tens of thousands. Getting them there is only the beginning of the bonanza. They'll need to be supplied as well, and for a long time to come. We're in the right place at the right time, and all we have to do is to keep our heads down and make one round trip every five rounds and we'll be on easy street,' she said as we ate a hasty dinner.

'We'll soon have lots of competition,' I pointed out.

'Aye, but there'll soon be 10,000 fools lined up for the gold mountain. It'll take a lot of barges and a lot of runs to get'em all there. And well, there's no telling how many of those barges will ever find their way to Chasm Lake. It isn't that easy to find unless you know the way.'

'There's must be maps.'

'Aye. There are maps aplenty. But there's a big difference between a river on a map and a river on the ground. And you know what it's like if you encounter a heavy rain...'

It would get almost as dark as night, and visibility would close in to a hundred meters or so. We'd slow down and follow the windings of the river, not twenty meters below us, so as not to plow into one of the steep hills that border these river valleys.

'Aye, but the small aircraft don't have to follow the rivers. They can fly straight there,' I said.

She shook her head. 'Once you're past the margin lands you'll lose the radio beacons of the bright side. There's no radio beacons to guide you over the shadow lands. You have to know the landmarks. If you don't, it's dead reckoning, iffy at best. It'd be easy to miss the lake, nestled into the mountains as it is. Oh, I'm sure some will find it, hopefully all of them, eventually, but our gang will be one of the first lot to start out. Never fear.'

'Why don't they have radio beacons on the shadow side?'

She gave me a strange look. 'Because, fine-feather, we broad-feathered folk are people of the shadow lands at heart. You see, we inhabited the whole island before the fine-feathered large islanders arrived and lived much like they still do in the shadow lands today. The bright side isn't ours alone any more, but we keep the shadow lands as they are so that we don't lose our heritage and our old skills.'

'And not just for sentimentality, I gather,' I said cautiously.

She shook her head. 'We broad-feathered folk are the Dragon King's people. You fine-feathered lot are not. The Nileana tree will flower forever, and we broad-feathered folk will see it bloom forever. The fine-feathered folk may not last to see it bloom forever... But that's just an old wives' tale,' she added, lightly, and without conviction, and moved on to practical directions concerning rigging a canvas shelter for the deck so that our passengers would be protected from the wind, rain, and odd Shadow Hawk.

I asked KaRaya about the Dragon Lords and their broad-feathered folk.

'Oh, that's a common belief, at least out here. These Donta Islanders still remember when there were none of your kind present. In the Saraim Core Islands that memory is lost. You fine-feathers have likely always been about. Just not here.'

'Everyone, broad and fine-feathered seems to get along these days. Was that always the case?'

'Who knows. You have to go back to the Time of Legends to find tales of broad-feathered fighting the fine-feathered and even then it's more a matter of place more than feathers. And then too, it the time of legends, so who knows the truth?'

03

We swung over the dark waters of Chasm Lake to land on the wide gravel strand between the shore and the long, single line of log-built buildings with a dark forest directly behind them that was Chasm Lake, the town. As we arrived, we sent up a cloud of pale sea-birds who'd been lunching on the shore. The dark lake was barren of boats, and as we rolled to a stop, there was no one in sight along the long street. Here and there a few lights glimmered in the houses and shops – we had either arrived in the sleep watch, or the town was mostly deserted. It proved to be the latter. It seems at least one of the aircraft had found Chasm Lake, so they'd learned that they were sitting on the doorstep of a golden mountain, and most of the natives had abandoned their boats, their shops, their wives, and kids to "find them some of that gold."

Chasm Lake is as close to night as you can get on Daeri. The narrow lake is located in the heart of the shadow lands and being surrounded by high, steep ridges that hide more than half of the twilit sky. The sky glowed pale yellow near the upper edges of the mountains, fading to a faint purple overhead. Chasm Lake was forever on the edge of slipping into night, and on stormy days, it managed to achieve it. As much as I missed the orderly succession of days and nights, the never-ending twilight seemed eerie.

KaRaya and I swung down to the deck from the deck house, unshipped a section of the railing and roused our weary passengers. After spending a full round jammed together with their gear on a cool open deck, the passenger's excitement had faded a bit. Most were dozing when we arrived. Stiff, sore, sleepy or groggy from the lack of sleep, they gathered their large packs, jumped down onto the gravel strand and began to take in Chasm Lake. They drew a big cool breath of Lake Chasm air – tasting of rotting fish guts on the shore, smoked fish from the smokehouse down the way, along with a hint of the pine forest, cold lake water, and cook-stove smoke thrown in. They staggered up the strand a little ways and stared around them. The complaining sea birds were settling down again amongst the rotting fish guts on the shore where the fishermen processed their catch – or had, before they abandoned the lake for gold in the hills. They looked up the wide pebbled beach towards the dark, brooding town, a single line of buildings, built high enough above the lake to avoid being swept into it by some serrata driven wave. And beyond it, the towering, nearly black pine trees, that rose to the pale sky so high that you had to crane your neck way back to see the sky above the little gold mountain.

The skipper jumped down to the gravel and called out to the slowly drifting mob. 'We'll be here for a watch or two to catch up on our sleep, so you've got some time to reconsider your decision. You paid for a round trip ticket, so if any of you come to your senses and decide to go home, it's already paid for.'

A couple of the hardier folk attested to their determination to get rich and lead a rather tentative cheer.

'Well, good luck to all of you then. Gold in your pouches or not, you've paid for your ride home aboard the Shadow Bird. Hope to see you all safe, sound, and rich, sooner or later.'

They gave her a cheer, and started trudging up the strand.

The skipper looked around and said, 'No fish this time, I'm afraid. Litang, you have the first watch, Raya the second. We'll sail after everyone has had some bunk time. More fools are no doubt impatiently awaiting our return.'

04

Having the first watch, I was sitting on the now empty deck in the silence of the ever-evening, with my back against the forward bulkhead, when I heard a slow creaking sound from the deckhouse aft. I slid slightly over and peered around the deckhouse. The lakeside engine room door had been carefully swung open and one, then another figure, jumped down to the gravel, followed by three large backpacks, three springer rifles, followed by a third figure – Orn, Barn and Cookie. They carefully closed the door and started quietly crunching towards the stern of the barge. They hadn't seen me, so I slipped over to the far side and jumped down to the gravel, every bit as quietly as they had and silently slipped alongside the barge to meet them around back.

They were trying to make like shadows, walking lightly and staying close to the hull and all gave a suppressed yelp when I whispered, 'Hi guys.'

'Wilitang, you son of a stink-dragon, what are you doing sneaking about?' Orn managed to whisper, after he'd grabbed a breath.

'I'm on watch, you know.'

'You should be on the bridge.'

'I was enjoying the evening air,' I replied. 'You fellows out for a breath of fresh air as well?'

They glanced at each other and shrugged. There was no secret between the four of us as to what they were up to.

'We're off to the hills to dig our fortune out of the ground,' replied Orn.

'Mom know about your plans?'

'Obviously she doesn't. Not unless you're planning to tell her.' said Barn.

'You think it's wise?'

'Listen, Wilitang. We know what we're doing. Cookie here has prospected for gold before. He knows the ropes...'

'He's a cook and general hand aboard a little barge. Hardly a glowing endorsement for his success at it, no offense, Cookie.' But in truth he looked the part of an old prospector, so I added, 'I suppose you pissed it all away.'

He grinned. 'I was younger back then, than I am now.'

I smiled. 'But you're wiser now?'

He laughed silently. 'Don't look like it, does it?'

'Just listen. Barn and I were about town before we sailed, and we tracked down the Lormia brothers – them that made the big strike – at the best hotel in town. They were in their cups and while they didn't say just where they found their gold, they said enough for Barn and I to have a pretty good idea where their diggings was. We've been sailing over and around those hills all our lives. From what they said, I think we can march straight to their find and start prospecting right off, long before this crowd shows up. It's as close to a sure thing as you're likely to find in a strike like this...'

'I doubt there's anything even close to a sure thing in a gold rush, but leaving that aside, what about Mom and the Shadow Bird? You could be making a fortune just by staying on.'

'It ain't the same. It would be Ma's fortune, not ours. It's time we strike out for ourselves. You and Raya and ol'King can get the Shadow Bird back to Bindare, and Mom will have no trouble signing up a crew coming back this way,' Orn whispered urgently, adding, 'You weren't planning on running yourself, were you? You can come with us, if you want. Fifty, sixty rounds of digging, share and share alike and we'll all be rich. Ma could hardly kick if we all come back lugging great sacks of gold dust...'

I had really thought about it, but it didn't appeal. 'Don't like the odds.'

'You going to tell Mom?' asked Barn again.

I thought about it for a moment and shook my head. 'No, I guess not. You're all grown up and I suspect will grow up a lot more before we see you again. As you say, we'll get by...'

They all breathed a sigh of relief.

'Thanks Wilitang. We left a letter for Mom, telling her what we're up to. We'll be back when we've

got our gold and she can chew us out then.'

'Right. Then be off with you. Good luck, and whatever you do, be careful, for your Mother's sake if not your own. I think things can get rather rough when gold's involved. Just get back alive, rich or poor.'

'Aye,' nodded Cookie. 'We'll be canny. Very canny.'

'Be very canny. Now off, before Raya comes on watch and we have to square it with someone else.' My actual fear was that KaRaya could be rather easily talked into going with them...

We clasped wrists and I watched them troop up towards the dark buildings and disappear into the shadows before I walked back to the deck to await my relief.

'So you let'em go,' said KaRaya sitting on the edge of the deck beside me, not too much later. 'I don't think Mom's going to be too happy with you.'

'Seeing that we're the only reliable crew she's likely to find in the next sixty or seventy rounds, I'm not worried about that.'

'Aye, there's that. You know, I think our value has gone up considerably as well...'

'Our four coppers against her thousand silver pieces. Yah, I think so too. I'll let you bring that up with her. I'm sure you'll drive a harder bargain than I. And well, it's a bridge officer's affair.'

'Aye, it is. Trust me, we'll be paid in silver now. And lots of it, too. A reliable crew is worth its weight in silver if you want to get your barge off the Chasm Lake beach.'

'Not tempted to run off yourself?' she asked after we sat kicking our legs off the side of the barge for a while, thinking.

'Not for gold.'

'You got something against gold?'

'I told you about my salvage of the gold ship, didn't I?'

'I believe you did. A very exciting tale it was, too. Not that I ever believed it.'

'Believe it or not, my share of the salvage would fill one of our flour barrows. And that was before my owner gave me 1/6th of the ship's share of the gold. I own enough gold back in the Unity that I doubt this old barge could lift it all.'

'And here you are...'

'And here I am. For all the good a barge load of gold did for me. You see why I'm not tempted to spend the next sixty rounds digging in muck and creek bed, only to risk being shot in the back by some ruthless claim jumpers?'

'You have a point... Do you really own that much gold, Litang?'

'Raya, my dear friend. I'm a very rich man back home. So rich, I don't really know how rich I am. And it hasn't done me a spit's worth of good. I'll settle for all the silver coins you can wring out of the Skipper, and be happy with them.'

A shadow scurried down the ladder from the bridge and Hissi swung around us.

'Hi Hissi. We're just talking... You're not off for gold are you?'

She gave her little barking laugh and wagged the tip of her tail.

'I figured you had more sense than that. Truth is, you and Raya here are far worth more to me than a whole barge load of gold.'

'By the smoke of the Infernal Island, he's getting soppy sentimental now, isn't he?'

Hissi laughed again.

We sat around a while longer in the twilight, before I decided that if I was going to get any sleep at all in the next round, I'd best find my hammock.

'So you just let them walk off?'

I shrugged. 'Aye.'

'Do you know what a watchman's job is, mate? It's to keep things from walking off.'

'Aye.' I've stood before angry captains before and knew enough just to roll with the punches. She wasn't all that angry underneath the bluster. I think she was rather happy that the boys showed a little gumption on their own, even if it involved sneaking off while she was asleep. And well, I knew my worth, so I wasn't concerned. She knew it, too, so we were just going through the motions.

'Hopefully Cookie will keep them out of trouble.'

'Even if they come home broke, at least they've struck out on their own. About time, I'd say,' I ventured.

She gave me a hard look. 'So you say, hey? You better hope they come back, rich or poor.'

Ah, there was that. Still, I didn't think it was my place to tell their Mom. 'They don't strike me as fools, Skipper. And any growing up they have to do, they'll do it faster on their own. And as you say, Cookie will look after them.'

She left it at that. 'So you and Raya are staying?'

'Oh, Litang there has more gold than he knows what to do with, back on his home island. He doesn't want no more,' said KaRaya from the other end of the table.

'I should have such problems,' muttered Captain DenMons. 'Well, you've both been promoted to first mate and Chief Engineer effective immediately. The boys can serve as deck hands when they get back. They won't need their wages with all the gold they'll be bringing home.'

'Thanks, Skipper,' said KaRaya brightly. 'And with our promotions, we should hammer out the wage scale as well. Now, before we sail. I'm thinking 10 percent of the gross for each of us. That comes to 120 silvers apiece per voyage.'

DenMons smiled grimly. 'If that's what you're thinking, you've got another thought coming.'

'I suppose you could get used to the smell of rotting fish, if you had to. And well, I've a feeling that pretty soon, a crew willing to man a barge home from here is going to be as rare as a bald dragon, so I don't think I'm asking too much...'

'Five percent each, net, and only until things get back to normal.'

'Eight percent each, gross, for the duration of the rush.'

'Seven point five percent, net.'

'Gross.'

'You're a hard woman, KaRaya.'

'And so are you, Captain. Do we have an understanding?'

'Do I have a choice?'

'Not that I can see.'

'Then I guess we do. Get up steam. You're going to have to work your tails off for that silver because I doubt we'll ever have a returning crew, not until the first unlucky ones come straggling back.'

'That's why we're being paid so handsomely,' allowed KaRaya. 'Hop to it, Chief.'

I gave her an indolent sneer. 'I'm chief engineer on this here barge now. You'll get your steam when it's ready, mate. Your job is to miss them hills, not order me about.'

KaRaya grinned. 'You missed your calling, Litang.'

'I may well have, but I've plenty of time yet to make up for those wasted years.'

'You won't if you don't get a move on it and get me some steam,' snapped Cap'n Mons.

'Aye, aye, steam coming up,' I said with a smile, pushing back my chair and snapped off a fearless sarcastic salute. I may well have been born to be an engineer.

The following weeks are a haze of steam, smoke, passengers, and the thumping of the Shadow Bird's engine. I had stokers and oilers underfoot on the voyage out to Chasm Lake, and the engine room to myself on the return trip for the first four trips. A tent city sprung up along the twilit shore and in the dark woods as thousands of eager prospectors rushed to Chasm Lake and the "Gold Mountain Find" to make their fortune. The smoke of their campfires replaced the odor of rotting fish. The pounding of nails, the buzzing of the steam powered saws, and the laughter and music from the tent taverns and dance halls replaced the cries of the sea birds.

The gravel strand became crowded with barges and fliers that were going nowhere fast – since they were abandoned by their crews for the gold fields on Gold Mountain's foothills and meadows. There may've been 5,000 prospectors camping around Chasm Lake, some waiting for a hint as to where gold was found before rushing off – others stayed, perhaps having second thoughts, or too short of money or supplies to move on, while others may have simply decided that there was more money to be made as the hired hands of the enterprising store keepers, tavern owners, dance hall proprietors, and whore house operators who were racing to build their establishments before the first fools and their gold arrived back from the digs beyond the dark woods. The first rumors had gold being found in the meadow valley over the first ridge line to the right of the newly christened "Gold Mountain" that towered over Chasm Lake. That sent a surge of prospectors out over that hill. By the time we landed with our third or fourth load of prospectors (the frantic first few weeks are all rather hazy), a steep trail had been cut through the tall pines over the ridge to "Lormia Flats." They were soon stringing a tram cable through the gap that would carry people and supplies up and over the ridge to Lormia Flats on a platform swinging under the cable, since the meadows beyond were too wet and marshy to allow barges to land, or at least to take off again once they had landed. Many of the just arrived store owners and taverns keepers were hauling their goods over the ridge to open up shop in the new tent city on the other side of the ridge. The first breathless reports said that there was plenty of gold for all.

By our fifth or six run we were carrying more supplies than people, and the people we were carrying were the shopkeepers with their goods, the tavern owners with their spirits, and the whore operators with their girls. Along with them came the gentlemen gamblers carrying a well traveled carpet bag who expected to find their gold no further into the wilderness than the taverns on Lake Street or the twisting back alley now known as Gold Mountain Street. The more enterprising ones may've made it as far as the taverns in Lormia Flats as well.

'Ain't he a dream come to life?' said KaRaya with a discrete nod of her head towards the clump of our passengers arranging themselves on the deck.

We were in Bindare awaiting the arrival of Captain DenMons and the last consignment of goods she had purchased. We'd gotten into selling goods on our own account – flour, beans, dried and canned, kaf and tey, and such offered for sale off the barge's deck. They were commanding outrageous prices on the strand so we now had a wholesale business in addition to the transport one. "Mom" saw no point in transporting supplies for merchants when she could buy and transport them just as easily, and rake in twice the profit herself. My engine room staff was polishing the engine and washing the charcoal dust from the deck – I like a nice and neat engine room, to start – and I was just hanging about the deck, hands in pocket watching KaRaya and her deck crew working to get everything ship-shape for sailing in the bright light of Bindare's bustling aircraft port.

'Who?' I replied absently.

'Him,' she said, nodding again, 'The tall one.'

'You mean the gambler?' I replied.



'Who says he's a gambler?' she demanded sharply.

'I was being charitable. Which ones are his girls?'

'Listen, Wilitang, if you weren't my friend you'd be sporting a black eye by now.'

'Oh?' I said, 'What did I say to warrant a black eye?' I wasn't clueless, but I was now a chief engineer, and had a long tradition to uphold. And, well, KaRaya ought to have known better. The tall, handsome gentleman in the faultlessly tailored black suit, with his shiny broad feathers tied behind him, with a nice black ribbon under his wide brimmed hat, was clearly trouble.

'You know exactly what you said. And if I wasn't certain that you were just teasing me, I'd have sent you flying.'

'Like him, do you?'

'Oh, he's just my type. Handsome, dashing...'

'Well groomed...'

'A true gentleman with those laughing blue eyes...'

'Who could deal you a winning hand of DuDan's Folly if he really liked you, but it would not quite win if he didn't...'

'Oh, come on now, Wil. You don't know he's a professional gambler. At least not one like that. How can you tell just by looking at him? How many gamblers do you know?'

'I don't know any personally. But I've seen them in the vids, which is to say, in the theater, and he fits the type to the last detail. He could've been sitting next to me and taking notes. I bet he has a small springer pistol hidden in a pouch in his sword belt and a knife in his boot, and several decks of cards in his belt pouch.'

'You have a little firearm in your pocket and that glass knife around your calf. Does that make you a gambler as well?'

'I don't have a deck of cards in my pocket...'

'You've got a dragon that has one in her pouch. You're a fine pair of gamblers.'

'Well, then how come you haven't fallen head over heels for me?'

'Your eyes aren't blue.'

'That close, hey?'

'And you're a chief engineer. I've got some sense of self-worth.'

'I should hope so. And I should hope that you use it when it comes to yon Gentleman Jim, man about the islands, who dabbles in cards every once and a while. Just for fun.'

She gave me a dark look and returned to directing her deck hands. And watching her dream come true.

02

And a round after our arrival in Chasm Lake I watched KaRaya and her blue-eyed gambler wander down the strand towards the barge from the engine room door. We still had to land near the old smoke house, a good walk from the bustling Chasm Lake Street, since the stand remained clogged with abandoned barges. They pulled up alongside and KaRaya introduced me to her "friend", DeVere.

I jumped down and wiped the charcoal dust off my hand with a rag and grasped his forearm in greeting.

'Nice to meet you,' I said, and undeterred by KaRaya's dark glare, added, 'Going prospecting, are you? Last time we were here, we heard whispers of a big strike over on the Horn Mountain side. With most of the prospectors already digging in Lormia Flats, it might be a canny move to try the other side.'

He laughed politely. 'I think, Chief, there's gold to be found just about everywhere, if you know where to look.'

'Aye, I suspect you're right. If you play your cards right.'

'Wilitang, you're steering close to the rocks,' KaRaya muttered darkly.

'Oh, I'm just enjoying my new role.'

'You won't be for long, Chief, if you keep that course.'

I shrugged, and turned back to DeVere. 'Raya and I have a partnership of sorts. Nothing romantic, but we look after each other. I'm afraid that I'm part of the deal – whether she likes it or not.'

He smiled and nodded, 'She mentioned that. And you needn't worry. I like girls and I go out of my way not to hurt them. I want to live to a ripe old age.'

'Right,' I said, and bit back a remark about how I didn't think that wanting to live to a ripe old age and being a gambler in a gold-boom town was exactly compatible. KaRaya gave me one last dark look, and they hopped down to the strand and set out for Chasm Lake. I watched them in the twilight and shook my head. Still any thought of mine would be the pot calling the kettle black.

### 03

We quickly sold our goods and headed back to Bindare as soon as we all had our naps. And made the round trip again, and again, and again as the boom slowly tapered off. Boats could be seen on the lake again, catching fish – though whether their owners had returned or some enterprising prospectors had decided that there was gold dust to be made by appropriating the abandoned boats and selling fish was an open question. One by one, the abandoned barges that littered the strand, scraped together enough of a crew to sail home. Chasm Lake was now a rough-hewn town of some 5,000 people, half permanent, half down from the hills, and their digs for a bit of a spree. Beyond the ridge, Lormia Flat was just about as large, and the other shoulder of the mountain, Zin's Town, was half the size of Lormia Flats. We were now only one of a dozen barges bringing in supplies and taking back the first of the prospectors to go home, the ones who found nothing but dirt and bug bites, the ones that found a little, and spent it all in the bright lights of MorDae's Palace and its dozen other competitors, and, I suppose, the ones who came back with small bags of gold dust in their pouches and hidden in their dirty clothes, who'd made their packet and were going home rich. You usually couldn't tell these folks from the rest by design, since it had grown distinctly unhealthy to advertise your wealth. That made you a "mark" for all sorts of people, including people with springers and their own idea of how wealth should be shared. Yet, every once in awhile, we'd have a lucky one aboard who found enough to have had a great deal of fun at MorDae's Palace, and still had plenty to take home as well. Some had it all, others none at all.

Faced with plenty of competition now, and few desertions on arrival, the Shadow Bird's business settled back to something like its normal level and our bonus pay settled back to regular wages. Still, the high tide of the gold rush had deposited thousands of silver coins in our bank account, so we didn't kick.

Indeed, I suspected that we continued to serve Chasm Lake only because Mom Mons was hoping her boys would show up sooner or later, rich or poor. As I hinted, the town and gold fields were getting a little more dangerous with every run we made. There was now enough gold above ground and in circulation that it began to pay to extract your share not from the ground, but from the ones who'd already dug it out. Tales of banditry, first whispered about, had grown to elaborate "old spacer" tales of unsuccessful prospectors, hard bitten professional thieves and natives, turning to claim jumping, hold-ups and even murder. Prospectors were said to be banding together to protect their claims or paying for "protection" with a cut of their golden take. At first all this came from back in the hills and flats beyond the ridge, but stories of hold-ups at sword point or springer pistol edged ever closer to Chasm Lake. Even so, no police force was brought in to establish law and order, no civil guards from Quandadar to keep the peace.

I asked the Skipper why and she just shrugged. 'The shadow lands are a land apart. The bright side

usually doesn't mettle in the affairs of the shadow lands. Everything was settled long ago. You come to the shadows knowing you're on your own.'

The bright lights and large population of Chasm Lake kept most of the banditry at bay. Still, as bright as the steam generated electric lights of the pleasure palaces were, as noisy and boisterous as their patrons were, there were shadows between the palaces and along the long, single muddy back street that wound its way under the towering pines, where bad things happened every round it seemed. Most everyone went out wearing a sword or one of those long barreled springer pistols on their hip and every establishment had its lounging "guards" armed with billy-clubs, swords, and springers to keep some pretense of order. Nevertheless, fights and brawls were common now, especially in the second tier pleasure palaces, that spilled out into the streets. Sword fights were still rare in town, but you never could be sure. And bodies turned up with slug holes in them as well, with enough frequency to warn the wise to keep to the bright lights. I'd known a few drift stations that approached this level of underlying menace, but none that exceeded it. Still, Captain DenMons was no longer in a hurry to leave the strand. We were still buying staple goods and selling them from the barge, wholesale and retail, still at a fair profit. And even when we'd sold out, she'd hang about for a few rounds – waiting for her boys to find their way back, though that was never said. KaRaya didn't complain since it gave her a great deal of free time to hang with her dream-come-true. She and Hissi would bound up to MorDae's to hang with DeVere around some card table. Hissi to play cards with great seriousness, and KaRaya mooning over DeVere.

04

It may've been our third run after KaRaya discovered her dream-man when we had our little talk. I didn't like it, but felt it was my duty. I didn't want to face accusations that I should've said something if, or more likely when, things dropped out of orbit for KaRaya.

'You know, Raya, from everything you've told me, DeVere's the fellow at the beginning of the path that leads to the Bird of Passage or worse,' I said to start.

She shrugged. 'Maybe. Maybe not. You just never know at the beginning. And you'll never find out unless you walk down that path a ways.'

'You'll know when to stop, now, won't you?'

'If I don't, you do, don't you?' she shot back.

'Oh, come now. You can't say I've been sticking my nose in your affairs.'

'You don't like him, do you?'

'Oh, I like him well enough. He's a pleasant, witty fellow, who seems to be treating you on the up and up. While you're around, anyway. So I can't say anything against him, except that when I'm around him, even as I laugh at his jokes and banter, I'm holding on to my coins in my pocket and keeping my fingers on my sissy. I don't think you can get to be like him without having a well-hidden streak of ruthlessness. You can't take money from chumps for a living without it... And no matter how he treats you, it's there.'

'Well, I'm in love, and I can't see it. So tell me what sort of fool I am, if it makes you feel better. Don't think it'll change anything. It's heart over head. My old failing...'

'I can't say anything, Raya. I fell in love with the woman who was trying to kill me. Who's the bigger fool?'

She gave me a look and then laughed. 'Why you are, Wilitang. Thanks. I needed a little cheering up. I can't be a bigger fool than you. We make a good team.'

'That we do. And I hope you can count on me, if you need to. I've been leaning on you all this time. You've earned a shoulder if you should ever need it.'

'I'm sure I can, and will, if it comes to that. But, Wilitang, there's a lot of good in Vere, just like in

your Naylea. I think things can work out. Keep your hand on your coins and sissy if you must, but like him.'

Well, I tried. In some ways it was too easy, because he did seem to treat both KaRaya and Hissi with a great deal of respect.

He kept Hissi at a table of serious card players. He warned them that she could likely sense enough of their thoughts to know just how good their hands were, so it was probably unwise to try to bluff her. On the other hand, he warned them that by the same token, she was sure to detect any attempt at cheating, and didn't tolerate it. She was known to grasp the arm of a player with an extra card up his sleeve in her jaws, so that they could be assured that the games she was in were all on the up and up.

She spent far too much time up at MorDae's but there was little I could do, except insist that she only go in the company of KaRaya. Still, I suppose, I could hardly blame her. Old King's passion was piloting the barge, and when it was on the ground, he'd sleep most of the time, so little Hissi, who slept her share of the rounds as well, had little else to do when she was awake but play cards until she ran out of coins to wager. Which, it seems, was unlikely to happen anytime soon, if ever. Her fortune may've ebbed and flowed with the luck of the cards, but she didn't make foolish mistakes and knew, perhaps unfairly, when to fold. And the regulars followed her lead. It was the new players who added to the collective fortunes of Hissi's playing partners.

Besides worrying about my girls, I spent much of my spare time keeping company with the two old engineers who ran the power station in Chasm Lake, who, between my tales, would instruct me on and allow me to work on the various components of their plant, boiler, engine, generator and regulators. I had a future to think of, and since I'd decided to be an engineer in this new life of mine, I took every opportunity to learn my new trade. Someday I might earn enough silver and gold coins to buy a cha garden, but until then, it was running the steam engines and rather primitive electric generators of the Dontas. When I had turned over the captaincy of the Starry Shore to Molaye – which now was a life so different that it has taken on something of the flavor of a dream – it had been a watershed decision. I found I had no desire to command again. The thought that Naylea Cin had been kidnapped and murdered on my watch left its mark. I'd been too lucky as captain to risk being one again. And then, too, there was a practical side as well. It would, I'm sure, take me thousands of rounds to learn ship handling and navigation in the wide-sky seas of the Pela, and likely a slow rise to a position where I might command decent wages and the freedom to search for Cin and Siss. On the other hand, all my years lending a hand in the engineering department of my ship has given me a solid grasp of basic engineering and electricity. All I had to do was to master the Saraime's far more primitive systems. With a thousand rounds, and a little luck, I could be a well-qualified engineer who could land a berth whenever one was needed, and have enough coins to spend time tracking down the DeKan's Talon-Hawk, and perhaps my boat as well. And yet, I'd been a captain too long, and a chief engineer too briefly, to feel free enough to carouse in places like MorDae's, so I wasn't missing anything by spending time in the subtle roar, oil and ozone of the little power station at Chasm Lake.

05

I pushed through the doorway into the loud bright, spirit fueled cheerfulness of MorDae's, mostly to escape the rain. Both KaRaya and Hissi weren't to be found on the barge so they had to be at MorDae's. DeVere had landed a job as the manager of MorDae's, Chasm Lake Palace. (MorDae had another "Palace" in Lormia Flat and a tavern in Zin's Town as well.) DeVere had several shift managers under him so he was free to circulate and spread his charm about the place, usually with KaRaya in tow.

I looked around the bright, noisy, and crowded room. There was never a time when it wasn't crowded or loud. There were no sleep watches in Chasm Lake these days. The rounds went unmarked, except for payroll, I presume.

DeVere and KaRaya weren't in sight. But Hissi was. She was all by herself and playing Dragon's Luck at a big table of rather rough and disreputable looking players. Her usual card players weren't around. I suppose even they had to sleep every once in awhile.

I may've been in a bad mood. I was also getting weary of the glitter and squalor of Chasm Lake, and wary of its increasingly dangerous ways. In any event, I got angry, and marched over to the table, and stood behind Hissi until she played her last card. She knew I was there as she gave a low growl with my approach, though continued to concentrate on the cards as they flew down upon the table.

'Time to go, Hissi,' I said. And without waiting for her objection, I swept her winnings off the table and into her satchel. 'Sorry mates, it's bed time for the dragon.'

Hissi growled angrily, her claws on my hand as I closed the satchel.

I didn't care. I grasped the clawed hand and lead her between the crowded tables to the entrance and out into the wet, smoke-scented night. For with the rain, it was night. She was cool enough not to make a scene as we left, but once we arrived on the rutted street, she broke free and hopped ahead and swung around to face me, standing tall, and stiff. She slowly opened her mouth and showed me all her teeth like she meant to use them.

Now, the funny thing is I've known her since she first hatched in my hand, and I've seen those teeth a million times. Siss's teeth used to concern me until I got to know her, but Hiss's, never. And here she was, as angry as a feathered dragon slowly getting wet could be – and a dragon with wet feathers is never happy a dragon in the best of circumstances – and she was baring them all at me.

It gave me pause.

She couldn't suppress a little bark of laughter when she caught that thought. Which gave the game away.

I leaned in and put my nose against hers. 'You know the rules. If DeVere and KaRaya went off on their own, you needed to return to the barge. You don't play cards with strangers. Now let's go home.'

She growled and stood her ground, nose to nose. And then snapped her jaws shut. I felt the tip of her jaw brush against my short, sinister whiskers and then, in a flash, she turned and bounded angrily off for the barge.

We had disagreements before. Hissi had a mind of her own, and she was a Simla dragon, not an Astro, or an Orbit, or even Ginger, though Ginger was a closer match. And, I suppose, she was pretty much of an adult now, as well, so I was flying a rather iffy orbit by exerting any authority over her at all. But I knew more of the ways of the worlds than she did, even if she could read minds. And, well, she had hatched in my hand, so she was my responsibility.

Later, as I lay in my hammock in the engine room where I bunk, she slipped in, hopped up on my chest and wrapped herself around the hammock. She rested her head just under my chin. She didn't do that much anymore. Too grown up. I idly ran my fingers through her damp feathers, and said nothing. The nice thing about Simla dragons is that you don't have to say anything to say everything.

## Chapter 21 On the Run

The rain was slanting across the half-opened engine room door, hissing on the lake surface, not ten meters below, as we slowly drifted across Chasm Lake. It was as dark as night. Chasm Lake City was a long smear of vague light through the rain and mist. Little glints of its stray light danced on the rain speckled surface of the lake. We were circling in to make our landing on the strand beyond the dark

line of fishing boats drawn up on it. KaRaya brought us smoothly around and then a gentle, crunching landing on the gravel shore, barely stirring the birds along the shore. 'Done with engines', she called down the voice tube. I released a head of steam as the propeller slowed to a stop. Back once again.

We had arrived early in the second sleep watch, the second of two vaguely defined sleep watches which could be translated as after midnight to morning. In any event, Chasm Lake was in its quiet phase. We were unlikely to get our cargo unloaded before the next watch. Captain DenMons and King wisely opted to get a nap in before opening for business and our two general hands, Sap and Gil, could stand watch over the ship, so KaRaya, Hissi and I were free. I would've taken to my hammock as well, but...

'Hissi and I are off to MorDae's,' said KaRaya, calling down from overhead grill in the mess room.

'It's the middle of the sleep watches. Why don't you wait till everyone's up?'

I heard her laugh. 'You know... And Hissi is anxious to get playing cards. MorDae's never closes.

'Right. Give me a moment and I'll be right out.'

'You needn't bother, we can look after ourselves, can't we?'

I heard Hissi bark a laugh.

'Hurry up Wilitang. We've got dates!'

I just grabbed my black spaceer jacket, slung my cutlass belt over my shoulder and donned my tricorne hat, telling Sap, my assistant to finish up. I joined them, waiting impatiently, on the glistening pebbles of the strand.

'You don't need to come along, you know,' said KaRaya.

'I want to see who's around. I'm sure you'll be shortly engaged in something other than card playing, and since Hissi will be on her own, I want to see who's playing.' There were a set of regulars who knew and enjoyed Hissi's company. If she could join a table with several of them, I knew they'd look after her. But with strangers, no. I still wasn't letting her play with strangers. She accepted that, grudgingly.

It was strange, I thought as we crunched through the last of the rain up towards the subdued lights of the Lake Street establishments, how well a two-and-a-half-meter dragon fit in with people. How well she could both understand and communicate. She's been my constant companion since she hatched, so I knew her well – her barks, her growls, her hisses, the angle of her head, every way she communicated her thoughts and wishes. Treating her as an equal pretty much came natural to me, what with my experience with Siss. What was surprising was how easily everyone else came to understand her as well as I did. I've watched her playing cards, and she wasn't just laying them down – she was every bit as engaged in the social aspects of the game, the banter and drama, as the humans, without saying a word. I suspect that perhaps her telepathic abilities are more than read only, she may, in fact, subtly communicate with them as well. There may be more than a bark and wiggling of the tip of her tail to her laughter. But I can't say for certain, it's that subtle.

By the time we reached MorDae's, the rain had all but ceased, but it was still as dark as night under the thick cloud cover. The fisheries and smoke house had not yet returned to operation, so the smell of rotting fish guts was almost, but not quite, gone, so the cool air carried the smell of wood smoke, and the spicy tang of the tall pines. Beyond the log buildings of Lake Street, the tall, black pine trees rose up the mountain until they were lost in the dark mist and clouds. The smooth stones of the strand glistened faintly in the lights from the saloons as KaRaya and Hissi, her little coin pouch in claw, eagerly skipped their way towards MorDae's with Litang reluctantly in tow.

MorDae's Palace was the brightest, grandest dive in Chasm Lake. Its walls of freshly cut logs still smelled of pine. It had a large, two story high dining, gambling and dancing hall with a long bar on one side, and two stories of rooms with a balcony on the other side – the Palace Hotel and Bolero. It was relatively quiet when we pushed through its doors. The band finished playing for the night, half the tables were empty, the drunks were mostly quiet, and the card players were intent on their games – the games had gotten serious and would be lasting as long as the players, or their coins did.

DeVere was lounging, half asleep at an empty table, keeping a weary eye on business, but he

brightened up considerably when he saw KaRaya, and hurried to welcome her with a hug and a long kiss. To be fair, he hugged and kissed Hissi as well, but it wasn't the same. We settled for the customary clutching of the wrists.

Hissi saw some old friends with an empty chair, barked a greeting and hurried over to the table – DeVere, KaRaya and I followed. Hissi had just clunked her coin pouch on the table after having been cheerfully greeted and invited to join the game, when I noticed that it had suddenly grown even quieter. I looked back at the door. Perhaps a dozen men in long black, damp, oil-cloth coats were filing through the door and slipping around the edge of the room, springer pistols in hand. They wore black scarves over their faces, leaving only their eyes visible under the brims of their wide-brimmed, feathered hats. Everyone but the most intense card players and the sleeping drunks warily watched them while rapidly considering their options.

One of the masked men, sword in hand, stood at the bar until the men had taken their places around the room, with several going up the stairs as well. He then banged his sword on a table, sending the glasses and plates bouncing to draw the attention of the card players and announced cheerfully, 'Hands on your heads, ladies, gentlemen. Don't do anything foolish. And not a sound, we don't want to wake up the sleeping guests. We're here for your gold, not for your lives. Cooperate and no one gets hurt.'

We all complied. Only the sleeping drunks, or the drunks with enough wits about them to feint sleep, ignored the order.

'The Black Mask Gang,' whispered DeVere, as he put his hands on his head. 'Didn't think they'd dare tackle MorDae.' And then, in a louder voice, he said, 'You might want to reconsider what you're doing, gentlemen. I don't think MorDae's going to appreciate this, and I really don't think you want to get on his bad side. There are plenty of other establishments up and down Lake Street that would be a safer mark. Just a friendly suggestion,' he added with a smile.

The spokesman laughed. 'Don't worry, we know what we're doing. We can handle MorDae if he wants to kick about it. It's share and share alike. Rob one, rob all. We can't make exceptions, that wouldn't be fair. We want to be fair, don't we boys?'

The boys growled and grunted behind their masks. They wanted to be fair.

DeVere shook his head. 'I think you're making a big mistake. MorDae's got a pretty big crew, and can hire as many hands and springers as needed. I'm thinking it would be a lot healthier if you stick to the Lake Tavern or Doynie's Place.'

'Small fish,' the bandit replied, dismissively. And then with a nod to one of the gang, added, 'Collect the table stakes. Sorry, they're just our tips. We're here for a bigger haul.'

The bandit drew a leather bag from under his long coat and began making the rounds of the tables, sweeping the coins into the bag.

He quickly reached the table next to us, with Hissi, now standing alongside me. She was having none of that, and grasping her coin pouch, bared her teeth and gave the fellow her lowest, most, menacing hiss. It certainly frightened me. As I've mentioned, my long association with her gives me a different impression of her than people who just meet her. Standing upright, she can look a man in the eyes, and opening her crocodile mouth suggests that she could, if she cared to, take your head off in one bite. I didn't know if she had it in her, but I didn't want her to try. The last thing we needed was trouble.

That growl, however, had its desired effect. The bandit stopped and looked back, not at the fellow giving commands, but at another, a large hulking fellow in the shadows under the balcony, with a springer in hand.

'She can keep hers,' the big bandit rasped in a low rough, voice.

DeVere, standing on the other side of me, started ever so slightly. The big bandit caught his reaction and there was a soft hiss and clunk of the pistol's spring being freed. DeVere gave a quiet 'Huh?' staggered back and looking down at the small hole in his jacket that the springer's slug had made, slowly started to collapse.

KaRaya, screamed 'Vere!' and hugging him, eased him slowly to the floor. Hissi let out a loud angry growl, and would've I feared, leaped towards the big bandit, had I not wrapped my arm around her neck and pulled her close, thinking fiercely, "Don't. You'll get us all killed!"

Looking around, all the springers were aimed at us.

Everyone stood frozen for a long, silent moment, before the spokesman stirred himself and, after a nod from the big man who seemed to be the gang's actual leader, asked, 'Anyone else looking to get a hole in you?'

No one had a chance to reply, for even as he finished his question, Mordae's Palace jumped – the office door, behind the bar, flew open and half off its hinges with a flash, a bang, a great chorus of rattling bottles and glasses followed by a rolling wave of acid smelling smoke that tumbled out of the back room.

'The bank's open,' laughed the spokesman. 'Everyone stay still. No one's in danger, if you just keep sitting and let us go about our business.'

On the other side of the barroom and above us, the bedroom doors flew open and frightened, half-dressed customers staggered out. Most of them blades or springers in hand.

MorDae himself, lunged out of his room on the ground floor, also armed with a long springer pistol 'Drop 'em now!' yelled the spokesman, 'You've got only a second. We're here for gold, not you.'

A score of weapons clattered to the floor. No point shedding blood for MorDae's gold.

MorDae, still with his springer in hand, glared around, settling on the masked man with a long barreled springer not a meter from his side.

'I'll track you down,' he said.

'No need,' replied the cheerful spokesman. 'We'll be around again, unless you pay up. Now, drop the springer or I'll drop you.'

MorDae glared at him for a second, and then dropped his weapon.

'The rest of you, back to your rooms,' ordered the bandits' spokesman. The two masked men at either end of the balcony growled as well, sending the guests scurrying back inside, bolting their doors. And then we all stood in silence for several minutes until one of the gang, who'd apparently come in the back way, stepped through the unhinged office door and said. 'We've got it all, chief.'

It was the big, silent man who nodded, but left it to the spokesman to order 'Right. We'll be going. The rest of you stay put. We'll leave some watchers behind, with orders to shoot anyone who comes out too soon.'

The silent chief stayed until all the gang but the spokesman had drifted back out the front door.

'Thank you for your cooperation,' said the cheerful spokesman and saluted with his blade before slipping out the back way.

When he was gone, several of the more foolhardy rushed to the doors to peer cautiously out. I knelt down beside KaRaya and the body of DeVere, a red stain seeping up through the hole in his jacket.

KaRaya was unbuttoning DeVere's jacket to get at the wound, when he opened an eye, looked around. 'Best leave it buttoned, my dear,' he whispered. 'I'll live, but I think it would be best if I be thought to be dying...' He then put a finger in the small pool of fresh blood on the jacket, and touched his lips and chin with it. 'I'm dying. Got it?' And closed his eyes once again.

KaRaya, sobbing quietly, who was thinking far faster than I, nodded, said quietly, no doubt for my benefit, 'Alive, but likely to die,' adding more hysterically and louder, 'Vere! Hold on, we'll get a doctor! Please, just hold on! Help me get him on the table.'

We'd just lifted the limp body of DeVere when MorDae dodged through the tables to arrive at ours. 'Vere! how'd this happen?'

'They just shot him for no reason,' cried KaRaya. 'We need to fetch Doc Mryn straight away!'

'Not dead, you say,' MorDae said, eyeing the bloody hole over his heart for some time. 'I'm not sure Doc Mryn can help, but let's get him to the back room, and see what we can do.' Then looking around, added, Maci, help Raya and Litang get Vere to the storeroom. I'll find someone to wake up Doc Mryn,'



adding in a loud voice. 'Sorry about this, folks. Everyone should go home now. We're closed!'

We carefully lifted DeVere and carried him around behind the bar and through the door at the far end, leading to the storeroom in back. We laid him on a table in middle of the dim lit backroom, its walls lined with supplies in crates and boxes. Having delivered his charge, Maci cleared off, closing the door behind him. Hissi stood silently, watching the proceedings.

As soon as Maci closed the door KaRaya went to work, unbuttoning DeVere's jacket to reveal a blood soaked shirt – and the thick sword belt that Rane wore over his shoulder.

DeVere opened his eyes. 'I don't think it's in too deep. I felt it hit a bone. It was my belt that slowed it down, wasn't it?'

'Aye,' said KaRaya, carefully lifting up the thick leather belt. 'And that knife you have tucked in the belt sheath.'

He grinned weakly. 'It's saved my life several times now. But get the belt off of me, I think it's going to be a lot healthier for me if I'm as close to dead as I can appear to be.'

'Why?' she asked, unbuckling the belt and slipping it off.

'Because I made a stupid mistake. A rookie player's mistake. One I should never have ever made.'

KaRaya unbuttoned his shirt. 'Which was?'

'I gave away my hand. This is what I deserve.'

'Your hand?'

'I recognized the voice of the big fellow, the gang's real leader, PinTear. He's MorDae's right hand man and the manager of MorDae's Lormia Flats' Palace. I know him well enough to recognize his voice, especially since it matches his looks, mask or not.'

'A traitor?' KaRaya asked as she splashed some spirits on his chest began to clean the blood from his chest with the bar rag she'd found.

DeVere winched and gasped for air as the spirits entered the wound, and then continued, 'I think not. All a smoke screen. All a show to remove any suspicion that MorDae's men are behind the Black Mask gang.'

'Well, it cost him his safe,' muttered KaRaya, as she wiped his chest clear of blood, which was still welling up from the wound. 'Do you have your glass knife on you, Wil?'

'Yes,' I said, and kneeling down, lifted up my pants cuffs and peeled out the knife. I handed the rolled up knife to KaRaya.

'I see the pellet, she said, poking about. It's not deep at all. But just keep talking, it might hurt a bit...'

'It's hurting now,' said DeVere softly.

'The cost of a rookie's mistake. So who or what is the Black Mask Gang?'

He gasped as KaRaya probed with the knife, and then said, 'Since you've been gone, three Lake Street establishments have been raided by the so called, Black Mask Gang.... ouch. Be careful, my dear. If PinTear is their leader, he's either struck out on his own or MorDae's the brains behind the gang. Array!'

'Don't be a baby...' muttered KaRaya still poking around with the knife. 'I'm going to pop it out...'

DeVere gritted his teeth as she probed and then lifted the small, skirted lead slug from his chest.

'There, another one to add to your collection,' she said, cheerfully, holding the slug and handing my knife back to me, adding. 'Look around for something we can use as a bandage.'

I found a pile of laundered dish towels. 'Will this do?'

'For now.'

I tossed one to her and used another to clean my knife before replacing it in my calf sheath.

'Go on,' said KaRaya as she doused the cloth in spirits and stuffed the folded towel under DeVere's bloody shirt. 'You're almost as good as new.'

'I'm pretty sure MorDae's behind it all. He's a very ruthless and greedy man. I know he's hired at least two dozen rough hands to guard the goods and gold he moves between his operations in the Flats and Zin's town. That strikes me as far more than he needs to protect his pack trains, even if things are

getting rather rough on the other side of the ridge. It's what they do in their spare time that makes for an interesting question... I suspect he's decided to take a cut of the action in Chasm Lake. I've heard rumors that the Black Masks were extorting money from the local stores and dives, so he may've decided to hit his place as well, just so it wouldn't stick out. He couldn't afford to stand out, untouched without getting people to wonder.

'Which is why I think we need to clear out now. PinTear suspected I recognized him, and once MorDae finds out, he'll have the gang back and I, and all of you as well, will be as good as dead,' he said as KaRaya helped him to sit up.

'Don't worry. With ol'Wilitang here we can just walk back to the barge. Anyone that challenges us, he can just put to sleep.'

DeVere gave me a questioning look as he slipped carefully off the table to stand somewhat tentatively.

I reached into my jacket pocket, and the inner darter pocket that came with the armored suit, and found it empty. I let out a string of curses.

'You left your little stinger on the barge, didn't you?' said KaRaya, still not alarmed.

'Yes. In my trouser pocket back at the barge. I wasn't planning on going out, and then I was only going to see what was up at MorDae's. Didn't think to check.' I was wearing my engine room jumpsuit rather than my old spaceer trousers and shirt. I hadn't bothered to change.

KaRaya laughed. 'Well, don't panic, We're hale, healthy, and armed with blades. Our old employer, Magistrate Py, would be envious of us if he knew about this. I'll have to tell him all about it, though I doubt we'll lead anyone back to the Greater Way...'

She was right about the panic. My darters and armored clothing had been my insulation from the Pela. With the exception of those red feathered telepaths from the great and ancient looking ship, I hadn't encountered anything that could stand up to my weapons – if I kept my wits about me. This technological advantage had allowed me not only to survive, but to feel comfortable in the Pela. And though I knew some day I'd run out of either darts or charge, that day seemed to be in the distant future, so it wasn't haunting me. Until then I thought I was safe. But I needed to keep my wits about me, and I had been careless...

I checked my other pockets, just to be sure. No luck. The storeroom door swung open, and two men with drawn springer pistols slipped inside followed by MorDae, also holding one as well.

'Ah, up from the dead already, are we?' MorDae asked. 'I figured you were playacting. You would've been dead if the slug had gone home. What stopped it?'

DeVere smiled, shrugged and winched with pain. 'My sword belt.'

'Well, I'm afraid, dead is your fate,' sighed MorDae with a sadness no one believed, and continued, 'Business is business, and as much as I regret this, I find that my business no longer needs your services. You're a wee bit too slick to have taken you into our whole operation, and well, now that you know about it, I think I need to make sure you and your friends won't talk.'

'Sorry, Raya, he's just too good of a man to let live. And I'm even more sorry that, you and your friends must die as well. The Black Mask Gang leaves no witness behind. Boys...'

He never finished. Hiss, knowing his intent, launched herself at the thug on his left. I'd never seen her attack more than butterflies and beetles as a baby, so it came as a shock to see her grasp the man's spring pistol arm in her jaws, and grasping him with her claws, give it a tearing twist. More of a shock to him, I'm sure, but still, an unexpected fierceness from the gentle card playing dragon. He screamed and sent the slug into the ceiling, falling back against MorDae.

KaRaya had her sword drawn in an instant, as I reached for mine.

The second thug fired his springer, hitting me with a painful, but apparently glancing blow along my left upper chest. I felt the slug ricochet off my jacket, just missing my chin. The blow knocked the wind out of me for a moment. I was useless.

KaRaya lunged at MorDae who sent a shot flying. It thumped into the table next to me and skipped

out of the storeroom and back into the barroom. KaRaya didn't have time to pursue him as the second thug was already cocking his springer. She slashed his arm upwards with the back of the sword's blade, knocking the springer out of his hand, plunged the blade into his shoulder, and then took a slice at his legs to cut him down. She then turned to the fellow Hissi was chomping on.

'I'll deal with him, Hissi,' she said, 'Get clear.'

As soon as Hissi disengaged herself from her thug, KaRaya again ran her sword through the thug's shoulder and cut his legs out from under him.

'You're lucky I took minor Laezan orders, or you'd be dead,' she growled, as they slowly collapsed to the floor, groaning and vainly trying to staunch the bleeding from their wounds. Still, they were alive – she'd been kinder to them than they were going to be towards us.

Hissi lunged for me, and gave me a quick licking kiss on my nose. I pulled her close for an instant. She was trembling.

'It's alright,' I said. Every movement of my left arm and upper body, every breath was painful as the energy of the impact had been spread across my chest. 'Thanks, Hissi. That was very brave of you. You saved all our lives.'

'Are you alright, Wilitang?' KaRaya asked turning to me

'No. But I'll live. Let's lift.'

'Got hit?'

'Just a glancing blow,' I replied, and taking a calming breath, added, 'It didn't penetrate my jacket. I'm a bit sore, that's all. Don't worry, I can still fight and run.'

'We need to get clear soon. MorDae has plenty of help to call on and I rather doubt the Black Mask Gang went very far...' DeVere said quietly, 'Collect their springers and let's go.'

'Front or back way?' asked KaRaya cheerfully, bending down to collect the two fallen weapons and yank the ammo pouches off the wounded bandits, sword point over their hearts to forestall any objections. She handed one to DeVere, and replaced her sword with the other captured springer.

'There's likely half a dozen men in the main room. I don't know if they're all up for killing, but they're all likely armed. I'd suggest we slip out the back and take a little more roundabout way to your barge... But if you think that's too big of an imposition, I could just hide out in the mountains, and let you find your way back some other way,' said DeVere, carefully. 'It's me they need dead.'

'Oh, I think we're on the list as well, now. We need to get to the barge. I don't think we have a choice. Mom won't mind – she's not one to shy away from trouble. Besides, the barge is easy to defend, especially once we have Wilitang's weapons at our disposal.'

'Right, the back way...' he said, and reached to grab his scabbard off the table, winced, and then stepped around the table to unlatch the rear door, carefully. He glanced around the muddy yard that bordered the ragged, former alley, now known as Gold Mountain Street. 'Looks clear.'

'We're right behind you, my dear,' said KaRaya, as she pried open the door to the bar and snapped off a shot, shattering a bottle on the bar. 'Just to give them something to think about.'

We staggered out into the damp, near-night. Gold Mountain Street was a twisty, narrow lane running along the back yards of the Lake Street establishments. Dozens of hastily built log and tent stores, stables, taverns, and dives now lined it. Most were set back into the hillside under the tall pine trees that had escaped, somehow, the rapid expansion of Chasm Lake. Rainwater in the thin wheel ruts glistened in the yellow lights from this ragged string of establishments.

DeVere turned right, and started cautiously up the lane as we followed, searching the shadows for any of MorDae's men who might've come out another door. Hissi took to the branches overhead. 'We can cut through SinGer's Yard to get to the barge. It's only half a dozen buildings away,' he whispered.

We were half way there when I felt something brush against my jacket. Turning back, I saw a figure silhouetted in the faint light from MorDae's back room, cocking his springer for a second shot. 'Behind us.'

KaRaya turned and snapped off a shot of her own. It fell short, but kicked up enough mud to send

the fellow, scurrying back under cover. We took off as well, loping the last thirty meters to the tall fence between SinGer's Yard and the Lake Tap Room and painfully vaulted over it into the dark, empty yard. Thank goodness for the island's minor gravity. I'd have never made it otherwise. We hurried through the shadows to the Lake Street fence and peered over.

There was still a small crowd of customers in the street outside the Palace talking over events. But there were also four men and MorDae spread out on the gravel strand before the dark silhouette of the Shadow Bird. As we watched, another joined MorDae and pointed our way. How would MorDae act in front of witnesses, should we appear?

'Chance it or not?' asked DeVere quietly. 'They'd only get a shot or two apiece. Moving targets are hard to hit... But, five or six men...'

'Will he shoot with that crowd still around?'

'Oh, I'm sure he'd come up with some tale of us being accomplices of the gang, or some such story. I'm not sure how many would believe him, but I'm pretty sure no one in Chasm Lake would be bold enough to challenge him on it. He's the big man in town at the moment,' replied DeVere.

'So, Wilitang?' KaRaya whispered. 'What do you say?'

'If we can't count on support from the bystanders, we'd have to go it alone. A desperate dash might work, but even if one of us got hit, I'd call it a failure. With that in mind, I think we'd have a better chance of making it to the barge untouched if we advanced behind some cover. We could borrow a cart or wagon and push it before us. I don't think it'd slow us down too much, and not only would it give us cover, but it would allow us to return more accurate fire as well. I know Cam's General Store has several carts. I'd like to see us all get to the barge. '

'Sounds like a workable plan. Back to the lane and on to Cam's,' said KaRaya, in her captain mode, ducking down, and starting off. DeVere and I followed, and with another painful vault, landed back in the lane. Single file, hugging the shadows along its Lake Street edge, we hurried down the line of buildings and fences for Cam's.

There were a few people about – staggering down the lane or standing around outside the various taverns – Chasm Lake never sleeps.

From behind us came the rhythmic sound of splashing. We pressed ourselves further into the shadows as a dark rider on a lopemount, bounded up the lane. He spied us as he passed, and whipping out his springer, snapped off a casual shot, missing us, but telling us who he was.

DeVere snapped off a shot of his own, also missing. 'Off to recall the gang,' he said grimly.

We picked up the pace, but not for long. Round a jog in the lane, we halted. A hundred meters or so ahead, the lane was filled with lopemounts and dark riders. The Black Mask gang had not gone far. They had nothing to fear. The lone rider had reached them, said something we couldn't catch and they started off, towards us. They'd be on us in seconds. At this point, the Lake Street buildings all leaned together without a gap, so we had only one option.

'To the woods,' said KaRaya, leaping across the lane. We followed, dodging between a large, dark wood framed tent and low log cabin under dripping pines, and started scrambling up the steep, slippery, pine needle carpeted hill. Hissi followed, staying in the tree limbs.

I could hear the riders pull up the lane behind us. A few shouted commands that had them spreading out along the lane and peering into the shadows around and beyond the ramshackle line of buildings twenty meters below us. We continued up the slippery slope, dodging around the trunks of the great old pines that marched up the steep slope. Glancing back, I could see the gang urging their mounts into the shadows and up towards us, their lopemounts carefully picking their way up the steep slope. I rather doubted the mounts would give them much, if any, advantage on the rocky, pine needle slick slope. I hoped not, anyway.

I looked across to KaRaya who had also paused to look back. She pointed upwards, and started off again. We followed, keeping low and trying to keep as many trees and occasional clumps of underbrush between us and the slowly advancing riders. Wearing my black spaceer jacket and my soot stained

jumpsuit, I was just a dark shadow amongst lots of dark shadows. The soft pine needle forest floor allowed us to move silently. As long as you missed stepping on the twigs.

Looking back, we seemed to have gained ten meters. We probably outpaced them on foot.

KaRaya slipped close to me and whispered, 'Let's see if we can edge out of their line of advance,' and angled off, skipping from tree to bush, in the direction we had originally been heading. We all followed, scrambling along the steep mountainside.

Had it been clear, we'd have been in plain sight, but with the heavy overcast and misty conditions, it was as dark as night under the thick tree cover, which allowed us to remain unseen and keep ahead of the gang. And truth be told, I didn't think the gang was all that determined to track us down. The terrain was not well suited to lopemounts, they could only walk them – any faster pace would be dangerous for the lopemount footing. And if we were armed – and we were – it might be dangerous for anyone who happened upon us, so they rather quickly became discouraged. They turned back within a few minutes. We continued on for a while longer until we came to a small, rock sheltered ravine, where we stopped to catch our breath and take stock.

Which was fortunate, since DeVere was gasping for breath and staggering by the time we settled in. All the climbing and running wasn't doing his wound any good. Hissi joined us from the trees, and we all huddled in the hollow and caught our breaths, saying little. KaRaya inspected DeVere's wound, adjusting the bandage and the belt that held it in place.

I needed to catch my breath and examine my wound as well. As far as I could see in the darkness, my injuries were nothing more than a big bruise near my collar bone. Painful, but it didn't feel like any bones had been broken. I'd been lucky it had only been a glancing shot. A direct hit might have been far more serious, even if the jacket had prevented the slug from penetrating.

KaRaya finally called the meeting to order. 'Any proposed change of plans?'

'I still think a cart for cover is best, but we should now wait until everyone's awake and about,' I said. 'I doubt MorDae could have us shot down in plain sight of everyone.'

'But that won't stop the Black Mask Gang from doing so. They're feared enough these days that they can operate openly if they care to. No one is strong enough to challenge them,' said DeVere wearily.

'Any other suggestions?' asked KaRaya.

'What do you think?'

'Can we get a message to Captain DenMons? Perhaps we could arrange to meet the barge down the strand rather than run the gauntlet.'

'Who?'

'I'm thinking Hissi could take the message. You still can fly, can't you?' she asked Hissi.

Hissi gave a tentative hiss. She abandoned flying more than a few meters at a time since her arrival on Daeri.

She continued, 'As long as it's cloudy and misty, she could probably soar right over anyone waiting for us on the strand, without them even noticing her. She'd just have to make it from the roof of the nearest building to the barge.'

'Do we have anything to write the message with and on?' I asked.

'Ah... Well, we've got Vere's blood, and my nails. We just need something to write on. Vere should have a deck or two of cards on him.'

He shrugged, and twisted about to one of his belt pouches, drawing a deck out.

'There. All set.'

'It's an idea,' I allowed, 'But let's see what she'd have to run through to get the message to Mom. If Vere's right, the whole gang might be waiting by the barge, or even taken it over. We can't send her in blind.'

KaRaya nodded. 'Fair enough. I'm no more prepared to risk her than you. I say let's push on towards the smokehouse and see if we can get a read on what's happening. Perhaps we could commandeer one of the fishing boats and sort of drift that way and make a dash from the lake. But we don't know that

until we see how MorDae's playing the game.'

'I agree. When everyone's ready, we can start towards the smokehouse,' I said. 'We still have some hours before everyone will be up, so there's no hurry.'

DeVere grunted, and slowly stood. 'I'm ready. We need to move. The gang won't give up easily. Or MorDae won't, anyway. He has too much to lose if word gets out.'

We moved, but slowly, staying well up the slope away from the string of establishments along Gold Mountain Street at its foot. And silently, keeping an eye for riders or other searchers as we made our way around the dripping trees, rocky outcroppings, and wet bushes. A half an hour or so later, it started to rain again, hissing in the branches overhead and drifting slowly down in a dark mist, cold and wet. We had to keep moving to keep warm.

After walking for a while through the darkness and the rain, we heard voices ahead. We froze in our tracks. Beyond some black tree trunks I spied three faint silhouettes vaguely outlined in the dim light of a campfire, not more than a twenty paces in front of us. With a nod from KaRaya, we edged a little closer.

They were standing, hands raised, their backs to us, outlined by a small campfire hidden in a little rocky hollow.

'Not who we're looking for,' said an unseen rough voice from the darkness beyond them. 'Look to be prospectors.'

'Check out what they have in their packs,' said the rough voice.

Two figures emerged from the darkness beyond the prospectors and rummaged through their gear, hidden in the shallow ravine. Less than a minute later, one of them stood up behind them, holding what appeared to be three waxed canvas tubes. 'Look'ee what I've found. I think we've struck gold!'

'Bring them over. Let's have a look.'

'Take your cut and let us be,' said one of the prospectors. 'We haven't resisted.'

The bandit with the tubes stepped around the prospectors and approached what we could now just make out as a rider on a lopemount. He handed one of the tubes up to the rider, who carefully undid the sewn seal with a knife and poured a little of the dust in his hand.

'We have indeed struck gold,' he said.

'I told you, take your cut and leave us be,' repeated the prospector.

The dark shadow-figure of the rider carefully poured the gold dust back into the tube and said. 'Put the other two in my saddle bag, along with this one.'

'What! The understanding is that if we don't resist, you only take half,' protested the prospector.

'Ah, yes,' allowed the bandit. 'That's the way it is in the digs, but this ain't the digs. Mount up boys,' he called to his detachment.

Then turning the prospectors. 'You were mighty lucky, mates. That's a lot of gold dust you found. But I'm afraid your luck has run out... Boys...'

At that moment, there came an eerie call, low, but rising in a savage crescendo to a scream that raised the hair at the back of my neck. It didn't do the lopemounts any good either. I could see them rearing and bouncing about, their riders desperately trying to control them. And then the scream started again, this time, closer to them.

KaRaya raised her spring pistol, and steadying it with both hands, sent a slug nearly silently on its way as the scream reached its savage peak. Whether she was aiming for the lopemount or not, I don't know, but that's who took the hit, sending it and its rider leaping into the branches overhead with a frightened scream of its own. It landed ten meters away, riderless and crashing through the low branches in panic, streaked out of sight, raced along with the rest of the terrified lopemounts and men desperately trying to stay on them.

The prospectors broke their poses and scrambled back towards their small campfire, to retrieve their long springer rifles. Armed, they stood, staring about the darkness close around them.

'Peace, brothers. Friends!' cried out KaRaya.

They peered into the darkness towards us. 'Come ahead, slowly,' one said, spring rifle on his shoulder, pointed slightly down.

We did. Slowly.

The broad-feathered folk don't have facial hair or feathers, so I recognized DenBarn and DenOrn right off when we got close enough to see their faces. Their faces were leaner, tougher, but familiar. Cookie had a full black beard and I wouldn't have recognized him at all. As they watched us approach out of the shadows warily, their eyes widened in recognition as KaRaya and I emerged into the dim firelight.

We all uttered cries of amazement and then joy followed by pounding on the back greeting. A very damp feathered Hissi joined us from the trees to complete the party. After we had hugged and slapped each other on the back, wondering out loud how we could've met on this rainy night in this forest, with bandits to boot. Recalling the bandits, we realized we'd better have a look at the dismounted rider and search for any others who may've been knocked clear of their lopemounts in the lopemounts' panic to see if they presented any pressing danger.

We found only the one. He presented no pressing danger. It appeared that the panicked lopemount's great leap had taken the rider into a low branch of a great pine with such force that it broke his neck, killing him. We left him as he lay, taking only his supply of springer slugs for the pistol we found on the ground nearby. This wasn't the Unity, and he was about to kill my friends, so I didn't shed a tear.

When we had all gathered around the little campfire in the hollow, we began to sort out our various stories.

'We're on our way back. We've had to move cautiously, taking a very roundabout way home. The main trails are guarded by all sorts of very ruthless men and there are bandits constantly prowling the woods between here and the flats,' said Barn. 'We should have been home free, having gotten this far. It's just ill luck that we should fall in with bandits so close to Chasm Lake. We was just relaxing and waiting for the Shadow Bird to arrive when they showed up. We felt we were safer here than holed up in town.'

'I take it you did alright in the digs?' I asked.

'Aye. Thanks to Cookie here. He's the one that knew what was what and what we had to do to work a claim and stay alive.'

'Seen a rush or two before,' he muttered.

'So he knew what to look for. How to dig it and what to expect as the rush settled down and the bolder, more ruthless men decided to get their gold at the point of a springer. By that time, we were well prepared for that eventuality with defensive co-ops and redoubts. So we made it out alive and with our gold. Until now.'

'Sorry. If we'd know it was you, we'd have tried to intervene sooner,' KaRaya said. 'You see, we'd only two springers, and well, we're the folks they're looking for...'

'What was it that made that terrible screaming? Was that you?'

KaRaya laughed and looked to Hissi curled around us. 'It was you, wasn't it?'

She gave her barking laugh and somewhere her tail wagged.

'What in the blazes was it? A hunting cry or mating call?'" KaRaya asked with a laugh.

Hissi just laughed again, and wouldn't say.

'Well, whatever it was, we may well owe you our lives, Hissi,' said Orn. 'There had to be half a dozen of them and they was fixing to put some holes in us.'

'Aye, slugs would have been flying,' KaRaya admitted.

After we'd told our tale, we all agreed that the sooner we made our way down to the strand and had a look at what we'd have to face to reach the barge, the better. We smothered the fire, and started off down the hill towards the abandoned smokehouse. There were seven of us now, all armed, so we moved boldly through the woods to the far end of the strand.

By the time we reached the lake shore beyond the old smoke house, the clouds were clearing and the sky gave every appearance of a day dawning. A day that never quite dawns.

Looking towards the town, we found that the Black Mask Gang was out in full force along the strand, lounging around the barge on their lopemounts. It was hard to see from the smokehouse and through the screen of bandits, what the exact status of the barge was. Had they captured it? Or were they just screening it, waiting for us to make our eventual break for it? I counted some 17 riders.

'Mom knows what is what,' said Barn. 'If your new crew kept watch like they was supposed to, I don't see how they could take the Shadow Bird. Mom would put a slug into anyone she didn't want on board. And Ol'King may be old, but he can move fast when he wants to. I wouldn't care to take him on, springer in hand or not.'

'Well, I rather suspect that between the blast that opened the safe and the subsequent eviction of the Palace's customers, the Captain would've been up and have learned what was going on, and would have been alert for trouble, especially since half her crew was missing – when the rest were turned out, she'd be doubly on guard,' added KaRaya.

Still, attempting to take the barge and deny us an escape was not beyond the boldness of the gang. But as Barn pointed out, the bandits would have to somehow get aboard the barge on the broad gravel strand without any cover. To do so, they'd have to face springer slugs delivered from the top of the deckhouse. A bold man on a lopemount might be able to reach the top of the deckhouse with a leap. But to do so in the face of three springers would take a very bold or desperate man, unlikely in your run-of-the-mill bandit working for wages. That, anyway, was what we concluded as we crouched in the damp bushes next to the smokehouse and considered our next move.

'I could saunter up there and have a closer look,' suggested Cookie.

'It's the same gang that robbed you and planned to murder you. Some of them might recognize you,' I said.

'I can trim my beard close. I don't think they'll recognize me. It was dark, back in the woods, and well, if I can get on board, we could be off as soon as they raised steam.'

'Just a quick look. I rather doubt they're letting anyone near it...' I started to say, before the shriek of the Shadow Bird's steam whistle, cut me short. 'Well, they've got steam up.'

They had, and still blowing their whistle, the drive propellers started to spin. The Shadow Bird seemed about to take off. The noise and movement of the barge scattered the calm of the strand, sending riders bounding away to get clear of the whirling blades. Disregarding the bandits, the barge plunged along the strand, picking up speed. It doesn't need much speed to get airborne in Daeri's light gravity, a run of less than a hundred meters. Once airborne, Captain DenMons, or ol'King sailed low over the strand to the far end to swing around and headed back, still meters off the ground, directly at the knot of bandits gathered on the strand. They apparently had annoyed Mom DenMons. The Black Mask Gang, or at least their mounts, decided they didn't care to tangle with a barge and its spinning propellers, and scattered, racing up towards the town.

'I bet she's out looking for us,' exclaimed KaRaya. 'Let's get out and show ourselves.'

We tumbled out of the bushes and started to wave, as the Shadow Bird approached our end of the strand. Captain DenMons, at the railings beside the bridge house saw us and waved back. I don't know if ol'King or Gil had the helm, but she turned and gave them an order to veer off and come about. She'd have to land with the barge facing the town if she wanted to get it off again.

DenMons wasn't the only one to see us. The Black Masks did as well. They rallied their mounts and started lopping down the strand, whooping and hollering, springers in hand. It looked to be a close run affair. Cookie and the boys knelt and started to sending slugs their way. A hundred rounds in the gold fields had apparently given them a great deal of practice, as several of the gang members dropped off, others reigned in and several mounts rearing up and then racing away, riderless. The charge of the



Black Masks slowed considerably. Their returning springer fire from their jittery mounts was so wild that it was of little danger. Or so I told myself. Still they rallied once more and slowly advanced, pausing only to pump their pistols. Things would be getting iffy soon.

With the occasional slug stirring the gravel or buzzing by, it seemed to take forever for the Shadow Bird to swing out over the lake and come in just over our heads. We took off as soon as its whirling propeller passed us by. King or Gil brought her down, fifty meters ahead of us. We and the Black Masks set off, racing for the barge.

We were closer and reached it first, but not by much. As soon as we all had tumbled on board the deck, the barge lurched ahead, as the bandits surged around the barge, their slugs pinging off its hull and deck. Lying flat on the deck, we'd only time to return a shot before the barge had risen too high to get another shot off. They were out of sight below the level of the deck.

'Get inside you idiots!' called out Captain DenMons, with more eagerness than anger. Her boys were home. 'We still got a cargo to deliver.'

Seconds later, the barge once more settled on the gravel and rolled to a stop in front of Chasm Lake. We climbed to our feet, and hurried through the door in the deck house that Sap had opened. Hissi hurried up to see ol'King, no doubt to spin tales of her night's adventures. The boys and Cookie hurried up to greet a broadly smiling Mom. KaRaya headed to the top of the deck-house to take pot shots at any Black Masks who dared to get in range, while I went down, collected my big darter and joined her. The gang now elected to stand off the heavily reinforced barge.

'Quite a night,' said KaRaya sitting down against the low bulwark.

'Yes. I think I've had my fill of gold rush towns,' I replied, keeping a wary eye on the clump of riders on the strand. 'I think I've had my fill of being a bargee as well. What do you think of returning to the wide-sky?'

She looked away. 'Well, Wilitang, Vere and I are considering settling down for a while... You know, just the two of us.'

'Of course. I understand. Settling down is exactly what I set out to do, some thousands of rounds ago...'

'But we're partners, so I won't leave you in the lurch. We'll go up to Daedora and I'll make sure you get a good, safe berth before we part company. That's a promise. And we'll keep in touch. We'll set up a mail box at one of the taverns where we can mail letters to...' she looked at me. 'You're good with that, aren't you? We've been through too much together to part with any ill feelings.'

'Raya, you're a sister to me. A big sister who's looked after me for half a thousand rounds now. I actually have an older sister already, she's a ship's captain like me. But you're one, too. So if Vere's your man, go with him with my blessings. You've earned some happiness with all that karma you've built up being good, cheerful, brave and helpful. Thanks, sis.' And I meant it all.

'You're just sweet talking me, Litang,' she said, with moist eyes. She gave me a peck on my cheek. 'I know you have your doubts about Vere, but he's a good man and he's willing to settle down and manage a joint like he has here – only in some civilized place. I can look after myself, so don't worry.'

'He is a good man, and I'll not worry.'

We off-loaded our cargo, told our story about MorDae's ties with the Black Mask Gang to everyone that came by, and sailed for Bindare. Whether anyone would have done anything about MorDae's activities, was an open question. I don't think it mattered, as we heard after our arrival in Bindare that the authorities in Quandadar had decided to send civil guards to Gold Mountain to restore order. Better late than never.

If Barn, Orn, and Cookie seemed too resigned to the loss of their gold, it became evident why upon our arrival in Bindare. They said nothing to anyone about it, until we arrived. Then, with everyone gathered about in the mess room, they proudly demonstrated their cleverness. Bringing out their well-worn and soiled coats, they began to undo the stitching of the linings of their coats, the backings of their belts, and soles of their shoes, each piling stacks of thin gold strips on the table in front of them.

'Them bags were just decoys. Mostly sand but just enough gold dust on top to give the sand some sparkle. These here strips was Cookie's idea. We built a furnace in our digs and melted our dust down and pored it out in a thin film on clay trays. Cut 'em up and sewed the strips into our clothing,' said Orner.

'An old trick,' said Cookie. 'There's always going to be trouble in the gold fields after the lucky ones have gold and the unlucky or lazy ones don't. Getting the gold out of the ground is hard work, but getting it home is harder and more dangerous...'

With the boys now grown up and wealthy, and unenthusiastic about a return to sailing a barge, Ma DenMons decided to sell the Shadow Bird and retire. The gold rush had been a thick, rich frosting on her savings, and without the boys along, I don't think she wanted to sail the shadow lands anymore. It was the bright side and a neat stone cottage where she and ol'King could settle into and make certain the boys didn't spend their gold fortune too swiftly.

'You aren't planning to stay on with ol'King, are you?'

Hissi released a low hiss, which I took to be a sigh. Then she flicked her long tongue at my nose.

'You have a mission to complete, don't you?'

She just barked a laugh.

04

KaRaya, DeVere, Hissi, and I left Bindare six rounds after our arrival aboard a propeller driven monorail train, bound for the city of Faenau, (KaRaya was still leery of returning to Quandadar). From Faenau we planned to book passage on a winged, propeller driven shuttle to carry us “up” and then “out” to the wide-sky port island of Daedor where KaRaya would help me land a berth on a nice, safe, reliable ship, where I could continue to learn my new trade – and perhaps start my quest to find Naylea.

## Chapter 22 Daedora and a New Beginning

01

It's a six hours' flight in a stub winged aircraft from Daeri to Daedora, a small cluster of islands far enough away from Daeri to be gravitationally independent, but close enough to serve as Daeri's wide-sky port. Since the wide-sky ships are designed for travel in the free fall conditions of the Pela, these small satellite island ports served as transfer points where passengers and cargoes for Daeri are transshipped to winged craft for the last leg of the journey down the gravitational well to Daeri. As we approached Daedora, it looked like a large, fat, green spider in the sky, surrounded by a swarm of mites. What it was, however, was a cluster of small, lush, rocky islands, linked by vines, spars and cables to form one intricate maze of an island, some ten kilometers in diameter that arches around a semi-enclosed inner harbor. This inner harbor shelters and serves the smaller trading ships, small boats

and lighters. The main trading center of Daedora is built around this hollow harbor, under a maze of quays, docks, and warehouses.

It proved to be a wonderfully strange, shadowed, city. Since the islands were too small for gravity to play a role in the design of the city, it rises like a haphazard collection of tree houses up towards the harbor between wharves and warehouses. All of the buildings are linked together by an intricate spider web of cables that serve as pathways through the city. The inhabitants fly about like birds through the dappled sunlight, swinging along and between the cables with casual deftness, shooting through the maze without more than the occasional halfhearted curse as they deftly dodge a less considerate, or skilled "pedestrian." The city's lowest level, the island surface, has twisting moss-carpeted streets lined with open markets selling most everything.

The larger ships are served by long wharves extending, like spider legs, from the ragged outside fringe of Daedora. These wharves and godowns are scattered throughout the web of islands. Scores of large wood, iron, and steel built ships float around the islands while awaiting their turn on a quay or simply off-loading their cargo to lighters, either winged ones to take the cargo straight down to Daeri, or non-winged ones to take it to the local warehouse. Small boats swarm all around the islands – bumboats, lighters, and quick-tongued merchants selling food and trinkets to sailors and passengers aboard the ships. And wheeling all about the islands are flocks of birds and lizards – calling, croaking and singing.

Like all port towns, Daedora had its own version of "spaceer's row." This sailor's town, which lay beneath the wharves and warehouses of the inner harbor, was the usual collection of brightly lit dives, whorehouses, and boarding houses. KaRaya and DeVere showed me its sights. Since then, I've mostly avoided it, and every other version of it on the port islands I've sailed to since then. I've seen enough spaceer's rows in my day not to have any curiosity about the Pela editions. Not only are they too familiar, but once you get beyond the city and the inner harbor of these free-fall ports, the islands become something of an actual paradise.

Since these island ports are usually collections of small islands – assembled by towing little islands together ages ago – they're a wonderfully eclectic maze of spar and rope bridges, narrow, moss-paved trails that wind around and through the fragrant, flowering jungle of large, spreading trees, flowering vines, and rocky grottoes. These tame jungles are alive with birds, flying lizards, butterflies and beetles. Lining the lanes are cottages designed to fit seamlessly into the landscape, everything from caves in the rocks to tree houses, and stone cottages set in lush gardens. Many are little more than open air pavilions, with screens to keep the beetles, birds and lizards out. Leave the bustling of the harbor city behind, and you have only bird songs and the sighing of the leaves to keep you company while you follow the sun dappled lanes around and about, in and out, of these little islands. I've come to know them well, and never tire of exploring these quiet, twisting sun and shade dappled ways, to find a particularly pretty house with an R&M sign to spend a round or two when on leave from my ship.

## 02

This first introduction to Daedora was mostly devoted to the business of finding a ship for me. KaRaya and DeVere took me on a quick tour of the town, one of her old stomping grounds, and then on to a boarding house for traders and travelers just outside the harbor town proper to settle in. Leaving DeVere behind, to play some cards in town, KaRaya, Hissi and I hired a small, electric, propeller-driven bumboat to cruise around the islands to give KaRaya an idea of what was available in the way of ships and shipping that might be suitable for old Wil Litang. Something safe and predictable.

It wasn't KaRaya that found something safe and predictable – I did. And it didn't take me long either. We'd only just left the inner harbor and began to cruise along the outer edge of the island where the larger ships docked, when I saw the ship I wanted to sign on to.

'That one,' I said pointing towards a large white ship in the distance, tied up along one of spider leg quays. It looked to be a freight/passenger liner, nearly a 100 meters long, built of steel. Unlike the Temtres' wooden ships or the rather primitive Bird of Passage, this ship looked thoroughly modern. Indeed, even from this distance it appeared have antennas for radio, and radar disks as well. It was built along the boxy lines of an ocean vessel – a long rectangular box, angling to a ship's bow forward with three large, enclosed drive fans aft, one center mounted, the other two on short wings, along with various steering rudders. The forward half of the hull had four grated, sheltered walkways that gave access to passenger cabins and it had a large promenade deck on the upper deck under grating as well. Amidships it had a raised, two story bridge structure, and then two cargo holds ending with a single story deck house over the engine room. There was a collier alongside the ship discharging black-cake into the ship's bunkers along with several lighters bearing the logos of local catering and supply companies.

'That Tourist Line monstrosity? You don't want that one,' said KaRaya, sadly shaking her head.

'Why not?

'A Saraime & Desra Line freight liner is just too boring.'

'Why?'

'It just goes around and around in a never ending scheduled circuit, calling on the same dozen or so major islands. Around and around you'd go. It'd be like sailing on the hand of a clock. So very tedious.'

'The very type of tediousness that I'm looking for. I don't want excitement. I miss being bored. Besides, I won't be bored because I'll have a new trade to learn and master. So is being bored your only objection?'

She shrugged. 'Well, I dare say it'd take you forever to move up in the ranks, especially since you'd likely have to start as a stoker again, if there's even a stoker's berth open.'

'I'm sure there are plenty of berths in the catering department and such...'

'I'm going to pretend that I didn't hear that, Wilitang.'

'I don't care what you have to pretend, Raya. She looks like a modern, safe, and indeed boring berth. Well worth looking into. Steer alongside, let's see if we can find someone to talk to who might have an idea if there are any berths available.'

She gave me a sad look, but swung our boat about and headed in towards the big white freight liner, the Telrai Peaks out of Deadora.

The collier was just pulling away as we arrived, so we pulled alongside the still open fueling port. In its dim recesses I saw one of the engineers, watching a couple of the black hole crew clean up the odd cake bricks that had drifted free of the conveyor chute.

'Greetings, chief,' I called out cheerfully, deciding it wouldn't hurt to give him a promotion if it wasn't the chief. 'Do you have a minute?'

'Depends,' he replied, turning to the port and giving us the eye.

For a chief engineer, that was downright civil, so I proceeded. 'I'm looking for a berth, and I was wondering if you know if there are any openings aboard?'

'What can 'ya do?'

'I've been running a gyro-barge engine room and I'm looking for a place in your department, but I'm willing to sign on in just about any capacity.'

'Stoker?'

'If necessary. Besides running a steam engine, I know something about electrical equipment, so I'm thinking I might be a little more valuable than a stoker. But I'm willing to start as a stoker. I've done it before.'

'Have you seen the postings?'

'No. We've just arrived up from Daeri, and we're just out looking at what might be available when I saw the Telrai Peaks and liked the look of your ship, chief. I convinced Captain KaRaya here, to come alongside. Any berths available?'

'Might be. So you were running a gyro-barge engine.'

'Aye, a Tanjer & Rosse 25 and before that I was stoking and oiling a Din'tra-Marca 200. Plus, as I said, I've some experience with electrical systems.'

'We run turbines, not cylinder steam.'

That sounded promising. It sounded modern. 'Electric drive propellers?'

'Aye.'

'And you have a berth open?'

'Aye,' he allowed. 'Fourth oiler, is the title, but it's a general hand position. Could be tending the turbine, or the stoking conveyor, wherever the watch officer needs ya.'

'Sounds like just what I'm looking for. How would I go about applying for the berth?'

'I'm sure it's listed on the exchange,' said KaRaya.

'Aye,' allowed the chief, giving us a long look before adding, 'Still, tie up and come aboard and I'll show you around. We'll see what you know. It'll save time. Where does the Simla dragon fit in all this?'

'She's my companion.'

'His keeper,' said KaRaya as she tossed the Chief a line to haul us close.

'So she's part of the deal?'

'Aye, but she been with me since she was hatched and has seen enough engine rooms to know what to stay clear of.'

He considered her, and nodded, so we tied up the boat and climbed aboard.

'My name's Wil Litang. My friend here is Captain KaRaya, and the Simla is known as Hissi.'

'AvenDar,' he said by way of introduction. 'Follow me, I'll show you around.'

He then proceeded briskly, but proudly, show off his engine room. It reminded me in some ways of the Starry Shore's, save that the platforms were orientated along the long length of the ship, not at right angles to it. It boasted twin boilers and twin main turbine generators that powered the electric motors that drove the ship and supplied its electric requirements. They were set alongside each other, secured in a web of girders on either side of the center line of the ship and were surrounded by a series of platforms. In addition, there was a smaller boiler/generator that was now running to provide power for the ship in harbor, plus two large banks of batteries, and all the auxiliary equipment – the steam condensers and pumps, the conveyors that fed the boiler's hot boxes, plus the electrical transformers and regulators related to the drive engines and the ship's power.

I felt instantly comfortable exploring Chief AvenDar's domain and could identify and ask informed questions concerning the machinery I saw. I made a good enough impression that the chief described the job I'd be doing as 4th oiler, and after I expressed my desire to sign on, took me up to see the Telrai Peak's captain.

'What have we here, chief?' the captain asked, looking up from his paperwork as we stepped into his large office with a knock on his open door. The captain was standing at his tall desk.

'A prospective 4th oiler, Skipper.'

'Which one of the lot?' he asked, taking us all in. If he was surprised to see a Simla dragon, he didn't show it.

'The fine-feathered fellow here, Wilitang. The Simla, Hissi, comes with him. Captain KaRaya was showing him about the anchorage. This is Captain MarDen.'

We greeted the captain.

'Captain,' he nodded to KaRaya, and then turning to me, asked, 'So you want to be a 4th oiler, do you?'

'I'd be more than happy to start as 4th oiler. But I want to learn the trade, sir. I think I've a good grounding in it, but there's a whole lot more to learn. I'm eager to learn.'

'What'd you do before getting this wild idea of becoming a 4th oiler?'

'He was running a gyro-barge engine,' offered the chief.

'For a couple of hundred rounds,' I added. Not that you needed a whole lot more to know how to run

a Tanger & Rosse 25.

'And before that?'

Ah, yes. The question. I hesitated, undecided on what to say. I hadn't really given it much thought. I hadn't expected to be in this position this soon.

'Yes?'

I shrugged and smiled, 'Actually, Captain MarDen, before that I was a ship's captain for ten thousand rounds. A freighter out of some very distant islands. Islands further away that you'd imagine. We sailed the airless outer-sea, beyond, what I gather you call, the endless seas. Being unfamiliar with navigation amongst these islands, and having to learn a new trade, I decided that I knew more about engines and electricity than I did about navigating these islands. Though I see you have radios and radar, so perhaps I can learn that too. Still, after ten thousand rounds of dealing with chief engineers, I think, perhaps, I'd like to become one myself.'

The captain stared at me for a while, and then said, 'And you expect me to believe that?'

'Well, sir, perhaps I can convince you...' I replied, and launched into my standard explanation, substituting islands for planets and the inner outer space of the Tenth Star for the Nine Star Nebula, and including a brief explanation of how I came to meet KaRaya, and our subsequent adventures.

'...And so here I am. Telling the truth is simply easier than coming up with lies, and while I don't expect everyone to believe me – I may well come across as the Saraime's biggest liar – the truth does save me from having to come up with excuses why I don't know this or that, or what any child would know.'

'He's telling the truth, captain,' said KaRaya. 'Show 'em your pockets, Wil.'

I laughed and put my hands in my jacket pockets, and then my trousers. 'These are what we use instead of belt pouches in the islands I come from. I gather they've not been invented here,' I said, pulling out some coins just to show them that they're used the same way as belt pouches.

The captain gave me a long measuring look. 'Still want him, chief?'

'Aye. Crazy or not, he knows enough to work in the hole.'

'And he's sober as well,' chimed in KaRaya to seal the deal.

'We sail first watch next round. Can you settle your affairs and be aboard?'

'Yes sir, though I must mention that Hissi will be accompanying me, won't you?'

She gave a short bark, what I've always taken as a yes.

'So the Simla comes with the deal?'

'We've been together since she hatched. We're a team.'

She barked another short yes.

'Her rations come out of your pay.'

'Fair enough, sir.'

'Have Purser sign him on and get him settled,' he said to Chief AvenDar.

'Thank you, Sir,' I said, and by the time we returned to our boat, I was a 4th oiler of the Telrai Peaks of the Saraime & Desra, or "Tourist" Line, since all the ships were named after the famous sights of the various islands.

'See, Raya, what a little good karma has gotten us?' I said as we slowly raised steam and pattered away to get my scant things. 'You have Vere and I have the Telrai Peaks.'

Perhaps the thought of parting after all the rounds we spent together made her sad, since she said, 'Well, we'll have to see if it's good karma or not.'

'I'm sure it is, Sister. If we keep our wits about us.'

'If we kept our wits about us all the time, we wouldn't need karma.'

'It never hurts...'

There was little to do but to arrange for a drop box at MinDo's Pub where we could send or leave letters to be picked up when we were in Daedora, and say a sad good-bye and good luck to KaRaya and DeVere.

I boarded my ship, before the early sleep watch, and was on watch as the Telrai Peaks carefully steered clear of the quay after taking on her passengers. Once clear of the islands, we set course for Tyrina, our next port of call, the first in my new life as a wide-sky sailor.

## Part Five – Voyage of the Lora Lakes

### Chapter 23 1,879 Rounds

01

At the risk of calling the attention of whatever superstitious forces rule the Pela, I must note that 1,879 rounds have slipped astern like islands in the wide-sky without one unfortunate event rearing its ugly head to threaten me with an untimely death. I'm a bit leery of even mentioning that, so I'll simply add a heartfelt "Thank you" to whatever fates rule the Pela for their kindness. And, for the first time in 1,879 rounds, I've a long stretch of idle time on my hands to not only bring this account up to date, but to be bored enough to do it.

Hissi and I are traveling – as passengers – aboard the S&D passenger liner Caves of Jinlopa crossing the Varenta Sea to Vennora, where I will assume my new duties as Chief Engineer of the Lora Lakes, an S&D freighter. So with time on my hands and a new beginning in the offing, I shall briefly outline my life in the last nearly two thousand rounds, which, as near as I can make out, is something like six Unity Standard years. There is something rather nice about being able to briefly outline six years of living. It was sort of what I expected my life to be like.

Having spent most of my life aboard ships, I easily fell into the rhythm of shipboard life aboard the Telrai Peaks. One watch followed the other, one round after the next, a simple, predicable life. The islands of the Dontas, large and small, emerged from the misty wide-sky, each in their turn, as we made our circuit through them while I never had to worry about anything except my part in keeping the turbines spinning and the lights on. Of course I had much to learn, but starting at the bottom, with a full, and stable crew, I had plenty of time to master my new career at an easy pace. My spaceer experience well qualified me to look after the ship's electrical components, from the large generators, banks of batteries, and the many electric motors right down to the lighting in the passenger compartments, so that quickly became my primary duty. I was, however, still involved with the general working of the engine room and learning my new trade. Being sober and responsible, I moved up the promotion ladder aboard the Telrai Peaks as people above me were promoted and/or moved on to other ships. I finished my stint aboard the Telrai Peaks, as her First Engineer, Chief AvenDar's second in command before being promoted and assigned to a new ship.

A dozen rounds ago, I received notice of my appointment as Chief Engineer of the S&D tramp freighter Lora Lakes. I had 40 rounds leave before I had to report, and the voyage to Vennora would account for 12 of them, but I was anxious to see my new charge, so Hissi and I hitched a ride on the Caves of Jinlopar, the first S&D liner sailing from Daedora for Vennora in the Varenta Island group, where the Lora Lakes had been laid up, apparently for some time now.

In these past six years, I've become quite Saraimian. I dress as one, and only on the rare occasions,

like when I'd accompany my shipmates to the iffy dives of some island port did I bother to don my old armored spaceer clothing. I have not, however, abandoned pockets, and have a tailor add them to all my trousers and jackets. I needed some place to put my hands. My shipmates found them funny, and have not followed suit, preferring their belts and assorted compartments and pouches. But if you should be reading this account in the Saraime some 100,000 rounds in the future, and have pockets in your pants, I claim credit.

So all in all, I'm happy to report that I've found a life I'm comfortable living without armored clothing or fearing for my life. Indeed, it's now rather strange to think that this wasn't always the case. Even stranger to realize that there was a time, now a long time ago and very far away, before I became captain of the *Lost Star*, when I only knew of armored clothing from vids, and even then I likely assumed it as something made up by fiction writers for the fictional drifts.

I was struck, upon entering service aboard the *Telrai Peaks*, how everything was more advanced than what I'd seen aboard the Cimmadar-built warship, *Guardian*, except for its Unity, nuclear power source. I'd have thought that Cimmadar, with its access to the technology of the Unity, would have been far more technologically advanced than the Saraime. Perhaps the explanation lies in Glen Colin's hints that the royals of Cimmadar kept Unity technology very much to themselves, fearful of it getting loose and finding its way to their neighboring empires. The Saraime Principalities had no such fear, as isolated as it is by the vast, island-less wide-skies that stretch in every direction from it, known as the "Endless Skies".

These wide-skies are not endless, and the Saraime is well aware of that. They had, in their age of exploration, sent ships out into these Endless Skies in all directions. However, all the distant islands they discovered were either, uninhabited or inhabited by primitive peoples, no different from the thousands in the Saraime, so interest in exploration waned. And yet, at some point, the Saraime must have been settled either from the Nebula directly, or from previously settled islands in the *Pela*. I suppose the span of 40,000 years provides enough time for humans to spread across even the widest the sky-seas of the *Pela*.

The Saraime does have an ancient and primitive history – going back to a very long "Myths and Legends Era" that includes the initial settlement of the core islands of the Principalities. But as the title suggests, it's wrapped in magical myths and legends. History begins with the founding of the first Principalities, many hundreds of thousands of rounds ago – more rounds than even scholars can agree on.

Today, the Principalities of the Saraime include some 179 different principalities – many of them multi-island nations – in a close and largely peaceful confederation. Plus, there are thousands of smaller, locally ruled islands, that are independent but tied closely to the Principalities. I suspect that the commercial, and occasionally military, rivalries between these many island nations has acted as a spur to innovation within the Principalities, which the hermit empire of Cimmadar lacks. Whatever the explanation, the core worlds of the Saraime boast of technological levels that include simple transistor based electronics, and perhaps on the big worlds, some sort of nuclear power. However, one of the governing features of the Principalities is that the technological level steeply declines once you leave the core islands, or cosmopolitan cities of every island, behind. Life gets primitive fast beyond the core and major cities, as my six hundred and some rounds in the margin and shadow lands of *Daeri* can attest to. Whether this is due to the conservative nature of the broad-feathered people who make up the great majority of the non-core islands, or simply the limits of resources and time, I can't say. No doubt I could find studies that would tell me more, but I've kept my research into the Saraime to basic history and geography to date.

The geography of the Saraime Principalities is simple in the big picture, intricate in the details. At the center of the Principalities are the seven core islands, some of them massive enough to be classified as small planets, though all are irregular in shape. And like all the islands, they're populated heavily only on their bright sides. The seven core islands were long rivals, but with the establishment of the



Principalities, they built a stable economic and political structure that has largely kept them at peace and ensured prosperity for hundreds of thousands of rounds. Being the richest, most populated, and most powerful islands in the group, the seven core islands provide the political and economic ballast for the rest of the smaller and newer principalities. There are occasional conflicts between the smaller principalities, some even escalating to war. Wars, however, are relatively rare and usually last less than a hundred rounds before the "Seven Principalities" of the core send in their warships to put an end to the conflict.

I don't suppose you can say anything general about the Pela – neither I, nor anyone else, knows enough to say anything definite about it, but I can say that in this tiny corner of it, the islands are arranged in layers, each layer separated by wide sky-seas that are mostly free of islands. The islands in each layer are clustered together to form long archipelagos of thousands of islands. The Saraime consists of four such island layers. Traveling inwards toward the brighter sky from the seven core islands, a Saraime & Desra liner can reach the Dardene Island group, consisting of 23 large islands and thousands of smaller ones, in six rounds. This is the inward extent of the Saraime, beyond which lies the Inner Endless Sky. Traveling outwards from the core, one crosses the five-round-wide sky-sea of Saraime to reach the 47 large islands of the Varenta group and then outwards again, across the ten-round-wide Varenta Sky-sea to reach the Donta Islands, with 39 major islands. The Donta Sea is probably only a five-round wide sky-sea in an S & D liner ending in the Outward Islands, beyond which lies the Outer Endless Sky, in which the Temtre's Assembly Island lies.

Scientists and explorers have pushed far beyond these limits, out to the edge of the atmosphere, so that my story about sailing in a rocket-powered ship in this space is not quite as unbelievable as one might expect. Indeed, I've had conversations with a few scholars aboard the Telrai Peaks about not only this inner space, but the outer one as well. I should have known better, but more of that later. Some may actually believe me, but until (or if) I ever recover the Phoenix, I have no proof, and must accept my fate as being largely considered an inventive teller of tall tales. I've often been told to set them down and sell them.

Whereas the intelligence of dragons seemed to be only suspected by the Cimmadarians, at least the ones I knew, it is an accepted fact in the Saraime. They have a complete classification system that defines "dragons", which are intelligent beings, and "lizards," that share many superficial characteristics with dragons, but fall under the threshold for beings you can reason with. For the most part, the larger, more dangerous dragons, steer clear of the large, populated islands, and humans. The Simla dragons, though not native to the core and larger islands, are usually considered friendly dragons, indeed, a lucky companion. While it is uncommon for them to live amongst people, they're not so rare as to incite wonder in adults, even on the large islands where Simlas are rarely found.

All this meant that Hissi was welcomed everywhere we went. And as I noted in the margins, she loved to play with children, and they with her. Whenever our island-side leaves take us to a park with children, Hissi is off with a start to play tag, catch, or any of the children's games she can play, leaving me to sit and just watch her having fun, barking with laughter. Not that I minded. I suspect that if you are telepathic, the simpler, more magical minds of children may well be a tonic after spending time with adults.

Aboard the Telrai Peaks, Hissi soon became a fixture in the passenger section as well. She'd spend time playing games or just frolicking about with the young passengers and once they were put to bed, she'd play cards with the adults, before wearily returning to our cabin to sleep.

There's not a vast amount of passenger traffic between the islands. (Between you and me, there's not much difference between them, but don't tell the "Tourist Line," which names its ships after the "natural wonders" of the various islands. They try very hard to entice tourists with the wonders of the next island over...) In any event, most of the passengers are traveling on business, with few pure tourists, so there were never many children on board. We did, however, have regular commercial travelers who we'd see on a regular basis, so that Hissi developed a regular set of card players during

the time we sailed aboard the Telrai Peaks.

The Telrai Peaks called on 21 of the larger Donta Islands, with brief stops at a dozen or so of the smaller ones, in a voyage that lasted a little over a hundred rounds. She was one of six "Tourist Line" cargo/passenger liners that provided scheduled passenger and freight service throughout the Dontas. As I've mentioned, technology falls off very quickly the further one ventures from the core islands so that the Telrai Peaks and her sister ships, built to core island standards, stood out in the crowded harbor islands of the Dontas where most of the ships were wooden island traders, less than 30 meters long, or local-built hybrid ships of iron or steel with cylinder steam engines and kite sails. Even the slightly larger and more modern steel ships were often rusty buckets like the late Bird of Passage, and still equipped with masts for sails. Thus, having secured a berth aboard the Telrai Peaks, I had no incentive to change ships, and instead, slowly moved up the ranks as I learned my trade and those above me were promoted and/or moved on to different ships.

So it was, shortly after arriving back in Daedora that Chief AvenDar came up to me with a piece of paper, shaking his head, and saying, 'Well, Litang, they've done promoted you to Chief of the Lora Lakes. They're giving you 40 rounds to make your way to Vennora where the ship lies to take some time off and celebrate your good fortune.'

'Really, Chief? Do I have a choice? I'm content serving under you and aboard the Telrai Peaks.'

He shook his head. 'No choice. Your replacement will report by end of the round. Congratulations, Litang. I'll miss ya. But I've taught you everything I can, except how to be a chief, and how to deal with captains.'

'I'll have to find my way as chief, but as for dealing with captains, you forget, I was a captain once. I know how to deal with them.'

He grinned. 'Good. I'll rest easy, then.'

'Any idea what sort of ship this Lora Lakes is?'

'It's an old Lakes class cargo ship. Fifty-five meters, twin prop steam-electric. Not bad ships, many newer versions are still in service. Still, you'll probably end up tramping. I gather it's been laid up for some time now – I seem to recall someone, sometime, mentioning that it was going to be scrapped. Must've changed their minds. I dare say you'll get your hands dirty trying get her into shape to sail again. That's likely why they're giving you 40 rounds to report, hoping you'll put in 25 rounds of unpaid work knocking the rust out of her. They can be rather canny that way.'

'But I should, right?'

'Aye, I would. Breakdowns in passage never look good on your record. It shouldn't take 25 rounds to get her back into some sort of order. But whatever it takes, it'd likely be well worth it. If only to sleep better in passage knowing nothing's likely to go up in a flash and a cloud of smoke...'

'I like sleeping soundly, and since I've nothing better to do, I might as well make my way to Vennora and get to know her, even if it is falling into their trap...'

I checked the mail drop at the tavern for any word of KaRaya and DeVere before I sailed. My letters had been piling up, uncollected, and they were still there when I looked in, so I added one more. I was disappointed, but not too concerned. The last letter she had left had said that they'd taken a berth aboard an Invertara Line liner (a fierce rival of the S&D line), she as a bridge officer and Vere signed on as assistant purser, so that it was entirely possible that they ended up on a ship that did not call on Daedora. It is the nature of the trade. Perhaps I'd run into them on my new run, likely amongst the Varenta Islands.

voyage. Light poured onto the desk through the porthole from the ever-day and featureless sky beyond. Hissi, as was her custom, was off playing with the children, so I had time alone to think and bring my account of my life in the Pela up to date.

I was thinking of Naylea Cin.

I hadn't spend a lot of time thinking about Naylea Cin for a long time. What was written was written. In 500 rounds I'd know more – about her and what seeing her, or not, would mean for the rest of my life. I was uncertain as to what I hoped to find when it did.

It seems that the time and space I'd given for her past life to fade away, had the desired effect – on me. While I had no history of bitter family feuds to forget or any great anger to fade, I'd found a new and pleasant life in the Pela that had largely replaced my old life in the Unity. Oh, I missed my old life, in the abstract. But my everyday life in the Saraime had become routine and my old Unity life had faded to old spaceer tales. In time I planned to make my way to the Saraime's core islands, where I was pretty certain I'd find a modern, safe, and peaceful life I had come to long for even before being castaway. Actually, I'd already found it, since my life aboard the Telrai Peaks was modern, safe and peaceful. There may be pirates about the Dontas, but they stayed well clear of a ship the size of the Telrai Peaks. Still, I was curious to see the core islands and perhaps find and reclaim the Phoenix before I did so. KaRaya had given me the approximate location before we parted, so I could find it. This was one of the reasons I had stayed in the Dontas, building bank account that would allow me to hire an Outward Island trader when I decided to find it. Naylea Cin was the other.

I'd not abandoned searching for Naylea. In my memory she was worth searching for. The quest, however, had taken on a mythical, dream-like quality that looked foolish in the bright skies or noisy engine room of every day life. Once I learned how vast the Saraime is, I realized that I'd never find her by chance. I had loved her and I was nearly certain I'd love her again – if I should find her again. But I'll never know – nor ever be entirely free – unless I either found her or came to see that I'll never be able to find her.

I realized that I needed to narrow down my search by contacting DeKan to discover the island she'd landed on. Locating the Talon Hawk was only slightly more likely than finding her, since the Temtres generally "traded" amongst the smaller islands, the islands the Telrai Peaks sailed by. However, I did occasionally see Temtre ships in the anchorages the Telrai Peaks called on. I made it my practice, when I had leave, to hire a small boat that Hissi and I could sail around the island ports searching for any Temtre ship in the anchorage. If I found one, I'd use my gold token to leave a letter to DeKan with the ship's captain, to be delivered should they cross courses with him, or a Temtre ship that had a better chance to do so. The first Temtre ship I found was the Wind Drifter – captained by an "old" friend.

## Chapter 24 The Wind Drifter

01

We were in Harave anchorage, the off-shore island port of Frisenue, near the end of my first circuit of islands aboard the Telrai Peaks, when Hissi and I spied the colorfully carved and decorated Temtre ship tied up to a small quay against the lush green of the island's jungle, as we were slowly putting around the small island in a hired launch.

'What do you say?' I said to Hissi, who with a claw on my shoulder, was staring at the ship as intently as I. 'Dare we rely on my gold token?'

She gave a low, tentative bark. I wasn't feeling any more confident myself in the token DeKan had

given me, supposedly the secret sign that I was an agent of the Clan. Still, I didn't think they would just up and murder me for coming alongside... So I swung the bow of the boat inwards towards the Temtre ship.

'Remember, Hissi, you're a Temtre Simla. You're Clan, even if I'm not. You may find your parents, or a brother or sister on board.'

She gave another quiet bark that trailed off to a hiss.

'If you can charm ol'King, you needn't worry.'

She gave my shoulder a squeeze with her sharply clawed hand and stood a little straighter, next to me.

'What do you want?' called out one of Temtres aboard the ship as I swung the launch alongside the closed gangway.

'To see your captain. On business,' I replied as we bumped against the grating. I grabbed hold and flashed him the gold token with the other.

'What business?' he asked suspiciously as he gave Hissi a long, thoughtful look and then back to me. His eyes widened a little when it dawned on him who I was. I, in turn, recognized him as well – not by name, but by his black outfit – uncommon amongst the more colorfully dressed Temtres – which marked him as a Crea. We may have met before.

'Is Clan-chief EnVey aboard?' I ventured.

He actually smiled, which in a Temtre, is not always a good thing. 'What are you doing here? Word was that you were going home,' he said as he unlatched the gangplank gate.

'I decided to stay,' I said simply as I handed him a line to tie up the bumboat and then leaped across the narrow gap to the ship, once he'd moved aside. 'Is the Clan-chief aboard?'

'Aye. And I'm sure he'll be delighted to see you.' This with another, somewhat unnerving grin.

He led me forward to the captain's suite in the ship's bow, knocked and called out, 'You've got visitors, Captain.'

Hissi gave a low hiss behind me. I looked back to see that two Simla dragons swimming into view. The three of them were staring at each other, no doubt deep in conversation.

'My friend here is one of your clan. I was given her as an egg on Blade Island. She's Clan,' I said out loud, just to smooth Hissi's introduction, if I could.

The door opened and EnVey stepped out, as tall, handsome, and elegant as ever. He stared at me for a second, trying to place me. But only for a second.

'Why it's Captain Wil...' he said, breaking into a wide smile. He was sober.

'Aye, Wil Litang,' I said, returning the smile, 'At your service.'

'Of course...' he said, offering his hand.

I grasped his wrist and he winced, theatrically, and laughed.

'I trust you've made a full recovery,' I said.

'Well, I'm now quite ambidextrous,' he allowed. 'I only feel the wound in thick clouds. Still, it's an island astern. Come in, come in. What brings you to the Wind Drifter, my friend? Indeed, what brings you to the Dontas? I thought you were to sail for your home islands, far, far away.'

'That may've been Naylea's idea. But I decided otherwise. I felt our differences could be resolved – if I gave her enough time.'

'Five hundred rounds?'

'You can't be too careful... But I've only recently got a berth that will allow me to start searching. What I'd like to do is either find the Talon Hawk or get word to DeKan,' I said as we stepped into EnVey's dim-lit cabin. Hissi stayed outside, now content to be with her kind, and perhaps her kin.

'DeKan usually sails amongst the fringe islands – though as Clan-king he goes where he chooses. My clan trades amongst the main islands, so we usually don't cross courses as a rule.'

'I have a letter for him. Do you think you could find a way to pass it along to him before the next gathering?'

'A letter? Yes, that should work. We do pass along posts, ship to ship, though I can't say when it would reach him, or how long it might take to receive his reply.'

'That is all that I expect, Clan-chief. I must take my chances as slim as they are.'

'Your lady is worth every chance, as I know well, no matter how slim. The price of the post is your story, my friend. I can offer you only tye, I'm afraid. You know my weakness...'

'Tye would be welcome. I'm quite fond of it...'

I spent several hours talking to EnVey. I told him my tale, not only because he was eager to hear it, and pleasant company with which to share it, but because I needed his good will not only to have a chance of contacting DeKan, but because I wanted to establish a good standing with the Temtres. We departed friends.

As the Crea clan traded amongst the major islands of the Dontas, we crossed courses a dozen times during those 1,879 rounds I spent sailing the Dontas aboard the Telrai Peaks – and ships of his clan a dozen more, each time leaving a letter for DeKan.

As for Hissi, having established her heritage, she would be swirling around me impatiently, anxious to be off in a hired launch searching every anchorage for any Temtre ships that might be in port so that she could, I presume, catch up on all the gossip. And to be fair, she may well have been looking for her parents and other kin as well, so at every port of call, we'd go off searching for any Temtre ships that might be in the anchorage – first chance we had to get off ship.

It was, however, EnVey who brought back DeKan's reply to my letter.

02

A couple hundred rounds before my promotion, Hissi and I found the Wind Drifter in Daedora anchorage. As soon as we could get clear of our duties, we paid a call on Clan-chief EnVey, who was eagerly waiting at the railing as my hired launch pulled alongside. He flashed me a wide smile of greetings.

'Well met, my friend! I have a letter for you,' he called out, waving a parchment envelope in hand.

My heart skipped a beat. 'Really?'

'Would I lie to my old friend? Come aboard and read it for yourself.'

He hauled me aboard and greeted me with a hug as Hissi darted off to visit her friends. Stepping back he said, 'I should let you read the letter yourself, but I cannot contain myself. DeKan expressly commanded me to speak for him, so excuse me if I do.'

'He told me in the cover letter to tell you how delighted he was to discover that you are alive, well, and here in the Saraime engaged in such a noble and romantic mission. I'm sure he'll have said that and more in your letter, but he instructed me to convey it in person as well. I've been told by the captain who delivered and received his letter from his hand, that he was delighted to hear from you.'

'Do you know what's in the letter as well?' I asked.

'I have the sense of it from his cover letter and from what Captain CenMora told me. But perhaps you want to read it yourself?'

I shook my head. 'Just tell me, Vey. I can read his letter at my leisure. I'm too anxious to do so now.'

'He wrote that Naylea Cin stayed aboard the Talon Hawk for some 300 rounds to learn the ways of the islands before setting out on her own. He was very, very sorry to see her go – as I can well imagine – but earnestly assures you that as delightful as her company was, he can look you in the eye and say that neither he nor her conducted their friendship in a manor inconsistent with impeccable honor,' he said with a sidelong leer. 'He would say that, the sly dragon, but in this case, I think you can take it as the truth. No doubt you have Naylea to thank for that, however.'

I returned a rueful grin. 'Knowing of the impeccable honor of the Temtres, and the precision of your

language, I shall have to parse each word to attempt to discover the truth of the matter. Still, Naylea was and is a free woman, and your Clan-king, an honorable man, in a Temtre way, so the nature of their friendship is neither dragon nor lizard.'

'That's the spirit, Wil. Still, I gather from DeKan's wishful manner in his remarks that you have nothing to fear on that score. I'm certain they were just friends.'

'Be that as it may, did he tell you where Naylea left the ship and where she intended to settle?' I asked, heart pounding and yet uncertain as to what I wanted to hear.

'He said that she left at Tydora, but where she planned to travel after that, she kept to herself. From Tydora you can go to many places... But don't be discouraged,' continued EnVey. 'DeKan also told me that he had sincerely urged her to return to Blade Island for the next Nileana Flowering. She could use her token to claim a ride on any of the clan's ships. He assured her that she was Temtre now, and that she should return for the Assembly as all Temtres do. It was no doubt selfish of him, but it serves you as well as him. And to be fair, he seemed sincerely happy to find that you are well and sailing the Saraime. He wanted me to personally extend this invitation to you as well. Take leave and join any clan ship in time to travel to Blade Island when the Nileana flowers. DeKan is Temtre to his inner heart, but I can assure you there was nothing in his words or manner to suggest that he was anything but sincere. You will be welcomed home, if you can make it. And well, I can't promise that your Naylea will also return, but I have a feeling that she will. I am sure you can't spend all that time aboard a Temtre ship and not be a Temtre no matter how far she roams. She'll return. And you'll come as well, won't you?'

'Yes, I believe I will,' I said. 'If I can. Without constantly having to worry about discovery, as I did the last time, I'm sure it would be a grand time...'

'Please do not wait until the last moment. Sail with me before the time. We'll have a grand time!' exclaimed EnVey. 'Aye, a grand time, indeed. And when we return, she'll be there to be won back!'

I was far less certain of that, than EnVey. But there was a spark of hope in my heart that I would not let grow, but would not extinguish either. A spark of hope was more than I had until coming alongside the Wind Drifter.

'I promise you, I'll try. I'll keep an eye on the date and find you or another Temtre ship before the Nileana flowers. I'm sure Hissi would not forgive me if we didn't make every effort to come,' I said.

'Ah, yes. Certainly for Hissi's sake,' he said with a leer.

03

The Nileana Flower Festival is now still almost 500 rounds away, so I have enough time to be chief engineer of the Lora Lakes for some 400 rounds and enough coins in the bank to take a long leave when it comes time to find a Temtre ship in some Donta Island harbor. The Assembly offers the only chance of meeting Naylea Cin again. I have to find her, or find that I can't find her, if I'm to find the heart she stole from me.

Ah, that was first dinner gong. I guess I've said all I can say about the last 1,879 rounds. Many rounds, little to say. I'll not complain. Now, I need to put on my white dress uniform jacket. I dine at the captain's table.

## Chapter 25 Tanjenree and the Lora Lakes

I stepped off the gangplank on to Tanjenree, the port island of Vennora.

Hissi swam serenely overhead as I slipped through the press of passengers lining up for the monorail that would take them to hotels and transshipment terminals for Tanjenree. Hissi and I would find our customary room & meal cottage in the jungle suburbs, so we headed for the winding, moss paved road that lay beyond the monorail platform. Tanjenree, followed the Donta Island pattern – a semi-enclosed inner harbor with larger freighters and traders anchored at quays along the outward facing facets of the islands, with all sorts of ships and boats tied up in little coves along the intricately irregular shore. It was not unusual to be sitting in a cottage garden with a freighter anchored to a rocky outcropping not far overhead, awaiting its cargo.

We followed the lane's shade and light dappled way until we happened upon an open air cafe under an arching umbrella of flowering vines where we stopped for some tey and a few sweets while I consulted our map of Tanjenree. The S&D Line office was in metro Tanjenree, but with 22 rounds remaining before I actually needed to report, we decided to search for a cottage to rent for our stay on Tanjenree. Tomorrow's round would be soon enough to look in on the office. On these transient islands, there's never a shortage of rooms, be they hotel, boarding houses or room & meals. I've spent my life aboard ship, but I've come to enjoy a bit of peace and solitude as well, so a room in a cottage usually provides just the right balance of company and solitude. Besides, it's fun to wander, semi-lost, through the lush, musical jungle-gardens of these small islands, alive with the songs of birds and the croaking calls of the lizards to hunt down the quaintest cottage R&M available. We spent our first several hours doing just that, stopping once at a small playground in a rocky grotto to give Hissi time to play with the kids.

The children and their parents would stare with amazement at her appearance. But seeing her elegant scarves and broaches, quickly realized that she was not a wild Simla dragon – not that it mattered too much, given their entirely benign reputation in the Saraim – so they'd soon cluster around her. She'd tap someone on their forehead and swim off – and the game of tag was on, the children soaring through the branches calling and laughing as they chased after her or darted about to avoid her. I'd settle on the benches next to the parents and answer their questions about my feathered dragon companion.

We found a nice rambling cottage – floors and ceilings artfully wedged in amongst a rocky outcropping and around a tree. The rambling rooms were divided by panels and screens. We presented ourselves at the front doorway, Hissi standing upright next to me, very proper-like in her scarves, holding her treasure-pouch of cards and her winnings in hand. The woman of the house opened the door, started a bit and then smiled, and when I explained our purpose, she invited us in and showed us the room to let – an upper level room open to the mild air of the Pela, more a tree house than anything else. We signed on for six rounds to start and after a very tasty meal, we continued our ramblings about Tanjenree until the middle of the local first sleep round.

I took a monorail car that swung and soared along a cable line that snaked through the trees and rocks of the little cluster of islands to metro Tanjenree the following round.

Hissi stayed back. I found her sleeping outside on a thick branch and she only gave me a sleepy low growl when I said I was going across the islands to the office, after which I'd likely visit my new ship.

'Yes, I'm sure you'd find it boring. You can stay here, if you like. Sleep. Play with the children. Explore on your own. You should be grown-up by now, I'd think...'

A low, menacing growl.

'And I can certainly find my way around without you at my side...'

A dismissive hiss.

'Right. If you get hungry, don't wait for me. Buy your own...'

A low, menacing growl.

'Right. You shouldn't starve. I'll see you when I get back. Have fun!'

A sleepy bark of agreement.

This proved to be how we operated throughout our stay on Tanjenree. I went to work, Hissi slept and played, and who knows what else. She may've found a gambling den for all I know. But she stayed out of trouble, or at least avoided getting caught. It was, perhaps, a slightly new phase in our relationship. She had grown up, and had been in human society long enough that she didn't need me as her keeper. And I didn't need her as mine, though she'd disagree with that with a long, suffering hiss.

The S&D Line office was located in the upper levels of one of those whimsical buildings that a gravity free environment seems to inspire. It offered a view up to the crowded small boat harbor overhead between other such structures.

The receptionist greeted me with a smile 'Ah, Chief Engineer...' she said glancing at the badge on my uniform cap, 'Wil Litang, is it?'

'Correct,' I replied returning her smile.

'Excellent. We noted that you had arrived with the Caves of Jinlopar. I expect that you'd be eager to inspect your new ship. I'll tell Mr RahJen that you're here.'

I was promptly shown into RahJen's spacious, mostly screened-in office, 'Welcome to Tanjenree, Chief Wil. All settled in?' he asked, stepping around his tall standing desk to greet me in the customary Saraime style.

'Aye, we found a nice R&M on Taira Island.'

'Excellent, excellent. I expect you're eager to inspect your new charge.'

'Am I?' I asked with a grin.

He smiled and shrugged. 'Well, take a seat and I'll fill you in on her,' he said, indicating a tall stool set before the desk. 'I don't want you to get too discouraged.'

Free fall chairs in the Saraime tended to be close to standing height and had claws on their feet to keep them attached to the thick carpet with arm rests and a bar to hook your feet under to keep you from drifting off. I settled onto it, as he returned to his side of the desk.

'To be fair, I will remind you that you still have 21 rounds of leave before you have to report aboard the Lora Lakes. I am not sure what your reaction will be once you've laid eyes on the old Lora. You may well decide to use your 21 rounds to rest up to the challenge of getting her up to snuff, or you may decide to tackle it now, rather than later. I assure you, the choice is yours. If you choose to tackle it now, I will put you back on active duty, but you need not feel an obligation to do so. You've earned your leave and are entitled to it.'

'You're scaring me, RahJen.'

'It's Jen, and I'm just being up front, Chief. You'll see her soon enough. The fate of the Lora Lakes has been hanging in the balance for something like 300 rounds now. She's a good solid ship – we're still building improved versions of her class. But current trade conditions have made her redundant. For too many rounds we kept her running as long as she could show even a marginal profit, which, I'm afraid, came at the cost of skimping on routine maintenance. And I fear that with the last 300 rounds of idleness, you are going to find a great deal of work to do to get your engines reasonably reliable.'

'I had heard rumors that she was going to be scrapped. So why the change of heart, especially given her condition?' I asked warily.

'Ah, I wish I knew, but I haven't been told. I don't see any uptick in trade that would explain it. I trust Captain KimTara will be able to help us out in that regard. We expect her aboard the Nivay Forests from Saraime in three rounds.'



'And, just between you and me, Kim is a pretty important name in the company. I'm not sure where Captain KimTara fits into the big picture – I didn't care to appear to be too curious by asking too many questions – but the Kim family is a major stockholder in the Line. There's a Kim on the board, along with a brother-in-law, a Val as well, so I think there's more to the story than appears to the eye.'

'Can you tell me anything about Captain KimTara?'

'I've seen her service records, of course. Like you, this will be her first command. And like you, she has an excellent record as a bridge officer, moving up through the ranks as rapidly as one might expect a Kim to advance.'

I considered that with a sinking feeling. 'It doesn't add up. If she is important, why would they give an excellent officer and a Kim such a second rate ship?'

'Exactly. We're missing a piece somewhere. But, as I said, I suspect Captain KimTara will know all, so we won't have long to wait. I'm still busy today with the Caves of Jinlopar in port, or I'd take you out to see her myself. But I can give you a note to the Lora Lakes' watchman, and directions, if you care to give her a look.'

'Aye, I think I better.'

'Excellent. Stop back after you've had your look and we'll compare notes. You can count on me to do everything I can to get the old Lora up and running again. I suspect, Chief, between you and me, we'll be doing ourselves a favor if we look sharp and active – no matter how far down the family tree Captain KimTara is from the director.'

'Aye, I've spent my life pleasing owners.'

'And you're excellent at it. Going from oiler to Chief Engineer in under 2,000 rounds in the S&D Line is something to be proud of. Whatever they have planned for the old little Lora Lakes under a Kim, it will likely do great things for your career. Trust me on that.'

I did. Not that it made me especially happy. Great things have a way of turning into great disasters.

03

With RahJen's note in my pocket, I made my way up to the overhead wharf where S&D's bumboat provider was tied up and engaged a weather beaten broad-feathered sailor by the name of YaCi, to run me out to the Lora Lakes in his small electric powered boat.

'New Chief of the Lora Lakes, are you?' he asked as he untied his skiff and pushed off. 'Who'd ya get on the lee side of to land the berth? If you don't mind me asking ya,' he added with a grin as he deftly wove his way through the throng of boats and lighters moving about in the harbor.

'It's a mystery. I've been assured that it's a promotion, so I'll not complain until I see this candidate for the breaker's yard.'

'She's a sight to behold, alright, but I'll say no more in respect for your new ship, Chief. What boat did they promote you off of?' he asked and we fell into talking shop as we made our way out of the harbor and then along the treetops to what seemed to be the far side of the islands.

'There she be,' he said pointing, as we arched over a line of trees into a sheltered bay. The Lora Lakes, along with several other similar ships, was tied up close alongside a jungle-draped point. Even having carefully prepared myself, I had to bite back telling YaCi to turn about, and grimly contemplated the rusting carcass before me. It was a typical boxy freighter with its bridge structure centered. Forward it had two side-loading cargo hatches and one cargo hatch aft. The amidships structure rose two stories above the cargo section, with the bridge and chartroom on top, then crew quarters, and below them, the boiler and steam turbine generators. Behind the bridge and crew quarters was a flying deck with two boats on davits that ended with a squat smokestack. Beneath the boat deck was a glassed and caged in deck. The stern tapered to twin enclosed propellers mounted on short wings, each of them tipped with upright steering rudders. The hull was painted black – standard for the S&D

Line freighters – but was now mottled with rust and hosted a large, colorful collection of feathered lizards, some of them as large as a man, peacefully sunning themselves on it. The bird contingent seemed to have claimed the upper decks, and as we approached, they rose as one, noisily squawking their protests as they swirled around us.

'ZesRe! ZesRa, you've company!' hailed YaCi as he swung our boat around to come alongside the short gangplank.

A broad-feathered fellow poked his head out from a lower bridge portal and yelled back, 'Company you say? I'll be right down, Ci!'

By the time we were alongside, he had emerged from the dark entry port to grab the line I cast.

'Chief Engineer Wil Litang, I wager,' he said with a glance at my company cap as he deftly tied the skiff fast. ZesRe was another old sailor. He greeted me with a knowing smile. 'Come to gaze on your new charges, are we? Well, welcome aboard the old Lora Lakes, Chief. Glad to have ya aboard. And don't get discouraged, Chief. Ain't nothing wrong with Lora that a few replacement parts can't fix...'

'A few! Go sailin' ZesRe! A list as long as my arm wouldn't do it all,' laughed YaCi.

'Don't pay any attention to him. Wouldn't reach more than up to his elbow. Not the stuff what you need right off, anyhow.'

YaCi laughed. 'Maybe. But only if you wrote really small.'

The old boys were having their fun.

'Well, let's have a look at it,' I said, 'Can't be any worse than the view from here.'

'Right you are, Chief. Not worse, but much the same. Stay for dinner, will you? It can get mighty lonely babysitting this rusting wreck, which I mean to say, the good'ol Lora. I sailed aboard her several thousands of rounds. Know her well. There's a good solid ship under the rust. Somewhere.' And when I nodded, he called out 'Two more for dinner, Ra!'

The good'ol Lora Lakes was dank, dark, and dreary, smelling of old dinners, bird and lizard droppings, rust and dust. It was rusting inside and out.

'They didn't do much of a job laying her up,' I said, surveying the rusting engine room from the main platform. 'Didn't grease anything up at all.'

'Well, the word at the time was her next port was the breakers and so we pretty much just abandoned her. No point prettying her up for the wreckers,' said ZesRe, rather sheepishly. 'We'd been scraping by for half a thousand rounds. No budget to get anything fixed right. The handwriting was plain as rust on the hull what they was fixing to do.'

'Apparently not. Any whispers about the port as to why the change of heart?' I asked. Word would get around – even to the caretaker of this remote ship if there was word to get around.

'No idea, Chief. I'm having trouble wrapping my feeble wits around it, myself. Not, mind you, that the ship isn't fundamentally sound, it is just that after letting her run down for so long, I don't know why they'd suddenly want her back in service. Ain't no boom in the cargo market as far as I can see.'

'I guess we'll all have to wait until the Captain arrives in a few watches. KimTara is her name. I gather there's likely a connection to some important people in the company – not that I know myself. Served all my time out in the Donta's, too far from the center to ever hear much gossip. Ever hear of her?'

'A Kim, you say. That's a name that has push in this company. Still, I can't say that I've heard of that one. Probably spent all her time in the core islands. Funny her getting a wreck like this...'

'It's a mystery,' added YaCi. 'I'll be curious to find out what's up.'

I was curious as well, as in a, "What have I gotten myself into now?" sort of way. It had been a while, but I'd a feeling I'd landed on something like this before.

I stayed for a simple, but tasty, meal with ZesRe, ZesRa and YaCi, and then headed back to the cottage to think things over. The following round I stopped by the S&D office to have RahJen sign me back on active duty so I could take an inventory of what the Lora Lakes would need to sail again. I wanted my requirements in hand before the captain arrived. Riv was never at a loss to say what his

engine room needed when I was captain, and it's hard to argue with an engineer with a list in hand and his story down pat. I'd take a page out of his book and have my list and story in hand. I arranged with YaCi to pick me up at the beginning of the first sleep round and spent the round going over every piece of equipment in my department, documenting every defect in the boiler, turbine, motors, pipes, batteries, and sundry other equipment, as well in the almost total lack of replacement parts and supplies. I took S&D's official list of necessary supplies as my basis and noted every deficiency. The list I made ended up five pages long, longer than ZesRe's arm.

04

'Company, Chief!' ZesRe called out, poking his head into the engine room. 'Looks like the skipper has arrived.'

'Right. Be right up!' I called back, looking up through the catwalks and platforms. No time to change out of my dirty, oily jumpsuit, but what the Neb. Every stain a badge of my enthusiasm for my job. I wiped my oily, rust stained hands on some rags and grabbing my cap from my tiny office off the main platform, made my way through the ship to the gangplank. I arrived with plenty of time to spare – probably could've changed into my white uniform – since the new captain was taking her time looking over her first command, likely with a sinking heart.

Eventually the boat, piloted by RahJen, pulled up alongside the short gangplank and our captain swung herself out and onto the ramp, not waiting for it to be tied up. ZesRe was hanging back, so I stepped forward.

'Welcome aboard the Lora Lakes, Captain KimTara,' I said with a pleasant smile, extending my hand.

She ignored my hand and gave me a long, measuring look. 'Chief Engineer Wil Litang?'

'Aye,' I said, with my most pleasant smile, slowly dropping my arm.

'KimTara,' she said, and then stood silently as ZesRe slipped by and tied up the boat so RahJen could join us.

Captain KimTara proved to be a slim, tall, fine-feathered woman, dressed in a spotlessly turned out in the S&D's dress white uniform – black boots, loose, white trousers and a form fitting jacket with a stand-up collar. Collar and cuffs were trimmed with gold, with a gold epaulet on each shoulder. She would have been called lanky, if she didn't hold herself as stiff as an iron bar. Her brown hair was as short as a man's under her white officer's cap. Her eyes were icy blue, her expression, at least on seeing the state of her first command was equally as cold. She was youngish, more handsome than pretty, but beyond her appearance, she exhibited, at least on this first meeting, a disconcerting coldness. If the Lora Lakes had sunk my heart, her captain sent it plunging.

'Hello, Jen,' I said with a nod, when it became evident my introduction was at an end as far as she was concerned.

'Litang,' he said from behind her with a nod and a shrug.

'Shall we go aboard? I'll ask Ra to brew up a pot of tey for us...'

'That won't be necessary,' said Captain KimTara. 'I will inspect the ship.'

And that is we did, from stem to stern, missing not even a maintenance supply locker. She said nothing until she happened to question some damage to the port side no. 5 hold door. I swung myself around and walked up the door to have a look and answer her question.

'How did you do that?' she asked as I swung back down to the mat covered deck. The ship's metal decks had the usual tough fiber mats for traction, but they were thin enough for my magnetic boots to hold me down, so I'd largely given up wearing my toe clawed boots aboard ship, though I kept them on since I'd need them whenever I was ashore.

'Magnets in the soles of my boots. They're controlled by the movement of my feet. In my old

service, we used plain metal decks aboard ship rather than fiber mats.'

Curiosity didn't seem to be one of her traits, so we moved on without further comment.

At the end of the tour she said, turning to me, 'RahJen says that you've been working up a report. Is it ready?'

'Aye, Captain. I have it in my office.'

She nodded, and I went to get it. As I said, it ran five pages, and she carefully read each page in without comment as RahJen, ZesRe, and I stood about in silence.

When she was done, she looked up and said, 'Do you have a sense of humor, Chief?'

'Ah...' I said, trying to make head or tails of that question. 'I believe I do.'

'Is this an example of it?'

Seeing the light, I replied, 'No, Captain. It is a complete report comparing company standards to the current state of the Lora Lakes. As you have noted, we are quite deficient in every category, from the current state of our power and motors systems, to spare parts for every mechanical and electric component of the ship. And while I recognize that no ship has everything up to standard, I felt that it would be helpful to list every deviation from standard, if only to emphasize the current unacceptable state of affairs aboard the Lora Lakes.'

'You find the Lora Lakes's engine room status unacceptable?'

'Yes, Captain, I do. I have highlighted a dozen key systems that are liable to fail without a complete overhaul, and given my lack of spare parts on hand, failures would require the Lora Lakes to be towed to port for repairs. Unless those deficiencies are remedied, I will not sail. There are two dozen other systems that I can predict will fail within the first 500 to 1000 rounds of operation. If I have replacements on hand, they could be repaired in passage. If not, we'd likely need a tow once again. In short, the Lora Lakes was apparently abandoned long before it was actually laid up. There's a price to be paid for such neglect and if they want to bring the Lora Lakes back into operation, it will have to be paid.'

'This is to protect your reputation should problems occur.'

'When problems occur. I'm sure you don't want to find yourself drifting in the clouds, radioing for a tug 50 leagues out of Tanjenree. It's your reputation more than mine, Captain.'

She folded the report in half and then said, 'I am going down to the main office on Vennora. In the meantime, Chief, please advise Mr. RahJen as to how large a crew you will need to get this ship looking like a proper S&D vessel. I have no intention of commanding anything less than a perfectly turned out ship.'

'To start with, I want the entire vessel power-washed, inside and out. No nook or cranny overlooked. I will inspect this ship again when the work is completed and I expect my orders to be followed. When cleaning, do not spare the paint, as everything will be repainted. I want all the woodwork polished, and every dirty and worn floor mat replaced. Mr. RahJen, if we do not have enough paint and other supplies on hand, please requisition what we need from the Vennora warehouse. All the bedding, curtains, tablecloths will be replaced. You can use the old stuff for rags, Chief.'

'This ship has been chartered. However, I have not been informed by whom, or the nature of our charter, but I am given to believe that it is a long term charter and that we will be sailing great distances. That being the case, every piece of machinery, every instrument needs to be reliable. We shall test how serious they are about putting the Lora Lakes back in commission.'

'Have I made myself clear?'

'Aye, Captain. Power-wash the hull, holds, every cabin and locker aboard ship. Repaint everything, replace everything movable, and get it done in time to sail in 19 rounds.'

'Or less. I will see about your requirements. I expect to reach our destination under our own power,' she said, and turned her cold eyes to RahJen.

'I will do everything in my power, Captain. However, I believe much of what you are ordering will have to be approved down on Vennora. I trust you will take care of that at your end.'

She nodded. 'I will. The Lora Lakes is a perfectly good ship that was allowed to rot. Since they now seem to have a use for it, the company will need to repair the rot. Consider the optimum size of the crew you'll need to get the job done in ten rounds or less. Let RahJen know how many you'll need, so he can hire them and get the work started as soon as possible.'

'Right,' I said, with a sketchy salute as she turned to go.

ZesRe and I watched them leave.

'Jeez, Chief. She's a cold one. What a mate she must've been. She'd make most captains question their qualifications.'

'Well, she's a captain now. We should get along fine, as long as she knows that her place is on the bridge, not the engine room.'

'That'll be up to you, Chief.'

'Aye. Well, let's hope she knows her place.'

'Good luck with that... Won't be pleasant company around the dinner table, I'm guessing.'

'We'll see,' I said. She was, after all, my captain now. It was up to me to adjust. It was up to me to be loyal to her as well. 'There's nothing wrong with efficiency. I'll take that over a jovial incompetent.'

'There's a difference between efficiency and rigid rule-following, Chief. I'm not sure what you're getting.'

I glanced at him. 'I thought you were thinking of signing on again?'

'I'm still thinking about it, Chief,' he replied. 'Thinking hard.'

05

I had RahJen hire two crews of six to work around the clock. I had only the hoses and fans on hand to set up one power cleaning line, so there was no point in hiring more than what was needed. I also told him that he should hire as many out of work engine room staff and stokers as he could find, in the hope of shifting through them to find a hardworking, reliable engine room crew before we sailed.

I got the small auxiliary boiler/generator up and running, along with a high pressure pump, and rigged two hoses, one for the water under pressure, the other, a larger one, with a fan attached to draw the water and debris away and off the ship, since in free fall, both the water used and the debris kicked up would tend to hang about in a cloud, and settle once again.

Five rounds later, a heavily loaded S&D supply lighter came alongside with every item I had on my list. I know this because I had to check each item off as it was brought on board and sign for the lot, a process that took the better part of two watches. Once I had my supplies, I signed on the best of my cleaning crew and got to work replacing or repairing the highest priority equipment.

Captain KimTara arrived the following round and took charge of the remaining cleaning, painting, refitting. The other officers arrived ten rounds later and were put to work installing all the new navigational equipment she had ordered. With everything in place – at least for the voyage to the port of Tindatear where we'd take on our charter, we hired the rest of our deck crew and took on a full bunker load of black cake for the boilers. I could trust DosKe, my first assistant engineer to oversee that, so I returned to my cottage to collect my gear and Hissi. She didn't show up until the middle of the first sleep period, tired from a day out and about.

'Your idle days are over, Hissi, that is, if you still plan to travel with me. We sail in the next round, so if you don't want to be left behind, collect your things and we'll go aboard directly.'

She gave a sad, sleepy, hissing sigh, but collected her satchel from the tree that she had adopted as her own room and floated into the room where I was packing away the last of my gear in my large kit bag.

'I want you along, my dear. But you needn't travel with me if you've found a home. You're a free dragon, you know. I can find my way back to Blade Island on my own, and from there, what will be

will be. So you're under no obligation to stay with me. I can look after myself...'

She hissed dismissively, and then barked a laugh, swirling around me and flicked her long tongue at my nose.

'Right,' I said, 'Partners.'

I introduced her to Captain KimTara when we came on board. 'My companion and keeper, Hissi.'

'Welcome aboard Hissi,' said Captain KimTara briskly, and then with a nod to me, added, 'You can get up steam, Chief. We'll sail as soon as I have steam.'

I fired up the main boiler and spun up the hastily refurbished turbine generator to begin charging our backup batteries. Then I swung myself down through the engine room catwalks and platforms, checking every dial, as I watched everything spin and move, and then drawing a long breath, signaled the captain that we were ready to sail. Twenty minutes later Tanjenree lay behind us as the bridge crew made their final adjustments and set a course for Tindatear. After that, it was full speed ahead, the Captain KimTara determined to stress test everything now to find any weak links – in both ship and crew – before taking on our charter.

I was looking to shake down my engine room crew as well. My first engineer, DosKe was an older, fine-feathered, and experience hand – which was all to the good. His flip side, however, was that his record showed him often missing his ships – usually on account of an injury suffered ashore, likely from fights, falls, and who knows what else that wasn't on the official record. I suspected that he drank a bit – a bit more than he should. Nor did he have a particularly pleasant personality, which might explain the injuries ashore. He was sober on arrival and curt and ill-tempered because of it. I guess the Lora Lakes didn't rate all that highly, despite having a Kim as captain. Still, he knew his way about an engine room and could do his job. I could put up with grouchiness. And I could be grouchy too, if I cared to be. I was, after all, a chief engineer.

My second engineer, BayLi, was also something of an oddity – a young broad-feathered female straight out of her apprenticeship. I have found that most engine room staff, excluding stokers, are fine-feathered people. Our broad-feathered brothers and sisters were not, on the whole, fascinated with machines. In the Dontas, at least, most of the crew from captain down, were broad-feathered people, as they were the islands' predominant people. However, the engineers were often people with fine-feathers on their head rather than broad-feathers. And unlike most other shipboard positions, most were men as well. Perhaps the noise, the black cake dust and oil were the reason why the broad-feathered people avoided these jobs, since I've found that my feathered brothers and sisters are often very particular about cleanliness and their appearance. (Stokers don't count, as they are often stokers simply to avoid starvation and can't be too choosy.) All of which made young BayLi something of an oddity. She did, however, seem to know her job quite well and was very eager to please, and more importantly, eager to learn. I quickly decided that I was lucky to have pulled her, despite her inexperience. She restored a little light and balance to the engine room to balance the grumpy grimness of DosKe.

We signed on six oilers and six stokers to complete my staff, all but two of whom I chose from the most reliable of my cleaning crew. All in all, I felt I was as well served as any chief could expect, though it was clear that my easygoing and competent crew aboard the old Starry Shore was more the exception than the rule. I realized it then, in theory. I realized it now, in practice.

The voyage turned up several weak links, two of which put us briefly out of commission – a water recycling pump jammed and then a step down transformer blew and needed replacing. Both of them involved no more than a few hours downtime. It gave me a chance to test my engine room crew as well, who all met my expectations, DosKe included. He knew his job and did it. Hopefully his attitude would shake out as well.

I haven't said much about Captain KimTara, mostly because there's not much to say about her. She knew what needed to be done, and did so with the absolute fewest words possible. Her bridge staff was also a mix of experience and youth. We didn't know each other well enough to confide in each other

yet, but, I gathered, the bridge crew and deck hands found the Captain more than a little intimidating, fearing an unseen iron fists in her starchy white gloves without even a glimpse of it, so far.

I was once, a long time ago and far, far away, a newly appointed ship's captain, so I assumed that Captain KimTara's tight lipped manner was her way of dealing with the new responsibilities. By the time we reached Tindatear I knew I was wrong. Captain KimTara was simply a person of few words. As few as possible. And any emotions she may have had were as thin and scarce as her words. She accomplished exactly what she set out to do with a minimum of words and fuss. While not comfortable company, she wasn't a tyrant either. Knowing the engineer's prerogatives – they're the same in the Pela as they were in the Unity and the drifts – I knew my place and my worth, as did she, so we got along comfortably enough on a strictly ship's business basis. There was no social interaction, even at the dinner, over which she presided. Being a very Unity Standard fellow, her cold, impersonal personality didn't bother me too much. A good working relationship was all that was needed, and after our shakedown cruise, I was comfortable that we'd established it.

We arrived at Tindatear five rounds after sailing, secured a quay, and arranged to meet our charter party at the S&D office the following round.

## Chapter 26 Setting Out

01

Captain KimTara and I arrived at the S&D Line's Tindetear office, where our charter party was already waiting.

A lanky, handsome, young fine-feathered man turned, smiled and starting eagerly forward exclaimed, 'Cousin Tara! Wonderful to see you again. It's been far too long!' He gave her a great bear hug and kissed her on both her cheeks.

I can't say for certain, since I was standing alongside of her, but I was left with the impression that she gave her cousin a fleeting hint of a smile or a grimace. Hard to tell. She stood like a statue while he hugged and kissed her.

'It is good to see you, cousin Dare,' she allowed. 'What are you doing here?'

He stepped back, still holding her in his outstretched arms and looked her over with a smile. 'You haven't changed. You look as competent as ever.'

'I hope so. Now answer my question.'

Turning to the rest of us, he said cheerfully, ignoring her question, 'Tara and I grew up together. She devoted her youth trying to keep me from doing stupid things, and failing that, as she often did, to keep me from getting caught and paying the consequences. She was the most useful cousin a fellow like me could ever have desired. Nothing phased Tara. She saw us through the tightest scrapes. So when I began to put my expedition together, I knew exactly who I wanted as captain.'

Turning back to her, he said, 'Now, to answer your question cousin, I have chartered the Lora Lakes and requested you for her captain. So you see, you have me to thank for your promotion, Tara. Of course you deserved it, but you know that old Captain BinNer would've kept you on as first mate forever, unless someone pried you away from him. He'd never willingly give up a first mate who ran the ship for him. But to the Infernal Island with old BinNer! I wanted the ever-resourceful Tara at my side, so I called on a few favors, and here we are.'

And then, turning to me and extending his hand, he added, 'Chief Engineer Wil Litang, I believe. I'm ValDare, of Val Studios Unlimited.'

'Happy to meet you, sir,' I replied, grasping his wrist.

'I've heard stories about you,' he added. 'Rumor has it that you've done more than sail a circuit around the islands. Tall tales that you come from a faraway island and have seen some action, pirates and the lot...'

I couldn't imagine how that gossip reached him.

'I've seen some, but not by choice, I assure you. And I can imagine how exaggerated the stories must have been by the time they reached you.'

He laughed. 'I intend to find that out as well. But, I wanted a fellow like you along as well. Not that I'm saying we're going to run into pirates or any real danger at all. I just like to be prepared.'

'It is good to be prepared. And better yet to avoid trouble if you can.'

'We're bound for an uncharted island that promises to be something amazing. It lays far beyond the Principalities, so I can't guarantee we'll not see a spot of trouble. Still, I expect nothing that Tara, a well-founded ship, and an experienced crew of explorers, can't deal with.'

I can see no further through a ship's hull than the next spaceer, or sailor, but I must admit I had that sinking feeling in my guts again. I'd felt it when Min talked of sailing the drifts, and many other times since then. My life had been too quiet, too long, for the Neb, or the Great Dragon, or who or whatever ran this place, to leave me alone. I have no idea what I did to deserve this fate, but whatever it was, it seemed I'd not yet paid my full dues for it yet. The only upside was that it would be Captain KimTara, not I, making the calls. Even on our short acquaintance, I didn't think she'd let cousin Dare do anything too foolish.

'What do you need a ship for?' she asked coolly.

'To film a documentary on a distant island. I'm afraid the details must wait until after we sail, I'll only say that it involves my usual passion – the myths and legends of the Saraime. I found that the Lora Lakes was available for as long as I needed it, so I collected my ever resourceful keeper, Tara and the rather mysterious Chief Engineer Wil Litang to run it. Rather than hand this project off to one of my producers to do the on-site shooting, I'm doing it myself. I'm greedy – it could be that important. But success is never guaranteed and not wishing to make a fool of myself by chasing a shadow, I'm keeping the details very hush-hush.'

'I need more than that,' said KimTara. 'I need to know what you've gotten me into. Again.'

'Well, then let's just say I've gotten wind of an unknown race of people living on an undiscovered island who may have living legends from the Dragon Kings' Age. Living legends from a very ancient age!'

'If someone knows of the island, it is not undiscovered,' she remarked dryly.

He beamed. 'True. But as far as I know, I'm the only one who knows – or at least believes – the only fellow alive who knows about it, and can find it.'

'That I believe.'

'Ha! But you see, I'm the only one who recognizes its connection to a very obscure account of an ancient legend.'

'A wild dragon chase,' she said dismissively. 'You're old enough to know better.'

'I'll have you know, Tara, my dear, that while you've been off sailing, I've built a very nice little business by combining my passion for pre-Principality history, legends and myths with the entertainment business. I've financed and produced three well received documentaries that explore the sources of old legends. I know what I'm doing. Everything I do is backed up by a great deal of research. This project is no exception. It's no wild dragon chase, but dragons are involved. Or their guards, anyways.'

'On the basis of one sailor's yarn? Really, Dare.'

'There's more to it than a sailor's yarn. The details of his story exactly match certain elements of a



very obscure mythical story I've only recently stumbled upon. There's no way he could be aware of it. He's a small Donta Island sailor and since almost all my fellow mythological scholars are unfamiliar with this Desra Island prehistoric legend, I don't see how, or why, I could be conned into this.'

'And he can find this remote island again?'

'He has the so called, "sailor's sight," the talent...'

'Right. The sailor sight,' she sighed. 'You're spending all these coins on an old sailor with "the sailor's sight"?''

'I've tested it. I had one of my trusted aides take him, confined to a cabin, to a tiny island several rounds distant. And then on to another island, still confined to a cabin, just to make it harder. He proceeded to sail straight back to the tiny island he'd been taken to without any hemming and hawing. Scoff all you want about the talent, he has it.'

'The sailor's sight?' I asked. 'You mean he's a guide – someone who can find their way back to anywhere they've been?' Sailing aboard an S&D liner and not spending much time in port side dives meant that I hadn't come across any mention of old Glen Colin's talent in the Saraime.

'They claim they can,' said KimTara. 'Mostly small island traders who know the islands they sail, which probably explains it. But I take it you've run across them in your extensive travels?' She may've allowed a little sarcasm to slip into that last part.

'I sailed with a Cimmadarian who had that sight once.'

'Cimmadar. Another myth.'

'I've known people from Cimmadar, so I doubt that it's a myth. And I've seen one of them, known as a "guide" find a small island 80,000 rounds after the last time he'd been there. He said that they use this talent extensively in Cimmadar to guide ships. Cimmadar may lay in more active air currents, as he suggested even large islands change their positions over tens of thousands of rounds, so that charts are rendered obsolete relatively fast.'

'Thank you, Chief. Never mind Tara. Her skepticism will keep us from making too many mistakes,' beamed ValDare, and turning to her, added. 'As for the Chief – he's a fellow out of the myths and legends himself. A friend of mine, Scholar NenDre, met him aboard the Telrai Peaks, and they got to talking about ancient prehistory. Our Chief had a lot of interesting things to say on that subject and the greater skies beyond the frozen islands, which NenDre passed along to me.'

'For that reason alone I planned to track you down, Chief,' he added, in an aside to me. 'If half of what NenDre said you told him is true, you're going to be a Golden Isle of information on the Myths and Legends period. In any event, when this project came up, it occurred to me that I could kill two dragons with one slug by getting you as chief engineer for this voyage. We'll have weeks to discuss all the secrets of our ancient past that you've only hinted at knowing.'

'I doubt it. I know next to nothing about your myths and legends.'

'Myths, legends and the talent...' the KimTara muttered, shaking her head dismissively. I had likely fallen to crack-pot status in her opinion.

'Trust me, cousin dear...'

'Ha!' she sniffed.

He smiled. 'We'll not argue. So let's get down to business. I've my crew assembled and ready to sail. There'll be 13 of us all told. I have a prefab cabin section to house them in one of the holds, though the ship will have to do the catering so an extra cook might be in order. We also have two launches, a special one for my camera crew, and the dragon hunter's boat. I've hired a hunting crew as our field hands. We'll need fuel and supplies for a voyage of 200 rounds – it might take less time, but better safe than sorry.'

'How far out is this island?'

'Hard to say. A powerful serrata carried old DeArjen's trader to the island, and it took him a thousand rounds to make his way back in a small boat across the endless sky-sea. We should be able to do it in far less time, but 50-60 rounds each way might be a good estimate. We'll need extra fuel bunkers...'

The S&D agent spoke up. 'I'll see to that.'

'Good man, ClemRie. We want to be well prepared. Tara here will oversee everything, and I'll pay for everything she thinks necessary. That's why I insisted on having her. We can trust ourselves in her capable hands.'

'And don't give me that look, Tara. I've seen it before and we've always come out just fine...'

02

I had to hope he was right about everything. I was, however, confident that he was right about the skipper. Not only did she seem capable, but since she turned out to be the daughter of one of the firm's major stockholders and the cousin of another, everyone was willing to go out of their way to be of service to her. She considered every possible circumstance and prepared the ship to face them.

ValDare, the son of another major stockholder, had as much pull as KimTara herself, so between them they quickly installed the expedition's supplies and crew aboard the Lora Lakes, and left nothing that could possibly be needed behind. And yet, I couldn't shake that "here we go again" feeling, especially after meeting some of ValDare's dragon hunters. Hissi, who is pretty easygoing, hated them on sight, and wouldn't go near them without growling a low, threatening warning. The fact that they hunted and killed dragons – and Hissi being a dragon – might go a long way to explaining her dislike. Dragon hunting for sport and feathers, while not illegal, was not considered very ethical by many people of the Saraime, especially if it included hunting the greater dragons. Though it must be admitted, that the greater dragons had no qualms about lunching on humans, and that was used to justify the sport. Still, I rather doubt the dragons hunt humans for mere sport. We were snacks. In any event, I must admit that I was leery of them myself. They had had an air about them of being as ruthless as their prey, and the remote islands they hunted in. I'd met their kind before in Hawker Vinden's employment. Still they were, I gather, well-known and respected hunting guides, and they had been hired to handle the heavy work of setting up camps and assisting the photographers and scholars of the expedition in their field work. They were, I suppose, just the type of crew you'd need in the wild islands.

Four rounds after our arrival I was leaning on the after railing of the Lora Lakes's crew deck idly watching our new, young second mate direct the stowing of the dragon hunter's long boat on the after deck when the skipper appeared alongside me. I straightened up and greeted her with a nod, 'Captain'.

'Chief,' she acknowledged and watched her second mate work in silence.

We'd been watching the second mate work for a while – I was certain we were making him uneasy – when I said to her, 'I've rather abandoned any effort to make small talk with you, not out of ill will, but rather in deference to what I believe you'd prefer.'

'I have no preference. Talk if you care to. Just see to your job, and there will be no ill will between us.'

'Ah, yes. Still, it would be nice to be able to talk a friends.'

'I will settle for an efficient relationship.'

'Right,' I said. 'But I've found that disagreements within the context of friendship are far less divisive and disruptive.'

'You expect disagreements between us?'

'Maybe. I'm a little leery of what your cousin is up to. I dislike all the mystery.'

'You don't trust Dare?'

'I don't know him well enough to judge. But it seems strange he should take this project on himself...'

'Did I hear my name mentioned?'

We turned to see him approaching us with an easy smile. But then, he always wears an easy smile.

No point dodging the question. 'I was questioning why you're doing this project yourself, especially since you're making yourself unavailable to your company for a hundred rounds or more.'

'Because it's my pet project. My chance to make a mark in my field, both as a scholar and as a producer.'

'Right,' I said, deciding it was wisest not to further pursue the question.

'We're set to sail within the next watch. I need to set a course. It's time to reveal what you're up to, while we still have time to jump ship,' said KimTara.

Which was the first joke I heard her utter. If it was one.

He laughed. 'Fair enough, Tara. Still, I didn't want it bantered about. Keep this just between the three of us. Right?'

'Aye,' I nodded.

He didn't bother to wait on the skipper's reply. 'As I hinted before, the islands old DeArjen found himself and crew shipwrecked in appeared to be home to an undiscovered race of people. People out of legends. While they are similar, in some respects, to our broad-feathered brothers and sisters, they differ significantly. They're fully feathered, and they were said to use their extra-long arms to fly and soar like dragons.'

'And you believe this nonsense, cousin?'

'Yes, my dear cousin, because the people he described match the description of "The Dragon People" or "Scarlet Guard of the Dragon Kings" of an old Desra Island legend. This particular legend was written in pre-Principality times and refers to events further back into the mythical age when the Dragon Kings ruled Desra. The fragments of the old text I've turned up mention that the Dragon Kings had these non-dragon warriors that seem to match the description of the people of DeArjen's islands. DeArjen has always been a sailor, and is a native of Krizar, so I can't believe he'd be familiar with ancient pre-Principality Desra texts, a manuscript, I might add, that took me hundreds of rounds to dig up myself. Besides, what purpose would it serve to take me on some wild dragon chase? I'm convinced I'm on to something – a living legend, in fact.'

His description of these strange natives struck a cord of memory that in turn, set alarm bells clamoring in my head. I'd met red feathered people before, and they had indeed seemed to be associated with the mysterious Dragon Kings or something like them. My experiences with the tall red feathered beings could all too easily be made to fit the idea of auxiliary aides to these unseen, but widely rumored, dragon rulers of the Pela.

'These natives, are they very tall and thin with red feathers covering their entire bodies, beak-like mouths, wide set eyes like those of a bird's, and tall, feather-tufted ears?'

He turned to me, astounded. 'How did you know all that? Who did you hear that from? DeArjen?' Or have you seen them yourself?' he asked, giving me a shrew look.

'If that's what they look like, I have.'

'You've been to DeArjen's islands?'

I shook my head, thinking hard. 'No. I saw only one, once and very briefly.'

I decided not mention our second encounter with them and their apparent association with the massive, if well worn, white ship. I've made it a point to keep everything associated with the Temtre's Blade Island as vague as possible in my "old spaceer tales" and I didn't want to compromise it now. Nor did I want to claim to have seen the ships of the Dragon King, when in fact I had no idea just what we had been dealing with.

And given ValDare's business – half research, half entertainment, I'd have to be very careful about what I said, unless I cared to become even more famous or infamous than I was already. If I had been more discreet in the past, I'd not be here – and if the red feathered beings were involved, I'd rather not have been here. A planet astern, but a lesson hopefully learned.

'Where and when?'

'A couple thousand rounds ago. On a little tumbleweed of an island likely beyond the Endless Outer

Sky-sea just after I'd been shipwrecked. Though come to think about it, I can't be sure even about that, since, like old DeArjen, I've been tossed here and there by serratas. It could've been on this side of the Endless Sea, and so perhaps I may have been near DeArjen's island. Who knows? In any event, the red feathered being I saw carried a long spear and wore only a single jewel around its neck and it was such a powerful telepath, that it paralyzed me and seemed able to draw my memories right out of my mind. If we're talking about the same beings, I don't think you'll want to deal with them. It didn't harm me, but I was totally in its power, no doubt of that.'

ValDare looked puzzled. 'DeArjen never mentioned anything like that. They were just ordinary island natives for the most part, which, by the way, is why I have Raz and his crew along. They're used to dealing with those types of peoples.'

'Trust me, if these are the same beings I encountered, they're not going to be able to deal with them.'

He shook his head. 'I rather doubt DeArjen would care to return to the island if the people were like that. Perhaps they're not the same after all.'

'Did he mention if they had a jewel about their throat. It almost seemed like a third eye, black and shiny'

He gave me a startled, sharp look, but recovered, 'He made no mention of his fellows wearing any jewels like that around their necks. And they dressed in dragon scale armor. And since he, and most of his crew survived their stay with them, I don't think they're all that unfriendly. Most of the rest of the crew, who survived the initial shipwreck, were killed in the course of their long journey home by the dragons, lizards and big birds of the wild islands they came across rather than by these bird-people.'

I shrugged. 'I suppose neither one precludes the other... We'll find out, I guess.'

'That's the spirit, Chief. It will be another wonderful tale to tell – when you can tell it,' he added.

'I don't need another tale to tell. I'm already far too well known for my unbelievable lies already. Given your business, I'm thinking it would be wise to keep my mouth shut if I hope to live a normal life.'

'Oh, I think we can come to an understanding. I'll have plenty of time to take a measure of your stories, Chief. And if I find them believable, I'm sure we can work something out that will keep you from the spotlight, if that's what you like.'

I shook my head. 'My best defense is that I can't prove anything, I've nothing to prove my tales true.' Which was a minor lie. I still had my darters and com link and nearly indestructible clothing, but I'd put them away in my locked chest several thousand rounds ago, and no one in my present life knew of them. If things got iffy on DeArjen's island, I'd be bringing them out again, but until then, they'd remain my secret.

'The thing is, Chief, I already believe you. I'm a historian. Believe it or not, I'm a recognized expert in the pre-Principality Myths and Legends Period – history before history began. Because I have a great deal of coins in the bank, I can bring some of the old myths and ancient legends into popular view with my production company. But I assure you, I'm not just a showman, I'm a scholar. I know that our ancient ancestors came here from somewhere else during the Myths and Legends Period. And I know that they brought their own, even more ancient legends with them. What you told my old professor fits too comfortably into certain aspects of our myths to be coincidence. Like DeArjen's story, it's too close to obscure legends to be pure invention. I'll respect your wishes about keeping you out of the picture, if that's really what you want, but I'll want to know the true history of the Myths and Legends period, and I've a very strong hunch you know it.'

I gave him a searching look. He seemed sincere enough. Perhaps... but only after I was certain of him. 'I assure you, I know nothing about your Myths and Legends Period. What I do know has very little bearing on the Saraime and would likely only make you and me look like fools.'

He laughed, 'Oh I'll risk that. You can't achieve greatness without risking looking the fool.'

He was, however, making sure he wasn't running those risks unnecessarily.

Throughout this exchange, KimTara had been staring at me. However, what she thought of all this

was locked behind those pale blue eyes and guarded face.

He went over last minute details with the skipper and left. After ValDare had gone off, I turned to her, 'Well, what do you think?'

'About what?'

'Can we trust that your cousin knows what he's doing? Is he telling us the whole truth? I find it curious that he's taking personal charge of this expedition, given how long it's going to take him away from managing his business.'

'We grew up together. He exaggerates, but I did look after him. He was very mischievous. We can trust him. To a point. He is still mischievous. He wasn't entirely joking when he said he wanted me along to get him out of trouble, which suggests he expects trouble of some sort. I doubt we know the whole truth. The Val's are not known for their free spending ways. We will need to keep an eye on him – and on his crew,' she said in one of her longest speeches ever, adding, 'Inform me of any further concerns.'

'Aye.'

03

ValDare's expedition crew consisted of – the shipwrecked sailor, DeArjen, an old, gnarled, white broad-feathered man, one of his university friends, Scholar PinTin, a young and up and coming anthropologist, eager to make his mark, who brought along two of his students. Then there was BinCar, the chief photographer in charge of both the vid and still cameras who had along one assistant. DeRaze was the chief dragon hunter who had a crew of three men and two women, all of whom could pass, without question, as any of the pirates or bandits I've had the misfortune to know. Still, they were friendly enough, and since they were hired as roustabouts they looked after stowing the expedition's supplies and boats, working alongside the ship's crew with easy camaraderie. Truth is, they did nothing to arouse my concern, except looking like people who should. I was getting too old for this business. Or too wise.

We sailed the round following our conversation with ValDare, leaving the last of the Varenta Islands behind, some six rounds later. The last of the dragons were seen a round after that, and for the next 23 rounds we sailed in empty skies.

04

I feel I should mention how we navigate the sky-seas of Pela in the Saraim. You can skip ahead to the next section if you're not interested in these little details of my trade.

The technologically advanced shipping lines, the ones with ties to the core islands, like the S&D Line, all employ radar. The Telrai Peaks, sailing within the Donta Islands, relied mostly on radar fixes to known islands to navigate.

However, once you leave the (more or less) fixed points of the islands behind and get out of radar range, navigation becomes a great deal less exact, though Saraimian navigators have tools that make crossing the wide, island-less skies fairly routine.

The modern tool is a gyroscope course plotter. The spinning gyroscope, once set on a course, alerts the helmsman to any deviation from the set course, using an alarm and array of lights. Vectors between every major port are known, and each port has a series of radio beacons that ships use to align their ship and set their course. In addition, most machines record the course on punched paper tape that notes the elapsed time and any changes in course so that the ship can use this record in reverse to return to its

original starting position. In theory. In practice one also had to take into account the movement of the air through which you are sailing. The longer the voyage, the greater the margin of error these air currents introduce. However, the chains of islands within the Saraimé are large enough, and the sky-seas between them narrow enough, to make it nearly impossible for a ship equipped with a gyroscope course plotter to miss the island group, unless caught in an exceptionally powerful serrata.

As for serratas, a ship like the Telrai Peaks, and even the Lora Lakes, if prepared and competently handled, could ride out most serratas without being driven too far off course. The serrata that the old Bird of Passage experienced was not only a very powerful one, full of debris from the islands, but coming out of a cloud bank, it caught the Bird of Passage broadside and unprepared, with ultimately fatal results. The Lora Lakes, bow on to the serrata would likely have carried along for a while in the initial squall and then fight it to a standstill, once the leading blast had passed, and then continue on its original course.

Since our voyage was both a long and without a charted vector, we paused twice each round to record the direction and strength of the air currents. These readings were logged and used to estimate the ship's drift so that they could be added to the gyroscope record if need be as a precaution in case something happened to DeArjen. The Captain, prudently, wanted to be able to find her way home without him.

There is a second tool, usually but not always, used in tandem with the gyroscope. It is a photo-electric sensor, a so called "bug eye." It consists of a concave disk with many individual photo-electric cells set on it. Each cell is baffled so that it receives light from only a small section of the sky. Though there are uncounted islands that lay between any observer and the obscured orb of the Tenth Star, the spot where it lies is still slightly brighter than any other spot in the sky. This "bright spot", as it's known, is the one fixed point in the Pela, though without any up and down, east, west, north or south, it tells you only if you're going towards the center or away from it, and the general brightness of the sky itself will tell you. The photo-electric cells are sensitive enough to precisely identify this spot. Then, aligning the bug eye to a second known point, you can set a course relative to the bright spot, and then use the bug eye to keep your the ship or boat on this course by keeping the bright spot centered on the bug eye.

Smaller and more primitive boats and ships which don't usually venture far from known islands also use charts like the Bird of Passage had that give bearing and time/distance measurements and visual clues to the larger islands. Many also use a simple version of the bug eye – a concave sieve, with an opaque backing, that filters out all but the brightest spots produced by the sieve. And, I gather, many a ship captain has something like the sailor's sight, even if it merely arises out of long familiarity with the wide-skies he or she sails.

I realize that the fine points of navigating the Pela may have a very limited audience, but I felt it necessary to explain why sensible people would undertake a long, open-ended voyage across a vast island-less sky-sea on the "talent" of a perhaps crazy sailor, and expect to get back. I'm not saying it wasn't foolish. I had strong misgivings about the whole program, but it was a practical proposition on the face of it. It's the wisdom of it that I questioned.

05

Most of the regulars of the first main meal – a mixture of the most senior ship and expedition crew members – had found their places and were loudly talking when Hissi and I entered the mess room and took our places near the middle of the long table. Meals are served four times a round aboard ship, corresponding to the four main divisions of a round, altered to straddle the change of watches, so crew members could either eat before or after their watch.

The stewards were waiting at the kitchen door for KimTara to arrive.

The smell of the food was as thick as the conversation. The smell didn't tell very much – every meal

smelled, and tasted just about the same. This wasn't a passenger liner and Captain KimTara wasn't all that particular, so we got mostly thick stew-like meals in about six (alleged) varieties. The bread was baked daily, so it was warm and fresh, and we had high quality preserved fruits and sweets, so I couldn't complain, too much.

The first main meal was the one the ship's captain traditionally presided over. To the minute, the Captain slipped in and took her seat at the end of the table without a word. Conversation ceased. As chief engineer, my place was on her right, though she had Hissi take this first spot, no doubt because Hissi had the same conversational skills as she did, and relieved her of any responsibility to carry on a conversation – on that side – anyway. To my right was the first mate and my first assistant engineer and purser and half a dozen senior crew members. Our passengers, the members of the expedition in attendance, sat to the left of the Captain, which usually included cousin ValDare, Scholar PinTin with his two students, BinCar the photographer, and DeRaze, the dragon hunter and some of his crew. She nodded to the stewards and they began serving the covered plates and side dishes. Only after everyone had a plate in front of them, did she start to eat, signaling that we could as well.

As usual, she said next to nothing during the meal, mostly a monosyllabic conversation with her cousin. He never seemed to mind the rather one-sided conversation. He was used to her ways and carried on both his and her share of the conversation. She ate lightly, and as soon as she finished, rose and excused herself with a nod, releasing a flood of pent up conversation and laughter.

06

We'd left the islands behind, and the meal was "Fini Lizard Baked Casserole", my least favorite, so I finished early and retired to the after deck to get some fresh air.

Captain KimTara was leaning against the after rail, watching the thin trail of smoke disperse into the pale blue sky-sea for some time.

The after deck was enclosed on each side by a steel bulwarks with a heavy cage arching overhead to keep dragons out and people in. It was sheltered from the wind of the vessel cruising at some 80 kilometers per hour by the two story bridge house that spanned the full beam of the ship. Above the grating was a second, narrow boat deck, stretching back from the bridge to the smokestack located at the after edge of the deck. The ship's two launches were on davits on either side of this deck. On both sides of the smokestack were canvas covered housing for the launching tubes of the ship's rocket defense weapons. (There are also launchers on the bow and stern decks.) Half a dozen rockets were stored in sealed boxes along the mounts. Ships like the Lora Lakes have little to worry about from either pirates or dragons. There were thousands of far more tempting smaller island traders for pirates to attack. And the dragons of the Saraime knew to keep their distance from all but the smallest of boats.

Along the center-line of the after deck – under the boat deck – rose a meter-high casing with a series of cranked open sky lights leading down to the engine room, allowing some light to find its way in and heat to find its way out. Circling these skylights was a long bench. I took my seat on the after end of it, behind the skipper, and listened to the whirl of my turbine and generators for awhile, over the subtle thumping of the propellers astern and the rush of the slipstream over and around us.

Knowing that the skipper found conversation trying, I said nothing, until she turned back, saw me in the shadows under the boat deck and turned away again.

'Quiet out here,' I remarked. 'Quieter, anyways.'

'It was.'

I smiled. 'Oh, come now Captain. I just said half a dozen words. I was just being polite.'

'Yes, of course.'

'Still, we should talk more, you know, to build a certain understanding between us.'

'Our jobs define our understanding.'

'Then an easy partnership.'

'A partnership? I believe you work for me.'

I grinned. 'Ah, see, already you're off course. You're in command of the ship. I am, however, in command of my engine room. Hence, our need to establish a comfortable working relationship – at a minimum. A friendship would be even better.'

She turned to me, watching me from the railing. 'I am in command of this ship. And you are under my command.'

'Correct. However, I have found, both as a captain and now as an engineer, that it serves a captain well to consider the chief engineer as a partner, if only because we have such an inflated sense of self-importance that we sulk easily. You don't want to deal with a sulky chief engineer.'

'Sulk all you want.'

'I'm joking, Captain. I'm trying to say that I found it nice to be able to talk to my shipmates as equals rather than subordinates. Subordinates are all fine and proper, but are not people you can speak your heart to. Of course, with your cousin on board, you may not feel the need...'

'I have no need to speak my heart.'

'Yes, of course – you are who you are. It is just that I have this pattern in my head of how my old ship operated. Of course we'd been sailing together for a 10,000 rounds. Here, we're just starting out, but I'd like to see the Lora Lake develop into that sort of ship.'

'Unlikely.'

'Unlikely, or not desirable?'

'Personnel come and go. No one will be aboard the Lora Lakes for 10,000 rounds.'

'True. Still, it shouldn't take 10,000 rounds.' But I could see I wasn't making any headway, so I left it ride. 'Enough said.'

'I agree,' she replied and turned back to stare out over the after deck to watch the spinning of our propellers and the thin trail of steam and smoke that twirled away in our wake.

I remained sitting silently, watching the same smoke trailing away, wondering how I could be so bloody Unity Standard. My parents were both spaceers, who as a group are generally not considered all that Unity Standard, and with half my ancestors seeming to have been rather ruthless practitioners of the martial arts, it seemed strange that I should feel compelled to seek a friendship with such an unlikely person. But, I guess, the arguments actually applied to me. I had Hissi as a companion and friend, and even as a friend, Captain KimTara would likely offer no more conversation than Hissi. But at least she would be an equal, something scarce on the deck of this small freighter. No matter how friendly and easygoing I might be with my engine room crew, I would always be their boss, and that always colors every relationship. Perhaps it was loneliness rather than any Unity Standardness that had me try to reach the very remote, Captain KimTara.

I was Unity Standard enough not to give up trying. I merely gave up trying to carry on a conversation with her. Instead, we spent some time after the main meal on the after deck, usually alone. We rarely said anything, but she didn't object, and would, sometimes, join me on the bench. I think by the time we reached "Halfway Islands", we'd reached our understanding.

## Chapter 27 Halfway Islands to DeArjen's Islands



crew, she had discovered a new game – the Pela's slightly mutated version of chess. PinTin found her card playing fascinating, and as an experiment, I suspect, introduced her to chess. As soon as she realized that this game was an order of magnitude harder than DuDan's Folly and Dragon's Luck, she embraced it. Simla dragons are not ill-equipped with ego. Fortunately, PinTin was perceptive and eager enough to have someone to play the game with, that he took the time to introduce the intricacies of the game to Hissi, explaining each move he made and, carefully, critiqued some of hers – not all, mind you – but just enough to keep her engaged and not discouraged.

Of course, playing chess with someone who could read your mind put PinTin at a little disadvantage, but I suspect that the intricacies of chess were too complex to give Hissi much of an advantage, beyond a hint of danger. By the time we reached the Halfway Islands, 27 rounds out of Tindatear, they were playing a pretty competitive game of chess, though PinTin was still explaining some of his moves and discussing the game afterward. It was rather humorous to watch them – PinTin explaining the various ramifications of each move and response, moving this piece and that, while Hissi watched each move, growling, hissing and barking softly with laughter. Actually, it was very strange.

02

We paused for several rounds on reaching the "Halfway Islands," a small archipelago of islands that DeArjen had discovered on his return voyage. ValDare wanted to get the team used to working together before we reached our final destination of DeArjen's Islands. I also suspect that he wanted to get as much entertainment value out of the expedition as possible – and so we stopped in the islands to shoot vids of some wildlife and perhaps a dragon hunt as well.

The hunters' boat was a heavily built, twin propped, ten-meter cage-enclosed launch. It had a semi-enclosed platform at its bow from which the hunter, armed with a large gauge air-rifle could shoot. The photographer's launch was a lighter, single-prop eight-meter-launch with a similar bow for the photographer and his cameras. The hunter crew manned both boats, using their launch as a second vid unit. We spent two rounds filming the very abundant island wildlife of the islands – who were unfamiliar with, and so not alarmed by, the hunters, and not intimidated by their boats – getting everyone familiar with their roles, and documenting hunting some rather large and dangerous lizards, which provided some fast and furious action at times.

The third round found us lying 100 meters off the jungle edge of a fair sized jungle island. Between the ship and the island with both the camera and hunter's launched maneuvering to film half a dozen large, stocky "Drego lizards" – some up to eight to meters in length, which were lounging on a rocky point. DeRaze, the head hunter, ValDare and BinCar, the chief photographer, were aboard the camera launch while DeRaze's second in command, FezSer, had command of the hunters launch, which planned to kill one of the Drego lizards, which were said to be good eating, adding Drego stew to the mix.

The sky was bright, light blue, with a few clouds hanging about. A slight breeze carried the sweet flower and earthy jungle scents to us. Colorful birds and lizards soared around the ship, squawking their protests, as the bigger ones darted after the smaller ones for a meal. The big, Drego lizards on the rocks watched the launches drift in with sleepy indifference. Most of the off-duty crew were lounging against the bulwark on the after deck watching the proceedings, while the whole scene was being recorded by the assistant cameraman from the upper boat deck.

'Nasty lizards, those Dregos. Give me the shivers just looking at them,' said DeArjen, who was leaning against the railing next to me, as the launches drifted in towards the lizards on the rocks. 'They look so lazy and slow, but they ain't neither.'

'From what I've heard, you found these islands to be very dangerous.'

'Aye. You'd not know it by looking at them. Look mighty peaceful, just like those sunning Dregos. And you don't have to worry about any savages either, since they're uninhabited. However, that meant that none of the beasties had any reason to fear us, as they do on the inhabited islands. That's why those Dregos are letting the boats get so near – with their size and speed, they don't have much to fear. It also made for easy hunting when we reached these islands. Our prey didn't flee at our approach. We knocked them over easy as kiss my hand. However, the flip side of the coin was that the bigger beasts didn't fear or flee us either, and had no qualms about attacking us like they might in the human inhabited islands. The biggest of them Drego lizards could dart out of the foliage and grab one of us in its jaws and dart back before we even knew what was happening. We'd just hear a scream and then see the foliage waving where the Drego had vanished back into the jungle. Oh, we could quickly track it down and maybe kill it with our springer rifles and spears since it had no fear of us, and so it didn't go far. But its victim would've been half chewed up before we could do anything and there wasn't much we could do about that, even if they were still alive after we killed the Drego. Still, we needed to resupply the boat, so that we couldn't just cut and run either,' he paused, and shaking his head, added quietly, 'But after a couple of rounds, we had more than enough provisions – seeing that there was just the two of us left alive when we set sail again.'

'We, me and Triz, made it to the Outward Islands, eventually. But, well, that was the Outward Islands. We'd done some trading there, so we knew our way about and managed to get accepted by the Isakans as sort of semi-slaves, and spent a couple of thousand rounds with them. Triz was killed on a raid and I, eventually, was able to slip aboard an island trader and make my way back to the Dontas, with a long, tragic story to tell...'

The Drego lizards began to roar as the launches closed in on their rocky point.

'Getting mighty close to them,' I said. 'Will they attack the launches?'

DeArjen shook his grizzled head. 'Dregos generally keep their claws on the ground. They'd have been after the boats already if they... What? By the savage gods of Te'arja!'

We instinctively jumped back from the bulwark, as a very, very large dragon, wing-limbs outstretched, suddenly and silently appeared over the top of the island jungle, and with a sweep of its limbs, flew over the ship, casting a deep shadow over us. It was the largest lizard dragon I'd yet seen. Each of its limbs, with their feathered wing membranes, had to have been over 20 meters long. Its long, emerald green body and wings were feathered, intricately patterned in golds and reds that glistened in the milky light. Its massive long-jawed head, set on long outstretched neck, was crowned in a long spray of golden feathers. This was no serpent dragon, but a full-bodied monster example of the lizard dragon. Its long tail had just passed overhead when it spied the sunning Drego lizards on the rocky point below and swung about, diving over us again, to grasp one of the suddenly scrambling Dregos in its massive jaws. It settled, with much creaking and cracking of wood, on the tops of the jungle trees, seemingly content to devour its catch while studying the Lora Lake.

This peace didn't last long, as one of the hunters sent an explosive slug its way, blowing a small hole in a puff of feathers in one of its forearm wing membranes. That apparently rearranged its priorities.

Abandoning the now limp lizard, it bellowed, and reaching down with its long, claw-tipped arms, grabbed the upper cage of the hunter's launch to pull it close, and began to tear at the cage with its claws and jaws to get at the crew. Inside, the hunters were flung violently about as the dragon angrily attacked the launch, scrambling to escape the dragon's probing claws and teeth as it attempted to tear it apart the launch.

'A King Emerald dragon. That has to be the King of King Emeralds!' gasped DeArjen. 'He'll tear that launch apart... The fools!'

After instinctively jumping back from the bulwark, I stood frozen, gaping at the giant dragon's violent attempt to tear the steel cage off the hunter's launch. Anchored to the island jungle, it swung the launch about. I could catch glimpses of its crew being flung about so violently that they had no chance

to send another explosive slug its way. All they could do was to hold on to something solid as far away from the dragon's claws and teeth as possible. Over its angry roars, I could hear the screech of steel being bent. As I said, I stood at a loss as to what I could do to save the launch from being torn apart by this massive king emerald dragon.

Captain KimTara was not at a loss. She leaped for the ladder to the boat deck.

'DisRay! To the rocket launcher!' she shouted to our second mate, who was watching from the bridge's wing deck above us, over the roar of the dragon as she flung herself up the ladder.

There was an even louder, angrier roar.

I looked back to see that the camera launch, which had been dancing in the air currents generated by the violent encounter, had caught the attention of the dragon. DeRaze, in the camera launch must have sent a second explosive round from his high-powered dragon hunting rifle into the dragon, with no apparent effect, save that the dragon roared, and lashing out with one of its long arms, caught the camera launch by its cage and flung it against the rocks of the point where the Drego lizards had been sunning themselves. They'd also been thinking faster than me – and had already made themselves scarce.

The camera boat hit the rocks with a grinding crunch and bounced off, spinning away out of control.

The Captain reached the boat deck and was unlocking the case that held the initial supply of rockets, as the cameraman scrambled to get out of her way – still filming. DisRay, at the launcher, was tearing off its canvas cover.

By now, the crew had snapped out of their shock, and were racing up the ladder to help the skipper and DisRay at the rocket launcher. She ordered DisRay to take several of the hands down the ship's rocket magazine to get more rockets, tossing him the keys. A dozen rockets were kept in a box on the deck for immediate use, which I thought would be enough. But better safe than sorry.

The skipper shoved a rocket into the launcher and swung towards the dragon. The problem was that with the boat, still being flung about in the dragon's grip, getting a clear shot at the dragon without risking hitting the launch was going to be tricky. Desperation would probably be the trigger...

The dragon roared again, suddenly glaring at the Captain and her crew on the boat deck. Its telepathic abilities may have given it a warning that things were about to get very dangerous. He roared and flung the hunter's boat at the Lora Lakes – at Captain KimTara and the rocket launcher beside the smokestack to be precise. Telepathy could only explain that. It then dived at them as well.

The boat deck is only a narrow deck running between the ship's two launches and only had a light grating overhead to keep people from being carried off in a wind. It seemed to offer no protection from either a very large and very angry dragon or the launch it flung at them.

The boat bounced off the smokestack just above the rocket launcher. KimTara and DisRay had prudently dodged behind the smokestack while the rest of the crew on the after deck and I dived for cover behind the solid bulwark. The boat bounced off the edge of the bulwark and grating just above me with a clanging crash and slowly began to drift away after putting a minor dent in the heavy grating.

The shadow of the dragon followed it, the claws of its legs raking across the smokestack and the thin grating of the boat deck. Then, with a flap of its forearm wings that brushed against the cage overhead, it soared away – the backwash of its wing-like forelimbs swirling around us. It rose high overhead, twisted, and disappeared over the island. The skipper slipped back around to the rocket launcher, but the dragon did not return.

I glanced up through the grating-- aboard the slowly drifting hunters' boat the bloodied men, were slowly gathering themselves.

With the battered propeller cowlings, they weren't going anywhere under their own power, but it was still close enough to secure, if I acted promptly.

I raced over to the after-gate, and down to the after hold deck, for one of the winches set in the bulwark used to secure lighters alongside the ship. Reaching it, I released the light cable and began to draw it out.

A couple of the crew joined me on the deck.

'Play out the line,' I ordered as I climbed to the top of the bulwark. The boat was a dozen meters or so off – but I thought I could still reach it with a jump – if the cable I was holding didn't hold me back too much. My boots were programmed for jumping, so they momentarily shut down when I crouched and then pushed off.

The cable slowed me down, but I was able swing about reach the boat with my magnetic boots. I crouched and grabbing the battered cage looped the cable wrapped it so that it could be winched down to its makeshift davit on the deck. There, the crew had gathered and helped the bleeding and battered launch crew pry open the bent-in access hatch and lead them to the ship's surgery to be patched up.

The Captain, meanwhile, was directing the launch of one of the ship's boats to tow the camera boat back, since, it too, was immobilized by a damaged propeller. As soon it was brought to its davits on the deck, DeRaze jumped out followed by a ValDare, nursing a bloody cut over his eye.

'Have you ever seen a dragon of that size before?' exclaimed DeRaze, as the skipper climbed down to see about her cousin. 'We need to get right after it – before it gets lost in the islands! We can't lose even a second more. Never mind steam, Chief. We can run on battery power. We'll run it down with the ship. Snap to it Chief, we've wasted enough time already!'

'You want to go after it?' exclaimed ValDare. 'After what it did to your boat?'

'Of course I want to go after it. A dragon that size would be the prize of a lifetime. That one was half again as large as any I've ever seen, dead or alive! We can safely hunt it aboard the Lora. Get a move on it, Chief.'

I glanced to the Captain.

'No,' she said, shaking her head.

ValDare glanced at his cousin, 'It would be a prize, if only to get it on film...'

She shook her head again. 'We were chartered to transport you, not hunt dragons.'

'Tara...' he pleaded.

'I've no intention of taking this ship through the islands looking for a dragon. You've got plenty of it on film already.'

DeRaze was not about to take "No" for an answer. At least not without an argument. The skipper simply turned her back on him and began directing crew to haul the battered launch back to its makeshift davit on the after deck.

DeRaze then turned his angry pleading to the rather helpless ValDare, which got him no more than, 'Perhaps on the way home we can stop and search for it again. As isolated as these islands are, it seems very likely they're its home, so it will still be here when we come back.'

DeRaze must've decided that this was the best deal he was going to get, since he just nodded, and said, 'I'll hold you to that,' and sulked off.

Hissi slept through the whole affair – until the launch hit the ship. She was pretty mad about missing the excitement, and didn't appreciate me telling her the tale, several times, just to annoy her. Simla dragons can be pretty annoying at times. Turnabout is fair play.

With both launches needing repairs, we'd no reason to linger any longer in the islands, so we sailed on the next watch. Once we put the islands a round behind, likelihood of seeing dragons dropped to near zero, allowing us to work on the launches on the open deck with only safety lines to keep us from being blown overboard by sudden cross winds. Repairing the boats kept all of us busy until we reached DeArjen's Islands, the islands of the Dragon People, the Scarlet Guard of the Dragon Kings.

All was not smooth sailing, however.

With the exception of Scholar PinTin and his two students, who had cabins in the ship proper, the other expedition personnel had their own quarters in #3 hold. The hold was well lit by thick glass skylights set in the upper deck and ventilators channeled fresh air down into the hold, so it could be made into a fairly cozy space. In weightless conditions you can get by building rather scantily. Quarters for the expedition consisted of 18 large, prefab boxes, that were stacked three high along two sides of the hold which left a large, open center space as a commons area. The six lower units were used as utility, sanitary, and storage rooms, while the 12 above were crew cabins reached by light ladders. ValDare and DeRaze had their suite of cabins and offices in the hold, and the photographer had an editing room. The center common room was set up as a lounge, with chairs and tables for meals and cards. While the expedition crew generally took their main meal in the ship's mess room, they had brought along a food supply of their own to supplement shipboard fare. (ValDare, as the son of one of the line's directors, was likely familiar with shipboard fare.) The expedition supplies also included alcoholic beverages, which are not available aboard the ship proper. The expedition crew invited off duty crew members to use the expedition's spacious commons room – for company and extra hands for the round after round of card games that occupied their free time. The two crews got along quite well, though Hissi refused to play cards with the dragon hunters or visit their quarters.

My first engineer, DosKe, had become a regular visitor to their quarters for their card games and generous supply of drink. As long as he showed up for his watch sober or even hungover, I decided to turn a blind eye to his unauthorized drinking. It's not like I could dismiss him anytime soon, so I'd have to pretty much bear it, and him, as well. However, a dozen rounds after the Halfway Islands, he turned up stumbling drunk for his watch – I decided that I could no longer ignore it. I ordered him back to his cabin, stood his watch, and when relieved by BayLi, I took myself to their quarters to have a talk with ValDare and DeRaze.

I dropped down along the long ladder to the hold's deck.

'Hello, Chief!' exclaimed ValDare looking up from an easy chair in the small lounge area. 'What brings you to our luxurious quarters. You're a rather rare visitor.'

'Putting your launches together again has kept me rather busy. I'm here now to make a request.'

'I promise we'll steer clear of giant dragons,' laughed ValDare.

'Good. I'll want DeRaze's promise as well. But that's not why I'm here.'

'Fire away.'

'DosKe turned up too drunk to stand his watch. I'm afraid that I can't tolerate that, as I'm sure you can understand. I need him sober, and so I'd appreciate it if you and your crew do not supply him with any more drink. Since you're likely the only source of liquor on board – with enough to spare to get DosKe drunk, if he shows up drunk again I'll know who to blame.'

'Ah, yes, Chief. I believe he may have overdone it a little the last time he was down here. Usually he's pretty careful...'

'He overdid it a lot. And I don't believe he's to be trusted not to get drunk again. I'm going to make your quarters off limits to him, and I want you to enforce that as well. If he makes a fuss, call me. Do we have an understanding?'

'Captain's orders?'

'Right now it's just between you and me. But if I find him drunk again, I'll take the matter up with the Captain. And if your crew are not to be trusted to follow the ship's rules, I'd have a talk with the Captain about your liquor privileges as well.'

'That's being rather harsh, Chief. We're passengers, not crew, you know.'

'DosKe is crew. He's not allowed to drink aboard ship. If you can't make that distinction, I'll speak to the Captain. I suspect that your cousin would be equally displeased to find any of her deck crew drunk on duty as well. If you want, however, we can take the matter to the Captain.'

He dismissed that with a wave. 'Point taken.'

'Right. I'm going to be talking to DosKe shortly and hopefully he'll stay clear of you on his own. But if not, just tell me, and I'll deal with him.'

'Whatever you say, Chief. We were just being social. It is rather boring being trapped on this little ship, round after round. It's just a way of passing the time.'

'Aye, I understand. But I'd advise you to be very careful. I don't know who else may be abusing your hospitality, but I doubt that the Captain misses much, if anything.'

'Right you are, Chief. We'll be more careful going forward. Thanks for not bringing Tara into this. We do want to keep everything pleasant...'

I nodded and turned to go, catching a smirk of DeRaze's face that he didn't bother to hide. I didn't like him much, so that changed nothing.

I had a talk with a hungover DosKe, informing him that ValDare's quarters were now off limits and if I found him there again, drunk or not, I'd take the matter to the captain. He was sullen and unresponsive. But then, he was always sullen and unresponsive even when not hungover.

He stayed sober, sullen and mostly unresponsive the rest of the voyage.

## Chapter 28 The Shadow Sea

01

Having guided us to his Halfway Islands, I had no doubt that DeArjen would guide us to the islands of the Dragon People as well. We sailed through the cloudless and island-less sky of Endless Sea for another 31 rounds before seeing clouds ahead, which usually are the first sign of islands. A watch later, the dim blue shapes of islands themselves began to emerge from the clouds and the hazy light blue-green sky. DeArjen, who had been standing watches on the bridge these last several rounds, fine tuning our course, was certain they were the islands where he'd been castaway. By the end of the round, we were alongside the outermost group of islands – a ten kilometer cloud of small, jungle-clad islands with birds, lizards, big beetles and bright butterflies flying amongst them. Similar clumps of islands, plus specks of small, free ones, floated, blue in the distance.

The slim red-feathered Dragon People, however, were not yet seen. DeArjen said that they were found in numbers only on the large core cluster of islands, a faint blue smudge in the sky.

We had come to rest on the fringe of this rather granular archipelago to allow the skipper, ValDare, and DeArjen time to discuss our next move from the wing deck of the bridge. As much as I enjoyed the freedom of not being totally responsible for the ship and the lives of its crew, I must admit that at times like this, I missed not being included in the conversation. In Captain KimTara's view, my job began and ended in seeing that the ship had power when she wanted it. Where it went was not my concern and I was not consulted about it, nor had our relationship blossomed to the point where I could invite myself, despite all those after dinner hours I spent on the after deck keeping her silent company.

The confab on the bridge broke up and I heard the warning bell ringing in the engine room from the open skylights – we'd be underway again soon. I stayed on deck. BayLi had the watch and I had long since banished any need to keep an eye on her. Moments later, the propellers whirled to life and I felt the slight tug of inertia as the ship got underway once again.

ValDare joined me at the railing to watch the nearest cluster of islands slip astern.

'DeArjen's Islands?' I asked.

'He says so. However, what we're looking for is a very large group of vine entangled islands that is

still some ways off. He says we'll need to do some tricky navigating to reach our final destination – some sort of hollow within the tangle of islands.'

'Getting excited?'

'Can't wait to get started. Everyone has been getting a little stir crazy after being cooped up aboard the ship for so long.'

'What sort of reception can we expect from DeArjen's bird-men?' I asked. 'My run-in with these folk was brief, and mostly benign. Still, they didn't seem to be folks I'd care to go up against.'

I'd never been able to get more than a vague answer as to what we could expect. There seemed to be a great deal of secrecy in this expedition, even after we left civilization behind, and even within the expedition itself. DeArjen never talked about his experiences on the island, and what he had told ValDare remained a secret. Even Scholar PinTin was told little more than what I had been; just enough to spark his interest.

He shrugged. 'Your feathered folk seem to be a different tribe than DeArjen's. His showed no telepathic powers. I've questioned him about that. As for our reception, well, he doesn't know himself. I gather that they were treated mostly with indifference. Two of the crew were taken away early on and never seen again. Their fate is unknown. The rest of the crew were likely watched, but left alone, and allowed to build a boat to take them away without any interference at all. So I'm not expecting a hostile reception, though I'm also not expecting to be welcomed with open arms either. I'd be fine with them ignoring our presence.'

'The main problem will likely be communication. On account of their beak-like mouths, DeArjen's crew found that it was impossible to duplicate, with any great accuracy, their speech, so that no more than a primitive, mostly sign language method of communication, was ever developed – a few basic words and playacting. We'll have to see it as it unfolds. With PinTin and his students, we have a better chance of developing a more elaborate system of communication. However, even in the worst case, we're dealing with very primitive people. Their weapons seemed to consist only of bows, arrows, and lances used for hunting. They use neither boats, since they fly, nor much in the way of metal work at all, so they should present absolutely no threat to the Lora Lakes or its crew, even if they violently object to our presence.'

'This cage will not protect us from arrows,' I pointed out, glancing up at an island drifting by half a kilometer off.

He glanced up and laughed. 'True, but I really don't expect it to come to that, Chief. We'll need to be cautious, of course, but we're under no pressing deadline, so we can take our time to establish a good relationship. I truly don't expect trouble. In any event, we can do most of our filming without interfering with their lives. And given their indifference to DeArjen's crew, I don't see that our presence will be very provocative. PinTin's mission is a bit iffier. We'll have to carefully gauge their responses before we allow him and his students off the ship to do their field research. That's why we have DeRaze and his crew along – to look after them.'

That was one of my fears, but I left it unsaid. For the moment.

ValDare didn't add much more. I had a feeling things were still left unsaid, but also that he didn't himself know just what to expect. I didn't press him. We'd all find out, soon enough.

Though most of the islands were clustered into five to ten kilometer clumps, often tied together by strings of vines, there were plenty of small, boulder-sized islands floating free to make for slow going – dodging all the little islands, while staying on course, for the still unseen core islands. Life teemed all around us, from the treetops of the big jungle islands to the mossy floating rocks, to the air about us. Like in the Halfway Islands, the larger dragons did not flee, nor did the larger lizards, sunning

themselves on the bare rocks, as the Lora Lakes slowly steamed past. The air around us was alive with the calls of the colorfully plumed birds and lizards. Butterflies and the fist-sized beetles of the Pela flirted and bumbled about the deck finding their way into the engine room through the open skylights. The moist breeze was lushly sweet with the scents of flowers and vegetation. And the deeper we went, the sky grew speckled with all these blue and green islands.

DeArjen stood on the bridge wing deck, confidently calling out orders to the helmsman. He never hesitated as we dodged, over this island, around that one, ever deeper, into the archipelago. He certainly needed to have the talent to have been able to direct the ship through these hundreds of floating rocks towards the vague blue smudge that marked the center of the archipelago.

It must've been exhausting working on the bridge. The engines were controlled from the bridge so that all we had to do was to keep the electric motors of the various propellers, large and small, supplied with electricity. At the speed we were moving, we could have supplied the engines on battery power alone, so we did little more than keep the batteries charged and watch the control panel as the various propellers spun up and down.

We spent the better part of two watches slowly weaving our way through the islands before the blue smudge grew into a large, green, vine-tied cluster of islands. This group, DeArjen assured us, was the home of the red-feathered people, the fabled Dragon People. We then spent another hour drifting along its shore, searching for the large passageway that DeArjen said existed, that would allow the Lora Lakes to reach the inner hollow where the Dragon People's village could be found.

BayLi and I, along with most of the off-duty crew stood at the bulwark of the after deck staring at the nearly solid jungle drifting by, close at hand. There were dark openings between the islands, but they were laced with vines that tied the islands together. I could see no opening large enough to drive the Lora through.

'Ever seen islands so entwined together with vines?' I asked turning to BayLi next to me.

'In brochures for tourists. They're usually called "floating jungles" But those were civilized places. Not like this,' she replied, staring about.

There were dragons, several of them quite large, drifting over and through the tangle of islands, searching for dinner. Every so often they'd flap their forelimbs to move on. Smaller flying lizards and birds flirted overhead, their calls and squawks filling the air. Familiar enough sights and sounds. And yet.

'Kind of eerie, isn't it?'

She gave me a glance. 'Not a place for tourists, I think.'

That, coming from a small islander, did nothing to ease my unease.

03

When we came to a wide, dark opening in the tangle of islands that DeArjen said was the passageway in, we paused for several hours to allow him time to get a nap in, and for the crew to enjoy a leisurely main meal.

Captain KimTara stood and spoke after the meal. 'I'm told that we're nearly there,' she began. 'A couple more hours of sailing – through the passage ahead. I want to remind everyone that these are savage islands. We are uncertain of our reception. You should be aware of what is going on around you. Since the cage will not protect you from dangers like jungle snakes that we might pick up brushing against the trees or the arrows of natives, everyone must remain within the ship with all the doors, skylights, and portals closed, until we've anchored.'

Good, if not welcomed, advice.

Once DeArjen had his rest, we realigned the ship and began to push through the dark channel in the tangled maze of little islands. The jungle closed in around us. It grew nearly as dark as night as we left



the sky-sea – no more than a dwindling spot of light, astern. We were now weaving our way – dead slow – through a narrow jungle-lined river, with the unbroken jungle all around us, close enough at times for it to scrape its branches along the hull. In the always dim light, the jungle consisted of pale, wispy vines, and fungus that smelled of rot.

With the skylights closed, it quickly grew very hot in the engine room. I let the boilers cool a bit and relied more on our batteries, hoping we'd be through the passage before we were baked alive. Still, the heat, however intense, was better than snakes floating about.

Our drive propellers were protected, in theory, from getting entangled in the vines and trees we brushed past and through by their surrounding cowling, but it was still a nerve wracking affair – any hint of the propellers encountering resistance needed to trigger their shut down or risk damaging the propellers or the electric engines, so we needed to pay constant attention to the indicator dials for each engine, looking for any spike of resistance and/or involuntary drop in rotation. This went on for the better part of a watch, until the bridge signaled that they were done with the engines.

Having the watch, I saw to banking the boilers and winding things down in the engine room before climbing the maze of ladders up and out, onto the after-deck to join the bulk of the crew now taking in the sights of Shadow Sea as it came to be known. And what a strange sight it was! I found it to be still twilight as I stepped out. Looking around, it almost seemed that we were inside just one hollow island, the surrounding islands were that packed together. This inner sea was lit by four long, ragged edged, vine-laced gaps in the islands above and around us, running nearly the length of the inland sea. We had apparently entered by the largest opening in one of them. Over, around and before us arched a pale jungle.

This inner island sea was some 14 kilometers long, and 7 at the widest point, as measured by the ship's radar. Looking ahead, down the gut of the sea, I could see that at the far end, the inner sea narrowed to a twisting passage through sharp sided ridge lines that rose into the twilight hollow like fangs. Their dark, brooding shapes were faintly outlined by the shafts of light that slanted in through the rifts. The shore of the Shadow Sea was crisscrossed by crags, and black shadowed ravines, covered with thick vines and pale spindly jungles, dotted here and there with tall groves of thin bamboo growing in the narrow valleys. Other than the rift we had pushed our way through, the other vine laced openings looked to be too narrow to allow the ship to pass through them. However, it was impossible to see where the rocks of the islands left off and the vines and jungles began, so perhaps we could force the Lora Lakes through one of them, rather than return the way we came. Given the length of the passage we'd just navigated, finding a simple way out might be a better alternative, if we needed to make a hasty retreat.

I bit back that thought, reminding myself that wasn't my concern. I sighed. I'd been very content for a long time aboard the Telrai Peaks to keep my nose out of the affairs of the bridge. Probably because they were so routine, and I wasn't her chief engineer. But aboard the Lora Lakes, as chief engineer, and with this voyage and its air of mystery about it, I was finding it much harder to do. I couldn't quite place my finger on why, exactly, but I guess I didn't trust ValDare. Not that he didn't seem honest enough, but rather that I was far from sure he'd outgrown the recklessness of his youth. I was, however, thankful for having KimTara as captain. I was pretty certain she'd not put up with any foolishness. Still, standing on the after-deck, looking about at this dim-lit Shadow Sea, that didn't keep me from worrying. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with a rag as my inner voice, speaking from long experience, said, "You're deep in the drifts again, Litang."

The Shadow Sea was alive with birds and lizards drifting like shadow-spirits in the gloom, their occasional strident calls adding no gaiety to the scene. BinCar and his assistant were on the boat deck recording the scene. It didn't take long for ValDare, DeArjen and DeRaze to spy the red feathered bird-men, the mythical Scarlet Guard of the mythical Dragon Kings. They flitted about through the jungles like blood-red wraiths.

'Are these the fellows you encountered on your little island?' asked ValDare, handing me his

binoculars and pointing.

As soon as I got the figure into focus – he was standing still, staring at us on the tip of a rocky outcropping – I recognized him. 'Aye, it's them, though the one I met wasn't decked out in that armor like this one. The only thing he was wearing was his sheath of arrows slung over his back and a collar around his neck.'

The figure in the glass was indeed, the same one that I'd encountered twice before. Like my bird-men, this one had a long bow on his back, as he stood tall and thin watching us as we were him. He was however, dressed in some sort of halter or armor of faintly shimmering scales, crisscrossed by belts of woven wires and wore a helmet made of the same translucent scales and yellow feathers.

'What's the plan?' I asked, handing the glasses back to him.

'We've brought a good supply of trade goods. We'll set out a pavilion on bow deck and see what sort of interest we attract. DeArjen says that their village is at the far end. We don't want to appear threatening, so we'll just stay here for the time being. We'll let them come to us. If we don't attract any interest, then we may send the two launches out and see what we can film from a safe, nonthreatening distance,' he said, and lifting the glasses to his eyes again, added, 'I think the key here is to move slowly. DeArjen didn't find them warlike. They were mostly indifferent, so I'm optimistic that if we're patient and keep our distance, we'll be able to establish some sort of understanding and perhaps buy our way into their society. PinTin hopes for more, but we'll just have to wait and see. Amazing place, isn't it?'

'It is indeed. Though I'm wondering if it was necessary to bring the Lora Lakes in. We could've kept outside and explored this with the boats through all those smaller gaps in the island.'

'Claustrophobic, Chief?' he laughed.

'Oh, I'm used to enclosed spaces. I've spent my life in them.'

'The darkness?'

I laughed. 'I've sailed in a darkness you can't imagine. And I did spend several hundred rounds in the Daeri margin and shadow lands. It isn't the darkness, or the closeness. But rather, it's the long, slow passage out of here if we need to withdraw. We seem to be relying a lot on their, well, indifference.'

'We considered that, and decided that it would be safer for everyone if we had the Lora Lakes in here. You see what they use as weapons, and those only for hunting – bows and arrows, and, I gather, long spears. While the launches are at risk of being disabled with a spear or two in their propellers, their weapons are useless against the Lora Lakes, so we felt it was better to have it here to serve as a base and a redoubt in the event of unpleasantness. And it could be used to collect any disabled launch with impunity. And, well, we're hoping that its size and strangeness impresses the natives enough that they'll deal with us cautiously.'

'I suppose that makes sense,' I admitted. I still was rather uneasy. 'This cage doesn't provide much protection from arrows or spears, once they get curious enough to get closer.'

'We're going to spread some canvas over the top. What they can't see they can't fire on. So between the canvas and the solid bulwark, I don't think anyone will be in any great danger, even when they begin to venture closer.'

I shrugged. 'Sounds like you've thought of everything...'

'Everything has been considered, Chief. I'm here and my days of taking chances are long over.'

I certainly hoped so. I couldn't put my finger on exactly what was bothering me. The Shadow Sea seemed to have a brooding, almost rotting air about it. In part, it may've been due to its relative darkness. In part it was the subterranean feel that very thick and ancient vines twisting over the jagged outcrops looked ever so much like roots of a massive jungle dark above us. And in part, it may've been the pale, spindly jungle in the shadows that seemed half dead and half decayed. And it may've been the silence. The birds and lizards that drifted through the shadows like dark wraiths – occasionally flaring to momentary brightness when they fluttered through pale shafts of light that drifted down from the long rifts – rarely sang and when they did, it was with a solemn, mournful air.

I'd spent most of my life confined to the tiny world of a space ship, so I shouldn't have been feeling claustrophobic, and yet, despite my denial, I was. There seemed to be some sort of size limit – when it gets too big, like within the Shadow Sea or aboard the Mountain King, so many years and rounds ago – I began to feel it.

ValDare's confident assurances should've reassured me, but I'd been aboard the old Bird of Passage when it was taken by primitive savages. And while the Lora Lakes was an order of magnitude better prepared to resist any savage attack, that knowledge somehow failed to take the edge off of my unease. If I had as many scars as I should've had from all my adventures, I was sure they'd all be tingling.

04

Sightseeing was soon brought to an end. The deck crew was sent out to rig a canvas tarp over the after-deck, and then, build a platform at the bow of the ship on which was spread brightly colored trinkets and general trade goods under a light netting, to keep them from drifting off. While this work was underway, the Captain shifted the Lora Lakes to one of the brighter spots along the shore – in a broad shaft of light from above – and anchored her between two vine encrusted points. And we settled in to await developments. If nothing happened in a round or two, ValDare said he'd send out the launches to begin a photographic survey of the Shadow Sea and what we could see of the native society from a distance.

We waited. During the first round, the red feathered figures could be seen flying amongst the crags and through the jungles on the far shores, but they stayed clear of us. With no overt show of hostility by the second round, nor apparent interest in the trade goods, and with DeArjen's assurances that they were largely indifferent to his ship when it was wrecked on the island, ValDare allowed BinCar and the restless hunters to take their boats out to survey and film what they saw. As DeArjen predicted, they met no resistance – the feathered bird-men kept their distances even when the boats flew over their village-in-the-trees beyond a tall, fang shaped peak at the far end of the sea. They could hang several hundred meters over the jungle-village, filming, without drawing any overt action. ValDare was happily optimistic that we'd soon be able to make face-to-face contact.

By the third round the natives, though still shy, had become bold enough to fly within a hundred meters of the Lora Lakes, so we had a chance to observe them close at hand. They were clearly a separate species – human-like in many aspects, but their heads were too different shaped to be a very near relative of even the feathered people of the Pela. They flew like birds in this free fall environment, using their long arms like wings. Their arms had a ridge of feathers running down them that made them into narrow wings, and without having to provide lift, they worked well as wings – a flicker of their arms to turn, a few quick strokes and they'd be shooting off. They slung their bows with quivers, on their backs over their tight fitting tunics of lizard scales that shimmered in the pale twilight. Like the natives of the Saraime, their chests were crisscrossed by belts of woven wire-like vines, holding the unstrung bow, quiver, a pouch and a long knife.

By the fourth round, several of the braver or more curious of them had landed on the trade platform. They silently observed, but did not touch. The assistant photographer filmed them from the bridge's wing balcony, since BinCar was off in the launch filming the village.

By this time, we'd caught up on most of the engine maintenance work, and so we, or at least I, had more time to brood. The crew was rather subdued as well. For some, it might've been their unfamiliarity with darkness. The margin peoples did not, as a rule, run off to the wide-sky, and few bright side people migrated to the shadows, so this brooding green twilight was out of the ordinary in and of itself. But I think there was more to it than the darkness, or even the somewhat claustrophobic sense of being trapped in this sea of shadows. It was the response of the natives, or rather their non-response that made us uneasy. Their lack of curiosity and unwillingness to assert any territorial claims

did not seem to be a natural reaction. Being ignored was certainly better than fighting off hordes of savages, but there was little relief in not having to fight them off. Yet. It seemed as if a clock had "ticked", and we were awaiting the "tock", uncertain of what it would bring. I spent my time refurbishing a pump to keep from brooding too darkly.

And as we all suspected, it couldn't last, and it didn't.

05

The elders of the tribe arrived during our sixth round in the island, along with what appeared to be their entire tribe.

It began as a scarlet cloud swirling up from the shadow peaks at the far end of sea, and over the next hour, the cloud grew to fill the sky of the inland sea. There must've been ten thousand of them. We sealed the ship – the photographer and his assistant being the last to take shelter inside the steel doors of the ship. As they neared us, and began to swirl around the ship, the pale light grew red-tinted and ever dimmer as ever more of the Dragon People gathered around the ship. At first, they did so silently – the swoosh of their arm/wings only emphasized their silent menace, and that was cut off when we closed and latched the last of the skylights.

BayLi, Cas, DenToy – the watch crew – Hissi, and I watched the swirling cloud of natives, from one of the large engine room portholes set in the hull. All of the natives had bows on their backs and were now carrying long lances in hand. I was tempted to unlock my chest and don my old Unity uniform and my darters, but decided against it. I'd put them away almost 2,000 rounds ago, and had determined to live my life going forward without them. I didn't like our position, but I also didn't think we were in any great danger. Yet. They'd have a tough time gaining access to the ship. But I suppose that if they were determined enough, even steel doors could be beaten in, the after deck and glass skylights overhead breached by a motivated mob. But not before I'd gotten my darters out and raised steam.

However, they merely continued to swirl around the ship in silence – perhaps waiting for the stragglers to arrive. When all had arrived, we heard, even through the hull, a keening chant. Faintly at first, but growing ever louder as it was taken up by the swirling mob, it rose and fell in an eerie, unnerving, cadence.

We exchanged glances.

'Don't like this at all, Chief,' said Cas. 'Don't recall signing on for anything like this...'

'I don't recall it either. And yet, here we are. Still, I don't think we've anything to worry about. Their lances can't do more than scratch the paint. We'll be fine. We can always run, if need be.'

'What about them skylights?' he said with a glance overhead. 'They can get at 'em from the outside...'

'They're thick glass and locked down from this side. And they'd have to get through the after-deck grating to reach them. I'm sure we'd start actively defending ourselves or running if they attack, so we're in no real danger. It's just a bit unnerving, which is probably what it's intended to be.'

That didn't reassure him, or any of us, even if it was true.

The eerie chanting grew ever louder, and then suddenly the swirling mass of natives veered off, allowing perhaps three dozen brightly dressed figures wearing long flowing capes and elaborate headdresses to soar through the mob. They were gone from our view in an instant, and so I must rely on ship gossip about what happened next, since I wasn't about to abandon my engine room.

These elaborately dressed men – either the elders or sorcerers of the society – had arrived to deal with us. They alighted on the trade platform forward and briefly inspected the goods displayed. The entire proceedings were recorded on vid from the bridge windows, where ValDare's expedition had gathered to watch and record. They were certainly getting dramatic footage – though how good the vid would be was an open question, since the scene was darkened by the swirling mob that surrounded the ship.

After giving them a few moments to inspect the goods, DeArjen, rather bravely, stepped out on to the bridge's wing platform and hailed the elders in what little he knew and could reproduce of their language. Whatever he managed to say, did not go over well. Perhaps he said something wrong, or perhaps they recognized him and didn't want him back. But whatever the reason, the response was anything but cordial. The Chief went on a shrill, angry rant, and at the end, took his lance and began slashing at the banner poles and then at the displayed goods, scattering them into the swirling red eddies. The Chief then began to thump his lance on the metal deck, as did all those who had landed on the deck. Soon everyone who could find a spot on the hull and superstructure to bang their lances on, was doing the same. DeArjen, I gather, had quickly retreated to the bridge.

The ship shivered in a rolling thunder of lances hitting the hull. The random pounding evolved into a slow, rhythmic beat – the ship one vast drum – as the elders chanted their curses down on us.

From our station in the engine room we couldn't see what was going on or why. All we could hear was the rhythmic and ominous sound of a thousand lances being banged on the hull. I thought for a moment that we'd been attacked, and flung myself up to the top platform nearest the skylights to keep an eye on them. The islanders, gotten to the after-deck, so there was no one on the other side.

I slipped over to com and signaled to the bridge. "What's going on?" I yelled over the racket, as soon as TeyLin, the first mate, answered. 'Should I make steam?'

'Nothing to worry about, at least so far, Chief. It seems the natives are demonstrating their disappointment in our selection of trade goods, and perhaps, suggesting that we leave. They're just banging their lances on the hull and yelling at us,' he yelled back. 'Just sit tight.'

'Right. Keep us informed,' I replied and relayed it to my crew.

If I'd been captain, I'd have ordered up steam as a prudent precaution. However, we did have plenty of battery power – enough to take the ship back through the passage, so steam wasn't strictly necessary.

This must have gone on for some fifteen minutes or so – until the Chief grew too hoarse and winded to curse us. And then, I'm told, he swung his lance around with one last, grand gesture, and pointed in the vague direction of the way we came while bellowing one final instruction – leave – before he raised his arms, swept them down and shot upwards from the deck, followed by all the other officials, and then the great mass of natives. The silence was deafening.

## 06

I waited in my little office until after the watch changed. I had half expected orders to get steam up. But when they didn't come down, I decided to wander up to the bridge to find out what the plan was now, since no one seemed to feel it necessary to keep me informed.

After that very clear indication that we weren't welcomed here, I didn't think we had many options. Sending the launches out now would seem to be rather risky since any future efforts might well be met with force. Even with our springers and rockets, ten thousand people was not a force to be dismissed. All in all, you might've thought that spirits aboard ship would have been very subdued. But if you, like me, thought so, you'd have been wrong. As I made my way up through the ship, I found the crew gathered in the mess room and in their cabins laughing and talking like drunks. They seemed to be boasting about their fortune. TeyLin, the first mate and the 2nd mate, DisRay, were both standing watch on the bridge when I arrived.

'The Captain?' I asked.

'In her office,' replied TeyLin with a brief jerk of his head towards the doorway to the deckhouse just aft of the bridge. 'Big con-fab with ValDare, DeRaze, DeArjen, PinTin, and BinCar. Been going on since the bird-people departed...'

I glanced through the doorway and decided that I wouldn't invite myself in. I'd my pride.

'I can't imagine there be all that much to talk about. They made it pretty clear we're not welcomed

here. So why is it that everyone seems so happy? Is everyone that happy to be going home?"

'Didn't the word reach you down in the black hole?' TeyLin asked, giving me a questioning look.

'What word? I've been in my office awaiting orders.'

'Soul stones,' he said simply.

I stared at both of them. 'Soul stones? What are soul stones and what do they have to do with anything?'

'Don't tell me you've never heard of soul stones!' exclaimed TeyLin. And then seeing that I was still at a loss, added. 'They're gems. Very rare, very valuable gems. The headpieces of the big wigs were encrusted with them. Or at least that's what they appeared to be. BinCar zoomed in on them and from the vid, they sparkled just enough to seem to have hidden facets characteristic of soul stones. That's what has everyone so elated. That's why they've been talking in there since the feathered crowd left,' this with another nod to the captain's office. 'I don't think the Captain was happy. ValDare had to know about them... Which is probably the true reason why we're here.'

This wasn't the Unity, so I suppose the headdresses of the native chiefs might be considered fair game. Still... 'But they're on the chiefs' headdresses. I don't see how anyone could expect to get them. I mean, I'm sure we could take the Lora to their village, but I can't see sending anyone down to pry them off the chief's head. Leaving the protection of the ship now, and facing the whole, angry horde would be suicide. And even if we could intimidate them with our springers and rockets, all they'd have to do was take off and hide in the jungle. We'd never be able to find them. I don't see any profit in using force.'

TeyLin laughed, 'I don't suppose they're ruling anything out. But I think they're hoping to find some soul stones on their own. Just one will pay for this voyage a thousand times over. No, we're not likely to go home without some soul stones. I'd imagine that they're thinking of ways to lay their hands on some. And, as you may have noticed, the crew is just as eager.'

I considered that. As I said, this wasn't the Unity. Still, I shook my head. 'They're no doubt watching us. And having delivered their warning, I don't think anyone will be able to get off ship without putting their life on the line. They likely could put an arrow – or a hundred of them, through the cages of the launches before you cocked your springer for a second round. It just doesn't seem worth it for even a small chest of gems. ValDare has plenty of coins without risking his neck.'

'It wouldn't be his neck he'd be risking,' he replied grimly. 'It'd be ours, if he can talk the Captain around. And even if he can't, I'm certain they'll make some sort of effort to find or take a few soul stones. I don't think you realize just how very, very rare they are. And how very, very valuable they are. I can't even imagine how valuable one of those headpieces would be back in the Principalities. You see, not only are they the rarest of gems, they're also reputed to have some sort of power over people, an almost hypnotic effect on most people. Amongst us broad-feathered folk they're said to be like a narcotic. Trust me, a single one is worth a vast fortune. Several vast fortunes. So you see, if those black stones on the headpieces of the elders are indeed soul stones – well, you can understand the crew's excitement. There may have been more soul stones on the old Lora's deck than there are in all of the Saraime. You could buy a small principality with one, or a big one with the soul stones of just one of those headdress! And there were dozens of such headdresses on our deck. You can see why everyone's so excited, can't you?'

I had a sudden vision of the Dragon Guard people that I had encountered. They wore a black gem on their collars... though I hadn't felt any telepathic pressure this time, I had a growing suspicion that if we were wise, we'd be raising steam within the hour. I also had a growing suspicion that we wouldn't be.

'I wouldn't think it would be wise to anger people with these soul stones, if they have the power you say they have,' I said slowly.

'Tell that to them,' he said with a nod to the back passageway. 'And, tell it to the crew as well. You saw what they're like. I don't think they're very concerned about that aspect of the gems...'

'How does the crew figure on getting rich?'

TeyLin laughed grimly. 'I'd bet they're all busy plotting that course as we speak. Come what may, their cut of the fortune will make them rich. And trust me, we'll get our cut. None of us are putting out our necks for anything less than a cut of the proceeds.'

'If they can lay their hands on any and get back alive. Which seems unlikely...'

'Which they'll certainly try to do. Think about it, Chief. DisRay and I were just discussing it when you came up. DeArjen certainly knew about the soul stones. He couldn't have missed them. ValDare almost certainly knew about them too. Why else would he have come this far and taken so much time away from his business? He couldn't have trusted any subordinate with a chest of soul stones. He had to know. He came here to get the stones and I don't think he'll go home empty-handed, not without trying every way he can to lay his hands on even a few. He doesn't need a headdress worth to make this voyage worthwhile.'

'Aye, he had to know,' spoke up DisRay. 'It's soul stones that brought us here. The Dragon Guard people nonsense was just a cover story. No doubt he was hoping to trade those trinkets for a few gems, but it doesn't look like that will sail now. You have to wonder what they're going to do now.'

'They'd have to be crazy to do more than try to trade for them,' I said, without conviction.

'I'm betting that they're crazy enough to do whatever it takes. I don't know what ValDare was thinking, but he's got a dragon by the tail now. Still, if they could get even a small stone, they could give us a fair cut of the proceeds and we'd all be, well, a lot richer...'

'If they give us a fair cut...' said TeyLin.

'They'd risk getting their throats cut if they didn't,' said DisRay, grimly. 'We ain't in the Principalities now.'

'Do you really think it'll come to that?' I asked.

'Oh, don't listen to DisRay. He's read too many adventure stories. We can keep this crew in check. At least our crew. Your black gang is another matter...'

'They're not murderers. And well, I can deal with them, if they get ideas,' I added as confidently as I could. I could deal with them, but I didn't want it to come to that.

'Right. But that leaves DeRaze's hunters. They're armed and they haven't struck me as people who'd either shy away from a fight with ten thousand natives, or cut a few throats. Not for a fist full of gems worth a principality. Hopefully they'll hammer out some sort of plan on how to get a few and how to divvy them up afterward,' said TeyLin. 'If not, well things might get very interesting aboard this old gal.'

I hung around talking for a while longer, but it became clear that the conference was carrying on without me quite well, so I decided to return to my office to await the official word.

I try to be as honest as possible in these accounts of my life. So I must admit that I was rather sulking when I left the bridge. ValDare claimed that he wanted me aboard on account of my wide experiences – or at least the experiences I claimed to have had. Yet now, in something of a crisis, I was left out of the discussions. I'd my pride and my ego, and both were rather bruised.

Still, I could see my pettiness in that, as well. They may well have been unaware of how the news was being treated by the crew. I'm sure they looked on this as a meeting of the board of directors. Experts, like me, might be called in, but this was essentially a leadership meeting. One that I was no more entitled to be in on than the first mate TeyLin, who, like me, had been on the outside of the Captain's door.

There was one other possibility. And that was that ValDare might not want to hear my advice. I had, unknowingly, mentioned the black gems in regard to the Dragon Guard I'd seen. I was now all but certain it had been a soul stone set in my Guard's collar. And it had seemed to be his source of

telepathic power. This power, I would've thought, needed to be taken into account in any proposed actions – even though we'd not experienced any telepathic attacks. Yet. I had a feeling ValDare wouldn't care to have even the possibility of some sort of telepathic mentioned within the hearing of the Captain, who, I was pretty certain, was trying to keep ValDare from once again doing something very foolish.

All I can say in my defense, was that I trusted Captain KimTara. She had an iron will and the respect of the crew. I was certain she'd not only keep a cool head in any crisis but could, in the end, handle her cousin. She'd certainly be able handle the crew. They might be excited by the thought of a fortune beyond their dreams, but they were not the type to cut your throat. I didn't think that even DosKe, would be capable of doing that. Dream of it, yes, but do it, no. So as long as ValDare was able to keep his dragon hunters in line – we'd ride out the initial euphoria and settle on a prudent course of action. I was certain, however, that we'd not leave without a soul stone or two. They'd find some, one way or another. I suspect that DeArjen could be counted on to see to that, somehow. And as long as they made arrangements to share the proceeds with the crew – the only prudent thing to do – the crew would be happy. So with these thoughts, I was able to pass my cabin by on my way down to the engine room to make the round's last inspection.

It was late in the ship's round of watches – we were in the second sleep round, the last watch. Everyone but the watch should've been in their hammocks. But I doubted anyone was. They were all still building castles in the clouds behind the closed doors of their cabins.

As I reached the narrow platform outside my office, Hissi drifted by with a low bark of a greeting. 'Hi Hiss.' I said, running my fingers through her feathers as she slowly circled around me. 'I don't know what you're picking up, but I'm thinking things might be a little tense for a while.'

She hissed dismissively.

'Yah, well, everyone might be happy and excited now, but that could easily turn nasty if too many dreams are dashed. If there is trouble, I want you to stay out of it.'

She gave me a dismissive bark this time.

'I mean it. If things should blow up and slugs start flying, you stay well clear of the action.'

Another dismissive hiss.

'Stay out of sight, that's an order.' She was having none of that, giving me yet another dismissive bark and wag of her tail.

'Yes, I know you're fearless, but I want you to be sneaky instead. Remember my story about how Siss slipped aboard the Temtre ship to free me when I was held captive?'

She barked her acknowledgment.

'That's what I need you to be. Be my back-up, my dragon in hand, if trouble erupts. I want you in a position to come to my aid, if I should get in a fix.'

She snorted as to say "When you get in the fix".

'Right. So you see why it's important that you stay out of whatever goes down, just in case. I want you sneaky, not bold.'

She hissed again, yawned, and drifted into the darkness of my tiny office to sleep.

It must be nice to be a carefree dragon. I wasn't, however, so I stepped around to the ladder and started down, platform by platform, to take my usual walk through the engine room before retiring. An old habit.

DosKe had the watch now. I found him on station, on the control platform, talking quietly with one of the dragon hunters, FezSer, DeRaze's right hand man. They stopped talking as I climbed down and stared at me.

'What are you doing here?' I asked, rather crossly. I didn't like the look of this at all.

DosKe gave me an unpleasant look. Nothing new there.

FezSer shrugged carelessly, 'We're just talking. Lots to talk about.'

'It's late. I'd have thought everyone would be in their hammocks dreaming of their palaces.'



'Too much excitement, I suppose,' said FezSer, adding, 'But I'll be pushing along. It is getting late.' And with a nod to DosKe, he sauntered off.

DosKe turned his back on me without a word. I debated whether to press him on what FezSer and he were talking about, but decided I'd only be making a fool of myself, so I pressed on and continued down walking around and then down the ladder to platforms around the idle main generator and turbine. We had the small auxiliary boiler/turbine/generator up and running to supply the ship with electricity. Cas, a rather massive stoker, was tending it – by leaning on his shovel and no doubt dreaming of the saloons he'd soon be owning, judging from the smile on his face. He greeted me with a sly smile, 'Hey Chief'.

I returned his smile and said, 'Don't spend it all in one place or on one girl, Cas.'

He grinned. 'Ha – girls. Oh, I know how to handle them. I've got plans. Big plans.'

I nodded and walked slowly on, looking everything over – like I used to do aboard the Starry Shore – though these days my inspection is confined just to the engine room, the limits of my domain.

I climbed back up, past DosKe on control platform, and on up to the upper platform outside my office. I was just heading for the stairwell up to my cabin when the Captain slipped down the steep steps in front of me.

'A word with you, Chief. In my office.'

'Right, Captain,' I replied as she briskly turned and disappeared back up the steps. I followed her to the bridge and into her office just aft of the bridge. She shut the door behind me.

'You are my friend and a loyal officer,' she said. There didn't seem to be a question mark at the end of that sentence.

I tried to keep any hint of surprise out of my voice when I replied, 'Yes, of course. Absolutely.'

'Good. I've had an unpleasant meeting with my cousin, DeArjen, DeRaze, and PinTin. It didn't end on a good note. There's going to be trouble.' She stepped around her desk and unlocked a steel cabinet.

'Can't agree on acquiring the soul stones?'

'Oh, we agreed. Not that I gave them any choice,' she replied, stepping around to the back of her desk. 'DeRaze wasn't happy. He seemed to keep forgetting that he's not in charge. I am. It looks like I have to pull Dare's arse out of the fire again. If I can.'

'What's the plan?'

'I agreed to drift over to the far side of the island and send off a few rockets. Just at some rock formation or another. Just to let'em know what they're dealing with. Hopefully that will give them something to think about.'

'PinTin thinks that we may be able to trade for a few gems on the sly. There's always dissidents, malcontents and criminals in every society. And with as many soul stones as we saw on display – there were dozens in every headpiece and dozens of headpieces – there seems to be no shortage of soul stones, so he'd be very much surprised if there were not a few of them in private hands as well. He thinks that if we keep the trade goods out, some of them might slip on over and have a look. DeArjen backs him up on this, and he thinks he can work a trade or two. So we shift over, let them know we're not to be trifled with, and then head back here and see if anyone shows up.'

'And they're happy with that?'

'No one is. But they'll settle for it. For now. But I don't trust DeRaze. The gems have gone to his head. Clouded his judgment. He went on and on about just taking them even if we had to kill them all. Couldn't be made to see things sensibly. He shut up when it became clear that I wasn't about to take the Lora Lakes over the village and reduce it to rubble unless they turned over the headpieces.'

'I don't know what he and his crew might do if left on their own, since they are armed. We're going to have to deal with him straight away. You and I,' she added as she swung the heavy cabinet door open. 'I'm not worried about the crew. They may be drunk on an imaginary fortune at the moment, but if we respond decisively, they can be cured of that quickly enough. Rough they may be, but they're neither cold-blooded murderers nor armed. We are. Armed that is. Take this.' She pulled out a holstered spring

gun.

'Thanks, but I have my own. And I know how to use them.'

'That's against company policy.'

I shrugged. 'They're not springers. They're weapons from my former life. They fire a tiny electrically charged dart that can knock people out for more than four hours with a hit anywhere. The fact that it's nonlethal means that I can use them freely, and more effectively as well.'

'Are you armed now?'

'Ah, no. I was just planning on stepping around to my cabin to get them when you arrived. Is the situation that desperate?'

'Could be. I'm not going to take the chance. I intend to disarm DeRaze's crew and confine them to their quarters in the hold until... Well, until tempers cool.'

'If we can. FezSer was just out and about only a short while ago.'

She frowned. 'Who of the crew can we count on?'

'Of my crew, I'd not trust DosKe. We don't get along. BayLi can be trusted, but she's very young and very inexperienced to deal with this type of an affair. The oiler and stokers will probably blow in the wind. A show of strength should keep them in line.'

'Right. I'm sure I can count on my mates and some of the senior deckhands. Then there's Dare and his crew. I doubt they'd be much help, but we could arm them, if only to keep the crew in line... Just like old times, hey, Chief?'

'What do you mean?'

'Haven't you seen this all before – pirates, bandits, assassins.'

She may've been largely sarcastic, but there was an edge of hope in there, too.

'I must admit that I've had the misfortune to cross courses with the likes of DeRaze and his crew under various conditions. I can't claim to be any Brilliant Pax... that is to say, a hero. But my weapons are an order of magnitude better than springers. They fire fast, true, silent and you can use them with a bit of abandon since they still have a hundred darts or more in their magazine. As long as we can dodge their slugs, we'll have the upper hand. Two with darters against six ain't bad odds...'

'We'll need them. Still, it's best to have some bargaining power as well. I may destroy the gyroscope tape. I don't need it to get us back, and all the soul stones in those headdresses won't buy you a cup of tey if they can't get them home.'

'I'd not bother, Captain – as long as they have DeArjen, they won't be needing you or the gyro-tapes.'

She looked grim – or rather, grimmer. 'There is that...' She may have thought of a curse or two, but said. 'Right. Get your weapon. Meet me on the after-deck. We'll tackle them in their quarters.'

'Right. See you in a couple of minutes.'

'Do you want to take this springer along for BayLi?'

'No. You and I can deal with them ourselves. I'll show you how to operate a darter and between the two of us, we'll put them to sleep before they know what's happening.'

She nodded. 'I'll arm DisRay and brief him on our plans and then be down directly.' With that, she unlocked the weapons safe and collected two slug pouches and grabbed the springers. We stepped out into the dim companionway. I turned for the stairs down to my cabin. She for the door to the bridge.

Don't move, you two!'

I looked back to see DeRaze, a long barreled spring gun in hand, swinging up the opposite stairwell. Another of his crew followed him.

'Drop the springer, DeRaze,' barked the Captain, her springer in hands as well.

Neither of them hesitated. He swung up his springer and snapped off a shot at the Captain even as she fired hers, while diving back into her cabin. I heard both slugs bang off the companionway bulkheads, and being unarmed, I didn't linger. I dived down the steep stairwell. DeRaze had not wasted any time, so events were now moving at escape velocity. Still, with a darter in hand, and a bit of luck, I might be able to put a quick end to it.

I was certain that KimTara could hold them off until I had my darters in hand. The interior doors of the Lora Lakes were only thin aluminum, but you don't go busting them down with a springer or two aimed at you from the far side.

There were six in DeRaze's crew. Two were accounted for. I found two more when I rounded the corner to my cabin. They were pounding on my cabin and didn't see me.

I could now hear a pounding from above as well, likely on the captain's cabin. The two at my door gave up pounding and were now trying to kick it open. I could hear some shouting now as well. DeRaze had, indeed, acted decisively. I continued down the stairwell and carefully stepped into the dark vault of the engine room. I'd collect Hissi and then perhaps we could hide out and wait for a chance to get to my cabin for the darters. Darters in hand, I'd be a force to be reckoned with, even if I just laid in ambush... But the darters weren't in hand.

I slipped down the ladder leading to the black cake bunkers, and the boiler head. I'd need to let things play out a bit before acting. So I stepped into the stoke hole between the bunkers and boiler to hide out, when DosKe, with a long knife in his hand, and two stokers, DenToy and MasTe, armed with iron bars, stepped around the boiler.

'Found him,' yelled DosKe, and turned to me with a grin. 'I thought I saw you sneaking about! We was looking for you, Chief.'

I heard a reply from above. Hiding out no longer seemed an option.

I glanced around and snatching up a two-meter pole with a hook at the end that was used to open and close boiler doors and maneuver the conveyor, faced the trio. 'Well, you've found me. Put down the knife and bars, gentlemen. It won't go well for you if you get caught up in the dragon hunter's mutiny. Dead men won't get a share of the gems.'

'It's not going to go well for you, Chief. We've some issues to resolve,' he added, advancing behind his knife. DenToy and MasTe held back a bit. They weren't the brightest, but perhaps just smart enough to know that this might not turn out well for them if things did not go exactly their way, especially since everything was still up in the air.

I hadn't time to talk. And while I only occasionally practiced my martial arts since leaving Magistrate Pi's entourage, I was confident that I remembered enough of the staff lessons Py had taught me to be able to handle an engineer with a long knife and two rather reluctant hands with short iron bars. At any rate, I didn't stop to think about it, but lunged, my pole little more than a swish of air until it struck DosKe's hand, sending the knife clattering against the boiler. I didn't stop, but swirled it around again and landed a blow alongside his upper arm and shoulder. I put my heart into that one. My St Bleyth ancestors may've been slumbering for many 'a round now, but they had opened an eye and grimly approved of the blow. We weren't giving quarters this time around.

My blow lifted DosKe off the deck with a 'Ugg -' and slammed him into the boiler. He bounced off, as limp and silent as a rag doll. I brushed him aside and charged the two stokers, who had turned and were retreating before me. I landed a blow or two on their backs to keep them moving before a slug pinged off turbine casting next to me. Looking up, I saw two of DeRaze's hunters on the upper platform. One was cocking his gun, the other taking aim. I dodged closer to the turbine and kept running, seeking cover behind the generator and transformers.

With the engines idle, it was dark in the engine room, and of course, cluttered with machinery and pipes, but it was also a dead end. Py may've felt comfortable facing two spring guns, able to dodge their slugs a fraction of a second before they were fired, but I wasn't. I'd have to keep running. Running in a crouch, I scurried across to the center of the room at the after end of the compartment and found the hatch to the service tunnel that ran along the ship's keel. It held all the power and control cables that connected the generator to the various motors and steering vanes aft. I carefully pried it up, and slipped down into the blackness, pulling it closed behind me, trying not to make a sound.

The tunnel was a little over a meter square with the top half filled with cable, but you could pull your way through it, even in pitch blackness. Which is what I did, as fast as I could, ignoring the

scrapes on my knees and shoulders as I shot through the darkness beneath #3 hold towards the faint light that marked the hatch grill in the small after compartment. As I reached it, a faint light shot from the shaft behind me.

'There he is!' someone exclaimed, but I was out of the way when the slug pinged against the end of the shaft.

If I wanted to keep my freedom, there seemed no alternative but to abandon ship. The small compartment was lit by skylights set in the deck above, so I could see the two access hatches, for the port and starboard wings and access to the main propellers. I stumbled over to the starboard access hatch, and bracing myself, pushed the heavy handle down to release it. But then, before I pulled it open – I experienced a flash of clarity. I stopped, pushed it shut again without latching it and scurried back across the compartment to open the port side access hatch instead. I pulled it open as the overhead hatch swung open, sending more light knifing down into the compartment, and the excited announcement, 'There, get him!'

I dived out onto the wing as another slug pinged against the hull next to me. Planting my magnetic boots on the wing, I scurried alongside the hull to the edge of the wing and swung around and under it to put it between me and any more slugs from the deck. I considered leaping for the trees below, but decided it might just be a tad too far. I'd not want to be hung up in mid-air, so I scrambled around to where the anchor line angled out to the ground below. I jumped for it and snagging it, raced, hand over hand, down the cable towards the rocks and the spindly trees below. A slug went whizzing by, just as I reached the trees.

I pulled myself deeper into its thin branches and swung around its trunk to get out of sight of the deck. Once I was deep enough in the branches, I didn't linger, but, putting the rocky point between me and the ship, sailed, branch to branch, tree to tree until I'd put the better part of half of a kilometer between me and the Lora Lakes. Where I stopped and collected my breath.

I was out of the frying pan and half a kilometer deep in the fire. But I was alive and free. All I needed to do was to catch my breath and come up with a plan of action. The first part was a lot easier than the latter. I hadn't made much progress on the second part before Hissi glided up through the dim lit branches, barking with laughter.

I greeted her with a hug, ignoring her amusement at my plight. Things were looking a little brighter.

'You didn't happen to bring along something to eat, did you?' I asked as she swirled around me.

She barked another laugh. I was only half kidding.

## Chapter 29 In the Hall of the Dragon Throne

We sat in the tree and considered our options. If they missed seeing the unlatched access door – the one that I didn't use to escape – and – kept a careless watch, I should be able to regain access to the Lora Lakes. There was, however, a 50-meter gap from the shore to the underside of the ship that I'd have to cross unobserved to do so, though once on the underside of the hull, I'd be out of sight from any sentries on the deck. Mutineers, especially in the thrall of unimaginable wealth might be a bit carefree and careless. I glanced up through the tree branches at the distant Lora Lakes. I could make out several crew members on the after-deck, one at bulwark, who may have been keeping watch. I'd keep a watch as well, and as soon as I saw a lapse, move.

'Let's get ourselves into position to make a dash for the ship, Hissi. It doesn't appear as if they're

going to bother tracking me down.'

She gave a low hiss, and we started moving back towards the Lora Lakes, deep in the cover of the rather spindly jungle. Once on board and inside, I should be able to sneak back to my cabin and liberate my darters. The Lora Lakes was not a large ship, but DeRaze's crew and any recruits from the ship's crew would likely be fairly scarce. My St Bleyth ancestors seemed confident that I could, with my darters in hand, deal with what I found and do so silently enough to retake the ship, one dart, one mutineer at a time.

Except.

Except in the thrall of unimaginable wealth, they didn't wait for me. We had only reached the nearest point in the jungle to the ship, when the Lora Lakes's main propellers began to spin, and it slowly swung out into the Shadow Sea, pulling up the trees it had been moored to in the process. They paused only briefly to clear the anchor lines before turning and starting for the native village at the far end of the Shadow Sea.

I cursed softly as I watched it recede, running on battery power. The mutineers hadn't grown carefree and careless, but impatient.

'I don't want to be marooned yet again, Hissi. And especially not here. Let's follow the ship. We need to get back aboard and take control.' Somehow.

It was over 10 kilometers to the far end of the Shadow Sea to where the peaks rose with the native village beyond them. The shoreline I had to traverse was a mixture of jungle, bamboo forests and rugged terrain. It would've been a long, rugged walk on any planet, but in free fall, we could soar from tree top to tree top, making the journey in a few hours. Assuming we didn't run into any natives, or large predators, since we were unarmed. Still, what choice did we have? We'd have to risk it.

The shore and Shadow Sea appeared to be deserted of natives. They seemed to have returned to the village after their great display of displeasure. It was, after all, only an hour or two later. Events had moved very quickly indeed. Far faster than I had anticipated.

Being unarmed, I could only hope that generations of hunting had either eliminated or greatly reduced any great predator. Still...

'Take the lead, Hissi. Scout ahead. I'll follow you.'

She turned to me, gave me a depreciating look with her two black eyes and a long sarcastic hiss as well.

'Hey, you're a great predator too, you know. I'm just giving you first crack at all the snacks along the way.'

She barked a laugh, and took off.

I followed behind her waving form, weaving my way along the top branches of the trees, pulling myself along, shooting as many of the gaps as possible while keeping up my momentum. I was as close to flying as I'd ever likely be – branch to branch over the pale, spindly jungle, through the feathery tops of the bamboo forests. Even in free fall, this was exhausting work, especially since I was hiking with my arms rather than my legs, but the alternative – of remaining here for life – was a great motivator. Though my hands grew red and raw, my shoulders ached in protest with every pull, and my breath came in ragged gasps, I pushed on. I didn't expect I'd have a great deal of time. The mutineers were in a hurry, so events would be resolved – one way or another – in short order.

Still, it us nearly took four hours of swinging through the tree tops and, eventually, dodging our way around the steep peaks at the far end before we reached the last, and tallest, of the great fang peaks, beyond which lay the village.

'Hold up, Hissi!' I called as we reached the edge of the jungle at the foot of the jumbled, vine entwined side of the little mountain. 'Let's rest a bit. I need to catch my breath. And we need to plan our next move.'

She turned about and settled next to me as I wedged myself in between two vines, the size of tree trunks, to stay out of sight of any passing native. Taking my suggestion to rest a bit, she serenely closed

her eyes to nap – more for sarcastic effect than any need to rest, I suspect. Nevertheless, I let her nap for a while in silence as I collected my breath and gathered my wits.

'What do you think is going on – on the other side,' I asked her after a while. 'I expected to be hearing and seeing fireworks of some sort by now. I would've thought that DeRaze was the type who would negotiate only after a rocket barrage. Either I've misjudged him, or I've miscalculated somewhere else...'

The mountain ranges may've blocked the flashes and noise of exploding rockets. But I doubted it. And there was no sign of the Lora Lakes floating overhead. I'd lost sight of it behind the peaks early in the journey and hadn't seen it since.

Hissi had little to say on this subject. Indeed, she didn't even bother to open an eye.

'We'll push on ahead, as soon as I get my breath back,' I continued. 'I haven't a clue as to what to expect, but if there's any chance at all of reaching the ship without getting noticed, we'll take it.' I then went on to explain how I hoped to find the starboard access hatch unlatched, and then use that to sneak back into the engine room... 'Between the two of us, we should be able to get to my cabin and my darters. Darters in hand, we can take the ship back. Don't you think?'

I shouldn't have phrased that as a question, since she gave me a dismissive snort and a long hissing sigh. But that was Hissi being Hissi, so I discounted it.

'Well, at least we need to try. The big question is; can we reach the hatch? I'm assuming they're either hanging over the village or have landed close to it. The ship may be surrounded by natives... In which case... In which case I haven't a clue as to what to do, save watch and wait. Or they may've chased them deep into the jungle, in which case, we might be able to sneak aboard... (a doubtful hiss) Of course, if you have another plan, feel free to share it.'

I had her there. She just barked a laugh, as carefree as ever.

'Right. Off we go. Let's see what we're dealing with.'

We hadn't gone far up the steep slope before we came upon a narrow crevasse that seemed to split the little mountain in half – its inner depths lost in blackness, but looking up, I could see a thin pale line of sky that seemed to cut halfway through the mountain.

'This crevasse looks like a short cut to take us through the mountain. Plus, it should keep us out of sight as well. Let's see where it leads.'

Hissi swung around and following her, I began to pull myself up through the narrow, cave-like crevasse, ledge to ledge, outcropping to outcropping. For all I could tell, it may've gone straight through the mountain, but I wasn't prepared to travel in complete darkness, so we followed it up and inwards, going no deeper into it than the faint light of the Shadow Sea sky could penetrate.

As we left the old vines behind and got deeper into the mountain, I noticed something very strange. Leaping from outcropping to outcropping, it almost seemed as if I could cling to the sides of the crevasse with my boots.

'Hold up,' I called out softly to Hissi on reaching a spot open to the sky, high above. Looking at my boots, I discovered that they had a thick cushion of dust clinging to their magnetic soles. I scraped this fine, magnetically charged dust off one and planted it on the side of the crevasse. It snapped to it like it would do on the hull of a ship. Very strange. It had to have a great deal of iron ore in it for that to happen. Looking closer, it seemed like an ordinary rock, weather worn, pitted and corroded, streaked, rusted, and stained, and yet, it had an underlying smoothness. I put my ear to the "rock" and pounded my fist on it. Faintly, but definitely, I could hear a hollowness in it. I looked around at the surrounding "rocks". They hadn't changed, but suddenly, I was seeing them as crumpled metal. It began to dawn on me that this vast, rugged mountain might actually be a pile of wreckage of some sort. A very, very, ancient pile of wreckage, judging by the vines that entwined it, a pile of slowly decaying metal. The shapes of the outcroppings, the spanning arches, the crumpled walls now looked to be the twisted and crumpled remains of a... A city? A building? A ship? One thing was certain, given its age and the fact that it wasn't a mound of rust, it was the wreckage of something made of a very advanced alloy.

Could it be the wreckage of one of the Dragon Kings' ships?

That might explain the presence of the Dragon Kings' old Scarlet Guard... Were they the descendants of some survivors of this wreck?

I recalled my mission, and the urgency of it, and shook myself free of this idle speculation. I could think while I advanced. Perhaps later we'd have time to explore this mountain and its implications... Hopefully we would. But not if I just stood here pondering it.

'Onward Hissi,' I said, as she waited patiently ahead.

We continued upwards, moving ever deeper into the – the wreckage?

We had reached perhaps the center of the mountain, probably halfway up it as well, when I noticed, something. It was... well, I'm not certain what it actually was. It seemed as if I felt a current of air, or electricity. Or perhaps it was a vague sound, the echoes of an echo or the distorted whispers of a chant. Or none of the above. I froze.

'What's that, Hissi?' I whispered.

She hissed softly, "?"

It was gone when I stopped to listen. But when I started climbing again, I could feel the “current” that pulled me, cautiously, but definitely toward what seemed to to be a vague, rhythmic sound. Even as I followed it, I couldn't say what this current was. It seemed almost like a physical current, a push of air on my back, or a drawing of it before me that pulled me forward, pretty much without a conscious thought. It was pulling me the way I wanted to go, so it could have simply been curiosity. But a curiosity that had short circuited any common sense I may possess, because it didn't take me too long to realize that the sound – it was clearly chanting now – was that of the Dragon People, much like the one they had used when they had surrounded the Lora Lakes. And yet, I kept following it.

If my common sense hadn't been short circuited, I would certainly have fought against this curiosity, which, like a hidden current, was drawing me through the dim, narrow crevasse towards this chanting. I wasn't completely in its thrall. I knew what I was doing, and knew I was running risks I shouldn't be running, but I cautiously pushed on nevertheless.

The eerie, rhythmic chanting grew ever louder as we slowly made our way through the twisting fracture that fell away into pitch blackness beneath us and rose towards the pale sky above us, until, at last, we reached a spot where the fissure narrowed to no more than half meter. The chanting seemed to come from just beyond this narrow passage. Cautiously I slipped through this fissure to catch a narrow glimpse of a vast, dimly lit space.

Wedged in this fissure, the current was very strong now on my back. It seemed to have the force of rushing water, so that I had to cling to a corroded outcropping – perhaps a beam – to keep from being pushed out into the great hall. And yet, heedless of danger, I still edged closer and closer to the opening in order to get a better view of what was happening in what I came to see as a vast chamber dimly lit by the fracture from above.

It must have been at least 100 meters in diameter, and twice that in height – the full height of the peak itself. A large, squashed, black structure rose from the center of the floor, more than a 100 meters below me. Its original shape may've been spherical – perhaps 10 meters in diameter. It seemed to be covered in an intricate mosaic of black cells of various sizes. Now twisted and squashed into a strange fluid shape, these cells flowed in a swirl of uneasy patterns between the gaping gaps where the sphere had been twisted and torn out of shape. The elders and sorcerers of the Dragon People, in their flowing robes and headdresses, stood halfway up the structure – where it had been flattened to almost look like the seat of a giant throne. The once spherical walls of the vast chamber were completely lined with chanting red-feathered figures, standing, clinging, and floating shoulder to shoulder, head to feet.

I realized, with a very dangerously subdued start, that the narrow fissure I had half slipped through was also surrounded by the scarlet feathers of the Dragon Guard clinging to the wall all around me. Indeed, their faces were almost next to mine, but they appeared to be even deeper enthralled than me. They never noticed me.

I paid them no further mind as the current tried to push me further into the vast chamber.

I was now out far enough to be able to look down to the floor of the chamber. It was lit by rows of flaming torches. Circling the base of the black sphere were the crew of the Lora Lakes, the mutineers at least, each with a broad, bloody knife in their hands. They were dancing. Dancing to the eerie, erratic tempo of the chanting. Around and around the black throne they went, striding, jerking, dancing like puppets on a string. At odd points the tempo and volume would increase and each of them – perhaps 18 of them in all – would each spin and take a swipe at their neighbors with the long bloody knives, sending up a faint haze of blood. Then, somehow, they continued to dance on, as if the blow meant nothing to them. Perhaps they were dead already. They should've been. Hopefully they were.

And yet, I wished to join them in their dance. It was my place.

And I would've, if Hissi had not nipped my ear, drawing blood and a painful exclamation, lost in the chant. But it brought me to my senses, at least momentarily. Long enough to know that I needed to get out of there. Fast.

I slipped back, fighting the unseen current that was pushing me towards the circle around the base of the black throne and started to climb upwards, seeking the light of the Shadow Sea in a mad scramble, fearful that my breaking of the spell would be noticed.

Only after I'd put the chanting mostly out of earshot did the current recede and my full wits return.

'A close call, Hissi. Thank you. You, no doubt, saved my life. What's a piece of an ear lobe compared to a life?' I added, looking at the blood on my shoulder and on my hand as I reached to stem the warm flow of blood down my neck.

She growled a low, heartfelt agreement.

'Did you feel it too?'

She growled again. She had.

'We'd best be going. It looked like more than half the crew was down there – the mutinous crew. I recognized the bloody shape of DeRaze. Hopefully we can secure the Lora Lakes and clear out. They won't be returning. And I've a feeling all of the natives are in there as well. Lead on!'

We scrambled up to reach the faint light, and then out and over the metal crags, now covered with vines. On the far side of the wreckage mountain we saw the Lora Lakes anchored on the ground at the foot of the mountain. The village, actually more of a city, built in the trees of a sparse jungle stretched out and up the steep forested hillside beyond it. The ship and village both looked to be deserted.

'Right,' I said. 'Let's get aboard.'

How it caught my eye, and why I paused when I saw it, I couldn't say, but nestled in the crevasse of the small vine roots that I was holding on to was a small round black stone. I paused and worked it out to examine it. It looked to be a small soul stone. I picked it up and examined it. It was a smooth, black oval, as small as my little finger fingernail. I brought it up to my eye and saw, in its depths, the black facets of dark colors – a boundless space you could fall into, if you didn't catch yourself.

I'd been there, briefly before. It was a darq gem. Or, as they are known in the Saraime, a soul stone. I realized that they were one and the same.

And even as that flash of insight faded, I realized what that black structure back in the cavern was made of – tens of thousands of darq gems or soul stones – call them what you want – of all sizes set in an intricate mosaic. And this insight was followed by another, tumbling over the preceding one, confusing me more than enlightening me. These soul stones had a purpose. I'd seen them in the collars of the Guards I'd crossed orbits with before – the ones that I assume who were still in the service of the Dragon Lords, or at least the owners of that ancient ship – they seemed to serve as some sort of telepathic gateway...

I looked at the darq gem I held in my fingers and, well... As I may've mentioned before, I'm no more superstitious than the next spaceer. But I'm not all that much less either. And even though I had, after all, a darq gem tucked away in my sock drawer for the better part of a decade, I somehow found that I had no desire to hang on to this one. Given my experiences with the Dragon Guards I'd crossed orbits



with who were wearing them, and having just seen my former shipmates hacking each other to bloody bits in their thrall, I had a feeling that I didn't want to be in the presence of one ever again.

And even as that thought crossed my mind, I felt this great wave of... Well, I suppose it was some sort of telepathic power. It rolled over us like a silent wave, lasting only a second, before it was gone, leaving a sort of vacuum that seemed to suck not only my breath from my lungs, but my thoughts from my head. And then that was gone as well.

I stared at Hissi. 'What was that?' I whispered.

She stared back, her black eyes wide and released a low and soft hiss.

'I think the party below is over...' I said, and realizing I still had the darq gem in my hand, slipped it back into the little crevasse where I'd found it.

I looked up. Hissi had been watching me closely. 'Let's lift.'

She hissed an eager, approving hiss, and took off down the steep slope. I followed as fast I could, skimming over the vines, trying to stay hidden. I didn't fear the natives, but I didn't want to tip off the watch aboard the Lora Lakes, if there was any.

The ship appeared to be deserted. The gate to the after deck was locked, so I had to hope they'd overlooked the unlatched starboard access hatch I'd left. Reaching the level, I scurried under the starboard after wing and carefully climbing around it, put my hand on the outside handle, and gently pushed. It squeaked open. I glanced into the stern compartment. It was empty.

'After you,' I said to Hissi, and followed her in, closing the hatch after me. I let my eyes adjust to the dimness. It was time to formulate a plan. Hissi let out an exasperated hiss.

'I suppose you're right,' I whispered. There can't be many, if any, of the mutineers aboard. Let's go.'

I returned to the engine room via the access tunnel, and then very slowly and carefully, undid the latch securing the hatch and lifted it up. The engine room was dark, save for a light over the control platform above. I could see a figure slumped in the chair, back to us. Searching about, I found my pole absently wedged under the nearest transformer. I slipped it out, and carefully glided up through the engine room to alight on the control platform behind the dozing MasTe.

He was wearing a spring gun on his waist, which I extracted without awakening him. I put its barrel next to his ear and said softly, 'Don't move or make a sound.'

He did both. He jerked away and would have flown entirely off the chair had I not put a hand on his shoulder. He also yelped loudly.

'Quiet you fool, or I'll quiet you permanently,' I hissed.

'Chief?' he asked, half turning to see me.

'Who else is aboard,' I growled. 'The truth, if you value your life.'

'Diz, Cas and Zara. They're on the bridge or sleeping.'

'And the Captain and the rest of them? What did you do with them?'

'We didn't do nothing to them. We just locked them in the empty storage room. We was going to maroon them on one of the outer islands. No one was hurt bad,' he added, nervously.

'Right. Come with me, no tricks unless you want to end up dead or marooned.'

'Aye, Chief. I'm your man.'

'We'll see... Where are the rest of your lot?' I asked as we made our way to my cabin. Not that I didn't know.

'We sailed to this here village and expected to have a bit of a fight. But the all the tree houses were deserted. So we landed. One of them flowing robe fellows then came out of a cave – the one with the broad path leading to it. He bowed, nice and respectful like, and laid one of them crowns on the ground in front of the cave. Four of us was assigned to hold the ship, and the rest went over the side to fetch the crown. I guess they decided to investigate the cave since they all went in. Haven't come out yet. It's been awhile, I guess...'

He didn't know any more than that. I didn't need to know more.

I collected my darters and my armored jacket, just to be sure, and then we proceeded back down to

the empty storage room beyond the bunkers to free the non-mutineer crew.

I had MasTe unlock the door and open it while I covered with my darter.

Captain KimTara was standing before the door, arms folded, ready to lay down the law, my 2nd engineer, BayLi, the 1st and 2nd mates, ValDare and most of his crew, and perhaps a dozen other crew members were standing behind her in the small compartment. Her uniform was not neat.

She might have smiled, ever so briefly, when she saw me. She nodded, 'Chief.'

'Captain,' I replied with a nod. 'I trust you've not been too ill-treated.'

'We're alive. They had hostages. Nothing to be done but surrender. What's the ship's status?'

'I've captured MasTe here. He says that Dis, Cas and Zara are around somewhere, either napping or on the bridge. The rest of the mutineers are off ship. And they won't be coming back,' I added.

MasTe gave me a startled look and got very pale.

'How do you know?' KimTara asked.

'I've just come from the great cavern in the mountain where they are. The natives must have used the narcotic or telepathic power of the soul stones to lure them in, and they are now ritually killing them. Trust me, they're not coming back.'

She gave me a searching look. I probably looked shaken enough to be believed, since she didn't question me further. 'Right. That story can wait. The Chief and I will see to the rest of the crew on board. Stay here until we've secured the ship,' she said, briskly, to the crew behind her and started off for the stairs upwards.

I tossed the spring gun I'd collected and slug pouch to ValDare, just in case, and followed the Captain. Dis and Zara were lounging about the bridge – they surrendered without protest, seeing that I had them covered. Cas was sleeping in his hammock. We collected him and marched the three down to the engine room.

'What about the rest? The ones off ship. Are you sure we can't do anything about them?' she asked as we herded our captives down to the engine room.

I shook my head. 'Too late. They may've already been dead when I saw them,' and went on to briefly outline what I had seen and experienced for myself in the great cavern. 'From the wounds they already had inflicted on each other, I almost think their bodies were being controlled by the sorcerers. They shouldn't have been upright, much less dancing.'

She nodded grimly. 'We'll sail, then. Raise steam – but we won't wait on it. We should have battery power to sail without steam.' She rarely asked questions, even if they seemed like ones.

'Right. The batteries were topped up. Sailing here wouldn't have drained them very much. Ah, you don't mind if I put these four to work? They're harmless enough. Stupid rather than sinister.'

They were looking pretty pale after overhearing my account of the fate of their mates, and seemed docile enough. We were rather shorthanded.

'Whatever you think best. We'll need them all sooner or later.'

## Chapter 30 The Long Voyage Home

01

'Step up to the bridge and have a look, Chief,' said the Captain from the com.

'Right up,' I said. They had shut down the main propellers, so something was up.

A minute later I was standing on the bridge wing deck, glasses in hand, studying the passage out of the Shadow Sea. Or rather where the passage had been. It was now clear what the Dragon People had been up to while we'd been waiting for them to show an interest in our trade goods. There were thick tree trunks entangled in a web of heavy vines now floating in the passage, as deep as we could see.

'Looks like we've some work ahead of us to clear the passage. Still, I wouldn't think it's blocked the whole length. A couple hundred meters at most.'

She continued to stare ahead. 'Ideally we'd send the launches ahead to cut the vines and haul the trees off to one side. Seeing as we're shorthanded, and vulnerable to attack once the natives notice we've gone, I'm going to use rockets to try to blow the blockage loose enough to push through. Not ideal, but we may be pressed for time.'

She wasn't asking for my advice, but was, I think, giving me an opportunity to object. Considering what I'd recently witnessed, my feeling was that the sooner we'd clear the Shadow Sea the better. 'Could work. It'd be a long hard job to cut our way through since we don't have ten thousand hands to call on to do the job. Worth a try.'

She turned to ValDare standing next to her. 'Dare?'

'Given a running start, I don't see why we can't just bull our way through. The ol'Lora Lakes should be able to build enough inertia to shear those vines and brush the trees aside. She's a solid built ship.'

'The bow may be able to take the blows, but I plan to be up on the bridge. Care to join me?'

'Ah, yes, I see,' he admitted with a grin. 'Use your rockets.'

She nodded, 'TeyLin, get the forward launcher set up. DenToy, bring up two crates of rockets from the magazine.'

I stayed on the wing deck to watch the show, as the Captain joined TeyLin at the rocket launcher mounted on the bow of the ship. DenToy and another hand brought up the two metal cases of rockets.

The rockets were only one half meter-long, but they packed enough of a punch that when they exploded against the trunks of the great trees they sent them bounding about in a cloud of splinters – a hit or two tore them free of the web of vines they had been entangled in.

When the last two rockets of perhaps two dozen shot through the passage to explode beyond sight, the Captain called up from the rocket launcher, 'We'll give it a try. To your stations.'

Before going below, I paused for a last look back, down the gut of Shadow Sea. I could just make out through the faint shafts of light that crisscrossed the sea, the peak of that strange, ancient, and eerie metal ruin, faintly highlighted by one of the shafts of light falling from one of the many gaps in the island. Driven by necessity, I had thrust aside my memories of what that mountain of metal contained and that bloody dance around that twisted, not-quite-slumbering – Thing? – of soul stones.

I'd only managed to escape its power, thanks to Hissi. But it still existed within that mountain of ruin, and having seen its power and felt its menace, I felt that it needed to stay lost, as did these islands. Lost forever. I was absolutely convinced that whatever secrets these islands held, they were secrets that the humans of the Pela would be wise to steer well clear of. I knew the power of a single stone – what sort of harm could a hundred thousand of them bring to the Principalities, if that great black – Thing? – was sacked for its stones? I had the distinct feeling that they weren't for humans. That their full name, dragon soul stone, was far more significant than just a more colorful description. But keeping these islands secret was unlikely now, given the siren call of the dragon soul stones.

But yet there seemed more to my fears than just that. Something deeper still.

I didn't know for a fact that the Dragon Kings of legend existed. And I didn't know how humans fit into the full scheme of things in the Pela. But I had crossed orbits with perhaps the real Dragon People and perhaps a ship of the Dragon Kings. The Dragon People were not likely the Dragon Kings, so I couldn't absolutely say the Dragon Kings existed, or that they were a danger to humans, but I was convinced they – and their works – should be avoided if possible. Let sleeping dragons lie. There was nothing good in that mountain – in that vast ruin of a machine – for the humans of the Principalities.

And with that thought, while staring out across the Shadow Sea, at the shafts of light slashing down I felt – in a fleeting instance – something like a cold hand squeezing the breath from my chest, for it suddenly occurred to me what this island might actually be.

What if it was not an island? What if it was a ship? A 15 kilometer long ship, that in legend was capable of brushing islands aside in its flight? Was that metal mountain, and all the others scattered

about its decayed interior structures of a vast wrecked ship? What if the shore of the Shadow Sea was not made up of hundreds of small islands tied together by vines, but was actually a single shell – a ship's hull, partially ripped open, and now encased by vines and overgrown with jungle? Since many Pela's plants draw their substance from elements in air, it was perfectly possible that, given eons, the great vessel would take on the look of an island. I'd known bottle-blown asteroids, this size and larger. In the Fist Worlds they circled their suns as giant cruise ships. It was possible. Anything was possible in the Pela. And where there is smoke, there is fire – where there are myths and legends...

And as I took one last look down the possibly rotted-out guts of this vast vessel, I'd a strong feeling it wasn't quite dead. Not entirely dead. And certainly not something that should be stirred up. But now, it may've been too late.

The siren on the smokestack above me let out a loud warning screech. I looked back to see the passage looming, and decided that, aye, I best be going down to my place in the engine room. The bridge wind deck wasn't going to be very comfortable with all the splintered debris still floating in the passage.

02

The ship shuddered as it slowly nosed the floating trees aside. They banged and scraped along the hull, doing the paint no good, but that was a small price to pay to escape the Island – or Ship – of the Dragon People. We proceeded slowly, in stops and starts, for the better part of an hour until we had apparently cleared the blockade. The RPM needles on the control panel for the main propellers jumped as the passage opened up and there was a faint sensation of acceleration, that lasted only a few seconds before there was a dull bang. The ship shuddered and a red light sprang to life on the control panel I was monitoring. We had lost connections with the bridge. Not good.

I killed the main engines, yelled to BayLi down by the turbine to come up and monitor the controls, while I went up to see what was wrong.

Even as she was arriving at the control station, ValDare called down from the passage, 'To the bridge, Chief! We need gear to clear wreckage!'

'I'm on it.' And turning, I called down to the depths of the engine room, Dis, Cas, MasTe, get up here!'

I raced over to the tool locker to hand out several salvage axes and some crowbars to my crew as they arrived. I grabbed a large power saw. 'Follow me,' I said and led them racing up the steep stairs to the upper superstructure and then up to the bridge.

We found it to be a shattered mess, small bits and slivers of debris, and shards of shattered glass floating about a central pile of twisted wreckage. The first mate, TeyLin, dazed and bleeding from a long gash on his forehead was standing, weaving about, vainly trying to staunch the flow of blood with a rag. ValDare had returned and was clawing his way through the twisted steel panels of the bridge's after wall and ceiling, amongst a cloud of broken glass, splintered wood and shattered fixtures. Several of the deck crew had arrived shortly before me, awaiting orders.

'One of you, get TeyLin below to the surgery. Find someone to patch him up, if you can't. The rest of you, start shoving this wreckage. overboard'

'She's in there somewhere!' ValDare exclaimed, digging frantically through the small debris of the bridge.

'Who?'

'Tara.'

'Right, Dis, help ValDare clear the debris. Carefully, we don't know where the Captain is. The helmsman should be somewhere within there as well. Te, Cas follow me, we'll tackle this from the other side.' We had to go down a deck and across to the port side, since a great trunk of a tree had

apparently come smashing down from behind to plow through the chart room and bridge.

Several more crew members arrived and I put them to work, clearing the floating debris so that we could get at the more substantial wreckage. It took only several minutes of work before we spied the Captain pinned under the collapsed after wall of the bridge.

'We've found the Captain!' I yelled. I heard them acknowledge me, and made my way carefully through the twisted wreckage and the cloud of glass, dust and debris toward her, with my power saw to cut her loose.

She was alive, and conscious, more or less, but I could see dark blood staining her brown hair.

'I'm pinned,' she whispered, as I knelt beside her. 'Dare, TeyLin, and the KenTre?'

'Dare is fine. TeyLin has a gash in the head, but should be okay. Don't know about KenTre yet. Don't worry. Just relax, we'll get you clear.'

'My mistake...' she muttered.

DisRay, the 2nd mate had arrived and was putting the crew to work prying away the wreckage I cut away to get her out. The crew, working from the other side, found KenTre alive, but badly banged up with several broken ribs plus cuts and bruises. Hitting the chart room first had significantly slowed the tree trunk's momentum, and while it had still pushed through to the bridge, it had done so with less violence than its first impact.

The Captain had slipped into unconsciousness soon after we'd found her, having lost a fair amount of blood from a ragged wound in her left leg. ValDare had bandaged the cut on her head even before we managed to pull her completely free. We staunched the flow of blood from the gash in her leg before carefully carrying her to the infirmary. There Scholar PinTin and his two students were patching up TeyLin and KenTre. One of PinTin's students, with emergency medical training, had taken charge. She examined the Captain's leg. It didn't appear to be broken, but it would need to be carefully cleaned and sewn up.

While the Captain, TeyLin and KenTre were being looked after, I returned to the bridge to help DisRay and his crew clear the wreckage from the bridge. A still rather groggy TeyLin had returned to the bridge as well. As we worked to clear the wreckage, salvaging everything we could, he told us what had happened.

He said that the ship appeared to have cleared the blockade. However, there must have been some sort of a thick vine caught on the lower part of the bow that they didn't see. So when the ship surged ahead, this vine, still attached to one of the large tree trunks that the ship had already passed, pulled the tree trunk towards the ship from astern with the force of the accelerating ship striking the center of the upper superstructure from above and the back, tearing through the chart room and the center of the bridge. One moment everything looked clear, the next, there was a great rending sound and the bridge dissolved into a mass of splinters and debris.

The crew spent the better part of a watch cutting away the damaged superstructure, leaving a gaping hole in the center of the upper deck and no working controls on the bridge. The ship did, however, have emergency controls at the stern of the ship, in a small deckhouse. While the Dragon People had yet to appear, none of us was eager to linger, so as soon as we had most of the debris cleared from the bridge, we began to slowly navigate the passage once again, with DisRay on the bridge calling back orders to TeyLin and the helmsman at the emergency controls. It was slow, wearing, work, but getting clear of the vast ship/island, and its strange and unfriendly natives was our priority.

I relieved TeyLin at the helm so that he could get some rest and we cleared the passage near the end of it. There we halted, rested, and took stock.

the Captain's hammock. The Captain was unconscious and very pale. ValDare didn't look too much better. Seeing me, he got up and drew me outside into the corridor.

'She's been unconscious all this time and LieTa doesn't like the look of that wound on her leg. She stitched it up, but is now thinking it might be infected. Is there anything you can do?'

I shook my head. 'I'm afraid not. I don't know anything about healing...'

'But you claim to come from such an advanced society, surely you can give LieTa some advise.'

'Where I come from, we have machines to treat injuries. They analyze the patient's condition and using robotic arms, and a number of different energy fields, manipulate and stimulate on a cellular level to keep alive and then repair or rebuild the patient's body. I have a basic med unit in my boat which I'm sure could have had the Captain up and on her feet within several hours. But that's no help for us now. So with med units, we never really had to deal with health issues on our own. I'm sorry.'

He shrugged, and said rather doubtfully, 'Well, LieTa seems to know what she's doing. She says if it is infected, we have drugs in stock to deal with it and that I shouldn't worry... But it's just that, well, this is all my fault...'

It was, but I didn't say it.

He pondered that for a moment, before saying, 'Let's go up to the bridge. Lin wants to settle on a tentative plan with me and you might as well be involved as well,' ValDare continued.

We were still hanging just outside the passage into the Shadow Sea of the ship island. The bridge now had a canvas shelter rigged to cover the gaping hole in the center of the bridge.

'How's the Captain?' TeyLin asked as we entered.

ValDare shook his head and gave a brief report.

TeyLin drew a long breath, and then said, 'As the head of the charter party, what do you suggest we should do?'

ValDare shrugged. 'I haven't really thought... What do you suggest?'

'I don't feel comfortable starting the voyage back without the Captain on the bridge. Our gyroscope was destroyed by the collision and without that, the record it made of our passage is pretty useless. While we have the log to go by, navigating by the sparse and rather general log entries over the course of 60 rounds would be...unreliable. To be honest with you, I don't have a great deal of confidence in my ability to find our way home. I have the sightings we took on arrival, but between the air currents and the great distance we have to travel without anything to fix our course... Well, I have a great deal more reliance in the Captain's memory than my own. To retrace our course home, she would want to start at the end point. Given the length of our journey, even the smallest error at the beginning can have a big impact 50 or 60 rounds down the course.'

The bridge crew had recorded the ship's approach angles, relative to several island groups, so that on the return voyage they could use those readings to retrace the original course back. Like TeyLin, I was sure that the Captain had the ship's course in her as reliably as the lost gyroscope record.

'So you want to stay here until the Tara recovers.'

'I think we can move to our arrival point on the outer edge of the islands. It might be safer, and I'm confident I can get us back to our initial point. There we can wait for the Captain's recovery.'

ValDare turned to me. 'Chief?'

'I agree with Lin. As long as we're not in immediate danger, awaiting the Captain's recovery seems to be our best option. We are not short of supplies and have no timetable to meet. I did, however, notice some islands on our approach that looked to be a promising source of peat moss. If we have time, we could cut and harvest them to refill our bunkers. Hopefully it wouldn't be necessary – we have well over half our black cake bunkers filled yet. But if we have time... well it would give us an extra margin to play with on the other end.'

'A good idea, Chief. We also should replenish our water tanks as well. There are plenty of water-well trees about that we can tap and distill their stored water. Without DeArjen to steer us home, even with the Captain on the bridge we may end up going the long way back – 50 or 60 rounds of dead reckoning

can create a wide error for even the most astute navigator. I'm sure the Captain would have ordered those precautions in any event, now that we don't have DeArjen's sailor's sight.'

'Right. Carry on, Lin,' said ValDare.

TeyLin turned to me, 'Get steam up, Chief.'

I nodded and went down to get my ex-mutineer black gang working.

04

By the time we had reached the edge of the archipelago Captain KimTara's condition had taken a turn for the worse. The ragged tear on her leg had indeed become infected. She had begun running a high fever and was now drifting in and out of consciousness.

ValDare spent nearly all his waking hours attending to her every need, even keeping her company when she was sleeping. Hissi also kept the Captain company – I have no idea why. Perhaps it was merely concern. I don't know what she could do to help in the Captain's recovery, but then, I didn't really know all that much about Simla dragons. Our resourceful student/nurse, LieTa, put on a brave, cheerful face, but I don't think it fooled ValDare. It didn't fool me. The Captain's condition was iffy. If the medicine was working, it was taking its time.

For the next four rounds, I split my waking time between taking one of the ship's boats out with a crew to cut and collect peat moss and relieving ValDare at the Captain's hammock side, so that he could get some sleep.

After I relieved ValDare, two rounds after we had anchored on the edge of the archipelago, she opened her eyes and recognized me.

'Chief,' she said, faintly.

'Ah, Captain. A sip of water?'

She nodded, and I held the drinking globe with a straw to her lips.

'You're a great liar,' she said faintly, when she'd had enough, and adding after a pause to think, 'You're my friend.' Again, it was not clear if that was a statement or a question.

'Yes, Captain, I am your friend. We're friends...'

'I don't believe half of what you say. You're a great liar.'

'Most people don't,' I admitted. 'But I'm not a liar. I haven't lied to you.'

She was having none of that. Shaking her head weakly, she went on to list all my "lies", and outlandish tales I've told (many of them she must have picked up second hand, since I hadn't told them to her or when she was around) and how she wasn't a fool – it would take a great fool to believe anything I said. Maybe the idiot like MasTe might, but not she...

She had to have been quite delirious, if only because she only stopped talking to take a sip of water now and then. She went around and around, reciting my stories and remarking over and over again how big a liar I was, only to abruptly break off to tell me what a great fool her cousin Dare was as well. She was unable to decide whether I was a greater liar than Dare was a fool. She spent a great deal of time debating this with herself, but in the end, decided that we both pretty much took the blue ribbon, each in our own departments, as a liar and a fool.

Hissi would bark out her agreement every now and again.

'See, she knows it as well as I do,' she'd mutter, 'You can't fool us.'

Every so often she'd break off from reciting my lies to tell me that we were friends. She had only two friends, cousin Dare and me. Only two friends, and would get angry if I told her that she had a lot more than that. No, no, only two. Only two that understood her and let her be as she was.

She was still talking when ValDare returned to take the watch with her. I lingered for a while, but seeing him, she turned her full attention to him and began to dig up all the foolish things he'd done, and what an idiot child he'd been, and was still... I thought it best to leave them, reluctantly, since once she

got going, she was rather eloquent in her delirium, describing with biting sarcasm all the idiot escapades he'd led her into that she had to get him out of. This last one, taking the prize. I did, however, get to hear all of the of the stories I missed the next time I sat with her, since she was still delirious, until her fever broke during the fifth round. She recovered quickly after that, though she remained weak for the better part of a dozen rounds. When she wasn't delirious, she was her own silent self.

She must've heard mention or hints of her loquaciousness during her illness. I was keeping her (silent) company on the after-deck two rounds after her fever broke. She was tucked into a lounge chair on the deck, when she asked, 'I didn't say anything, while I was sick, did I?'

I glanced over and smiled 'Would you believe me if I said no?'

She may've smiled, faintly and briefly. 'No.'

'Right. Then you were mostly sleeping. I don't believe you said anything of consequence.'

She considered that for a while.

'Did I make a fool of myself?'

'No. You were delirious at times, and mumbled this and that. Nothing that you need to be concerned about at all. You're among friends.'

She turned her head to me. 'You're not lying to me, are you?'

'I never lie.'

Hissi, who was lounging about close by, barked a loud laugh.

'You always lie,' she muttered, and may've blushed, momentarily, ever so slightly, and said nothing more.

It would have been nice if we could talk a little more, but on the other hand, having had a glimpse of what goes on in that mind of hers, I suppose one should be careful what one wishes for...

We started for home three rounds after her fever broke. Though still weak, she insisted on returning to the bridge – she could lounge on the bridge as well as the after-deck. She directed the positioning of the ship using the arrival bearings and the setting of the bug eye bright spot indicator, and then nodded to TeyLin, who spun up the main drive propellers and we started for home.

05

Within a round we had lost sight of DeArjen's Islands, leaving behind its Dragon People, its dragons, birds, beetles, and the shadow of legends. Once more we were alone in the empty sky, with only the rhythmic beat of the propellers and the rustle of the wind to break the silence of the great wide-sea. The soul stone fever had passed, but not the memory of them. Little was spoken about them, or the rush of events that led to the death of 18 members of the expedition, but both were on everyone's mind.

I had held off saying much about the fate of the mutineers to the surviving crew until the Captain had recovered and we were well on our way. In part, so I needed to tell the tale only once, and in part to assemble my arguments for letting the lost island of the Dragon People remain lost. It was, and is, I'm convinced, absolutely vital that the secret of those islands be returned, unopened, back to legend. So it was only after we had put the islands well behind us that I told my story after the main meal.

I began at what I considered the beginning – with Glen Colin's stories of the great ships of the Dragon Kings that were said to be large enough to brush islands aside, and then on to my two encounters with the Dragon People with the soul stone collars, and how it affected me then. I told them about seeing the two ancient ships, small and large, driven by forces I could not name. Only after that did I tell them about the metal mountain and then in great detail, the current that drew me to the great cavern, the smashed soul stone "throne" and what I saw going on below and around me.

I then mentioned finding the little soul stone...

'You found a soul stone, and didn't bring it with you?' exclaimed ValDare, his mouth agape. 'You had



to know the value of even a small one!"

I shrugged. 'Yes, but having just witnessed its dreadful power over people, and from my personal experiences with the Dragon People, I really didn't feel like having one of those things around me.'

'They're harmless – unless, I guess, you know how to use them. Why if you didn't want it about, you could've sold it and gotten wealthy – perhaps even richer than myself. Or you could've given it to me,' he added, half seriously.

'Dare, I'm a fairly wealthy fellow, back in my home islands. And all those coins haven't done me a bit of good. No amount of coins would've kept you or anyone else from dancing that dance of death, if you'd gone with the mutineers. I didn't feel comfortable bringing something like that back. And well, I hesitate to say this, knowing my reputation, but that wasn't the first soul stone I held. I once had a soul stone – we call them darq gems – tucked away in my sock drawer for thousands of rounds, before I arrived here...'

The Captain rolled her eyes.

ValDare snorted. 'Really?'

'Really...' I replied, and spun a brief tale of Captain Miccall's ring, and its eerie effect when viewed. 'So you see, soul stones have some sort of power, or perhaps the more correct word is "function." And I think that function is somehow connected to the Dragon Kings. And that island – well it might actually be a Dragon Kings' ship...' And went on to describe my theory.

'Your greatest yet,' muttered the Captain. But we were friends, so it didn't bother me.

'Oh, I can't prove it – it may be the ruins of a base or a city, but since it fits the description of a Dragon King's ship, I'm willing to bet that it's the wreck of one. But that's not important. What is, is the soul stones and how they can be used. We've seen how they can take control of people, and we already know that they have some effects even without someone using them deliberately. With so many available, we need to consider all the threats they present, should this find become known – as it will, unless we're all in agreement.'

'What threat?' demanded ValDare.

'Well, let's just consider what impact that many soul stones would have on the Saraime. First of all, their prices would likely collapse under the weight of that many stones coming to market. But more importantly, if they do have some sort of narcotic or hypnotic power, what would that many soul stones, in the hands of many people, do to the entire population. If they have the power to command, control, and manipulate people, as they seem to do, how might they be used by those who own them? Picture what effects they could have on the social order of the Saraime if they were held by ambitious people.'

'But can they be used in that way? They may well have that effect on an individual, but there is no evidence that they could be used on a massive scale. Indeed, not only have some people possessed them for thousands and thousands of rounds, but you, yourself, claimed to have owned one with no ill effects,' said ValDare.

'Single stones have their effects. I couldn't bear to look at mine. And I gather the effects are much more marked on our feathered kind. But now we're talking a hundred thousand of them. What I saw in the mountain could only be explained by some extremely powerful force that had dead men dancing about like puppets. I have to believe that it was an effect of the thousands of stones linked, somehow, together with thousands of the Dragon People, though I can't offer any explanation for how this could be brought about. But I know what I experienced when I met the soul stone wearing Dragon People on my own. You can believe my tale or not, but how do you explain the fact that our shipmates simply walked into what was obviously some sort of trap? They had to be under the thrall of the stones as soon they left the ship. Clearly soul stones open an avenue into our brains which can allow others to take control of it. I don't think it would be wise to have them about.'

'Even if you're right, the incident you witnessed involved many thousands of them in one place with many thousands of Dragon People possibly involved in using them. Single ones don't seem to have any

marked effect beyond unease or a certain minor enthrallment. You lived in proximity of one for thousands of rounds without ill effects,' he replied.

'But who's to say the effects need be that obvious to be dangerous? Who's to say, knowing what we know now, they can't be harnessed? But there's some more things to be considered,' I paused to marshal my thoughts, to say what I believed as clearly as I could.

'I've been giving this a lot of thought, and I've come to suspect that the true purpose of soul stones is communication – mind to mind communication over vast distances. I will admit that I have no direct evidence to support this theory, but I've asked myself over and over again, what possible use could that sphere of soul stones have? We know they can be harnessed to project a sort of telepathic power, and we know some dragons, at least, are telepathic. I suspect that soul stones are some sort of device that transmits thoughts – or orders. Perhaps each stone is unique, "tuned", as it were, to an individual, so that each crew member had their own soul stone that tied them to the ship and the Dragon King who controlled them. A ship the size of the island could easily accommodate tens of thousands of crew – the Scarlet Guard I encountered had a stone that may have controlled them and certainly controlled me. I admit that this is just speculation on my part. But it is, I think, at least one possible explanation.

'What we need to consider, if I'm right, is that these soul stones are linked to the Dragon Kings. Between the Dragon People's legendary links to the fabled Dragon Kings, and the likelihood that their island is the wreckage of a vast ship, I think it would be hard to argue otherwise. And when you consider that I may have seen the true Dragon Kings' Scarlet Guard in action, you can't dismiss the Dragon Kings to the ancient past. I know there's an underlying feeling in Cimmadar that it would be wise to avoid calling themselves to the attention of these mythical Dragon Kings. Just why, I don't know, but they have chosen to be a hermit kingdom. There are likely several good reasons for that, but it is whispered that some hidden knowledge of the Dragon Kings may account for at least one of them. I can't say this for certain because I've never been to Cimmadar.'

Captain KimTara rolled her eyes again.

'I haven't been everywhere,' I said.

'It just seems like that,' she said softly.

I ignored her and continued, 'So what I'm going to suggest is that we have, on the Dragon People's Island, a hundred thousand links to either the Dragon Kings or some very advanced civilization. They may be links to beings dead for millions of rounds, but that's not a given. One has to wonder if some disruption caused by looting the soul stones would register on something, somewhere beyond the Endless Seas. What sort of attention might that attract? Do you want to attract the attention of the builders of a 15-kilometer-long great ship?'

'I'd suggest, Chief, that the legends of the Dragon Kings show that they already know about the Saraime,' said ValDare. 'What harm would gathering the stones do?'

'You may be right. The Principalities are a drop of water in a vast lake. It may've been forgotten. But, on the other hand, who knows what they'd do if they learned of their existence through the soul stones? Safety first has always been my motto. (Not that it seemed to matter.) So my inclination is to not take chances. And even if we discount the Dragon Kings, the soul stones are dark in so many ways – in their thrall you can dance even when dead. I think they're best left alone.'

The conversation about the soul stones went on for hours after that, and for days, and weeks as we sailed through the empty sky. In the end, I doubted that I had succeeded in talking would-be seekers of soul stones out of a return quest. It may be up to the Scarlet Guard – or the trackless Endless Sea – to protect the secret of the soul stones.

We missed the Halfway Islands. At the 30 round mark we began looking for the distant cloud bank that would be our first glimpse of the islands. By the 35th round, we'd pretty much abandoned hope.

We had no real reason for calling on them, we were still well supplied, but it got everyone, save the Captain, wondering about how far off course we might be. Without the gyroscope record, the course had been plotted using the log which recorded the bright spot reading and the air current reading the Captain had taken twice a round. They had then undertaken to follow these readings and the course they described in reverse. Missing the Halfway Islands showed how small errors over time build up.

The Captain did not seem concerned. 'The Halfway Islands are a tiny group of islands, the Saraime are not. We won't miss the Saraime.'

True enough, though the Saraime Archipelago was divided into those five groups, they tended to be a month's sailing long, but only a few rounds sailing narrow. We were approaching them from their narrow end, and if we struck one of the inner seas, we could miss them entirely, though I'm sure that when the time came that we should be in the Saraime, and had not sighted them, we would alter our course inward to strike them... If we hadn't missed them "high" or "low". Navigating in a mass of moving air with only one point of reference over the course of 50 plus rounds is always going to be an iffy thing – without the "talent", as it proved to be.

So we sailed on. Working watch on watch off, my engines kept my mind occupied so that I didn't have a lot of time to worry about navigation. If I wanted anything to worry about, I worried about the soul stones – and what ValDare, or indeed, any of the crew would do about them on our arrival back in the Saraime.

I realized that word of the vast treasure trove of what I felt, at least, very dangerous wealth could not be kept secret. ValDare had sunk a great deal of coin into this project and to abandon it, along with the vids of the Dragon People wearing the soul stone headdresses, would put a serious dent in his coin vault. I wasn't sure of where he stood on the matter. Scholar PinTin, and his students, dedicated to searching out the truth, would not likely turn a blind eye to one of the great mysteries of the Saraime either. I was, however, pretty sure they'd be in no hurry to return, even if they could raise the funds for the expedition, since they had a pretty good idea of what their reception would be – and the reliability of the crew that would take them there. The crew, well, they'd tell their tales. Nothing in the Saraime would keep them quiet, though, I suspected, that they'd be seen as spinners of fantastic tales, as I am. Captain KimTara's watch officers might be more creditable witnesses, if they talked. So the big unanswered question was if ValDare or anyone else would bet the fortune it would take to equip another expedition to find a tiny group of islands in an endless sea on their tale and vague directions. We only found the islands with DeArjen's talent. If Captain KimTara and her mates missed the Halfway Islands on our return voyage, the prospect of finding DeArjen's Islands in the Endless Sea 50 rounds distant, without a long and extensive search, even with one or more of those navigators on board, seemed pretty iffy. It would be a very long and costly project. In the end, I had to believe that only ValDare, who knew firsthand that the treasure existed, would be confident enough to mount such an expensive and potentially deadly expedition. I didn't press him on the matter, but I had the impression that his experiences with the Dragon People – and the greed of anyone along with him – would make him very reluctant to return.

07

Sixty rounds out of DeArjen's Islands, everyone spent their off watch hours either sleeping or looking for the clouds that would mark the islands of the Saraime.

The Captain told me that we had benefited from the air currents going out, so that the voyage home would be longer, but she wouldn't put a number to that difference, which left us leaning on the bulwark searching the featureless brassy blue-green sky for a speck of white.

In the end, we did find that speck of white 71 rounds out of DeArjen's Islands and altered course for it, and the small islands sprinkled within the clouds. The islands we found were small, and seemingly

uninhabited, and at first we thought they may have been just another isolated group like the Halfway Islands, as we put them astern within the round and continued on our original heading.

With everything running smoothly in the engine room, I stopped in my little office to brew a covered mug of tey, and then climbed up to the after deck, to cool off a for a few minutes. I walked over to the bulwark where BayLi was looking out on the Endless Sky, to catch a little of the slipstream. I set myself against the bulwark, thoughtfully downwind of her.

'Have you spied the Saraime yet?' I asked.

'I'm looking at that vague flaw in the sky,' she said, pointing ahead and down a bit. 'Doesn't it look a little lighter than the sky?'

I looked in the direction of where she was pointing.

'You see it, don't you?'

'Ah...' I said, not seeing it. Or maybe I did. I could imagine, anyway, a paler streak of sky in the direction she was pointing 'Could be clouds and then it could be wishful thinking. We'll know soon enough if they alter course.'

'Do you think we should tell them? They might not be able to see it from the bridge.'

'I think, Li, we should let them find it on their own. Our concern is the engines, theirs is navigation, and it's best to leave them to it. Besides, if that streak is a cloud bank, we seem to be running parallel to it, and so they'll see it sooner or later.'

She gave me a rather doubtful look.

'If it is the Varentas or any one of the major island groups it will be there for the next 20 rounds or more. They won't miss it.' And since she still looked doubtful, I added, 'If we don't alter course I'll mention it to the Captain at dinner.'

I didn't think they'd miss it, or ignore it even if it was a pretty iffy sighting. Neither Captain KimTara nor her mates were careless – and missing something as large as the tens of thousands of islands of the Saraime would not be a feather in their cap – though it was easy to imagine how it could happen... Therefore I was happy when I felt a tug of inertia that marked a change of course not long after I returned to my engine room.

The faint line did prove to be clouds and then a chain of small islands that we followed inwards for two more rounds, before spying the sails of a ship in the haze of the islands. We altered course to close with it and ask about our position.

I was off duty and on deck at the time, and as the speck became bigger – and once I could see the color of its sails – red – I began to wonder. And wonder enough to climb up to the bridge.

The Captain gave me a rather cool look that said "What are you doing here?" but said nothing out loud, as I joined her on the bridge wind deck.

'Could I have a look at that ship with your glasses?' I asked politely.

She gave me another cool look, but lifted the strap over her head and handed them to me.

In her glasses, the ship looked familiar. Not only did it have the traditional red sails, the ram-like bow, but I could just make out enough of the pattern in the decorative line along the hull to be confident that it was a Temtre ship.

'You might want to station some people at the rocket launcher,' I said, handing the glasses back to her.

She gave me another questioning look, but I said nothing more until she asked, 'Why?'

'That's a Temtre ship. They're sometime pirates. We don't want to give them any ideas.'

'What's it doing in the Varentas? They're Donta Island pirates, at least according to you.'

'True,' I said, and left it at that.

She watch as the Temtre ship casually let us get ever closer.

When they were less than a kilometer away, and we could see that the ship matched my description of the Temtre ships without glasses, she ordered the three rocket launchers – fore, aft, and by the smokestack manned. She then turned to me and said, 'Deal with your friends, Chief. Find our location.'

I'll bring out the charts.'

I didn't recognize either the ship nor its captain, as we closed within 30 meters of the boat. I'm sure they noted our manned rocket launcher, since they had crew casually standing around theirs as well, but we were likely too tough of a nut to risk trying to crack. We, on the other hand, were very unlikely to pose any danger to them. They recognized what we were, a freighter, and were curious as to why we were closing with them to allow us get this close.

I hailed them cheerfully, met with a wary reply, and began chatting – inquiring about DeKan and the other Temtre captains and ships I could name hoping to make a nice friendly impression. By this time Hissi had joined me, and was soon over, visiting with the Temtre Simlas aboard the Temtre ship. Only after gossiping for a while did I get around to inquiring as to our position, explaining that we'd been caught in a serrata in the Varentas and with our bridge damaged had been carried far off course with it. The makeshift repairs to the bridge made my story very believable, and after a bit of negotiating – we sent over several dozen bales of peat moss we didn't need now, in exchange for our position in the Donta Islands, we were dealing with the Temtres after all, and they give nothing for nothing. Having gotten our position – the name of the island group we were in – we parted ways with a friendly wave.

The Captain was clearly peeved about having missed her target by width of the Varenta Sea, but the rest of us were just happy to have gotten a toehold on home again, and had a long celebration over our dinner.

It took us five more rounds to reach the first of the major Dontas, Karena, and report our arrival to the S & D Line office there. We then sailed on to the line's home-port in the Dontas on Daedora. It took the better part of 30 rounds to clear the inquest and paperwork involved in the whole affair. In the end, the old Lora Lakes was once again laid up.

08

Parting with Captain KimTara was bitter sweet.

'So you've taken a job in the shipyard.'

'Aye, Assistant Engine Room Maintenance Supervisor.'

She rolled her eyes. 'You realize everyone who works there is some sort of supervisor. They're all engineers like yourself, and are touchy about having a suitable title.'

Which was almost true.

'Perhaps. Oh, I'm sure we all get our hands greasy, but you must admit that Assistant Engine Room Maintenance Supervisor does kind of roll off your tongue rather grandly.'

'I'm glad you're so happy, Assistant Engine Room Maintenance Supervisor Wil Litang.'

'Thank you. And I wish you the best in your new command, Captain KimTara. I trust it will be more profitable and less exciting than the last. It was a pleasure to serve under you.'

She looked closely to see if I was being sarcastic, and deciding I was not, said, 'Good luck, Chief,' and grasped my wrist. And then, with an effort added, 'You are my friend.'

'Yes, Tara, I am your friend. I shall send you a letter in care of the line now and again to tell you how your friend fares.'

She nodded. 'Yes,' and turning to Hissi, who had come to see her off as well. 'You are a friend as well. Take care of the Chief.'

Hissi barked a laugh, and licked her nose.

She gave Hissi a look, but said nothing more as she turned and walked up the gangplank of the Hilona Caverns, the liner that was to take her back to Tindatear and a new command.

At the head of it she turned to look back, so I gave her my best imitation salute.

'You're an arrogant Chief Engineer, Litang,' she called back.

'Thank you Captain. I put my best effort into it.'

She may've smiled. But like her questions, it's always hard to tell.

My new job was part of the crew who looked after the engine room and electrical systems of the line's ships at the end of each voyage around the Dontas. KimTara's assessment of my assistant supervisory position was close to accurate, but I didn't mind. I had regular work, regular hours, and would be in an ideal position to catch a Temtre ship to the Assembly when the time came.

The rest of the Lora Lakes crew and passengers had long since dispersed. Only the Captain and her mates had remained for the full inquiry. By the time they left, I'd already heard rumors of the "Soul Stone Island," as it was now whispered about. As a known member of the crew, I was asked about it. I simply said that they shouldn't believe everything they heard in harbor-side dives. I hadn't seen the headpieces encrusted with soul stones (I was in the engine room at the time). Yes, there were those who claimed the gems were soul stones. Half of them were left behind, dead. And well, good luck finding the island, seeing that the very meticulous navigator sailed for the Varenta islands and arrived in the Dontas – a soul stone would do you little good drifting lost in an endless sky.

I suspect that the story will cost lives. Whose and how many, time will tell – or not, I suppose.

## Part Six – Blade Island Revisited

### Chapter 31 Old Friends

01

'Until the Desdar Castle, Chief,' said my assistant, TenZi, with a nod.

We had reached the top of the steeply angled lane that led "down" to the Saraime & Desra Line shipyard nestled in the cove.

'Enjoy your time off.' I smiled and nodded goodbye before turning back to the shipyard, and, hands in my custom tailored pockets, gazed down on it. It clung to the rocky shores of the cove in an unruly collection of cranes, workshops, and warehouses – orientation ruled only by expediency. The white hulled freight liner, Shandu Forest, floated in the center of the yard, secured in a spider's web of lines and platforms. Work crews were replacing hull plates damaged by a recent encounter with a strong serrata and flying trees. It would still be a couple of rounds more before they finished their repairs, and since TenZi – my crew – and I had completed our electrical work on her, we had a half a dozen rounds free until the Desdar Castle put in for her scheduled 400 round routine maintenance.

I was, however, uncertain if I'd still be around then. The Nileana Blossom Festival was now only 29 rounds away, and if I was to return to Blade Island as planned, I would need to find a Temtre ship within the next few rounds. I had tentative plans to sail aboard EnVey's Wind Drifter, but they were understandably subject to the uncertainties of winds and trade.

To be honest, I wasn't sure I wanted to return. The romance of my quest had faded with a decade astern. Refurbishing the electrical systems may not be growing cha trees on the green peaks of Belbania, but it offered the quiet, ordered, and settled life that I had been searching for. I felt a certain reluctance to give it up in order to chase the faded dream of Naylea Cin – a dream that led to the rather

savage heart of the Temtre's Assembly, gold-token or not in hand. And yet... And yet, I didn't feel that I had a real choice in the matter. Not if I wanted my heart back. The thief of St Bleyth had stolen it. I missed it. I needed to either find her, or try and fail, putting the quest astern, if I was to recover it.

There was, however, a practical reason to sail with EnVey. We had talked about collecting my gig, still hidden in the Outward Islands, on the return voyage. Unlike most Temtres, the Crea Clan had an island base, complete with farms, a small shipyard and a new factory where they assembled, under license, modern, Core Islands-designed electric drive motors for small ships. Between the Phoenix's technology and EnVey's resources, we had a basis for a business partnership that could set me up in a new and useful life in the Principalities. And well, It would be nice to have my little wreck back in hand – if only for its med unit.

It was my custom to take a little boat that I'd purchased out and sail around the island every round or two to see if any Temtre ships were in harbor. I'd pay it a visit if I found one – they were almost all Crea Clan ships. Now, with the Blossom Festival at hand, I found myself reluctant to do so. Cin aside, did I really want to become a captive of the Temtres on Blade Island again? EnVey and the Crea Clan I could trust. As for the rest? It was not as if they eagerly begged us to become members of the clan. Cin's pirate piece darter and their Clan-king as hostage played a prominent role in our recruitment. Blackmail is not a reliable basis for lasting friendships.

I sighed, and still putting off what I knew I had to do, stood and savored my quiet island life for a while longer. On my left, the S & D Line pier stretched out along the top of the rocky shore ending in the bright Pela sky. Beyond it, a few boats and launches floated in the offing, while flocks of birds and lizards drifted this way and that along the shore, their calls and whistles coming to me over the racket of the work crews. A mild, island scented breeze of lush foliage and bright flowers played around me. Still, there was an essential stillness – a sense of place – here. It was something I'd not known for a long, long time. Ah, the island life. I'd grown rather fond of it.

Reluctantly, I turned away to face the broad, mossy strand that ran along the shore and the ragged line of buildings that bordered it on the island side. The largest was the S & D Daedora Hotel – a cluster of platforms and rooms rising in a series of steep terraces along the cliff behind it to the jungle above. The hotel was orientated to the pier. The orientation of the ragged line of shops, restaurants, taverns, and booths on either side twisted up and around as they followed the moss road into the jungle on either side of the cove.

A whirling and clicking sound from the jungle on the far side of the pier announced the arrival of the fan-driven monorail car that ran along a cable line. It slowed to a brief stop at the spindly platform to take on a couple of shipyard workers, and set out again, swaying gently overhead, to disappear into the jungle on my left.

With that excitement over, I started across the strand to the hotel, where I'd likely find Hissi, either in the hotel's lobby playing chess, or in the garden restaurant playing cards. She spent her life, when not sleeping in a warm patch of light, playing games. She'd play tag and hide and seek with the local children and then, once they were tucked into their hammocks, cards or chess with the adults – workers from the shipyard and hotel, and a wide set of transient passengers – regular travelers on the S & D liners who had gotten to know her from our time aboard the Telrai Peaks. Since she played with her own coins, and had yet to turn up broke, I let her live her carefree life and tried not to envy her too much.

She wasn't in the empty lobby, so I drifted into the open, tree shaded restaurant terrace. The card players were at their usual table under a tree on the terrace. The restaurant was largely deserted – it was late in the first sleep watch and with the Desdar Castle still a dozen rounds from sailing, there were few passengers around yet. She barked a brief greeting when she saw me.

'Hi guys,' I said to the gang. 'Time to call it a round, Hissi.'

She gave me a dismissive hiss.

'Suit yourself. I don't feel like cooking, so I'm stopping at EiVen's for spicy-sauce fini char-buns.'

You can shift for yourself once you've finished playing...'

She growled at me, but playing her last card, gathered her coins and with a cheerful bark, rose to go. Spicy-sauce fini char-buns never fail – nor the prospect of having to pay for her own meal.

Except for some tangy, thick stews, small island cuisine consists mostly of finger foods – either wrapped in some sort of dough or leaves, or skewered on a stick. Char-buns stuffed with various fillings are a favorite of ours – a crispy, slightly charred crust, a soft interior with a pocket filled, in this case, with finely chopped fini lizard meat and tangy vegetables in a spicy-sauce. I picked up half a dozen at EiVen's always-open booth and we ate them on our way home – I walking and she swimming in the air alongside.

'I'm thinking we'll take the boat out and have a look around the anchorage before calling it a round,' I said as we made our way along the jungle lane. 'If we're ever going to get to the Assembly this holiday, we'll need to find a Temtre ship soon.'

Hissi gave a brief bark as she delicately nibbled on her bun.

'Would you be very disappointed if we didn't go?' I figured she could read the subtext of that question in my mind, so I said nothing more.

She glanced back at me with a very long, cool, one-eyed stare, and growled menacingly. Simla dragons are very effective in communicating their thoughts, one way or another.

'Right. Well, it's out of our hands. Either EnVey and the Wind Drifter show up, or another Temtre ship willing to take us does, or we'll not make this Festival's Assembly...'

She gave another low growl.

'Aye, we'll keep an eye out for a ship. As I said, we'll take a turn around the island when we get home. Ready for another bun?'

She barked "Yes!" Simla dragons can't stay menacing for long with char-buns around.

02

We had finished our buns by the time we reached home. Home was a tree house/cave, a three char-bun stroll from the shipyards. I pushed through the gate in the thorn hedge, walked along the short path through wild-growing flowers and pulled myself up a pole-ladder to a broad platform built around the thick trunk of a wide-spreading fist tree laced with flowering vines. Being a typical island dwelling, it was merely a platform with a system of sliding beetle-proof screens and waterproof fabric walls that could be shifted about to form various sized and purposed rooms. The unique feature of our digs was that half of the platform was set into a shelf in the stone cliff that ran alongside the tree. The rooms set in the rock allowed me to sleep in actual darkness. The natives never associated sleeping with darkness, but I enjoyed the chance to have a bit of night to sleep in, or even to sit around "at night" after work, so it was the perfect cottage for me. In addition to these tree houses, there are many stone-built ground cottages scattered throughout the islands as well, which are much more secure in the occasional serratas. From talking to my coworkers, I gather that the style of dwelling you live in depended on how much you liked living in the open air or feared the serratas – and how many friends you had with stone cottages. I had the best of both.

I washed up, changed out of my work clothes and followed Hissi up to the top of the cliff where we tied up our little, electric motored boat. Hissi slipped on board as I untied it. Then, with the quiet whirl of the rear mounted fan I steered it through a narrow gap in the branches and vines out into the wide-sky sea.

We leisurely wove our way through the flock of ships and boats in the busy anchorage towards the usual Temtre landing pier close to the inner harbor.

My heart skipped a beat as it swung into view and I saw the familiar shape and declarative hull pattern of the Wind Drifter. The island breeze carried the sound of laughter and I could see children



playing on the deckhouse and in the rigging. EnVey had already collected the clan families for the journey to the Assembly.

'It looks like we're going to the Assembly, Hissi.'

Hissi barked a loud laugh, eager to visit her dragon friends – and the children – on board. She shot out ahead even before I edged the launch alongside and hailed for a line.

TaFin, the first mate, pushed his way through the press of young people who had gathered, peering over to the bulwark to see who was calling for a line.

'Litang! Come aboard, the Captain is eager to be on his way. We all are,' he said, glaring at the youngsters and adding gruffly, 'Give me some room to toss a line.'

I secured the launch and stepped across to gangplank gate.

'Litang! Welcome a'board!' exclaimed the black clad EnVey with a grin, as he sauntered over, the youngsters scattering before him. 'Are you ready to sail? Time is of the essence. My meager store of patience is already dangerously close to exhaustion.'

'My kit bag is packed. All I have to do is stop by the shipyard office,' I said, as we clasped wrists in greeting.

'Excellent. Still, I suppose we must give your dragon friend a little time for gossiping. We'll have a glass of tey and a bit of gossip ourselves. Let's retire to my deck – it should be more quiet there – it had better be, if the young pups know what's good for them,' he added, glaring around, but the youngsters had drifted back to play, so he continued conversationally, 'I was afraid I wouldn't find you here. I crossed courses with Captain EnTar. He said that you'd been promoted to chief engineer of a Varenta Islands tramp.'

'I was.'

'It was a promotion, wasn't it?' he asked with a grin.

'Yes, it was. But knowing that I had to be here before the Blossom Festival, I signed on for only one cruise. I've been working in the S & D shipyards waiting for you since I returned. They know my plans, so all I need to do is tell them my ship has arrived, and I'm ready to sail. Or as ready as I will ever be.'

He grinned again. 'Having second thoughts, are we?'

'A few. I'm remembering how I became a Temtre. I'm not sure every Temtre is as forgiving as you.'

'Few are. Still, you can – probably – trust DeKan,' he said with a laugh, and then called to his steward for tey. 'Take a seat,' he added, with a wave to a table and stools set on the small deck, faintly checkered in light and shade from the overhead grid of beams. 'Keeping out of trouble since we last crossed courses?'

'Can't get into too much trouble crawling around the guts of a ship working on its electric system – if you're careful, anyway.' And we went on talking of this and that – my voyage with the Lora Lakes was just a filming expedition in my telling, no hint of the mutiny or the soul stones – until his steward brought a domed tray of small sweets, the cylindrical glass tey pot with a piston top to pump out the tey and a pair of thick glass mugs with covers.

TaFin stepped around the deckhouse just as the steward departed. 'Another visitor to see you, Cap'n. Would you believe, a Laezan. No doubt wants to steer you closer to the Way. Or collect some coins. Care to run either risk?'

'No danger of the former. Give him some coins and send him on his "Way."'

TaFin was back less than a minute later. 'Says he needs to speak to you on a pressing matter. Wouldn't tell me more.'

'By the Dragon, just toss him overboard, TaFin. Can't you see I'm busy?' exclaimed EnVey.

'Right you are, Cap'n,' said TaFin with an eager grin, touching his brow in an informal salute.

'Do you think that's wise?' I said as he pumped the tey into my glass.

He shrugged. 'Oh, I'll have TaFin toss him some coins as well...' he muttered as we heard a muffled scuffle beyond the deckhouse.

A moment later, the Laezan, dressed in the traditional "blues" – the light blue jacket, dark blue shirt

and pants with the yellow sash, with a low crowned wide brimmed hat stepped around the deck house.

'Captain?' he asked, and caught sight of me. He broke into a his broad, boyish smile 'Wilitang!'

He hadn't changed a bit in the 2,500 rounds since I'd last seen him.

'Magistrate!' I exclaimed standing and cupping my hands with a brief bowing greeting.

Cupping his hands briefly in reply to my greeting, he crossed the deck to give me a bear hug. We pounded each other on their back, and we each asked how the other was doing and what brought each of us here. An angry TaFin had staggered around the corner of the deckhouse and EnVey looked on with an amused smile.

'I take it, you know each other,' he said, after Py and I stood back grinning, to take each other in.

'Why this is Magistrate LinPy,' I said, glancing to EnVey. 'The magistrate I served while in the Marches of Daeri after I arrived in the Dontas. I've told you those stories.'

'Ah, yes. The Young Magistrate Py.'

'The one and only. LinPy, this gentleman is Clan-chief EnVey, captain of the Wind Drifter, Chief of the Crea Clan. He's the fellow who tried to kill me when I was with the Temtres. I spared his life, forgave him, and now he's an old friend.'

'He stuck his knife into me, crippling me for life. And, as I recall, it was he who apologized afterward and I who forgave him. I am a very forgiving fellow. Why, I'll even forgive your insistence on seeing me, Magistrate – and the rough handling of my mate,' he said, casting his wicked grin towards a red faced TaFin with a nod of dismissal.

Py laughed, and bowed, 'Thank you Clan-chief. I am sorry to have insisted on seeing you, but it is about a matter of great importance for all of the Temtre clans.'

'So what's this pressing matter, Magistrate LinPy?'

'I'm now an advocate, rather than a magistrate, and a simple Py will do for an old friend of Wilitang. As for being here, I've been given an urgent message from my Order to your Clan-king and all the Temtres. The Elders of the Order feel that with the clans assembling for the Blossom Festival, now is the perfect time – before the warship from the Saraimé arrives.'

'I'm afraid that the Assembly is for the Temtres only. Guests are not welcomed, as Litang discovered the last time he visited it. I will, however, be happy to convey your Order's message. Ah, warship?'

Py smiled. 'He told stories about it. Very discreetly, I assure you. But given the dire consequences of the message not reaching the Temtres, which involves that warship, I think you can bend the rules in my case. I give you my word of honor that I shall respect the secrets of the Temtres.'

'Dire consequences?'

'Temtre ships and lives will be lost if the message fails to reach the clan and taken to heart.'

'What message? Can't you just tell me?'

'I can, but I was charged with delivering it in person to your Clan-king. It involves Temtre activity in the SaraDal Islands.'

'Ah... I've heard some ship-talk about that. Another tey cup, Dal!' he called out to his steward. 'Have a seat, and tell all. Even if I can't deliver you, I'd be happy to deliver any message from the Order of Laeza,' he said with his rather evil smile.

'So they did make you an advocate,' I said as we took our seats around the small table. 'Has it worked out well?'

He smiled, 'Yes, though I miss the Marches and the people. Their problems are so quaint compared to some I've had to deal with.'

'You've found your bandits to lead to the Way.'

He shrugged. 'I've found the greedy and the powerful. But simple, colorful bandits, no. The greedy and powerful are usually not pleasant people, Wilitang. I would much rather lead simple bandits to the Way. Oh, I am not without my successes and though not all find the Way, they learn to treat others in accordance with the Way. And then with a bright smile, added, 'Perhaps the Temtres are more like honest bandits than the greedy mine owners and the city criminal gangs I've had to lead back to the

Way.'

'We are merely keen traders and businessmen,' said EnVey. 'Most of us, anyway... Well, I and my clan are.'

'I believe you, Clan-chief, since you trade amongst the big Donta Principalities where piracy is frowned on. But in the fringes, as I am sure you know, things are different. The old ways are still followed. My message is for those Temtres of the fringe islands, specifically, the SaraDal islands.'

What followed was a long conversation, which I'll briefly summarize. The SaraDal Islands are several dozen medium sized islands, each ruled by a prince, under a Prime Prince on the island of SarLa. The island princes operate small fleets of ships – traders, opportunist pirates, and occasional raiders, very much along the lines of the Temtre – except that each prince has an island base and estates from which they derive much of their trade goods – farms, mines, and crafts. The common people of these islands are little more than serfs of their island's prince. A recent and bitterly contested war of succession amongst the princes of SaraDal, destroyed many of these island princes' ships, leaving their islands poorly defended – making them easy and tempting targets for raids by the SaraDal's age old rivals, the Temtres.

The common people of the SaraDals have long relied on the Order of Laeza to mediate and mitigate their exploitation by the royal caste. Left undefended, they turned to the Order for protection from the Temtre who, taking advantage of the SaraDal princes' weakness, have been pillaging, raping, and murdering them without consequences. The new Prime Prince, realizing his remaining princes were unable to protect his Principality, agreed to finance the Order's efforts to protect his islands and people. Neither he, nor the Order believed that arming the people to protect themselves would be wise. So the Order persuaded the Prime Prince to petition the Council of the Seven Core Islands to send one of their modern, steel warships to the SaraDals to destroy any Temtre raiders.

The Prime Islanders are eager to spread their law and modern ways into the smaller Principalities – the islands of the broad-feathered peoples. However, in order to do so peacefully, they respect the sovereignty of all the small, predominantly broad-feathered principalities, intervening only in the case of inter-principality wars or when petitioned to. Thus, the Council was happy to send a warship to eliminate the type of violent activity they hope to eventually eliminate from all of the Saraime – especially since the Prime Prince agreed to pay for its operation. However, negotiations between the fringe islands of the Dontas and the Core Islands takes time and only now was the warship set to sail, likely after the Blossom Festival.

The Order also persuaded the Prime Prince to finance a system of hidden island watch stations, equipped with radar to track Temtre ships and radios to warn the people of possible raids everywhere within the SaraDal islands, making the warship even more effective. The Order has had this system set up and running for some time now, saving lives but not property.

Being familiar with Prime Island designed ships, I assured EnVey that it would be ten times as fast as a Temtre ship, and being equipped with radar and guided missiles, it could easily destroy any Temtre ship before they even knew they were under attack. Temtres simply did not stand a chance of success in a battle or have any hope of escaping such a ship, insuring the destruction of every Temtre ship raiding in the SaraDal.

Py said that in order to avoid this loss of life, both SaraDal and Temtre, the Order was warning the Temtre of the consequences of continuing to raid. They hoped that all the Temtres would change their old ways, for other long suffering principalities might take the opportunity of a Saraime warship in the Dontas to rid themselves of pirates and raiders as well.

'This is the message I am charged with delivering to your Clan-king and people,' Py concluded. 'It can be looked on, of course, as a warning – an ultimatum even – but it is also an invitation to meet with the Elders of the Order and Prince of SaraDal to find new ways to live and prosper within the Way and our islands. For, you see, the ways of the fine-feathered people and the gentle Way are seeping into even the fringe islands. The old ways, and the peoples who follow them are fading away.'

'Ha!' said EnVey, shaking his head. 'Good luck with delivering that message.'

'I don't expect it to be well received,' admitted Py, 'But I trust you realize that what I have to say must be heard, believed, and acted upon for the good of all the Temtre clans. At the very minimum, the clans should avoid the SaraDal Islands after returning from your Assembly.'

EnVey stared out over the bulwarks to the wide-sky for a while. 'Unless we want to die with the old ways,' he muttered. 'Still, I will, of course, deliver your message. Litang can, I'm sure, provide the details of Core Island devices that we would be facing. I cannot, however, take you to the Assembly. It is against the laws and customs of the clan. There may be some captains or clan-chiefs who could defy that custom, but I'm not one of them. I'm ill regarded and have little or no say in the matters of the clan. I can do no more than carry your message. And well, I must admit knowing whose nose this message will tweak, I think I'm doing you a favor by saving you from tweaking it.'

I gave EnVey a look. 'DeKan's?'

He shook his head no. 'DinDay's.'

'Ah...' I had dealings with Clan-chief DinDay. His was not a nose I'd care to tweak either. He'd likely bite off your hand.

EnVey nodded. 'It is the Din Clan who sail in that region of the Dontas. The Dins are traditional, old style, Temtres, so raiding is right up his line. Litang and I will carry your message and argue your case. Why, I seem to recall that Litang is some sort of minor member of your Order already, so he stands in both decks and can deliver the warning as a gold-token agent of the Clan-king and a Laezan. The Clan-king DeKan is more far seeing than DinDay. He may well see how the currents are flowing and act on your warning.'

As I mentioned, I was already leery of my status within the clan as it was – gold-token or not – and wasn't overly eager to be the bearer of this warning. But clearly, it was my duty to both the Order and the Temtres to do what I could to keep the Temtres from doing something foolish, so I hoped I didn't hesitate too long before saying, 'I would be happy to act as the Order's messenger. I'm certain I can argue the case almost as persuasively as you, with greater safety.'

Py nodded and smiled, but said nothing as he, in turn, pondered his reply.

'You put me in a dilemma,' he said, at last. 'I am very reluctant to abandon my mission so early on by simply handing it over to either of you. It is my mission, not yours. I know that the message will almost certainly be ill received, and whoever delivers it, or has a hand in delivering it, risks disfavor, if not worse. But considering the consequences, the risk is worth running. I am determined to bear that risk. As an advocate, I am expected to risk my life in pursuit of my mission. I believe we can find a way to...'

And catching my slight smile – I knew Py well enough to know that he enjoys running those risks. He may have never dreamed of steering 10,000 semi-pirates to the Way, but I'm sure he relished the chance. In any event, he added, 'Wilitang knows my foolish boyhood dreams – and my pride – as well. This mission suits my dreams too well for me to simply give it up...

'However, I was about to say that I believe you could carry me to the gathering with no blame attached to you, Captain EnVey. My mentor did not expect me to be welcomed with open arms aboard a Temtre ship. She suggested that you could consider me a hostage awaiting ransom and carried to the Assembly, as many others have been before me.'

EnVey burst out laughing. 'Ransom a Teacher of Laeza! Is there any coins in that? Why, I'd be considered even more the fool than I am already, if I arrived at the Assembly with a hostage Laezan.'

Py smiled and shrugged. 'I doubt most Laezans would yield many coins from the Order, but for this mission, my master has authorized me to say that the Order would pay a reasonable and customary ransom for my safe return. Since outsiders are often brought to the gathering while awaiting their ransom, no blame can be attached to you for bringing me. And, I should add, you will get your ransom.'

'A couple of hundred gold coins for a Laezan?'

Py smiled again. 'You will need to negotiate my price with my mentor. She did say that she would

pay the customary ransom, but just how much that is, she didn't say. I didn't press her, but I'm curious to see how many gold coins I'm worth.'

'I'm sure you'd get a good price for him, EnVey. I know that they value him highly. Especially since the coins would likely come directly out of the Prime Prince's treasure cave,' I said with a laugh. 'It's a solid business proposition. No one could fault you for that.'

'Really?' he muttered, looking to both of us while weighing the profit against the risks of bringing LinPy and his message to the Assembly. He shook his head. 'No – no one would believe I'd taken him hostage. My clan doesn't take hostages. We're merely keen traders.'

'And truth be told, I'd not miss DinDay and his clan... Still, I suppose I must do the right thing, according to the Way... So here's what I propose. You, Teacher Py, travel to the Assembly as Litang's guest. Litang is, after all, a gold-token agent of the Clan-king. Calling DeKan's attention to a pressing danger to the clan could be seen as his duty as an agent, and bringing you along to make the case, well, I think the case can be made for that as well. DeKan is a good fellow. He is more Temtre than I, but he's no old fool like DinDay. He admires boldness and bravery, and I think he respects Litang enough that Litang runs little risks of displeasure. I may charge your Master a fee for your passage – but we will see how events unfold before settling on any amount.'

'So you're willing to put your head into the dragon's mouth for a few gold coins on the pretext that he is my guest?' I asked, giving him a sidelong look.

He grinned. 'Not a few, I assure you. I'll get my ransom for his passage. But it is for the greater good of the clan, not the coins... I resent your smile, Litang. In any case, I think my risk is minor. I can't be more disliked than I am already and DeKan will likely appreciate not only the warning, but the fellow who dares delivering it. Plus, you have the gold-token that I dare not refuse.'

'However, I should add, Py, that I cannot, and will not, offer anything more than transportation to the Assembly and back – if you're still alive to return. Once there, you're on your own. Both of you, for that matter. I'm only willing to take you to Assembly Island because I believe DeKan will treat you as merely the messengers. Are we agreed? Py sails with us as your guest, Litang.'

'Aye. As my guest. I am honored to serve both the Order and the Temtres in this matter.'

'Say it again, this time with conviction, Litang,' laughed EnVey.

'I am honored. But I also fear it will be no picnic on the sward either. Still, I'm sure having Py on board will do wonders for your morals, EnVey. You'll be a far less keen trader after this voyage. And have many more bruises to show for it. Py likes to steer his flock of cutthroats to the Way with his iron vine staff.'

'A risk I will gladly run!'

Py beamed. 'You and I, my friend Wilitang, will both lead them all a little closer to the Way. I trust you are still in practice with your sword and dagger.'

'I am happy to say, my dear Py, that I am not. I have lived a largely quiet life, with little need of swords and daggers.'

'Never mind, we have the voyage ahead to remedy that.'

EnVey, clapped. 'Excellent! We'll have so much fun... At least until we arrive, and hopefully, even afterward. Gather your kits. Time is short!'

## Chapter 32 The Assembly Revisited

I stood on the Wind Drifter's upper deck along with most of the crew and passengers. Blade Island filled half the sky. We'd gathered to watch the antics of the youngsters scrambling along the various masts in order to take in the sails. It's a Temtre tradition for the youths of the ship to take in the ship's sails on the approach to Blade Island. Though they had been taught and practiced how to do this during the voyage, it was treated as a joyful lark by both the youngsters and audience – save, perhaps, those whose youngsters were out, clinging to the masts.

Py – ever a boy at heart – had joined them. The children insisted on that, claiming that he was required to do so since it was his first visit to Blade Island – not that he needed any such inducement. So he was out there now, clinging for dear life on the tip of a spindly mast, pretending to be too afraid to move, despite all the directions shouted to him from all his young friends.

He had become a favorite with the Wind Drifter's pack of youthful passengers. Each round, Py and I would spend an hour going through our martial arts routines, as we had in the marches, after which we gave martial arts lessons to the youth – Py, long after I begged off. He would then spend the rest of the watch working or larking alongside of them. This included their lessons in sail handling – which had him swinging about on the many masts and lines that the ship sported – with an assumed air of clumsiness. He was forever falling off, and – almost – being left astern to the howls of laughter of his many young friends. It was all an act, of course – Py's martial arts skills made him a virtual acrobat. And in the quiet hours, he could be found surrounded by a flock of youngsters telling stories – stories of his youth growing up in the monastery, his grown up adventures as a magistrate and an advocate, plus all the traditional Laezan stories. When I could be coaxed to sit beside him, I'd tell my tales adventures among the strange and very distant islands I grew up in.

'I fear I'll find myself with a dozen Laezian Teachers in my clan before too long,' said EnVey, standing beside me.

'You'll be all the better for it,' I said.

'And I thought you were my friend,' EnVey sighed, shaking his head. Then, nodding to the knife-shaped island, floating in the endless sky, 'Getting nervous?'

'No more than I have been since we sailed.'

'About seeing her, or not seeing her? Or Py and his message?'

'Yes.'

He laughed, 'And Py?'

'He's no fool, however foolish he can act. He can look after himself come what may, and as you know, he's nearly impossible not to like. He's the perfect messenger. I'm sure he'll charm DeKan with his good humor and his sincerity, since he shares the small islanders' reluctance to change regardless of the message he brings, and that will show.'

'That may be,' said, EnVey, adding, 'But I doubt he'll charm DinDay. I'll do what I can to help, but I can only do so much.'

'Don't worry about us. You forget, I was an uninvited guest at the last Assembly, and would've remained undiscovered if Naylea hadn't decided not to move aside for you and your gang.'

'A painful memory. Did she ever say why?'

'No. Pride, perhaps. Still, she was a professional, and shouldn't have called attention to herself like that. But what I'm saying is that it's a big island. We could take to the hills or jungle should things go poorly.'

'It may come to that,' he said, and broke off as the youngsters screamed in mock horror. Py, attempting to climb back from this precarious perch, had lost his handhold on the mast, and was “falling” back, only just saving himself from being left behind by grabbing one of the many control ropes further aft – with his foot. Yes, Py could look after himself just fine.

Once the sails were finally gathered in, the masts folded against the hull, and the youngsters, including Py, were safely back on board, the propeller was engaged and the ship steered for the clan's traditional anchorage on the grassy savanna of Blade Island. The savanna was already dotted in broken lines of ships. Perhaps a quarter of the Temtre fleet had arrived before the Wind Drifter took its traditional place in the ship-city.

Py and I joined the crew who dove down to the grassy plain with anchoring lines in hand, as the ship drifted to rest five meters above the ground. Stakes were swiftly pounded into the turf, lines attached, and the ship heaved down and secured.

Hissi and the Wind Drifter's pair of Simlas were off before we touched down. Hissi had family here – parents and siblings, I suppose. And well, I doubt that Simlas have the word “work” in their language.

Once the ship was secured, we set up the booths alongside the ship where the Crea clan would display the trade goods they brought to sell. Some clans were famous for their food and/or drink, others, for their special skills – sword making, or pottery and such. Others were known for the unique products of their trading territories, and still others for their loot. The Creas were known for their modern – large island – manufactured goods. For this Assembly they brought along two of their newly manufactured electric drive launches that they hoped to introduce to the clan – a short haul battery powered one, and a long range boat with a small steam driven generator.

'We'll likely have to bring them back several times before we sell any, but we have to start sometime. You'll help us make the pitch, won't you?'

'Aye, of course. Be glad to talk about the advantages of electric motors and man the booth now and again. Least I can do to pay my passage.'

I had spent a lot of my time aboard the Wind Drifter with her engineers and EnVey talking shop. Not only about the launches, but about converting the Wind Drifter to electric motors powered by a steam turbine generator – like the S & D ships I had been working on. EnVey thought that they could use their ships as test beds for the installation, and then, perhaps, begin to build bigger engines and ships in time. The serious business of selling, however, would wait until after the formal Assembly opening. Visiting took precedence during the first few rounds, since the clans were laced with inner-clan marriages and so family members were scattered far and wide through the fleet.

With the work finished, Py was anxious to explore the growing ship-city. He smiled and shook his head as I donned my armored trousers and shirt in the dim lit section of the hold that served as the unmarried males' bunk room.

'I've got a jacket as well. It should protect you from a blade,' and seeing his smile widen, added, 'And perhaps the odd springer slug you can't dodge.'

'Thank you, Wilitang, but I think I shall rely on my smile and my staff.'

I didn't argue. He probably could. He frowned a little when I strapped my darter under my arm and donned a lizard leather vest. 'Is that necessary?'

'I hope not,' I replied. 'But I've recently relearned the need to be prepared – the hard way. Besides, darters don't have to be lethal – they're a lot more humane than your staff. You just wake up with a headache, not a broken head or arm.'

He nodded. 'Yes, I suppose that may be true. I'm just old-fashioned.'

'In any event, you know that I'm just your loyal lieutenant who lets you take the lead.'

'Except when you don't.'

'Ah, yes. An old habit. But then I've lived longer than you, in part, because I have.'

So I emerged into the bright ever-day of the Pela, armed and dressed in my finest Temtre garb – loose trousers, leather vest, belts and pouches, and a dagger in my belt. I decided to skip the sword, since I wasn't sure where my gold-token placed me in the clan and the fine-feathered retainers of the Temtres did not wear swords. Py insisted on staying in his blues, despite my suggestion that he might want to wear the Temtre style clothes he brought along so as not to draw attention to himself, just yet.

We joined the still thin throngs of people hurrying through the scattered ship-city searching out family and friends – I, with my defined and undefined misgivings, Py with his boyish enthusiasm. A thin haze of smoke and the smell of roasting food drifted through the lines of ships from the food sellers and makeshift taverns that did not wait for the formal start of the Assembly to sell their goods. Clusters of Temtres, loud, happy, and excited, gathered around these food stalls and taverns to exchange news and gossip. Children ran about in laughing and shouting gangs, perhaps just happy to be able to run about after the twenty-some round voyage to Blade Island. We – Py, anyway – gathered our share of curious glances, but much to my relief, nothing hostile. They ignored me – as a fine-feathered fellow I was either a ransomee or an artisan of some sort for one of the clans, not a person of consequence. Py – well, I'm not sure what they thought of Py. Perhaps a Temtre youth rebelling against tradition. When questioned by the sellers of spicy-sauce fini and other, undefined lizard, char-buns, smoked lizard on a stick, and ginger beer, Py would say that he'd come to lead the Temtres closer to the path of the Way – but with such good humor that no one took offense. As I've said, it's pretty much impossible not to like LinPy. In any case, the general tide of happy excitement allowed us to wander about sampling the many tempting entrees unchallenged.

I, as I've hinted, was not quite so carefree. Even as my fear of some sort of confrontation about the presence of a Laezan at the Assembly diminished, I felt a growing, undefined uncertainty concerning the confrontation I'd come seeking. I constantly searched the faces in the crowds for Naylea Cin. But was it with eagerness or dread that I searched those passing faces? It was strange that I could not put a name to it. Perhaps it was a mixture of both. In any event, we explored the growing city – newly arrived ships drifted overhead all the time – without seeing her, before returning to the Wind Drifter, weary and stuffed with food.

I climbed into my hammock in the dim lit hold amongst a few other snoring bunk mates, and quickly fell asleep. I likely slept for a good while – not having to stand watches, it was hard to tell in the timelessness of the Pela. The sleepers had changed when I awoke and Py was already up and gone when I arrived on deck, washed, dressed and ready for breakfast.

I met a grim faced EnVey coming up the gangplank. 'We need to talk. My quarters,' he said, and led the way.

'What's wrong?' I asked, alarmed.

'Where's Py?'

'I just woke up. I haven't seen him on board, so I assume he's out and about. What's wrong?' I asked again, as I followed EnVey into his quarters.

He turned to me. 'The Talon Hawk has arrived. As is our custom I, along with the other clan-chiefs hurried over to greet DeKan. DeKan, however, did not return with the Talon Hawk. He's dead. Killed in a ship battle with a SyTarn serpent ship just before they were to sail for the Assembly.'

I stared at him in disbelief, my mind whirling around all the implications. I couldn't think of anything to say.

'And it gets worse,' he continued grimly.

'How?' I managed to get out. Whatever optimism I had entertained for the success of our mission was based on my reading of DeKan's character. With him dead...

'We – the clan-chiefs – will elect a new clan-king. One guess who that's likely to be.'

I knew of only one other clan-chief by name. 'DinDay?'

He nodded. 'He intends to be clan-king, and there aren't any who would care to contest him for it. Indeed, he's already acting the role.'

'That's not good at all – for any of us.'

'It gets even worse.'

I didn't think it could – not this fast, anyway. 'I don't think I want to know, but I suppose you'd better tell me.'

'DinDay was talking up this plan, before the Talon Hawk arrived, of the entire clan, sailing as soon



as it assembled, back to the SaraDals. He wants to stage a massive raid on the Prime Prince's citadel on Sarla. The attack, coming during the Blossom Festival, when it is well known we gather, would come as a great surprise. The full Temtre fleet, he claims, would have no problem destroying the remaining SaraDal ships and capturing the citadel. We'd then empty its legendary treasure cave and be gone, all before the end, or soon after, the end of the Festival. Which, as we know, would be before Py's Saraime warship even sails from the Core Islands. We'd then return to Blade Island – every ship's hold filled to the hatches with treasure – to celebrate our good fortune with a delayed Assembly.'

I shook my head. 'It can't be that easy... And if the Saraime warship arrives while the whole clan is laying siege on SarLa, you'd all likely be destroyed. The Core Council and the Prime Prince would like nothing better.'

'Yes, yes... It can't be that easy. The idea of sacking SarLa and emptying the treasure cave that lies beneath its citadel must've occurred to every pirate for the last 100,000 rounds, as well as every Prime Prince of SaraDal. And as far as I know, no one has even attempted it. I believe that the citadel is built on top of a rocky peak and consists of a great dome surrounded by a massive wall bristling with rocket launchers. The cave beneath it is said to run the length of the entire peak and is filled with the 100,000 rounds of loot and taxes. The truth is that our entire fleet could stand off and send every rocket we possess into the dome and likely never do more than chip away at it.'

'So how is he proposing to take it?'

'He claims to have a traitor in hand – one of the princes from the losing faction – an old favorite of the late Prime Prince – who knows a secret way into the citadel. He'll lead us into the citadel for revenge – and the crown. We'll still have to fight the garrison, but that'll be in the citadel itself. DinDay has the plan already worked out. The fleet, with only the women and children on board, would circle overhead to draw their attention and fire, while the men slip into the citadel through this secret way and take it by storm.'

'The Prime Prince is no fool, if he was clever and ruthless enough to win the crown, how can you be assured that this disgruntled prince is what he says he is? He could be a double agent of the Prime Prince. To lure the entire Temtre clan into rocket range of the Saraime warship would be a cunning stroke. A rival eliminated to every last ship. Indeed, why would any would-be Prime Prince agree to giving the Temtres the treasure trove of the SaraDals for either revenge or the crown?'

EnVey nodded. 'DinDay says we could fill our ships and not take half of the treasures in the cave. Perhaps. But like you, I feel that it doesn't ring true. Still, who'll stand up to DinDay to be slapped down? Not me, I assure you. And it gets worse.'

'It can't!'

'It does. DinDay seems to know of the Order's ultimatum. If anyone does, he would, since it may have been delivered to him in the SaraDals. He knows that there's a Laezan advocate here as well. As I was leaving the Talon Hawk, I heard him order his first mate to gather the clan, divide them into search parties, and scour the Assembly for this Laezan spy. They're to bring Py to him when they find him. And I'm willing to wager it's not for a glass of tey. DinDay sees himself clan-king already – and with no one to seriously challenge him, he is. He can do what he wants with Py. And, well, I'm not certain just how much protection your gold-token gives you anymore. You're an agent of the now dead clan-king. You're without a champion. Your status as something of a Temtre might buy you a trial for treason, but with DinDay, I doubt it. And, as I said at the beginning, I can't protect you. I'll do what I can as a friend to keep you alive, but I can't fight DinDay on your behalf.'

'Don't. We'll look after ourselves. The island is big enough, and the Assembly crowded enough that we can disappear once Py gets out of his blues. You stay clear. I'll find Py before DinDay's gang does. You just came from the Talon Hawk, right?'

He nodded. 'I hurried right back. I'll round up some of the youngsters and set them looking for Py as well. He's a hero with them, so they'll be eager to find and warn him. But you need to act fast since DinDay doesn't want word of the Order's message and the Saraime warship getting around if he can

help it. He'll want Py – and you – silenced just as soon and as sure as he can.'

'Right. I'm off,' I said.

'And, Litang... Be discreet. I'll do what I can, but I can't be seen with you or Py. Once DinDay finds out I brought you, he'll likely be watching us...'

'I'll steer clear of you and the clan. I would suggest, however, that you privately deliver the substance of Py's message to your fellow clan-chiefs. And if I were you, I'd get lost on the way to the SaraDals, if it goes that way. My gut tells me, it'll be a disaster – the end of the clan if DinDay carries the day.'

He nodded grimly. 'Aye, I feel it too. Still, even as clan-king, he can't order us to break up the Assembly and go. But I'm sure many will follow him anyway. He commands the respect of the old style clans. And well, a hold filled to the brim with the treasure will tempt many.'

'We'll be back for our gear once I find Py and then we'll take to the hills. What we do after that, I don't know. But I do know Py won't be deterred from delivering his message. Especially now when the whole clan is at stake.'

### 03

I hurried out onto the lane and turned toward the encampment. The Crea Clan enclave was located on its fringe, so looking towards the small, but rugged mountains of Blade Island's "handle," the Assembly was spread out ahead and to either side. Several ships were drifting overhead, carefully maneuvering for their traditional landing spot to join the many more that had arrived while I had slept. The lane ahead was now thick with Temtres strolling between the long rows of stalls under colorful banners. Only the fact that Py's distinctive blue outfit would stand out amongst the colorfully dressed Temtres made me hopeful of finding him in the throng.

I turned and worked my way, along the edge of the encampment, peering down each lane as I crossed it. Reaching the last lane without spying him, I hurried halfway up it and started working my way back – zigzagging through the lines of ships, stopping for a minute to survey each lane in both directions before I continued on.

I caught a glimpse of his blue garb in the crowd, a hundred meters down the third lane I crossed. He was being carried along – feet off the ground – between two massive Temtres, and surrounded by half a dozen more. He didn't appear to be resisting. Either he was unconscious or was going along willingly.

I hurried through the crowded lane trying to catch up with them without attracting attention, planning my rescue as I went. With both darters along, I had a very unfair and very welcomed advantage. If I could catch them by surprise, I should be able to silently disable his captors before they could even draw their swords. However, since DinDay's ship would likely be nearly deserted – between the search parties and everyone else out visiting, I decided to postpone my attempt until they reached the ship, where I could disable his captors out of public view. I'd rescued Cin in a similar situation when I was last here – not that she needed it. I figured the same approach – putting a dart in everyone I saw aboard the ship – would work now as well. So once within 20 meters of Py and his guards, I simply followed them to DinDay's ship, arriving in time to see Py being hauled into the forward deckhouse for his interview with DinDay.

I slipped between the empty stalls and drew my darter, setting it for maximum stun – we'd need all the time we could get to gather our gear and make our escape to the foothills beyond the encampment. Taking a deep breath, I muttered, "Right" quietly to myself, and started up the gangplank with my darter held close to my side, half hidden in the generous fit of my trousers.

As expected, the ship was nearly deserted. Talk and laughter drifted down from above the grating, but no one was guarding the gangplank, nor did I see anyone on the main deck, save a pair of guards outside the captain's cabin. I put them to sleep before they even knew I was aboard.

With more than a vague sense of déjà vu, I pushed through the cabin's door – behind my darter. Inside, it was dark, crowded and noisy. Everyone had their backs to me, all giving angry roars and growls. Through the press of bodies I caught a glimpse of DinDay, at the far end. Py, held by his massive guards, stood before him as he bellowed something about putting an end to this blasted interference in Temtre affairs. I didn't wait to hear what more he had to say before pressing my darter against the hulking backs of the two fellows before me and putting a dart into each. Held that close, no one noticed the little flickers of blue light as the darts discharged their energy. Pushing their bodies slightly ahead, I darted their neighbors on each side before elbowing my way through their inert bodies to get shots at DinDay and the rest of the mob.

I didn't catch Py's reply to DinDay, but from the roars and growls of DinDay's followers around me, and DinDay's long string of curses, I judged that it wasn't well received. And then, ending with a mighty curse, DinDay reached to draw his sword, apparently intending to divide Py in two. But even as he drew it, he had a little blue dot on his upper chest immediately followed by several darts. His string of curses ended abruptly as his sword floated from his hands.

Confused, the men yelled and started surging about realizing that something had gone amiss. Py had, in fact, reacted to DinDay's intent and his guards were struggling to hold him. I took a second to aim carefully, so as not to put a dart in Py, and sent a dart into each of their backs before turning my darter on the other half dozen active clansmen jammed into the cabin. Bodies – both the inert and the animate surged about the close confines of the cabin. Flashes of blue light flickered in the cabin as I sent my darts towards anyone looking to still be moving on their own accord.

This phase ended within seconds with a bright blue flash on my shoulder and a wave of heat on my face. Looking down, I saw a smoking hole in my shirt sleeve. The dart had discharged on the armored shirt I wore underneath it. I stared at it for a second. I hadn't realized that darts could ricochet... Actually, I was pretty sure they couldn't. I looked up and across the now silent cabin. Inert bodies were drifting aimlessly about and between them I saw the adept-in-blue-who-wasn't-Py pointing a sissy and staring wide-eyed at me.

'You!' she said as our eyes met.

I couldn't think of a thing to say. I couldn't think. Naylea Cin in the blues of an Adept of Laeza was... dumbfounding.

'What are you doing here?' she demanded, clearly less dumbfounded than I.

I managed to retain enough of my wits to bite back "Saving you" but couldn't think of anything else to say until it struck me what she'd just done. I started laughing. 'You put a dart in me again – just like you always do!'

There wasn't much light in the cabin – but she shrugged and might've smiled. 'Old habits die hard. Once more, what are you doing here?'

'Looking for you.'

She shook her head, as if to clear it, and pushed several inert bodies out of the way to get closer.

I cupped my hands – with my the darter still in hand – and bowing slightly, said, 'Teacher.'

She stopped, smiled slightly, and cupping her hands – Like mine, her left one still holding the sissy and bowed her greetings. 'Brother,' she said, adding 'Once more, Litang, how is it that you happen to show up here and now?'

Closer now, I could see her eyes. I needed to see them to know what to say. To know what to feel. They were not as bright as I remembered them. And not as cold. They were serious, wary, but not, I felt, angry. I let out the breath I was holding. 'It is good to see you again, Naylea. I had hoped to find you here. Not here like this, but here at the Assembly. As for your question, I'm here – here in this cabin – because I caught a glimpse of your blues from the back and followed you here. I actually thought you were Py. I just learned that DinDay had ordered his clansmen to search the encampment for Py...'

She shook her head. 'Wait! Who's this Py?'

'Py, LinPy is the advocate I came here with. It's a long story and I don't think we have time to go

into it here and now. We should be gone before more of DinDay's men return,' I said, and started to turn to the cabin's door. 'I'll fill you in as we go.'

She grabbed my vest. 'No. I have plenty of darts. I want to know what you're doing here – now.'

I sighed. 'I'm here at the Assembly to see you again. I'd a letter from DeKan saying that he had urged you to attend the next Assembly and invited me to return as well. I'm here in this cabin because I thought you were my friend, a Laezan by the name of LinPy who traveled with me aboard EnVey's Wind Drifter in order to deliver the ultimatum to the Temtres... Which, I suppose, is why you're here as well.'

She nodded yes. 'Go on.'

'EnVey just told me to find Py and lift for the mountains since DinDay had turned his clansmen out to find the Laezan on the island and likely silence him. DinDay has great plans for the SaraDals and doesn't want Laezans throwing shade on them.'

'DinDay thinks he can get away with silencing an envoy? I'm going to have a few words with DeKan.'

'Ah...' I muttered and boldly took her hand. 'I'm sorry. But well, DeKan is dead. Killed in battle not long before the Talon Hawk sailed for the Assembly. EnVey says that DinDay will be elected the next clan-king – there's no one brave enough to oppose him. He's the clan-king already in all practical matters.'

'DeKan dead...' she said softly.

I could see the news hit her hard. 'I'm sorry, Naylea. The Talon Hawk only just arrived. EnVey and the other clan-chiefs here had gone to pay their respects, only to hear the news – the very sad news...'

She stood silently staring into the dim recesses of the cabin for perhaps half a minute, letting me hold her hand before I said. 'Perhaps we should be going now. I'm sure there are more parties about searching for LinPy. We need to find him...'

She shook her head and slipped her hand from mine. 'They'll only bring him here, and as I said, I'm not short of darts. DinDay won't be getting into mischief anytime soon, so we've time to find Brother LinPy. Still, I suppose that I should get my gear off the Dagger before the news spreads. Once I'm out of these blues and into conventional garb, I'll be able to go anywhere without attracting attention. We can then return here if we miss him and the search parties don't. Right. Let's go,' she added, pushing a body out of the way to grab her iron vine staff floating by the door.

'Wait a second,' I said, and shoving my darter under one of my belts I brushed the sleeve of my outer shirt to clear it of the charred fabric around the hole while Naylea waited, watching me with a faint smile.

'Did you really dart me for old time's sake?'

'I'd say yes, but as an Advocate of Laeza, I must be truthful, and admit that I was just darting everyone in the cabin.'

'If you had your sissy in hand, why did you wait so long to use it?'

She shrugged. 'I had hardly stepped off the Dagger when they pulled up alongside and grabbed me – demanding that I go with them. I thought they were acting under DeKan's orders. Hauling me off to see him under guard would've been his idea of a joke. When I found that I was being taken to DinDay, well, I had a few things to say to him, so I went along with them without a fuss.'

'Whatever it was you had to say, he didn't take it very well. He looked ready to slice you down the middle when I arrived.'

'With my sissy in hand, I was in no real danger,' she replied giving me a look that dared me to say otherwise.

I passed. 'Right.'

'Open the door and stand aside,' she said, straightening her low crowned hat.

I cautiously opened it as she stood, her sissy in hand waiting to see who was outside.

Nothing had changed. The sleeping guards were still standing guard. Unconcerned laughter still

wafted faintly back from the deck overhead. The ruckus in the captain's quarters had not spread beyond its door and the whole episode hadn't taken more than a few minutes.

'Lead on, Litang,' she said with a nod.

I slipped past the silent guards and stepped out into the light. Cin followed. After our eyes adjusted, we walked quickly down the gangplank. Then taking the lead, Cin led me past the empty stall at its foot, dodged across the lane, slipped between the two ships opposite, pulling up under the bow of one of them to consider our next move.

I took the moment to study her. She was still her straight, slim self, all the elegant little curves of her face, neck and from what I could tell, body, were just as I remembered them. Even in the blues of the Order, she was still Naylea Cin. How I'd mistaken her for Py, even from the back and between two thugs, I don't know.

She still struck a cord in my heart. And yet ... Perhaps in a lower register than before. Was it something in me, or something in her? She seemed more mature, or perhaps less vibrant – as if touched by a gentle sadness. DeKan? The wild joy she had shown when dueling with the thugs of the Legion on Despar was entirely missing. And that cold streak of cruelty in her eyes, which I knew ran through her character as a stealth of St Bleyth as well, seemed to be missing or suppressed. In short, during the time since the Nileana Tree blossomed, she seemed to have lost a little of herself in the Order of Laeza. And I found that it saddened me to discover that.

'Right,' she said and turned to me. 'I'll return to the Dagger to collect my gear. I'll keep an eye out for this LinPy of yours. If I find him along the way, I'll take him along with me. After I collect my gear, I'll head for that little woods on the edge of the island where the white ship crashed. You can still find it, can't you Litang?'

'I believe so.'

She gave me an impatient look. 'Right. You continue searching. If you don't find him once you've gone through the Assembly, assume I've found him. Collect yours and his gear and meet me in the woods. If it turns out neither of us has found him, we'll return once I'm out of these blues. With DinDay out for hours, he'll be in no great danger. Agreed?'

'Right.'

'Then let's get moving... Oh, and buy some food – a lot of food. You know my favorites. I didn't have time to eat before DinDay's men collected me.'

'Gear, food, anything else?'

'Make sure you're not followed. You might be remembered.'

'Right.'

With that and a nod, she started off.

'Be careful Naylea. DinDay still has plenty of clansmen out looking for you.'

She didn't look back, but held up her hand holding the sissy so I could see it. I sighed. Well, I'd found her. It hadn't gone exactly as I'd hoped – or as I feared. Still, whatever she'd become, I was fairly sure our St Bleyth past was safely buried.

I stepped into the lane and looked up and down it. No blue dressed Laezan was in sight. With DinDay out of action I figured I'd time to walk up and down every lane to be certain of finding him. I turned left and headed up the lane towards the low mountains in the distance. I'd have to walk a dozen lanes to cover them all, so I walked as fast as I could without attracting attention or losing contact with the island.

I had reached the lane's end and was half way down the next when I suddenly found myself engulfed in a whirlwind of feathers. A cold nose touched mine, and beyond it stretched a long, toothy snout, with two bright black eyes twinkling at me. A lot more teeth, a blast of dragon's breath, and a soft bark with a sloppy wet tongue that slapped my nose.

'Siss!' I exclaimed.

She barked giving me another lick of greeting.

'Let go of me and I'll give you a hug, you old feather duster!'

She uncoiled herself and I drew her close again with an arm around her long neck, drawing her crown of feather to my face. Unlike Cin, there was no bad history to stand between our affection. 'Neb, It's great to see you Siss! Hissi, the egg you gave me is here too. Have you seen her yet?'

I heard a barking laugh behind me, and turning saw Hissi floating close by. In that moment I wondered if Hissi was indeed, Siss's daughter. They had different feather patterns and Hissi was at least half a meter shorter and smaller, but there were subtle similarities – if only in attitude. Who knows?

'Great! My two dragon friends are with me!' I gave Hissi a hug as well.

A fine-feathered fellow hugging two Simla dragons attracted some curious, amused glances, so I let them go and led them beside an empty stall to be out of traffic.

'We need to talk, girls. We're in big trouble already. I've met Naylea, and the powers that be are already looking to kill her and Py. She's heading back to the Dagger to collect her gear and we're to meet in that woods where we saw the small white ship and the two talon hawks. Remember it, Siss?'

She barked her "Yes."

'Good. You go find Naylea and look after her. We'll catch up on all the gossip once we're hiding in the woods. Meanwhile, Hissi and I will find Py and bring him there as well. Any questions?'

They both barked their unconcerned laughs, and Siss headed off to find Naylea, after accidentally on purpose brushing the tip of her tail across my face. She hadn't changed.

'Can you find Py?' I asked Hissi.

She barked a laugh and started off. I followed. It was of some comfort to have companions who found this all a lark. She led me to the edge of the large sport field where I saw a lively throng of young people laughing and shouting encouragement. As I approached, a young man from within the crowd rose, flailing about, into the air, to the hoots of the crowd. A couple of his friends climbed on each others shoulders to haul him down. Hissi had found Py.

I slipped through the crowd, getting a few haughty looks for being fine-feathered and not clan – but I didn't let that discourage me until I came to a hulking youth scowling at the proceedings. He took active offense to my pushing in.

'Who do you think you are?' he demanded.

I made a quick calculation and decided to try the gold-token before my sissy. I reached into my vest and hauled it out. 'Your superior, son. Step aside,' I growled in my best Captain Miccall voice. I palmed my sissy in my left hand.

He took in the gold-token for a moment. Hissi, floating behind and above me, growled menacingly. He took both of us in and made a small step aside, still scowling – enough to allow me through. Good enough.

I reached the front row of spectators, to see a grinning Py send another youth flying before turning to the next in the line of youths, waiting to try their luck taking on the Laezan. I stepped into the ring and called out 'Teacher!' cupping my hands in greeting.

He smiled and returned the greetings as I hurried over to him to whisper, 'Trouble. We need to go. Now.'

He gave a brief nod, and then turning to the eager challengers. 'Duty calls, my friends. However, I shall be available throughout the Assembly to give more lessons.'

The largely cheerful crowd expressed their disappointment as Py collected his staff, stuck in the turf, but cleared a path for us as we struck out for the Crea clan encampment. As we walked, I charged Hissi with keeping a wary eye for DinDay's men and brought Py up to speed. I found myself too shy to name the second advocate, saying only that there was another Laezan here on the same mission who had just escaped from DinDay's clansmen, and was now collecting her gear with plans to go undercover.

'Good! I knew that I wasn't the only advocate charged with delivering the message. It was too critical to be left to just chance and one advocate,' he said with a smile. 'So a sister Laezan found a way to get here as well. I'm looking forward to meeting her.'

'We will, shortly,' I said. 'We're to rendezvous and decide on our next course of action.'

Remembering the second half of my mission, I stopped at several stalls to buy a supply of stuffed char-buns, half a dozen jars of spice ale and a good selection of smokey, charred lizard meat and vegetables on sticks, stuffing all into a mesh bag that I bought as well. I guess I wanted to make a good impression with Naylea. Hissi insisted on a char-bun to eat as she swam alongside of us.

Py had grown more silent, and more serious than I'd seen him since he had to try the murder cases as magistrate, as the full implications of DinDay's plans settled in. 'This is not good, Wilitang,' he said at last. 'The stakes have gotten a lot higher.'

'Aye. Not good at all.'

One of the youngsters off the Wind Drifter slipped alongside us.

'Follow me. The ship is being watched. The Clan-chief has shifted your kits over to the Island Serrata – I will lead you there,' she said quietly – proud to be the first one to have found us.

'Run ahead, Ria,' said Py. 'You don't want to be seen with us. We'll follow you from a distance.'

She gave him a quick conspiratorial smile and skipped ahead. As we followed her around to the far end of the Crea clan encampment in a wide circle, she was joined by several more of Py's young friends, who fanned out as scouts and guards.

TaFin was waiting for us in the shadow under the stern of the Island Serrata. He shook his head sadly as we approached.

'I knew you was trouble the moment you came aboard,' he said. Just who he was referring to was left for us to guess. Kicking our stuffed kit bags with his long sandals, he continued; 'Here's your gear. The Cap'n says to tell you that for the Dragon's sake, keep clear of the Wind Drifter and himself. DinDay has men hanging about and he suspects that he'll be followed wherever he goes as well. He'll do what he can for you, but that won't be much. If he can, he'll send a boat back to pick you up once we've sailed. But don't count on it. If you need to get a word to him, do it through me, or one of the youngsters here. Discreetly.'

'Tell EnVey not to worry. We can look after ourselves. And we'll stay well clear of him and the clan. Tell him to blame me and my gold-token for having brought Py here. A ride back would be nice, but I think that we can find our own way home, if necessary.'

'And how would you do that? Grow wings?'

I shrugged. 'I haven't really thought about it much. I suppose we (and by that I meant Cin) could steal a ship's boat, or even build one if we're left behind...'

TaFin gave a snort.

'We'd have plenty of time. And I've got coins to buy the tools. We might even buy one of your electric boats you're trying to sell,' I replied. 'That'll make him happy.'

'Good luck with that. We don't extend credit. And certainly not to a fellow whose prospects for paying it back seem so dim,' he replied with a shake of his head. 'You're a long way from home, Litang.'

'Never underestimate an engineer. I've already found my way to the Dontas from here once. I can do it again.'

'Right you are, Litang,' he said with a grin. 'That will make the Cap'n sleep sounder. Now get on with you, before someone wanders by looking for you.'

'Thanks, TaFin. Take care. And tell EnVey thanks for everything. I'll be sure to look him up when I get back. And whatever you do, make sure you get lost on the way to SarLa, if that's the way things go.'

He shrugged. 'Let's hope it doesn't come to that.'

noticed, anyway. At least no one had emerged from the edge of the encampment, the better part of a kilometer behind us. Even so, we walked around to the far side of the woods before pushing our way into the thick vines and underbrush of its dim green interior. Ahead I heard Hissi and Siss bark a greeting.

'Up here,' called Naylea from high in the branches of a wide-spreading fist tree. Py and I found vines to haul ourselves up through the maze of branches to a green-lit open space – between the branches of the fist tree below and under the spreading fern-like branches of the fern top trees that had quickly recovered from the great serrata 3,000 rounds ago.

Naylea was standing on top of the maze of branches still in her blue uniform. "Greetings, brother," she said cupping her hands and bowing.

Py followed suit. 'Greetings, sister. I am LinPy of Cloud Home Community, Daeri.'

'NyLi of Jade Peak Community, Tydora' she replied.

Py stared sharply at her. 'Why you're the Jade Peak advocate who oversaw the construction of the SaraDal Island's defense system!' He bowed again. 'I am honored to meet you.'

I stared at her and then laughed. 'Of course!'

Who better to set up a modern surveillance system than a former thief who is not only familiar with the technology but trained to detect and defeat it? Still ...

'Weren't you being rather reckless – coming here to confront the Temtres with your accomplishment? DeKan might possibly have found that amusing, but I doubt many others would've.'

She flashed a fleeting smile and shrugged. 'Who better to convince them of the risks they run than someone who knows all about them? I did, however, assume that I'd be dealing with DeKan. I'd have nothing to fear from DeKan...' she said, growing sad, adding, with a glance to me, 'He was an honorable man.'

I nodded. 'I'm sure he was. From his letter, he sounded eager to see us both again.'

Py gave us each a questioning glance as he said, 'I knew the Order had charged several advocates with the letter, hoping one might succeed, but I never expected to meet you, of all people, here. How did you convince them to bring you here on one of their own ships?'

'It was just as simple as I assured my mentor that it would be. I'm sorry that they didn't believe me. In any event, I caught a Fray Clan ship out of the Principality of ShantaRain. As a gold-token agent of the Temtres, I had a right to claim passage to the Assembly. And I wasn't a Laezan when I boarded. I saved that surprise until we arrived. Captain FrayDar was dumbfounded when I set out from his ship as a Laezan, and was even more so when I returned, especially after I put a half dozen Din Clan members, hanging about the Dagger, to sleep.'

'NyLi... Of course!' Py muttered, his face brightening with a wide smile and a boyish laugh. 'Why you are Wilitang's Naylea Cin – the girl he has been searching for!' He beamed.

Naylea gave him a questioning look, and a bemused smile. 'I was known as Naylea Cin in the past. But that past is behind me. And yes, I must admit to knowing Litang in that past. But how is it that you know about me? I know he's fond of telling tales, but certainly that would be an old tale by now.'

Py clapped and laughed and then put his arm around my shoulder and drew me towards Naylea, so that he could put his arm around her shoulder as well. 'Why, I knew Wilitang when the story was fresh! When I was a new magistrate and he was one of my lieutenants. And now you meet again! The Way is wonderful in its mysterious workings!'

Naylea allowed a tentative smile and gave Py, at his simple, boyish best, a searching look. 'Litang – a magistrate's lieutenant?'

'Yes. And he took the minor orders, which he has not renounced, so he is within the Order. Everything is proper!'

I was not familiar with all the ins and outs of being a Laezan, but I'd a feeling that being within the order was a requirement of Laezans becoming partners. From the look Naylea gave him, Py was racing far ahead of her thoughts, and mine as well.



'Good,' she said, quickly stepping back. 'I'm glad that he's a member of the Order since he must bear the risks we need run to complete our mission. It looks to be a more desperate one than we had bargained for.'

Py stepped back as well and sobered up. 'Yes. Wilitang told me of the unfortunate death of the clanking and his likely successor. It seems that our chances of success have been greatly diminished. I have, of course, copies of the Order's missive and have been carefully instructed as to what the Order wishes to convey. However, as the prime advocate of the mission, you, no doubt, have a far greater appreciation of the situation than me. You must take the lead in this mission.'

Naylea nodded. 'Right. And my first order is to hand over that satchel with the char-buns in it. I can smell them from here and I'm starving.'

I did as ordered, and as she opened the satchel, Siss appeared at her side. She took out two char-buns, and handed one to Siss, who wolfed it down.

'Don't you hunt anymore?' I asked Siss.

She gave me a dismissive hiss.

Hissi drifted up as well, no doubt looking for another char-bun.

'Hissi, this is NyLi. We knew her as Naylea Cin. She was the one who suggested I have you for breakfast, back when you were in the shell.'

Hissi moved nose to nose and gave Naylea her most fearful growl, showing her teeth.

'Nice to meet you Hissi. Glad you're looked after Litang. I suppose you want a char-bun too.'

'Hissi barked an enthusiastic "Yes!" as Naylea handed her one. Naylea knew Simla dragons.

'Right,' she said after several bites. 'The first thing to do is to get out of our blues. This is clearly an undercover mission. Out of our blues we can come and go in the Assembly as we please. Neither of us are well-known enough to run much of a risk of being identified.'

'Py can pass as a Temtre, but you can't,' I pointed out. 'You're fine-feathered.'

She reached into her kit bag and drew out a long broad-feathered wig. 'I can. As an advocate I often had to work under cover,' she replied between bites. 'You'll notice my sandals are designed to give the impression I'm long footed. I've nothing to worry about. You, as a fine-feathered retainer, might run some risks. There are far fewer of them and you might be recognized...'

'You can buy me a broad-feathered wig...'

'You'd also have to shave off your sinister whiskers. I'm sure Brother LinPy and I can do whatever will be necessary to complete our mission without you getting us into trouble,' she adding, after another bite, 'We'll make formal plans once I've had one or two smoked lizards on a stick, changed, and visited the Talon Hawk...'

'That's crazy,' I exclaimed.

She shook her head. 'DeKan was a friend. I have many friends on board. I need to see them. Besides, I'll get a sense of what we can expect going forward. And with DinDay out of the picture for the moment, there shouldn't be any fuss. The longer I wait, the more people I'll have to get through to see the people I want to see,' she said. And grabbing two sticks of roasted lizard meat, added, 'I'm on my way. Siss, you stay here and entertain the boys – let them arrange your feathers or something. When I get back I should have a good idea about how DeKan's death will all play out and we can plan accordingly. I suggest that you change while I am gone, Brother LinPy.'

'Buy me a broad-feathered wig,' I said. 'If you can pass as Temtre, so can I. We're in this together. Do you need coins?'

She shook her head, no, and grabbing her kit bag slipped down between the branches and out of sight.

'Are you going to let her order you around like that, Teacher?' I said to Py.

He smiled. 'I think I will.'

## Chapter 33 The Ultimatum

01

'Time to get moving,' said Naylea, putting away the glasses she'd been using to study the encampment. 'We need to deal with the guards in the trees.'

Naylea, Py, and I were nestled in the upper branches of the re-grown jungle that clothed the lower foothills of the island's handle. From our vantage point, the ship-city spread out in long straight rows over the flat savanna blade of the island. The Temtres were streaming through the encampment towards the crater amphitheater, hidden from our view behind a low mound and a stand of trees, for the Grand Assembly that officially opened the gathering. Earlier, we'd seen five figures slip into that stand of trees behind it, likely in anticipation of the type of disruption we were planning.

'Right,' I said, and we started off through the mid-level of the jungle for the edge of the island.

Naylea had returned from her visit to the Talon Hawk with a feather wig for me – a wig of long, pale yellow feathers. 'I remembered that yellow was your favorite color,' she said with a smile – she'd not lost all of her good-natured wickedness – as she handed it to me.

'DeKan's body was wrapped in oil soaked cloth, set afire and adrift soon after his death, as is Temtre custom, so there will be only a eulogy at the start of the Grand Assembly. After that the clan-chief candidates for clan-king will speak to the Temtres, though the actual selection will be made by a vote of the clan chiefs,' she said and added, 'Talking to my friends aboard the Talon Hawk, there's no chance that we'll be accepted as official envoys of the Order and allowed to deliver our message. especially in light of DinDay's ambitions and the lack of anyone willing to challenge him on it.'

'But we must deliver the message!' exclaimed Py.

She nodded grimly. 'Yes, we must. And I think we need to take our case to all of the Temtres rather than just the clan-chiefs, who seem covered by DinDay. We need to sow as much uncertainty, amongst as many Temtres, as possible. Even if they end up falling in with DinDay's plans, they'll do so with great reluctance, and hopefully, will bolt at the first sign of trouble. To do that, I think we're going to have to be uninvited speakers at DeKan's eulogy.'

Py, of course, fell in with the idea immediately. It may have been a hundred times larger than the bands of bandits than he had dreamed of leading to The Way, but he was undaunted by the prospect. I was less daunted than prudence should've dictated because I knew we had, in our darters, a hundred times the fire-power to even the score. And since this was their mission, I largely stayed out of their discussions.

Their plan involved crashing the Grand Assembly just after the eulogy and before the clan-chiefs spoke. Naylea, the stealth, would slip through the tall grass to the edge of the amphitheater above the upper terrace where the Sword of the Temtre would be stuck in the ground, pending the selection of a new clan-king. At the proper time, she'd send a few darts into the stone lip of the terrace – their blue flashes would announce the appearance of Py – earnest, and nearly impossible not to like – who would descend to the terrace and deliver the Order's message – the written and oral versions – with Naylea covering him with her darter. Since her darter had a long range sight, she could pick off anyone armed with springers who might take exception to Py's message. Py, with much practice, had gotten the Order's message down to five minutes. Litang, ex-spaceer tramp ship captain, wide-sky engineer, and deadly with a darter as long as his target was in spitting distance, would be stationed at the base of the mound to cover their backs and their line of retreat, which suited me fine.

Our plans beyond that – including the minor matter of getting back home to the Dontas – were

rather vague and depended on circumstances to be revealed. None of us believed we'd be welcomed back aboard any Temtre ship, save possibly EnVey's. Having brought Py and myself here, the Crea Clan ships would likely be very carefully watched by the whole Assembly. I wasn't about to put him into any more danger or disfavor than he was in already.

Naylea said we'd just steal a ship's boat to take us home, but not until the end of the Assembly, when most of the ships had departed and any response would be muted. We'd then sail the boat across the Outer Endless Sea, through the Outward Islands, and across the Donta Sea to reach home. I'd done it, once, in the Phoenix and then with the captured Vantra dragon ship, but I wasn't eager to do it again. I was, however, hard pressed to come up with an alternative, except trusting EnVey to send a boat back for us. I did suggest that we might want to buy the tools we'd need to make our own craft if need be, and a small steam engine to power it, as an alternative to stealing a boat, but we put off those plans until after we delivered the message and gauged the response.

We had nearly three rounds to prepare, waiting for the last of the ships to arrive. I shaved off my whiskers with a Saraime razor I had in my kit bag that I used to keep my sinister beard sinister.

'I'd forgotten how innocent looking you are without your pointy little beard,' laughed Naylea.

'I am innocent,' I replied, 'with or without my pointy little beard.'

Still studying me she shook her head. 'No, I take that back. Your sinister beard hides your slyness, the oily snake in the grass, Litang.'

'Innocent, sly, or sinister – it was all one and the same to you, my dear.'

'Perhaps, back then...' she admitted with a theatrical sigh while lingering over the "then." 'But I've changed.'

She had, but I said nothing more.

She glued two soft strips of the yellow feathers over my eyebrows. And disguised my claw boots to look longer, so that with my new yellow feathers tied in a ponytail streaming back from under my tricorne hat, I passed as a broad-feathered Temtre without a second glance.

We moved our hideout to a narrow canyon high in the mountains – a hollowed out nest under a mass of vines that filled a narrow cleft in the rocks. We then charted an elaborate, and hopefully misleading, line of retreat from the amphitheater, around the island, through the jungle, and up the narrow canyons to reach it.

After that, we spent our awake time amongst the Temtres. The death of DeKan cast a far lighter pall over the Assembly than I would've imagined. The likely explanation being that the Temtre clan-king is a largely ceremonial post. He presides over the Assembly and the council of clan-chiefs to settle the affairs of clan but plays no role in the every-round affairs of the clans, since the Temtre are mostly solitary traders. The various clans have their own island territories, only occasionally crossing courses with other Temtre ships in the ports where their trade patterns overlap so that most Temtres see their clan-king only once in a decade. And I gathered that most clan-kings generally preside over one or two Assemblies – they're either too old or too bold to preside over more of them.

Hissi and Siss were mostly off on their own. The Simlas seemed to have their own Assembly and paid little attention to the affairs of their human companions – save when they wanted something to eat. Hissi, brought up nearly human, had her own coins in the little sachet she wore, so she could buy food on her own, when she didn't feel like hunting me down to spring for a meal. Much to my surprise, I didn't see her often.

In order to lay the groundwork for the Order's message, we spent much of our time in the tent taverns talking about the widely rumored raid on SarLa. You don't keep secrets in a gathering of families with a decade of gossip to exchange. We talked up the likelihood that it was a trap. Py and Naylea decided that it was the best line to take to dampen the enthusiasm of the Temtres for the great raid. They could understand revenge, but could also appreciate treachery, so the idea of leading your enemies into a trap baited with a vast treasure trove was something they could appreciate. We'd argue amongst ourselves, and with anyone who cared to join in, about the dangers of trusting any SaraDal

prince eager to give away the treasure trove to the Temtres. Given that the raid was a widely debated subject even without us, and had garnered considerable skepticism, I questioned the need to make an Assembly appearance at all. We had copies of the message that we could plant all around the Assembly, so that word would get around. Py and Naylea, however, viewed delivering the message in person as their mission and wanted to make certain that all the consequences were fully understood, including the consequences of continuing to raid in the SaraDals.

On the second round, we caught sight of EnVey in one of the lanes. Naylea hurried ahead to talk with him and learn what the clan-chiefs were thinking. He gave a little start when she pulled up alongside like an old friend, but they walked and talked for quite a while. EnVey told her the clan-chiefs were leery – but tempted. None of them believed the rumored Saraime warship would sail before the Blossom Festival, which, if they postponed the Assembly, would give them something like 20 rounds to take SarLa before it arrived. DinDay was certain that they could do that. Naylea assured EnVey that they couldn't. EnVey said he believed her and would not be amongst those laying siege to SarLa, but that his opinion alone would sway no one. It was up to us.

02

And now it was time to do it.

We made our way down the hillside, swinging through the jungle and then along the cliff edge of the island to the edge nearest to the amphitheater. We did so largely in silence, each with his or her own thoughts. I was confident we'd be able to deliver our message and escape. I knew my companions were fearless, competent, and eager to succeed. Naylea's breezy fearlessness may have been missing, but she seemed cool and competent as ever. Py – dressed once more in the Laezan blues of the Order, since he was to be its envoy – was cheerfully going over his speech in whispers. I make no claim to fearlessness – someone has to be realistic. And the realism that comforted me, in addition to the competence of my companions, was that our darters gave us a very great advantage. We could fire several orders of magnitude faster, more accurately, and further than the Temtre's air guns. And being nonlethal, we could use them freely without leaving the path of the Way. We might be facing odds of thousands to one, but our darters, and, hopefully, an element of surprise would more than even the odds – at least as long as Py stuck to his script and kept the message down to five minutes. I was sure he could charm them for five minutes, even delivering what amounted to an ultimatum. My main worry was that he might get carried away and go on and on.

'Right, Let's deal with the guards,' said Naylea hidden in the long grass on the island's edge, after taking one last look with the glasses. 'You know your part, Litang? We're in love and lost track of time.'

'Oh yes,' I replied. 'I remember it well.'

She scowled at me, but there may've been a brief spark of laughter in her eyes. They were harder to read now than they had been in the past.

With a nod to Py, she said, 'Come a'running when we give you the signal. I don't think the eulogy will take very long. The Temtres aren't very sentimental people.'

We could now hear the low roar of singing coming from the amphitheater, so we knew the proceedings had gotten underway.

As we climbed over the edge I reached for her hand to hold with my left hand. I'd my little sissy hidden in my right hand, and I knew she was left handed so I wouldn't be covering up her sissy.

She gave me an annoyed look and flinched to pull it away.

'We're in love, my dear,' I whispered, moving close. 'We've just made love – and will again. We must play our role. I seem to recall that you always loved acting.'

She scowled, but let me hold her hand and fell into her role. (I do think she loved to act.) And so, we started off, hand in hand, across the several hundred meters of knee high grass toward the stand of

trees, brushing against each others as we walked, like lovers do.

'I'm glad we have this chance to talk, alone,' I said in a low voice.

'Litang, this is not the time.'

It hadn't been the time since we first met.

'We should be talking, my dear. It's part of the act. And without Py, and the sarcastic dragons about, I'd say now is as good a time as any to clear up a few things. I don't think we need to say too much for now.'

'No we don't. Now tell me, why aren't you with your friends in Cimmadar? Or growing cha on some island peak as you claimed you wanted to do? Why are you here?'

Not quite what I wanted to talk about, but it gave me a lead.

'Because I loved you. I'd already made my choice between you and my friends, and had chosen you. My St Bleyth ancestors are neither dust nor gas to me, and I felt that with time and a new life here, they'd mean less and less to you, so that we could take up where we left off – if I could only find you again.'

'You really thought you could find me amongst a thousand islands?'

I shrugged. 'At the time I may not have been thinking too clearly. I thought that Siss had given Hissi the task of finding you for me...

'In the egg?'

'Why not? They're telepathic. I thought maybe they could keep in touch and Hissi would lead me to you with Siss's help.'

'Did she?'

'Well, no, I suppose not. But she's saved my life a few times, so she can claim some of the credit. And well, here we are.' And I had to laugh, 'Though I never expected to find you as a Laezan! The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.'

'You should talk. You've not fallen very far either.'

'Oh, but I have! I'm an engineer now, no longer a bridge officer! It's entirely different.'

'No it's not,' she replied. 'You haven't changed at all.'

'I have. I've gone over to the dark side to become one of the hardworking black hole gang, the bane of idle captains and mates, just as you've gone over to the bright side. Once a thief in a mercenary order, you're now an advocate of the downtrodden people in a new, noble order.'

'The difference isn't all that large, in practice. I'm an advocate because I am a thief and a spy. They're skills that can be useful when dealing with the people we sometimes have to deal with. And I rather doubt engineers are as villainous as you make them out to be.'

'Trust me, I was a ship's captain for a decade. They – we – can be, if not exactly villains, certainly a pain. But that's neither dust nor gas. What's important is that we're here – together again.'

'Is it? You were talking about love in the past tense.'

'I was. And it is, at the moment. I'll admit that the romantic glow that sent me on my quest to find you has faded in 3,000 rounds. I came here not knowing what I'd feel if I found you here. But I had to find out.'

'And what did you find?'

'Let's say, I found an old friend. And someone who's every little curve, every little look and manner I could – if she'd let me – fall in love with again. I made the right choice, when I fell in love with Naylea Cin. I think it may still be the right choice. But back then you were in love with me as well, so it wouldn't be the same now – until you fall in love with me again.'

I felt her shrug against my shoulder. 'I won't... And I'm no longer a Cin. That past is dead and buried. I'm NyLi now. And I'm on a very important mission. A very emotional one for me.'

'I know. But no matter what you call yourself, NyLi, Naylea, or Nadine. You were someone I once loved, and could love again. But you're right. Now is not the time or place. Still, we can be friends and shipmates can't we? I'll try not to love you, until you love me.'

She gave me a look, and I could see she didn't believe me. Well, not entirely. Perhaps she could see in my eyes that I wasn't lying. Well, not entirely. She was dear to me, but she was different as well, different enough to make my old love obsolete. It would have to be a new love.

'Don't,' she said. 'Don't ever, and certainly not now. You don't know how hard this mission is for me. I came to understand the Temtres. I might never have left the Talon Hawk, but I was curious to explore the islands and find my new self. Now I'm working against them. A traitor.' She paused, and then continued, 'Still, they shouldn't be raiding, killing, and raping people. I have no qualms about working to put an end to that. The Dins and any other old fashioned clan need to change – or move to the Outward Islands where they'll find many tribes who'll give them the savage fight they delight in. But now, with DeKan's death, DinDay might lead the whole Temtre destruction. That would be a terrible tragedy. The Temtres, by and large, are good people, just set in an old tradition. There are many others just like them in the more remote islands.'

'But times – even in the timeless Pela – are changing. And the Laezans are one of the motors of that change.'

'Yes... And I am an agent of the Laezans and change. But change need not be violent. It need not lead to the destruction of a people. The thing is, I know ZarKar, the SaraDal Prime Prince. He's no fool. He's using the Order and the Order's concern for the SaraDal islanders to secure his reign and I truly believe that this traitor of DinDay's is one of his agents. If he succeeds in luring the Temtres to SarLa and their destruction, I would bear part of the blame for it...'

'You'll have done all you could to save them. If the Temtres are foolish enough to ignore your warning, it's not your fault.'

'I've set the trap, Litang, knowing full well, that the Temtres wouldn't be deterred by mere threats. I had hoped to talk to DeKan and make him see that it was more than a mere threat – that the system I'd set up would mean certain death to any raiding Temtre ship. But now all we can do is threaten, which I know will not deter them.'

'I've seen Magistrate Py speak in court. You can trust him to make clear the dire consequences of challenging the Saraim warship, the fortress of SarLa and the possible treachery of ZarKar. He'll make them see reason.'

'Oh, I hope so, but I doubt it. Words won't frightened them.'

'Well, some will see the wisdom in them. I'm sure EnVey and his clan will get lost on the way to the SaraDals if it comes to that.'

'If he's smart and brave enough to get lost. But there are a lot of fools amongst the clans. Fools and gold...'

'Aye. I've got a tale to tell about that as well...'

'Save it, Litang. We're getting close...'

Indeed we were. And unchallenged. We needed to be challenged, since we'd have no excuse for walking into the woods when we could easily walk around it. Unless...

03

'Once more, my dear!' I said, as we came alongside the fringe of the woods without a challenge from the guards hidden within. I pulled her towards me and the woods.

'But the Assembly,' she protested, holding back and playing her part.

'The old Assembly can wait. They'll be talking for hours,' I replied, eagerly tugging her towards the woods. 'We've plenty of time – and not enough! Please?' The part I was playing was written just for me, I found.

I half dragged her into the shaded underbrush – several meters – before we bumped up against three large fellows, armed with springer rifles. I let go of Naylea's hand.

'Get along to the Assembly, you two,' one of them said gruffly. 'Get along, I say. You should be at the Assembly.'

'Yes, of course. Sorry,' stammered Naylea, blushing, and looking up at the hulking Temtre.

Seeing that she had his full attention and that I had clear shots at the two behind him, I took them, with two little flickers of blue light, and searched the underbrush for the remaining two. She put a dart into the fellow before her. With no gravity, they just stood stock still.

'Come along, Max, my dear. We must go,' she said loudly, adding in a whisper, 'Make noise going out.' And crouching down, quickly scampered deeper into the underbrush.

I slashed my way out and then crouched down and waited no more than half a minute until Naylea called out. 'Signal LinPy. Let's get moving.'

Py came loping, like only a true small islander can. There was no one in sight, so we quickly moved to our positions. I stayed behind as the two Laezans crept through the tall grass to the edge of the amphitheater where Py held back, while Naylea crawled on to the edge. And then we waited. The worst part.

Finally, Naylea signaled Py, and I could see a bit of a blue flash as she set the stage for Py's speech. Between the fireworks and Py's speech, they kept the Temtre's at bay for more than ten minutes by my com link, though Naylea had to silence a fearless DinDay with a dart, who, along with the other clan-chiefs, lined the second terrace. And then, the two Laezans appeared alongside of me.

'Go, Litang,' said Naylea, darter in hand, 'I'll cover you.'

I rose and raced alongside Py past the trees, telling Py to keep going on – I stopped to wait for Naylea. She was following closely behind, and seeing no pursuit, we reached the edge of the island, and began our well-rehearsed retreat in good order.

## Chapter 34 An Unfortunate Escape

01

Our elaborate retreat route took us along the cliff and then into the jungle on the other side of the island. We sailed through the jungle, leaping and diving tree to tree, vine to vine and then up into the rough handle half of the island, keeping to underbrush filled ravines.

Naylea was grimly silent, Py, bright and cheerful. He apologized for running long, but explained that he wanted to make certain everyone understood that the Order was not challenging the Temtres. It was hoped it would protect their lives – as well as those of the SaraDal islanders. And as long as they were willing to listen, he felt it was best to explain this as clearly as possible. And, well, they didn't seem threatening at all...

Our elaborate escape route worked as planned – we were either not followed or if we were, we lost them quickly. Nevertheless, it proved to be our undoing – the hour long trek gave them time, and they used it.

We were nearing the end of our escape – walking up a narrow, steep-sided canyon within a hundred meters of our hideout – when a ship's boat drifted over the edge of the canyon, its little steam engine thumping, its propeller whining softly. Tilted on edge to us, we saw its large crew. And they, us.

'There they are!' yelled several of the dozen Temtres on board, pointing down at us. All let out a savage roar, swinging their springer rifles towards us.

Naylea had already crouched and sprang for the boat, drawing her darter as she did so. Py followed,

a half second behind her – leading with his staff. Reaching the boat they grabbed hold of its gunwale – Py wielding his staff to knock springer rifles pointed at them aside while Naylea efficiently went about silencing the crew one by one with her darter. Ex-spaceer Litang managed to get his darter in hand but found no clear shot before the boat disappeared beyond the canyon wall.

I scampered up and out of the canyon in time to see Naylea and Py tumbling into the boat as it sailed on over the rugged mountainside, now out of control. I set out in pursuit.

Temtire boats are large – some eight meters long and broad beamed. A small-bore rocket launcher with a steel shield on either side is mounted at its bow. The deck is enclosed by wide spaced ribs that arch high over it to a thick keel running over the top from stern to the bow rocket launcher. A heavy net, secured in a roll along this upper keel frame, could be rolled down to secure passengers and cargo aboard during abrupt maneuvers. This open frame allowed the boats to be used as cargo lighters as well as making it easy for a boarding crew to swarm aboard rival ships when the opportunity arose. DeKan was killed aboard one such boat leading just such an endeavor.

The netting hadn't been unrolled so Naylea and Py quickly climbed on board, pushed its inert crew out of the way to make their way to the tillers and take control before the boat collided with the looming cliff. She swung the boat back around towards me. Py had his hands full, keeping the inert crew on board as the boat swung about. She cut steam to the motor, allowing me to leap, grab the gunwale, and pull myself aboard.

'Can we use this to get home?' she asked, even before I swung myself in.

'Give me a moment or two,' I muttered, and made my way aft, dodging the inert bodies to examine the engine and take inventory of the boat's fuel and food supplies. The engine proved to be a well looked after Akino engine – smaller than the one on the Vantra boat, but Akinos are known for their reliability. It could be run constantly for months – if you had enough fuel and water. I rummaged through the fuel bunker and food hampers set in the hull alongside the engine, and stretching forward for several meters. The fuel bunkers were all properly filled with black-cake packed in wicker baskets for easy handling, and the food lockers filled with water, rice, and dried meat and vegetables. Everything was shipshape. We'd have enough food to last for weeks with a crew of five.

'Well?' she asked impatiently as I had finished my inspection. She and Py had finished rolling down the netting on each side to keep the former crew on board for the moment.

'The boat could get us home. The fuel supply won't,' I replied, slowly, thinking out loud. 'It's stocked to get you to a decent sized island, not to cross an endless sea. The Wind Drifter had its sails set almost the entire voyage which suggests that we'd be sailing against the prevailing air currents, so we couldn't rely on its sails getting us home if we ran out of black-cake. Having taken the Phoenix to the Outward Islands, we're looking at maybe 5,000 kilometers just to reach the Outward Islands, and another 5,000 to cross the Donta Sea...

'We'd need to lay in a good supply of peat moss or dry wood here and again in the Outward Islands, to get us home.'

'But it can be done?'

'Yes. With luck. We'd have to survive crossing the Outward Islands...'

'Do we have a choice?'

'If EnVey can send a boat back for us, we do. But if not, well, no,' I admitted.

'Right. Let's get this boat under cover. We'll use it as our hideout. Once the Assembly breaks up, we'll have plenty of time to provision it. Take the controls, Litang, and circle back over our camp. We'll collect our gear, dump the crew, and get this boat hidden in the jungle. Unless you have a better idea, Brother,' she added, turning to Py.

He laughed and shook his head. 'No.'

'Right. Let's get a move on it. This probably isn't the only boat they have out searching for us.'

And as if on cue, another boat soared over a ridge line not a 100 meters off.

'Get down, Py, wave and hail them. Litang!' she ordered briskly.



We did as she ordered and they altered to close with us, getting within 25 meters before they sensed something was wrong – likely from the stillness and awkward angles of the former crew. Still, it was close enough for Naylea who, was resting her darter on the gunwale, to take out the boat's pilot and then the rest of the crew, one by one, without giving them time to return a single shot.

'Put us alongside that boat, Litang.'

I opened the steam valve to the engine, bringing it chugging to life, and swung the tillers around to chase after the pilotless second boat. I didn't have to chase it far, since it quickly hit a cliff with a loud thump that sent its inert crew surging into the cliff wall. The boat swung broadside to it with enough force to smash in the propeller guard, shattering the wooden propeller with grinding whine. As I brought our boat alongside, Naylea jumped across, carrying a line. I followed her to open the boiler's escape valve before anything untold could happen.

Naylea looked about, searching the sky for more boats. No more were in sight.

'Someone has acted very promptly down at the encampment,' she said. 'They didn't wait for DinDay to revive. I gave him a full charge again.'

'Perhaps they're searching for us because they want to hear more of what we have to say,' said Py.

Both Naylea and I gave him a glance to see if he was kidding. He didn't seem to be.

He smiled and shrugged. 'We didn't give them a chance to ask questions.'

'No, Brother, we didn't,' said Naylea. 'But we'll be around to answer questions, if that was their intent – once we secure our escape. Now, Brother Py, could I ask you to jump down and collect our gear from our hideout? Litang and I will shift the Temtres to this boat and shift its fuel and food to ours. Will double the fuel and supplies give us enough to reach the Outward Islands, Litang?' She was in an all-business mode.

'It might,' I replied as Py disappeared over the side. 'I'd like a fatter reserve, but let's get it on board. We can make our plans later.' I had a feeling we'd not have a great deal of time. It could be that these boats were manned by the more hot headed of the Temtres, but I wouldn't count on them being few in number.

I started digging the wicker hampers of black-cake out of the second boat's lockers and hastily stowing them aboard our boat while Naylea dragged our sleepers over to the damaged boat. We worked fast and had almost finished by the time Py reappeared bearing all of our kit bags. So far, so good.

'Now let's get this boat under cover,' said Naylea, stepping aboard. 'We'll need to put some distance between us and this boat since it'll be the center of their searches once they find it. Open her up, Litang. I think ditching this in the jungle is our best chance of keeping it.'

'Aye,' I said. Standing and looking about, I tried to orient myself. The encampment and savanna were hidden beyond the uneven ridge lines of the mountainous handle of the island that surrounded us. Calling on my memory of where our hideout lay as my reference point, I swung the boat slowly about and set my course, shoving a couple more of the charcoal cakes into the small firebox and twisting the steam valve to the engine full open. I followed the rising and falling of the terrain as closely as I could to keep out of sight. The big boat was not particularly nimble, so that I needed at least 10 meters of clearance for maneuvers over the rough terrain.

'I think this course should take us around to the jungle side, angling slightly for the foothills and jungle, so we shouldn't have far to go by the time we reach the other side.'

Nevertheless, we didn't get even that far. Several minutes later, as we cleared a ridge line, we ran straight into a long staggered line of boats crowded with Temtres. I could see half a dozen of them before the line was lost in both directions around the close horizon of the island. One boat was coming almost directly at us. There was no way to avoid being seen.

'Down again, Py. Stay out of sight!' I said, and looked to Naylea standing beside me. 'Do you still have a few 5mm darts?'

She didn't answer, but stared intensely at the boats.

I'd seen what those darts could do the last time we were here – they had blasted gaping holes in

boats. With her pirate piece darter we could easily put any and all boats out of action. However, once you start firing 5mm darts into boats packed with people, people would likely get killed.

'Ready to fight or shall we try running?' I asked once more, as we quickly closed with the Temtre boat ahead.

She sighed. 'My vows forbid me to use lethal force. I am allowed to disable, but not to kill, if I can help it. They don't have radios, so if we can run past and out race them, we may still have time to duck into the jungle. With so many more people aboard their boats, we should be able to outrun them... Right?'

'We should,' I said. Whether or not we could get enough of a lead to hide the boat if they pursued us, was another matter. But that wasn't my choice. With the boat before us less than 50 meters ahead, we didn't have time to turn about and run away. We could, of course, shoot up and away from the island, but that would likely cause a great deal of suspicion. Our best course was to continue on to see if we could bluff our way past them. Even if we couldn't, they'd need to turn the whole line around to pursue us – assuming they didn't kill us as we passed by. I changed our course ever so slightly to pass through the approaching line boats as far from them as possible.

We didn't bluff our way past. I suppose being so lightly manned and heading the wrong way we looked suspicious. The boat ahead hailed us as we closed with it. It was our bad luck that it had a clan-chief on board who ordered us to come alongside. I didn't recognize his name, but I'd no intention to coming alongside (and expending more darts) – with half a dozen other boats in sight, and so we just waved as we sailed past them, while I called out we were going back for more reinforcements. I doubt that we were actually recognized, but our actions spoke for us. The clan-chief ordered us to stop, and when we didn't, angrily ordered the boat around to chase after us, with the rest of the boats following suit once they saw and heard what was happening.

With only the three of us aboard, and despite our doubled supplies, we were able to sink our pursuit out of sight behind the curve of the island within minutes – but not before they'd sent several volleys of their little rockets streaking by us, trailing tails of smoke. Unguided rockets fired from moving boats are not very accurate weapons, so that hitting a boat, stern on, would be pure luck, and in this instance, at least, luck was on our side. The closest one hissed by within five meters of us before we managed to get the island between us and them. If we could put them far enough astern, I thought, we might still have time to ditch the boat in the tall jungle – and at least make our escape.

Our luck, however, only extended to being missed by rockets. Five minutes later, as thinly jungle-clad foothills of the mountains just started rolling into view, another long line of boats appeared over the curve of the island. And, half a kilometer behind them, a full sized Temtre ship drifting up over the horizon as well, its large propeller ticking over lazily on the thin head of steam it had time to build up.

I cursed softly, as I think Naylea did as well.

Py shook his head sadly and said, 'I fear I have failed. They seem not to have taken the message in the spirit the Order intended it to be understood.'

'Keep out of sight,' I said. 'Every second we can fool them into thinking this boat is still manned by Temtres, the safer we'll be.'

We were now nearly trapped between two lines of boats. We could perhaps, run through the second as well, or shoot up and away from the island, but the big ship behind it made both courses iffy. If they recognized us, or when they met the pursuit behind us, we'd be under rocket and springer fire from several dozen boats and the big ship as well.

'It appears we've stirred up a quite a hornet's nest. Still not ready to use your 5mm darts?' I asked Naylea.

She shook her head “no” so I swung the boat away from the new line with the idea of running between the two lines for as long as possible. We now seemed on course for the savanna side of the island and if the Temtres had turned out every ship's boat, we might be able to get lost in the swarm of boats likely overhead. It takes time to raise steam, even on a little boat, so that the bulk of them were

likely still rising over the encampment.

'If we can't reach the jungle unobserved, we're going to have to get clear of the island,' I said as I settled into our new course.

'For the Outward Islands?' Naylea asked.

I shrugged. 'With luck, only as far as they chase us. Hopefully it's not too far. Once they give up, we'll slink back in and hang off the island until they sail. When they're gone we can land and supplement our supplies before setting out. That is, unless you have a better plan.'

'I don't,' she said listlessly.

'Anything to add, Py?'

'No. Is there nothing I can do? I feel rather useless huddled here under the netting and amongst the supplies. I'm missing all the fun.'

'With any luck at all, you'll not miss much more,' I replied, shoving another black-cake into the firebox. 'Neb! These Temtre launches are sluggish!'

We were still ahead of the new line when the savanna appeared beyond the curve of the foothills. I found that we were actually running along the narrow edge of the island. The savanna and ship-city appeared to the starboard under a cloud of steam and smoke. As I suspected, a great swarm of boats was slowly rising from the encampment. It looked as if the Temtres had manned every boat in their fleet. If only we were seen as part of the swarm, we'd have a chance to slip under the edge and reach the jungle without attracting more attention.

'They seemed to have learned their lesson from the last time we were here,' I said over the whirling of the propeller and thumping of the engine. 'They're out quickly and in force.'

A grim Naylea shrugged listlessly and said nothing. She was taking their response hard – not so much for our sake, but because it looked likely they'd ignore the Order's warning and risk paying a very steep price for that.

Glancing back, I saw the two lines of pursuing boats had converged a kilometer behind us and that they'd now swung about in pursuit. Still, with the better part of a kilometer behind us, we had a good lead – given the sluggishness of the boats. Plus it was a lead we could continue to expand, assuming the boats over the encampment paid no attention to us. I continued along the edge, angling down to pass below the savanna to the jungle side. If worse came to worse, we still had clear skies to run away from the island.

The pursuing boats weren't about to let us slip away unnoticed. They started sending rockets our way, not with any hope of hitting us, but to alert the hundred boats over the ship-city. Even the big Temtre ship sent several of its much larger rockets screaming at us. The rockets succeeded in drawing attention and I saw dozens of the nearer boats in the swarm swing about in our direction. I swung our boat more sharply “down” to quickly put the edge of the island between us and the boats over the ship-city. Having time to find a hiding place in the jungle was now looking unlikely.

I felt a touch on my shoulder and looked up to Naylea. She pointed towards the edge of the island ahead. Two Simla dragons were frantically swimming out towards us – friends and shipmates. You don't leave shipmates in the lurch, so I swung the boat towards the island to meet them – and the dozens of boats now headed our way. I had to shut down the engine and drift, or we'd have run by them. As we drifted to a stop, I stood, dividing my attention between Siss and Hissi and the boats behind them. The dragons were swimming rhythmically – their tail feathers spread out wide to give them the most thrust possible. Still, we were giving up much of our lead, but Naylea, beside me, had her darter out again, waiting for the approaching boats to get near enough for effective fire.

And they did get near enough – for both her darts and for the Temtres to begin launching rockets that flew screaming by the now sitting boat. All missed, and I could see the occasional blue flash of Naylea's darts as one exploded against the steel shields of the bow rocket launchers. She was still firing 1 mm non-lethal darts, hoping to pick off crew member that dared to lean out from behind the rocket launcher shields to fire on us. Still, she didn't intimidate the Temtre – their rocket fire didn't slacken,

and their boats bristled with springer rifles vying to send slugs our way as well. A rocket sizzled by from our old pursuit. We were now in a cross fire.

I told myself that we'd have to be very unlucky to be hit. But luck is a fickle lover, and she may have been the Temtres' in this affair...

A rocket tore through the boat's netting, a meter over the deck, exploding 10 meters beyond us. I couldn't decide just who luck was loving with that one.

I threw open the steam valve and jammed the tillers around as the two exhausted dragons slipped under the netting Py (who had given up hiding) was holding up. They gave a rather breathless bark of greeting as the boat slowly swung about and got underway once again.

'Stay down, Py, girls,' I said as I glanced back. 'There's going to be slugs flying around soon.' The lead boats were now that close – no more than 100 meters.

With no chance now of finding concealment on the island, I pointed the boat's bow to the empty sky and twisted the steam valve wide open.

A slug pinged off of the propeller cowling, and another took a chip out of one of the overhead ribs as we slowly started to pick up speed. Naylea stood beside me, leaning against the propeller cowling picking off the Temtres who, in order to take a springer shot at us, ventured outside of the rocket launcher's shield. With a dozen boats in springer range, her darts did little to slacken their fire.

A second Temtre ship rose slowly over the encampment on a bare minimum of steam and slowly turned towards us. I could see its crew clearing the canvas covers from its rocket launchers. They'd have to fire through their own boats, but I didn't count on that discouraging them. If they had a clear line of fire, they'd take it. I angled the boat “down” a bit more to try to get the island between us and the ship.

Despite the occasional ping or thump of a slug, the whole drama was being played out in slow motion. The boats were no jump-fighters – so our relative positions changed so slowly that time appeared stuck in an invisible morass. Only the rockets, launched with muffled bangs that went streaking by, their tails of smoke etched against the bright sky, seemed immune to the morass.

As we ran from the island, I noted that there were boats over the jungle as well, so we never had a chance for shelter there. Indeed, a third Temtre ship was slowly edging around the far edge of the island's jungle side as well. We were now running the only way left to run. And I'd a feeling we were running away from the Saraim since glancing around, the sky seemed to look brighter beyond the island. Not that it mattered, I told myself – we'd only run until they lost interest in the chase. That was my plan, anyway.

In the meanwhile, we slowly pulled away from the more heavily manned boats. The slugs and rockets dwindled, and then ceased, as we crept out of range.

02

The boat was equipped with a fairly sophisticated “bug eye” navigational device, so I had Naylea take the helm while I set it up, and then, altered our course to put Blade Island right in the brightest spot in the sky. That would give us an accurate way of finding our way back when the time came to turn around if we couldn't follow our pursuers back.

Our lighter load put the general chase half a dozen kilometers behind us within several hours, by which time the small boats had abandoned the chase and headed back to the island. Only the three big Temtre ships continued on. Once they built up a full head of steam and set their sails, they started to very slowly gain on us even with the little engine running flat out and burning through black-cake at a rather alarming pace.

They were still chasing us when I turned over the helm to Py. I hung about, showing him how to

steer using the bug eye, how to keep an eye on the pressure gauge and when to feed the boiler, since it now appeared we were in for a long chase. Naylea was forward, either meditating or napping. The dragons were napping – something they do a lot when they're bored.

'I'm sorry I brought this all on, Wilitang,' said Py.

'You?'

'If I had expressed myself as clearly as I thought I did, they would not be chasing us.'

'I'm sure you did just fine. It is the message, not the messenger, they didn't like.'

He glanced at the three ships behind us. 'It seems that they're not too fond of the messenger either.'

'They're only three ships out of 200. They may not represent the true response.'

'There were a lot more than three boats out looking for us. The whole clan seemed to be out for our blood. Perhaps we should've tried a different approach. One that didn't challenge them so openly.'

I shrugged. 'I doubt spreading rumors would have succeeded in deterring the clan-chiefs with DinDay harking back to the grand old days. Let's hope this is just an instinctive response. Once the clan-chiefs have time to read the full text of the message and calmly consider its implications, they'll see the risks they'd run if they embarked on a raid and will give DinDay's raid a miss. They may not like the message and what it means for the future, but they're not all fools.'

'Besides, Naylea and I could well be the cause of this,' I added. 'We treated them rather roughly the last time we were here and they no doubt feel it was very presumptuous of us to return to demand that they now mend their age-old ways or face destruction. DeKan might have admired Naylea's boldness – and with their friendship – would certainly have considered the message carefully. But with him gone, well... In any event, you delivered the Order's message to the entire clan – which is what you were charged to do. Whether or not they heed it, is out of your hands.'

'Our mission was to prevent bloodshed, both SaraDal and Temtre blood. It appears somewhat doubtful that we'll succeed.'

03

The big ships were noticeably closer – the closest, perhaps now only three kilometers back. We were into the second round of the chase. One ship had the lead while two others were several kilometers behind it. Naylea had the watch, sitting at the stern, tillers in hand, the engine chugging away before her. She had defiantly changed back into the blues of the Order. Py was feeding the boiler and keeping her company. Siss and Hissi were napping, as I had been.

I stood, stretched, and made my way back to them.

'They seem very determined,' said Py.

'Yes. I hadn't expected them to be this vindictive.'

'They intend to bring our head back on poles,' said Naylea. 'It is a matter of honor, not of vindictiveness.'

'That's nice to know,' I muttered. Honor or anger was neither dust nor gas to me – if our heads ended up on poles.

I studied the ship and considered our options. It had all its sails spread wide – fin-sales on either side and kite sails flying from the various masts, top and bottom.

'Do you think we should spread our sails?' asked Naylea. We had fin sail spars lashed on either side of the boat.

I shrugged. 'I wish I knew. I'm an engineer, not a bridge officer or a deck hand. The big ships may benefit from them, but I'm not sure our small sails would do more than drag on the engine. Let's give it another watch or two. If they keep closing we'll give them a try.'

I stared at the ships for a while longer and shook my head. 'I wager they're still pursuing us because they don't know that we acquired a second boat's supply of black-cake. They're expecting us to run out

of black-cake any moment now. I don't believe they really intend to chase us all the way to the far side of the endless sea just to put our heads on poles...'

'Will we be able to reach those islands?' asked Naylea.

'I can't say for certain. Still, the serrata that carried us to Blade Island must have carried us from islands on this side of this endless sky-sea. How far away they are, or even if our course will take us to them is an open question.

'In any event, I can't believe they'll chase us much farther, and we still have more than enough black-cake to make our way back to Blade Island, if they abandon the chase anytime within the round.'

'But we've already used more than half of our supply,' said Naylea, with a nod to the empty black-cake hampers lying about.

'That because we're running flat out. Once we can start sailing at an economical rate of speed, the boat's original supply will last for a dozen rounds or more. They'll abandon the chase soon. Remember, they're putting the Assembly rounds behind them as well. I don't think they'll want to miss it just for petty revenge.'

'It's for honor, Litang, not revenge.'

'Honor or revenge – let's hope missing the Assembly is too steep of a price to pay for our heads in either case.'

I relieved Naylea at the helm, and she went forward to prepare a meal in the black-cake fired iron cooking pot. Siss and Hissi woke up in time for dinner.

Py, Naylea, and the dragons joined me at the stern of the boat for the meal. As we ate, Py, making an effort to lighten the somber mood, started telling some stories about our time together in the marches of Daeri. Hissi must be a very witty Simla dragon, since she had Siss barking with laughter and hissing with sarcasm throughout Py's stories, even in the parts that neither Py nor I thought were all that humorous. I got to thinking that two sarcastic Simla dragons, in stereo, so to speak, might be two Simla dragons too many.

And after a series of stories, he asked Naylea how she came to be Adept NyLi. I suspect he did it for my sake, sensing the tentativeness between us, which would be another disappointing ending.

She obliged him, perhaps because he was the senior advocate by time in Order. 'I left the Talon Hawk after a 150 rounds or so to see something of the islands. I wandered on foot, sailing here and there for a while – big islands and small ones, living a simple life on the coins I'd stolen from DeKan,' she began. 'It was a rather shiftless, aimless life. I had no skills that I cared to offer, besides that of a cook. I was looking for a new way to live, but I was in no hurry to find it, since I'd not spent all my coins. I guess I was simply trying to put my old life behind me, trying to forget, so that the more I roamed, the more I saw, the more real life I experienced, the further away from the old life I drifted, and so I kept on drifting.

'I may've rambled for something like two hundred rounds – I stopped counting – when I came upon two Laezans in the market of a small town on the island of Tydora. They were putting on a display of their martial arts skills with their staffs, like we often do, to attract the attention of young and foolish boys and girls, to sow the idea in their heads that living the Way, even within the Order, can be an interesting life,' she said with a hint of a smile and more than a hint of the old Naylea Cin.

'And look just how interesting it is!' Py exclaimed with a broad grin, sweeping his arms to embrace our situation – the empty black-cake hampers piled under a cargo net forward, the empty, endless sky all around us, save for the three Temtre ships piling on sails to get near enough to murder us. 'However, I was born into the Order, so I didn't need any such demonstration to lead me to the Way and all this excitement.'

'No, my dear Teacher. You were born to live this life,' I said, with a sarcastic sweep of my own arms. He grinned and nodded. 'I was born lucky.'

'I hope so,' I said.

'Litang was also born lucky – which, no doubt, explains our circumstances,' said Naylea, sweeping

her own arms as well.

'It explains why I'm still alive,' I replied with a smile.

The dragons barked their laugh, while Naylea and Py smiled, after which he asked, 'So what did you do next, Sister?'

'Well, as I watched them work out, I could see through their routines. And since they were similar to the ones I learned, I felt I could give them a good work out. So when they invited anyone in the audience to test their skill, I volunteered.'

'And sent them scurrying with bruises,' I said.

'I did not. I gave the senior Laezan a serious workout, but I was out of practice and shape, so that I could retire gracefully, and honestly without embarrassing the Laezan. She was, however, impressed with my skills, and we fell into talking over a cup of tey. In the end, I accompanied her back to Jade Peak with the idea of exploring the possibility of taking some minor orders and teaching martial arts within the community. Long story, short – I stayed on as an instructor and eventually took up the yellow sash. By that time my mentor was aware of my past life, and life skills, and suggested that I give the advocate life a trial as an advocate's assistant. Which I did for several hundred rounds before becoming one myself. I completed several missions before the Way led me to the SaraDal islands. I was the perfect choice for the mission, since I was not only familiar with the technologies that were to be deployed to track ships within the SaraDals and could see that they were positioned and used in an effective manner, but I was familiar with the Temtres as well. And since I held DeKan's golden token, I could use it to hitch a ride to the Assembly and deliver the Order's warning to the full Temtre council when it came time. So, you see, the Way has led us all here, one way or another...' she ended, with a sad smile.

Py, never discouraged, continued to bring out her story in greater detail, as well as mine as we sailed through the empty skies, slowly losing the race with the pursuing Temtres. Glancing back, every now and again, I figured we'd be within their rocket range early in the next round if they didn't abandon the chase.

04

They didn't abandon the chase.

A rocket hissed by, trailing a tail of smoke. It missed us by less than a 20 meters, exploding several seconds after it passed us. The shock wave rocked the heavy boat. We were now, without a doubt, within effective rocket range of the leading ship. I lashed the tillers and stood to look back over the propeller cowlings at the approaching ship that was looming large behind us – sails spread wide, half a kilometer off. I could see the crew crowded on the upper deck, eager for the kill. At the moment they could only fire the lead rocket launcher, but once they got close enough, they'd likely swing the ship around to allow all the rocket launchers on the deckhouses to bear – something like a half a dozen or so.

We had set our fin sails, but it hadn't made much of a difference. We were now burning the boat's original supply of black-cake, and though we still had a round's worth to burn, with the Temtres in rocket range, that no longer mattered.

Naylea stepped aft to stand beside me.

'Do you think you can deal with it?' I asked quietly. 'We'll need to at least cripple their sails. Without the sails, I think we can still out run them. Better yet, we should try to disable its engine as well. The sails can be done without hurting anyone – the engine room, well, we'll see. In any event, that hinge on the hull where the two spars meet would be the place to put a 5mm dart, once you're in range.'

I'd seen what 5mm darts could do to ship's boats, so I knew we could cripple our pursuers, with any luck at all.

She sighed. 'It's in range now, I suppose. And you're right. We have to do something and there's no point waiting any longer.' She pushed herself off, and walking forward to her kit bag, dug out her multi-caliber, pirate piece darter. Py watched her silently and followed her back.

She handed it to me. 'You'll have to do it, Litang. You've not taken the vows Brother Py and I have taken. Do what you need to do.'

'No one will be killed if you blast those sail hinges.'

She shook her head. 'We both know the engine has to be disabled as well. We can't keep up this pace any longer. We'll be out of fuel within a round or two.'

Which was true. Clearly someone had to do it, and someone looked to be me. Still, I didn't think I'd loose too much karma taking out a few sails and blasting the propeller cowlings to save my friends' lives. Naylea activated it, deactivated its security lock, switched it to the large 5mm darts, and handed it to me. I steadied the darter on the cowlings and sighted it, Naylea explaining how to use the very sophisticated sight her weapon possessed. Looking at it, it filled my eyesight with a magnified view of what I was aiming at. I could see the blue dot where the drive beam would deliver the dart even at this range – it was dancing wildly about against the hull of the pursuing ship.

And I couldn't stop it from dancing, so I stepped back and shut off the steam to the engine and opened the relief valve. As the propeller slowed to a stop and the cowlings ceased to vibrate I was able to hold the darter a lot more steadily. The blue dot still jumped a bit, but I didn't care to wait too long for the ship to get closer.

'Well, here we go,' I muttered and took a shot at the big wooden hinge where the two long spars were attached to form the port side fin sail. There was a bright flash of blue and a large rip appeared in the sail, torn by flying hull splinters. I had, however, missed the hinge, hitting the hull behind and above it.

'How many darts do I have to burn?' I asked, turning to Naylea.

She smiled slightly. 'Oh, a hundred or so. Enough, if you can hit something with them.'

'Right.' I muttered and carefully took a second shot. This time I got lucky and shattered the hinge. The spars were blown free and the ragged sail flew forward in a tangle of lines, that carried off a few minor spars on the upper deck as well.

The unbalanced thrust brought the ship half around so I could take a shot at the starboard hinge as well. That dart exploded on the hull just behind the hinge, shredding the sail and cutting lines that controlled it. The rags and spars flew out in disarray as well.

'Right,' I said. 'That should keep them occupied for a while. Let's put some distance between us.'

I'd barely got those words out when six booms rang out, and six rockets were reaching out for us like a giant hand. With the sails in disarray, the ship had begun to swing broadside to us. Even dealing with the damaged sails and masts, they still had plenty of crew to man the six rocket launchers along the top of deckhouses. I could see the crews racing to reload even before the first volley streaked by us. One of the rockets exploded before it reached us – luckily, as it was uncomfortably close to being on line to hit us. The other five streaked by, one less than ten meters off, their explosions setting the boat bounding once again. I had to grab hold of the cowlings and brace myself using the overhead beam to avoid being tossed about like all the loose hampers and dragons where.

Siss and Hissi barked in alarm. Apparently they didn't care for the idea of being collateral damage.

'This won't do,' I said. I brought the darter back down the cowlings and stared into the sight. What could I do? I needed to put those rocket launchers out of action – preferably without too much carnage. My St Bleyth ancestors had no problem with carnage, but I did. There was, however, also the pressing question of time... Something needed to be done before the next volley. I swept the ship's upper deck with the darter's long range sight, searching for a target other than the launcher crews.

Could I bring the main mast with its fluttering kite sails down on top of the launchers? Ah-ha! As my sight moved across the deck towards the main mast, I spied a large box at the base of the mast. From my time aboard the Wind Drifter I knew that the box stored a small supply of rockets that could



be gotten to at a moment's notice. The main rocket magazine was located deep within the ship, and needed a chain of crew members to toss up the rockets to the launchers in battle. The deck magazine was meant to provide fire until that chain could be organized. It likely contained two dozen rockets at most. It was a small target, but an instantly tempting one to my St Bleyth ancestors, and so, without a further thought, I sent a 5 mm dart on its way the instant I saw the blue dot jiggling across the box. The fireworks that should result, would provide the diversion we needed.

It did, and more than that. The 5 mm dart exploded in a brilliant flash of blue light shattering the box into a hail of flying splinters and igniting several of the rockets within – which then ignited all the rest – setting off the explosive charges of several of them in a series of explosions, the balls of flame of each shooting up to the top of the mast, the shock waves blasting the nearest launcher crews overboard. The rockets, whose warheads didn't explode, but had their drive propellant ignited shot out in random directions, one down the deck, scattering the rest of the launcher crews. One shot through the sails overhead, while others shot out from the ship at all angles, leaving the remains of the box, the deck around it, and the main mast, burning furiously.

We watched the rockets explode or go shooting by for several seconds in silence.

'You're a ruthless bastard, Litang,' said Naylea, with a sidelong glance to me. From her tone and look, I couldn't quite decide if that was good or bad. She may have been wearing the blue of Laeza, but she was a daughter of St Bleyth.

'I didn't actually intend to do that,' I said, apologetically. 'Well, I did, but I didn't expect it to be this... effective.'

She shook her head in disbelief. 'Don't give me that. I know you too well. Blood tells.'

'I thought it would just create a diversion. Be that as it may, let's put some distance between us and that ship. I don't want to be around if that fire finds its way to the rocket magazine.'

'Shouldn't we take on survivors?' asked Py.

'And have them cut our throats for it?' I replied. 'No, I think we'll leave that to the following ships. The crew may not be able to save the ship, but they should be able to get clear of it even if they have to take to swimming in the air. With the other two ships coming up, they'll all be alright,' I replied, adding mentally, "Those that aren't already dead" since I could see several inert bodies floating around the burning ship. They may have paid a steep price for their determined pursuit of our heads. Still, who's to say what had gone on in the Assembly. If DinDay got his way, the Temtre fleet may have already sailed for the SarLa, so these survivors may actually be the lucky ones. The ones still alive.

I handed the darter back to Naylea and turned to open up the steam valve to the engine. 'I think we'd best put some distance between us and those approaching ships. They're not going to be in a good mood.'

05

I was standing, leaning against the propeller cowlings, glasses in hand, thinking. What was left of the Temtre ship was now just smoke smudge in the featureless sky, her two companion ships, tiny dots viewed without the glasses. We'd put the better part of 10 kilometers between us. I had the propeller idling now while I considered our options. I didn't like any of them.

Py came aft to stand next to me. 'What are you thinking, Wilitang?'

I shrugged. 'I'm thinking that we should have turned on our pursuit and delivered those darts two rounds ago. It was a mistake to run this long.'

'Did you know you could do so much damage with Sister NyLi's weapon?'

'I'd seen what 5mm darts could do, so I was fairly confident we could've crippled the ships. I hadn't realized we could destroy them. I don't like violence any more than you, but with hindsight, we should have used the darts far earlier so as not to have been chased this far. I just never believed that they'd

pursue us for so long. I fear we may've run too far.'

'Because we don't have enough black-cake to return to Blade Island?'

I shrugged. 'We might have just enough – if we could sail straight back to it. But I'm not sure we can.' And turning back, I called to Naylea, 'Join us, Naylea. Decisions need be made.'

She stood up rather listlessly and stepped aft, along with the two dragons, whose inputs I figured I could ignore.

She sat down on the low bulwark. 'What needs to be decided?'

'Here's our situation. We probably have enough black-cake to get back to Blade Island at a moderate rate, assuming we can find Blade Island right off...'

'What about your device?' asked Naylea with a nod to the bug-eye on the overhead keel. 'I thought the whole purpose of that was to lead us back.'

'Without air currents, it would. And for a target as large as the Outward Islands, it would. But for a sliver of an island, with maybe six to nine rounds of sailing into unknown air currents, I'm far less certain of finding it straight off since. We wouldn't have to miss by more than 30 to 40 kilometers for the island to be nearly invisible in the vast sky.'

'Why not just follow the Temtre ships back? They probably have pilots with the location sense. We don't have to do more than just keep them in sight.'

'Aye, we could try. However, they also have black-cake to burn and we don't, so I'm afraid that keeping them in sight might require us to burn too much black-cake – assuming they didn't turn on us at some point. Still, I think they'd likely run us out of sight in short order.'

'But we'd have a bearing before they did.'

'True. But we'd still have those six or more rounds of currents to contend with. Finding Blade Island is certainly possible, I'll grant you. Say, even chances. My concern is the downside consequences of not finding it, and finding ourselves without fuel to burn and at the mercy of the winds in the middle of this Endless Sea.'

'Wouldn't they just blow us the way we're now going?' asked Py.

'I suppose, but how long would it take on sails alone?'

'And the alternatives are?' sighed Naylea.

'On the assumption that the islands ahead are a large and numerous group – based on our prior experience when we first arrived – I'm thinking that if we continue on, under power, we'll run across them a whole lot sooner – say half a dozen rounds or less. Once there, we can load up on peat moss and food to set ourselves up to sail directly back for the Outward Islands and the Principalities.'

'And you're sure we'll find these theoretical islands ahead?'

'Well... Yes and no.'

Naylea sighed again. 'Litang...'

'Yes, I know. It's just that while I believe, based on our ride on that serrata that we're within half a dozen rounds of them, I can't be sure they're exactly before us. They could be over our heads, under our feet, to the right or left of us, but not before us. Still, we saw an awful lot of islands during our stay on Tumbleweed Island, so I'm fairly confident of finding them sooner or later. I just can't guarantee it.'

'You can't guarantee anything.'

'No. And I can't give you the odds either. But we have to do something, and I don't want to make that decision alone. The three of us need to decide.'

Siss and Hissi growled their objections.

'Fine. The five of us, then. Can you gals steer us back to Blade Island?'

They were notably quiet, so I took that to be a "no." 'Well, what should we do?'

The discussion went on rather aimlessly for a while, until, in the end, they left it to me, saying I was a sailor and they were not. And I, well, I have a history of avoiding downside risks and I figured that sailing down wind would extend our black-cake supply and allow us to use sails if it ran out, so I decided to continue on to the islands that I hoped lay in the sky, unseen, before us. Not without serious

misgivings. But there was no way of avoiding misgivings.

06

I brought a covered plate of rice and preserved vegetables wrapped in large cabbage leaves that I'd made back to Naylea, who had the helm. Py was settling down forward for a nap, as were the two dragons, now well fed. Our little engine was thumping quietly along, nice and fuel efficient-like.

I stood for a few moments looking back. The burning Temtre ship was just a small, faint smokey dot on the featureless sky, now the better part of 30 kilometers astern.

I settled down beside her. She was in a dark mood, so I said nothing as she listlessly ate her meal. And nothing for an hour or so afterward either. I'd never seen her this low, and didn't know what I could say to make her feel any better. She didn't seem to mind my company, so I sat with her behind the tillers and made mental plans. Lots of plans, most of which were just wishful thinking.

I looked around. Everyone else was sleeping, so I held my breath and put my arm around her shoulder to pull her closer. 'I'm sorry things worked out as they did,' I said quietly.

I felt her shoulders twitch. 'I made a mess of it, Litang. And many lives will be lost because of the mess I made of it.'

'You made a mess of it? How? You delivered the Order's message which was all that you were charged with. How the Temtres decide to take it was out of your and our hands.'

'Delivering the message was only the beginning. Convincing them to change their ways was at the heart of my mission.'

Py had said the same thing. My St Bleyth ancestors disagreed.

'And I'm sure you would have succeeded – if DeKan hadn't gotten himself killed playing pirate. But you'd never have succeeded with DinDay, even if he didn't kill you out of hand, which he apparently intended to do. Hopefully Py's speech to the entire clan, laying out the full consequences of an attack on SarLa, will convince enough of them to give the SaraDals a miss. I've been told that even as clan-king DinDay can't order the clans to follow him. If worst comes to worst, you'll succeed in changing the Temtres by culling out the most bloodthirsty of the lot.'

'That's not the Way, Litang. And you know it. Besides, how many clan-chiefs will defy him? Look at their response. It doesn't look like we made any impression at all. Why, we may've made his case even more compelling by making it a direct challenge to them and their ways. We failed.'

If their response to our message was any indicator, they'd be on their way to the SaraDals by now. Still, 'That may have been only their first reaction. Challenge a Temtre and you'll have a fight on your hands. I'm certain that you gave them something to think about. And even if they sail for the SaraDals, they now know they have a definite time limit, so that if things don't go exactly as promised, they'll get clear before the warship arrives. I really think they won't hang around for long. They're too suspicious of a trap. Those that do hang around will prove to be a lesson for the rest of them. One they will understand.'

She didn't say anything more for a while, until she asked, 'So, between you and me, just how likely are we to see these islands of yours?'

'They're not my islands, but I'm confident we'll reach them.'

'Before we starve?'

'We've plenty of food,' I said, and lowering my voice added, 'Enough for a month at least. And if we run out of food, we've got the two dragons – they're hunted for food in the Outward Islands, so they're probably pretty tasty...'

The two "sleeping" dragons gave a low deep growl and showed more of their teeth without opening their eyes.

Naylea laughed softly. 'They were probably thinking the same thing...'

The two dragons barked a soft laugh.

'Two dragons. Life just seems to get better and better,' I muttered, before adding, 'Oh, don't worry about the future. We'll get by.'

'But will we get back to the Principalities?'

'If we reach the islands...'

'Your islands.'

'If we reach the islands that I believe lay before us, we should be able to resupply the boat with enough fuel to recross this sea. It'd be a long voyage, but navigation isn't tricky. I'm sure it can be done.' If we weren't captured and eaten first.

'And you'd be willing to try it?'

'Yes. It may not be the Unity, but I've come to consider the Principalities my home. I'm as eager to return as you are, especially now that I've found you.'

She shook herself free of my arm and said, with a sad smile, 'It's your watch now, Litang. I'm going to join the sleepers.'

## Part Seven – The Far Islands

### Chapter 35 The Floating Jungle

01

If you're thinking of taking a long voyage in a small boat with two Simla dragons, don't. Not if they're Siss and Hissi, anyway. By the time we left the Temtres behind, they had apparently caught up with their sleep. Bored with life on a small boat, Hissi taught Siss how to play DuDan's Folly. Simla dragons apparently take games very seriously – or, perhaps more accurately, very intensely. Every card they played brought a vocal response and reply – long sinister hisses, barks of delight, deep growls of anger and challenge. There were times that I thought the game would end in a thrashing, whirling ball of feathers. And though it never did, their vocal style of card playing got old very fast.

Desperate for some peace and quiet, I suggested to Hissi that she show Siss how to play chess – the theory being that a more cerebral game would be significantly quieter. It wasn't. They were constantly, and noisily, commenting not only on every move, but apparently on every contemplated move as well. If I could have gotten close enough to them when they were sleeping, I'd have lashed their snouts closed – but it's impossible to spring surprises on telepathic dragons, and even my best Captain Miccall impression would only subdue them for a few minutes.

Naylea found it amusing, at first, but eventually grew tired of the ruckus. We all needed to sleep, and couldn't sleep unless the dragons were sleeping as well. Her solution was to introduce them to a St Bleyth card game En Garde! – with suitable modifications for the Saraime set of cards. The beauty of En Garde! was that it was a very complex game played by two teams rather than individual players. As long as we had the two dragons on the same team, they both could win and were content to express their pleasure and contempt with little barks of laughter and hisses of sarcasm – when they were winning – which they did consistently as long as they weren't playing against Naylea. They could just as easily played Py's or my cards as well as theirs, since they seemed to know them so well. But when Naylea played the game, rules tended to be, ah... more fluid? En Garde! was a complex game, and

translating the rules to the new deck perhaps meant that the rules had to be somewhat improvised, which Naylea did while playing the game. The dragons didn't like it, but she had a way with them; either her mind was too devious to read, or too dangerous enough that the dragons preferred to be in her good graces, so that they were content to lose, sometimes, when she played. Still, they won most of the games without her, and were delighted to watch their cumulative score against us humans grow ever greater. You'd have thought it really mattered. They apparently did. Still, it was a small price to pay for some peace and quiet.

In addition to playing cards to pass the timeless time, we practiced our martial arts. Since we all knew the Laezan forms, we could work through them with swords and staffs, in safety. I never could trust KaRaya to actually follow the form, but with Py and Naylea, I could comfortably go through the form with a real sword.

I have this image of sitting at the tillers in the stern etched in my mind. The dragons were playing their vocal game of cards in the bow, sheltered by the rocket launcher shields. In the light broken into squares by the arching ribs and netting amidships, Naylea and Py were dashing back and forth, working through their forms with their iron-vine staffs whirling and rat-a-tatting against each other. Before me the boiler smoked quietly, the gleaming iron and brass steam engine huffed and thumped away, while behind me the propeller whooshed. And beyond, behind us, and all around us; the milky bright featureless sky, which seemed to stifle every sound and movement as they left the boat. I've sailed the black and bright seas of the Nine Star Nebula, a speck of steel in millions of kilometers of nothing but a bit of dust and gas, and never felt smaller and more insignificant than aboard that Temtre launch in the middle of the Endless Sky. We seemed to be a very small and strange universe of just ourselves.

And so the rounds slipped astern, standing watch at the helm, playing cards, going through long martial arts exercises, preparing meals, and after meals, spinning tales, all without any sign of the islands that I had gambled on – as our supply of black-cake slowly drifted away as smoke.

## 02

Ten rounds of those endless skies had slipped astern after the Temtres ships were left behind, without seeing any sign of islands ahead. We weren't desperate, yet. It was true that we were burning the empty black-cake hampers to supplement our dwindling supply of black-cake, but we had dozens of rounds of food left and our sails intact so that we could sail on the wind for many rounds more. Still, by my calculations of the serrata wind that carried us to Blade Island, we should have reached the far side islands by now, which made me rather nervous. Not desperate, but nervous. The empty skies seemed cruelly indifferent to my calculations. There was, however, no alternative plan, so we sailed on, the bright spot squarely astern. We'd reach something, sooner or later. In theory.

I woke up with a hand on my shoulder on the eleventh round. I brushed some feathers off my face – Siss up to her old tricks again.

Naylea was standing beside me. She didn't say anything, but handing me the glasses, pointed ahead.

I twisted about in the hammock and shoved Siss off; she growled without bothering to wake up. I slipped my feet to the deck and standing, raised the glasses to my eyes. There wasn't much to see – just a faint smear of paleness in the bright brassy blue green sky that surrounded us. I stared hard. It wasn't my imagination.

I nodded and smiled. 'Definitely a cloud which should mean an island. I was beginning to get a bit nervous...'

'You'd better hope there's an island in that cloud, Litang. We had voted you to be the first to be eaten,' she replied. 'It was unanimous.'

'I don't recall voting.'

'You may've been asleep. Still, four to one, it wouldn't have mattered how you voted.'  
'An asteroid dodged.' I turned to Py at the helm and nodded.  
'Shift our course for it?' he asked.  
'Seeing that I'm the first item on the menu, I'd say yes. Let's see what's behind that cloud.'

03

It grew into a bank of clouds that stretched out to vague whiteness in every direction ahead of us. I noticed that our sails were no longer drawing – the wind had shifted – which was not surprising, since the clouds usually formed downwind from the islands. We took them in and secured their masts to the hull. It still took us a watch for the misty edge of clouds to start to curl around us, thick enough to hide islands beyond them, though Py announced that he could smell them.

'I'm not hearing or seeing birds and lizards so they must be a ways off yet,' I replied, adding, 'I hope we haven't found a real large one. The last time I approached an island in the clouds, it didn't end all that well.'

Py grinned. 'But not all that badly either.'

'I guess not, in the end,' I laughed. 'Still, it was touch and go there for a moment or two at the very beginning.'

I took over the helm and shoved in a few more black-cakes into the fire box, in case we needed power in a hurry, and steered blindly into the moist mist.

We spent half an hour chugging through the cloud bank, getting damper, and the light dimmer without seeing anything before Naylea, on lookout in the bow, called out. 'Something dead ahead!'

I cut the engine and we drifted closer to the long, vague shadow that proved to be a mass of twisting vines. Its sweet fragrance of flowers and damp smell of leaves hung in the air around us. I swung the tillers up and we drifted under it.

'We must be near an island now. Can any of you tell which way the vine's growing so we can follow it back?' I asked.

'You're seeing what I am,' replied Naylea. 'Your call.'

'Py?'

He shrugged. 'Hard to say. I'd suggest we continue on to get clear of the clouds and then see where we are.'

'Sounds like a plan,' I said, and opened up the steam valve again setting the engine chugging.

We soon encountered more steaming vines – long lacy strands that appeared to port and disappeared to starboard without a hint of land. Brushing past them we'd now sent beetles flying and lizards scurrying.

It continued to grow dimmer the deeper we went in, as the open spaces between the floating vines grew smaller and smaller.

'Whoa!' said Naylea, 'A big one dead ahead!'

I stopped the engine and we drifted towards the broad dark shape that blocked our course. It was a very massive vine indeed – as thick as a tree trunk entwined with dozens of smaller flowering vines woven around it, making it two meters wide.

'I think, my friends, that we've found a real floating jungle,' said Py, as Naylea used a long, light spar to fended the boat off from it. 'Vines of that size can stretch for many leagues. I've heard stories of floating jungles the size of a fair sized island.'

'I've seen a few, but nothing of this size. Do you think we can push on through, or will it get too congested to navigate?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'Without knowing how extensive this one is, it is impossible to say with certainty. Do we have an alternative? Is there another way around and through the clouds?'

'That's what I'm wondering. Any ideas, Naylea?'

'I've no idea. It's your call, Captain.'

Which I suppose it was. I considered our options. Turning around would just put us back on the edge of the vast cloud, and likely doomed to try to sail through them again, sooner or later. In view of our now very limited supply of black-cake, I sighed and opened the steam valve. 'We'll push ahead and hope for the best. The far side can't be too far, and it will be cloud free. The important thing is to keep going straight through it. We don't want to start going in circles.'

'You have the helm, Litang,' said Naylea. 'And let's hope you're better at estimating where we are, than you were at finding these islands.'

'I found'em, anyway,' I grumbled.

'The vines all seem to flow in the same direction. We just need to keep crossing them as we have been,' said Py.

'Right. Keep me on course.'

So we pushed ahead. Naylea and Py using light spars to steer the boat in quarters too tight for our rudders to work. One after another, the massive vines appeared out of the dim mists; one after the other we dodged over or under them. The lacy veils of little vines grew thicker, but they were still thin enough that we could push our way through them with little trouble, sending startled lizards, and birds into the mist. It was no longer eerily silent. The screeching and squawking of lizards, the sweet songs of birds and the buzz of the big beetles in the dim mist around us made for an eerie and largely unseen choir.

Rough and ready Siss had never lost her taste for the hunt, and insisted on being let out to chase the bugs, lizards and birds that flirted around us. Hissi was too civilized to enjoy hunting – unless there were char-buns buzzing around us – but she joined Siss as well. I'm pretty sure she just went through the motions. I didn't think she was ever hungry enough to eat lizards on the wing anymore.

We pushed on and on, with no end to the vines, though the clouds seemed to be thinning. Now deep within the jungle, it had grown nearly dark, and I was far from happy until a brightness ahead raised my hopes, only to be dashed when we pushed out into a large jungle clearing – a lake of open air at least a half a dozen kilometers wide, and perhaps twice as long. Great strands of vines enclosed the clearing, forming the shoreline of this lake of pale green half-light. Flocks of birds and lizards soared through the misty air all around us. Ahead, the tangle of vines looked as solid as ever, but then, so did the jungle behind us, so we chugged slowly onward, towards the opposite shore. At least we didn't seem to be going in circles.

As we crossed the clearing, Naylea silently pointed to several dark shadow shapes in the distance, drifting along the edge of the vines. Dragons, and large ones, hunting. The closest was several kilometers off, but I called to our dragons, and as soon as they were on board, we secured the netting, and opened up the steam valve wide to reach the far wall of the jungle a little faster. I didn't think our netting would prove much of a hindrance to large dragons, but our darters should keep us safe enough.

'Not planning to stop and have a chat with your dragon friends, Litang?' laughed Naylea quietly from the bow. 'I seem to recall that you were always eager to make friends with the dragons of the Pela.'

'I was,' I replied. And with a nod to Siss and Hissi. 'And you see where it got me.'

They growled. We had our routine down pat.

The jungle on the far side proved no different than the jungle we had left – we still found just enough narrow openings and thin enough vines between the major strands to continue weaving our way through, to the noisy annoyance of the birds, lizards, and bugs. Siss insisted that they be let out to hunt again.

Another half an hour's travel had the jungle brightening ahead. Once more our hopes were raised and dashed again. While it was even brighter and the mist much thinner than the last clearing, it was still a clearing. The floating jungle, more distinct than ever, still surrounded us, stretching out to

eventual obscurity in the haze, four or five kilometers to starboard.

'We must be getting close to the edge,' said Py, looking around cheerfully. But then, he was almost always cheerful, so that he was hardly reassuring.

'You'd think so,' I said unable to keep my disappointment out of my reply as I opened up the steam valve wide for the far shore, perhaps two kilometer ahead.

Siss and Hissi swam up alongside and yelped to be let on board. As Naylea raised an edge of the netting to let them in, Py asked, 'Where have all the birds and lizards gone to?'

I looked about. He was right. We seemed to have left the noisy menagerie astern. Indeed, only the rhythmic swishing of our propeller and the chugging of the little steam engine kept the silence at bay.

'I don't like this...' I muttered, peering around suspiciously.

'Oh, Litang, you're such an old lady,' laughed Naylea.

'What's that?' exclaimed Py, pointing to the jungle shore ahead of us.

"That" was a huge, blood-red cloud that had erupted out of the shadows of vines on the far side of the clearing. A moment later the faint sound of a several thousand wings beating and the savage cries of a thousand talon-hawks reached us.

I prefaced 'Talon-hawks!' with a long string of spaceer adjectives in Unity Standard, and threw in few more heartfelt spaceer expressions afterward.

'Litang! Please, I can still understand Unity Standard!' said Naylea with a mocking smile, even as she hurried aft for her kit bag and her darter.

I didn't bother to respond, but stood up and stared about, searching for the nearest shoreline that could offer some shelter to keep the talon-hawks at bay. The closest vines arched overhead, perhaps half a kilometer away. I shifted the tillers to swing the boat toward it and a dark, narrow opening in two large vines, and leaning forward, twisted the steam valve wide open. The boat slowly gained a little speed. 'Blast these Temtre slugs!' I muttered.

'Do you think your 5mm darts or the rockets would have any effect at this range?' I asked Naylea as she dug her darter out of her kit. 'I'd like to disrupt them now, before they reach us.'

She shook her head, 'I doubt it. The darts are not designed for soft targets, so they might well go through the horde without hitting anything solid enough to discharge. And we could only get a rocket or two off before they'd be on us. Hardly worth it.'

I turned back to the surging horde, already noticeably closer. 'Right. No matter. I've seen them go up against a battleship's battery of rockets and a deck full of small arms-men for hours. They'll attack through a cloud of their own dead. We have to get into the jungle where they can't reach us in mass.'

I glanced ahead at the approaching shore. It would be close – at best. With nothing we could do to deter the talon-hawks, I twisted the boat around to put its solid lower hull between us and the onrushing horde. Hopefully it would shield us from their initial impact. And then I made a slight adjustment in the boat's course to compensate for the impending impact of dozens of birds, twice the size of a man, hitting the hull with outstretched talon-tipped legs. Satisfied, I quickly secured the tillers in position with the strong leather straps – the boat's auto pilot. I didn't trust myself with the strength to keep the steering flaps in place with the impact of the great birds. Besides, I was going to have other things to do. I stepped forward and drew my darter out of my kit bag and hoped for the best. Then there was nothing to do but to watch the vines of the shore ahead slowly creep closer while the cries and thunderous beat of wings grew ever louder.

'I'll cover this end, you the other,' called out Naylea from the bow.

'Right. Py and you dragons, just stay down and hug the hull.' The dragons needed no orders. They were already hunkered down. Carefree as they were, they apparently had a great respect for talon-hawks. 'There'll be lethal darts flying around and you don't want to be in their way,' I added grimly, my heart pounding and then turning to Naylea stationed amidships, added, 'Though perhaps, full non-lethal would be better.'

'Oh, Litang, you're such a softie!'



'They devour their dead, but perhaps they'd hesitate to attack a living comrade – even if only for a few seconds. We'll need every second. And well, things might well get a bit chaotic, and I'd hate for a wild dart...'

Naylea nodded and yelled over the increasing loud cries of the onrushing horde. 'All we need is a layer of inert birds in the netting for protection until we reach the vines.'

I glanced ahead. We were 50 meters away from the vines and the cover they'd provide. Perhaps we might just...

The boat rocked with the first booming impact of talon-hawks striking the hull, talons first, hoping to tear it apart between their talons and sharp powerful beaks. Their angry, savage cries grew shriller – they had no doubt expected to find the softer, feathery flesh of a large dragon. They're not brilliant birds, but that never discouraged them. I recalled how they had attacked the hull of the Ghost again and again.

The blood-red feathered horde surged around to our side, tearing at the thick net with their talons, beaks, and savage cries. The net withstood their first impact, and prevented most of the talons and beaks from penetrating too deeply. However it had enough give that the low points of the talons and sharp beaks had me crouching as low as possible while sending a stream of darts into to the swirling horde above my head. I couldn't miss, since they now covered the entire netting, trying to tear it apart. It grew pitch black in the boat, lit only by the blue flashes of our darts as we shot at anything moving over our heads. It would've been only a matter of a minute, or less, before their razor sharp talons and beaks had torn gaping holes through it. We couldn't give them a chance.

In seconds, their cries were silenced – we'd put the first wave of talon-hawks out of action. Still, we could hear the eager cries of their comrades, impatiently awaiting their turn to tear off a chunk of us. The ones we couldn't reach were still attacking the hull and the propeller housing behind me. Nothing to be done about them.

What mattered now was just how much they had knocked the boat off course, and how much they had slowed its progress with the weight of their attack. Failing to reach the cover of the vines, would doom us. We'd run out of darts before we'd run out of attacking talon-hawks. It did seem, however, that they were not – yet – tearing off the layer of unconscious birds we had darted. Yet being the operative word. I doubted talon-hawks would let their comrades eat in peace for long.

The boat hit the shore of the vines and lurched to one side. And stopped. I cut steam to the engine, afraid we'd slip further from the gap I had been aiming at.

Naylea darted forward in a low crouch, snatching up her staff, as she went. Reaching the bow rocket launcher, she used it to shove off a few stunned birds to get a view of what was hanging us up. Py was right behind her with his staff ready to steer us toward any opening. From my position in the stern, I could faintly see only leaves and vines, no opening in sight. They, however, saw it, and bracing themselves, began nudging the prow of the boat toward it.

'We just missed it,' Py yelled as he heaved against a thick vine to push the boat's bow towards the opening.

Watching them closely, I undid the lash on one of the tillers and began to force it into position to steer the boat into the opening when it appeared – not that it would do too much good with all the talon-hawks on board. But every little bit helped. 'Tell me when we're clear!' I yelled over the cries of the birds.

It was a big boat, made more unwieldy by the layer of attacking talon-hawks, so each heave moved the boat's bow only centimeters at a time.

Overhead, I could sense that the talon-hawks were growing restless since some of the inert ones on the netting were being jerked about – attacked from behind by their impatient comrades. I sent a few darts on their way when it looked like a live one had replaced an inert one.

'We're clear enough! Full power!' yelled Naylea.

I opened the valve and the propeller began to spin again, causing a great uproar astern as several of

our attackers must have gotten wings or talons through the cowlings' grating while it was idle. The boat began to chug ahead, slowly slipping into the gap between the thick vines. As it got narrower, the surrounding vines began brush off the stunned birds from the netting and the live birds from hull. The talon-hawks sent up a great chorus of cries of protest as they dimly realized that their prey was escaping them.

Naylea and Py continued to guide the boat through the narrowing gap using their staffs. Once the tangle of vines carried off the inert talon-hawks on the netting overhead, I stood, and switching to lethal darts, firing back into the horde attempting to follow us into the gap. I intended to leave a trail of dead talon-hawks behind us. They'd have to eat their way through them to reach us.

Progress was slow, the gap narrow, and filled with small trailing vines that we had to force the boat through. But that prevented the talon-hawks from pursuing us – they were built for the open air. Five minutes later the ruckus of fighting birds was left behind – we were alone in the jungle, traveling along a narrow passageway between several thick vines, with Naylea and Py in the bow guiding the boat through with their staffs. There was no room to swing the boat about to resume our course across the flow of the jungle, so we continued on, now in the direction of the vines.

Perhaps twenty minutes later, I paused the engine and listened. The little birds, lizards and beetles were back, and shooting around us. I let out a sigh of relief.

'You are a very dangerous person to be around, Litang,' said Naylea quietly. 'I think that you're a magnet for danger.'

The dragons, still hunkered down along the bottom of the boat, softly barked their agreement.

I opened my mouth to argue... And realized that I couldn't.

'But think of all the stories we'll be able to tell,' said Py brightly.

'If we survive them,' muttered Naylea. The dragons, now drifting up, once again barked their agreement.

04

The narrow rift we'd chosen proved to be a one way street. We followed its twisting and turning course without coming upon any opening wide enough to turn and continue on our way across the grain of the jungle for several hours. It was very slow going, and rather claustrophobic as the vines were constantly brushed along the netting. Now and again, we needed to stop to allow Py to climb out with a machete in hand to hack through one of the thicker vines that had snagged our wing and/or rudder. He was good at it – it often took only a couple of blows to clear the tangle.

'Keep an eye out for snakes,' I called out to him. 'You too.' This to Naylea in the bow.

'Litang...' she sighed, shaking her head without turning around.

'You never know – there could be more than birds, bugs and lizards lurking in these vines. You don't see our brave dragons out there now, do you?'

They each turned to give me a one-eyed look and a low growl.

'Right,' I said. 'Go on out and lead the way, girls.'

They growled louder – but didn't move.

'I suggest that you find a larger space to sail through, now that we've shaken off the talon-hawks,' said Naylea. 'Then you wouldn't have to worry so much about lurking snakes.'

'Great idea,' I said, 'Seeing that you're our pilot, be sure to point it out to me when you find one.'

Py grinned, apparently viewing this semi-domestic squabble as a promising sign for the romantic end to my quest that he considered the only acceptable end of this adventure.

We had been pushing our way through the vines, at a walking pace, for the better part of two hours, before it began to grow lighter ahead. A few minutes later, we slipped out into a long, but narrow

clearing amongst great trunks of twisted vines. I let out a sigh of relief. Too soon. I should've known – naming names.

It must have been resting in the tangle of vines beneath our hull, because we never saw it. Not until it attacked. The boat gave a tremendous lurch, throwing us against the netting. We yelled and hissed as something very large and emerald green appeared along side the boat, and then began to swirl around us – a swiftly flowing river of deep green scale-like feathers. Its body, the size of a good sized tree trunk, was encircling and engulfing the boat – tossing us this way and that, as the coils multiplied, aft to bow.

I caught a momentary glimpse of the creature's large head as it swiftly and silently wrapped itself around the boat. It opened its mouth wide; a mouth full of little teeth. Its small eyes glittered greedily, framed by a feathered scarlet mane. It had the boat in its coils within seconds and then it began to tighten them.

The boat groaned and creaked – and then let out a series of explosive cracks as it was twisted and crushed out of shape. The overhead frame cracked and buckled as it was being squeezed by the great coils of the serpent. Thrown away from the helm, I scrambled back to reach the steam valve to stop the engine. But I was too late. The propeller cowl buckled, and with a grinding scream, the propeller shattered in a burst of splinters and stopped – as did the little engine in a loud rattle and a violent lurch, shooting hot steam in every direction. I managed to open the escape valve on the boiler before being driven back by the scalding cloud of steam from a broken line.

Looking forward, the boat was a dark, distorted tunnel, that was shrinking as the powerful coils crushed the boat. My shipmates were dark shadows against the only light left – an opening at the bow of the boat where the coils left off to hold the giant head of the serpent/snake that was staring at us with its mouth wide open.

And then there was an explosive flash of blue light, blinding me.

Naylea was dealing with the serpent.

'Must've had a thick skull,' she muttered, as its death convulsion twisted the boat almost in half, the crunching overhead ribs driving me into the shallow hollow of the boat's hull.

And then there was a moment of pure silence.

'Litang,' said Naylea, quietly. 'I'm holding you directly responsible for this snake.'

I opened my mouth to protest. And then closed it again. Naming names – what could I say?

'You are alright back there?'

'Aye, a bit scalded.' Waves of pain were now coming from my hand. 'But alive. Everyone else okay?'

'A bit sore, but otherwise fine...' said Py

The two dragons barked a tentative "yes".

Looking at the steaming wreck of "my" poor engine, I quietly muttered a suitable epitaph for it and my small command – once more in spaceer Unity Standard. 'What are we going to do now?' I asked aloud after I had expressed my dark, heartfelt, feelings.

'I think we're going to have to walk the rest of the way,' replied Naylea, brightly.

Yes. No doubt about that. But to where?

05

'See, it wasn't a snake, but a serpent dragon,' I said to Naylea, pointing to the dragon's relatively small legs. 'I'm innocent.'

She laughed, 'I stand corrected. But I still hold you responsible. It's your weird charisma that attracted it, snake or serpent dragon.'

The serpent dragon was still coiled around the twisted wreck of the boat, hidden in its massive coils. It had to have been at least five times the length of our boat long. It was covered with shiny, hard

emerald green feathers, the size of dinner plates. They were more scale-like than feather-like, but they were attached to the body by their leading edge so they could be fluffed out, and perhaps used to provide traction when moving through the vine jungle. Naylea had blown its head apart with a 5mm dart, so there wasn't much left to it, but from what I saw of it when alive, it had a very wide mouth, likely used for swallowing its crushed victims whole.

With the serpent's blood in the air, we worked fast – fearing that its smell would attract creatures we wanted to avoid meeting. We collected our remaining food and water and wrapped them tight in one of the sails that we had pulled free from the wreck. We made the package as sleek as possible and lashed it between two of the sail spars, rigging them with lines fore and aft so that we could drag it behind us as we made our way through the vines. We chose to wear our kits as knapsacks, not wishing to put all our eggs in the one large basket – one that might have to be hastily abandoned.

There was some salve in the medicine chest of the boat that Py and Naylea assured me would do wonders for my scalded hand, so they plastered it up and wrapped it in strips of canvas. It throbbed and ached, but as long as it didn't get infected, I'd not complain. I was still alive against all odds.

Less than half an hour later, we were floating in the little clearing alongside the headless remains of the great serpent, ready to set out. Py and Naylea would take the lead, hauling the cache behind them. Me, with my rather useless hand would man the trailing line to steer the cache from the rear. The two dragons...

'Right. It looks like we're set to go. Hissi, Siss, you guys take the lead and scout for us.'

They both gave me a hard glare and a low warning hiss. Neither of them moved.

'Oh, don't be a Tiny Timid Dragon Timmy! Your job is to lead us and deal with any... Any little thing that you might run across.'

They gave me a deeper growl and shook their heads "no".

I glared at them. 'Right. If that's the way you want to be, fall in behind me...'

They barked their agreement and started drifting back.

'And be sure to give a loud warning bark when the serpent's mate slithers up and takes its first bite out of you. Your job is to warn us before the second bite.'

They stopped and gave me another low growl, showing a bit more of their teeth.

I glared at them. I was in no mood for these games of theirs. 'Right. Naylea, you deal with these two useless feather dusters,' I snapped.

"Oh, quit teasing grumpy ol'Litang. His hand hurts and he's not in the mood,' she laughed, and then added softly, 'Siss, Hissi.'

They growled their protest.

She said nothing, but just glared at them.

They growled again, but slowly swam forward to take the lead. Clearly, the tiger in Naylea had not changed all of her stripes...

'It's now your job to give us a loud warning yell, Litang, before the next big snake swallows you completely,' she added as we got underway. The dragons, ahead, got a good, barking laugh out of that.

We wove our way through the floating jungle more quickly than we had in the boat. Each of us had a loop of rope around us attached to our supply cache to keep us together. Naylea and Py had theirs over their shoulders, I had mine under my arms so that we had our hands free to pull ourselves along. Once we got the cache moving, it moved almost effortlessly in the free fall conditions, and as we followed the contours of the vines, it slipped along nicely. My job was to keep it straight and free of snags. Naylea and Py with two working hands pulled it briskly along, half dragging me along with the cache.

Without a boat, finding the anchoring islands was our first priority. While we were still uncertain as to what direction the closest island lay, with the talon-hawks and the dead serpent-dragon behind us, we didn't debate long as to our course. We continued on the way we had been heading.

Between watching for any flash of shiny emerald behind me, and possible smaller snakes on either side of me, I was making useless plans as to what our next move could be. Returning to the Principalities now seemed to depend on finding a fairly advanced and friendly society at the far end of these vines. I wasn't in a very optimistic frame of mind.

We dove and darted our way through the jungle and its colorful, noisy, but thankfully, harmless inhabitants for the better part of four more hours before we emerged once again into the milky light of the Pela. We'd found the windward edge we'd been looking for – a little bit of good luck. But I think we were owed that. We stood on the edge of the jungle to look around.

Behind us, the vast floating jungle stretched back ten kilometers or more, fading into a cloud bank. Ahead, the jungle arched “down” several kilometers to surround a small, rocky island, and then another kilometer beyond it, to a much larger island, perhaps 20 kilometers long and half as broad where it had its roots. And beyond it, the blue-green shadows of more islands that faded away into the distance and the blue-green sky.

I slipped out of the loop and walked forward to join the rest of the gang.

'Glad to see you're still with us, Litang,' said Naylea, cheerfully. She seemed to have put, at least for now, her concerns for her mission behind her. 'I wasn't sure you'd have time to yelp if the big snake's mate caught up with us.'

'We're not out of the jungle yet,' I muttered, and looking around at the sky. 'And now we'll have to keep an eye on the sky as well.'

She shook her head sadly. 'You never seem to learn, do you?'

'I'm just saying – we may've put some dangers behind us, but we don't know what lies ahead. And I didn't name anything this time. So you see, I do learn.'

'Oh, don't be so grumpy. But I suppose it's just your poor scalded hand talking. As long as our supply of darts last – and I have thousands of them – we can deal with whatever the Pela has in store for us. Still, if we follow the Way in all its subtle in and outs, we won't need darts, will we brother?'

He nodded and smiled, 'Indeed, sister. With a carefully considered approach to whatever lies ahead, we should get along fine with just our staffs.'

She laughed. 'See, you've nothing to worry about.'

'Well, I'd like to get home.'

'And where is home?'

'For now, I'll gladly settle for the Principalities, though they seem as remote as the Unity. But we'll never reach them if we don't get started. Let's see what we'll find down there,' I grumbled, with a nod to the large island ahead.

'We saw a steam ship during our first visit to these islands. I'm sure we'll find a means of returning home.'

'It was slaver ship, I seem to recall.'

'I doubt that only slavers have steam ships. And if they do, well, that will make it all the more easy for us to acquire it. The Order frowns on slavery. But let's be on our way. We can make camp and make plans once we reach the big island.'

We set out, now walking on a thick, twisted vine, dragons in the lead, our cache trailing Naylea and Py, with me once more to the rear to keep the floating cache from darting this way and that, as they rapidly skipped along down the vine lane toward the islands ahead – careful to keep one claw or the clawed tip of their staffs anchored in the vine between the two of them. I had to work hard to keep up with them – without being carried off my feet and just dragged along behind, though I was tempted to.

By the time we crossed the small rocky island in our path, it was clear that the big island beyond was inhabited. We could see the faint lines of crops growing in the fields beyond the great roots and

trunks of the vine jungle that streamed out from the island. We paused on the far side of the small island to consider our course.

'Do we continue on and see what we have to deal with, or camp here, rest up, and perhaps take a covert recon of what lies ahead?' asked Naylea.

'I'm not tired, and as you have said, we can likely deal with anything we find. I'm sure they'll be wary of us, but I doubt they'll be hostile,' said Py.

'Litang?'

I was likely already outvoted, so I said, 'It doesn't matter. Whatever you think best.'

'Right then. Let's push on and see what we're dealing with.'

In the timelessness of the Pela, one went for as long as one could go. And though it had no doubt been a long round already, we still had enough energy and eagerness to push on.

07

On reaching the big island we made our way along the tree-trunk sized vine-roots to where the planted fields began. The crops, like all crops in the weightless islands, were planted in long lines of small holes punched through the tough moss that covers much of islands, to preserve the layer of soil and organic matter that covers the rocky core of the islands. The bean plants were young and unattended. We saw no one about, but found a narrow moss-carpeted lane that lead across the wide, flat fields towards a distant forest that likely sheltered a village. Island villages were often built under trees or in caves for protection from the large dragons that hunted in the skies of the small islands. Or human raiders.

We seemed to have been noticed before we saw anyone.

'It looks like we have a greeting party,' said Naylea, pointing down the lane.

It was a fairly large greeting party. I reminded myself that we had plenty of darts. We continued on to meet them. Both parties stopped to take stock of each other with 30 meters between us. The native contingent may have numbered three dozen, and if they were armed, it was with swords rather than springers or rifles. From their ranks, a tall woman emerged and began to walk slowly towards us – accompanied by a Simla dragon. Hissi and Siss exchanged glances and a questioning hiss. The rest of us exchanged quizzical glances as well. The figure slowly approaching us appeared to be dressed in the blue uniform of the Order of Laeza.

Naylea glanced back at me. 'How sure are you of the way we were heading, Litang? What are our chances that we're back in the Principalities?'

'I'd say none,' I replied, grumpily.

'You didn't happen to have that bug-eye thingy set up backwards, did you?'

'No.'

'Then how do you explain her?'

'I can't. But I'm sure we'll know soon enough.'

We started forward to meet her and the dragon.

When we were within 5 meters of each other, the lady in blue stopped to peer at us intensely. Her eyesight did not appear to be all that sharp since, now seeing us clearly, a look of surprise crossed her face. She cupped her hands and bowed, greeting us with unfamiliar words. We did the same in our language – Py and Naylea, bowing very low indeed, for this elderly personage was wearing the white sash that marked her as an Elder of the Inner Order.

She was a tall very thin, broad-feathered woman, of great age. The long feathers of her head had faded to almost as white as her belt, and her face was deeply lined with wrinkles of age, and though her eyes were cloudy with age, her expression was serene, secure, wise, and perhaps humorous as well. Her familiar looking blue outfit was as well worn and faded as she was, but neat and clean, and worn with

assurance. It contrasted sharply with the jungle-stained blues Py and Naylea were wearing.

'Laeza,' said Py, touching his chest.

'Laeza,' replied the Elder, with a nod.

'Greetings, Elder Scholar,' said Py, breaking into his boyish smile. 'We are delighted to meet with such an exalted Elder of our Order. Allow me to name, my friends...'

As he named us and we bowed again, the old Laezan followed his speech closely.

'She pointed to the large Simla dragon that had been floating over her shoulder – every bit as faded and ancient as his companion, and named him – in a language that was neither Cimmadarian or Saraimian. And then, touching her breast, named herself.

She went on in a short speech of greeting – or inquiry – in a language we could not follow.

Py smiled, shrugged with an apologetic shake of his head, and then made a short speech describing our situation, miming our circumstances with gestures towards the sky and bringing one hand to his other palm to illustrate our method of arrival. The Elder followed him closely, nodded, and said a few words, a question, perhaps.

Py took it as one and pointed to the sky, 'The Saraime Principalities.'

'Saraime Principalities?' she repeated.

Py nodded, beamed at her, and said to us quietly, 'Is it not wonderful, to find one of our own Order this far from home?'

'But is she really one of our own Order? Appearances may deceive. Though perhaps she is of a very distant branch from a wind-blown seed – like us – planted long ago?' asked Naylea as the Elder considered us.

'Does it matter? But let us see...' replied Py, who then began to quietly sing-chant what I recognized as one of the meditation chants of the Order. The Elder broke into a faint smile, and joined him in the refrain – though the words did not quite match. Naylea joined them, and for several minutes they happily sang-chanted an apparently universal chant while several promising implications sent a thin ray of hope through me.

We had found a White Sash Elder of the Order of Laeza – the same Laezan Order, more or less, that was found in the Principalities, here on this island.

I considered those implications. No doubt thousands of Saraimians had found themselves in these islands, carried by misfortune or serrata winds, in the course of many hundreds of thousands of rounds, and it was very likely some of them would have been Laezans, since the Laezans travel widely throughout the Saraime Islands. So, if the Order here was founded by shipwrecked Laezans or even far roving missionaries, how long would it take for the Order to mutate and adopt a distinctive local flavor? In short, how long would the blue uniform of the Order and this meditative chant remain intact if there was no further contact with the Laezans of the Saraime? I didn't know – but I suspected that just a few generations would see significant changes, if only in the insignificant elements of the Order – like dress or meditative chants. Which seemed to offer a ray of hope, but I doubted that it would last. My luck only went so far.

When the chant concluded, the Elder called back to the larger party 'The strangers out of the great jungle, seem to be what they appear to be, Laezans from somewhere beyond these islands.'

Though, of course, she didn't say that in either Saraime, or Cimmadarian speech, but her own. I just heard her meaning in my head. My com-link had already identified the translation key to convert the local language into Saraimian. Which implied, given the limited computing power of the com-link, and the small sample it had to work with, that the two languages were closely related. Indeed, the differences were almost entirely in pronunciation rather than in grammar. But then the same thing could be said for Cimmadarian as well, and there was no historical contact between Cimmadar and the Saraime, so language alone meant nothing. It seemed that the known Pela had one root human language.

Words of reply formed in my head, but I bit them back. Did I really want to try to explain how I

knew their language while claiming to be from across the Endless Sky? I decided it was better just to be a simple shipwrecked sailor, at least for now. It seemed to be the role I'd been cast to play. Besides, by keeping my knowledge to myself, I might be able to give us warning of treachery, not that I had any real fear of any. I didn't think Laezans did treachery.

'What do you think of them, my friend? Are they what they seem? Can they be trusted?' she said to the Simla dragon floating next to her, adding with a little laugh, 'And don't let the two attractive female Shadow Dragons color your judgment.'

The old Simla gave a little bark of laughter, and then turning his head to her, said "yes" in a low reassuring bark.

She nodded, and turning to us, 'If you will follow me, you will be made welcome in my village,' she said with words and gestures. 'Long-tailed Companion assures me you are who you claim to be. I am looking forward to learning more about you and where you arrived from. You will be my guests, for I have plenty of room in my quarters.'

'Thank you, Scholar. We are honored,' replied Py with a smile, in response to her gesture rather than speech. Naylea and I smiled our thanks as well, while Siss and Hissi swam up alongside her Simla dragon.

'Remember your age, my friend,' she said to him.

He gave her an absent minded dismissive bark – his attention was focused on our two Simlas. I doubt he was considering his age.

We walked back with her to the gathered villagers.

'Who are they, Bowing Pine Scholar?' they asked as we approached.

'Shipwrecked survivors from far beyond the bright sky, I believe,' she replied. 'They do not speak our language, but my companion assures me that they are harmless.'

'But two are fine-feathered barbarians,' objected one of the party.

'One of whom is a fellow member of the Order. We've nothing to fear,' she replied.

'It seems that we are to be the guests of the White Sash Elder, Bowing Pine Scholar. Her Simla dragon has vouched for us, though how much Siss and Hissi had to do with that, I can't say,' I said as we started off towards the town in the woods.

'How do you know all that, Litang?' whispered Naylea.

I lifted my arm to show her my com-link.

'Yours still works?'

'Yes. I spent the better part of 50 rounds charging it, along with my darters. You don't realize how much energy those super-capacitors hold until you have to charge them on the common voltage of a ship.'

'And it picked up the language already?'

'It must be very closely related to Saraime's. I'm thinking it's only a matter pronunciation. We should pick it quickly. Or you should, since I and my com-link already have.'

'Don't gloat.'

We accompanied Bowing Pine Scholar and the island elders and warriors to Finvere, the only town on the island of the same name.

## Chapter 36 The Islands of the Catarians



We stayed in Finvere as the guests of Bowing Pine Scholar for several dozen rounds. Within a few rounds we were all able to pick up the basics of the language. Thanks to my com-link, I was remarkable for my linguistic ability. However, the language of Windvera, spoken in these islands, was almost close enough to be considered a dialect of the language of the Saraime, so that Naylea and Py picked it up rapidly and by the time we departed, we all were fluent in it.

Bowing Pine, as she insisted we call her, was a retired Elder of Laeza. She had chosen to spend her fading rounds on her home island rather than in one of the Order's communities. The Laezans have few hard and fast rules, even within the Inner Order, which encompasses the members who have chosen to devote their lives working within the Order, so this was perfectly acceptable. Bowing Pine, though half-blind, saw clearly and deeply what she did see and took to my two companions and myself with kindly patience. She proved to be a wise, patient, and knowledgeable mentor to us in our new surroundings.

Finvere Island had only one town of the same name, which was common practice throughout these small islands. The moss roads from several directions lead into the forest, and then down into a long, deep, green-lit, and smoke scented crevasse – a massive crack in the island hidden by trees and vines arching over its entire length. Its two sides were lined with the terraces and honeycombed with caves – the family homes of all the island's inhabitants, though the distant fields had shelters they used during planting and harvesting. There were several thousand families living on the produce of the fields, the livestock they raised, and the game they hunted in the vast floating jungle.

Bowing Pine lived in a large terrace with a multi-chambered cave behind it, along with a quiet old servant to look after her, though she claimed she did not need her at all. From talking to the people of Finvere, we gathered that Bowing Pine Scholar was the glittering jewel of their community – a native daughter, who had made good. They were delighted that she had returned to her people and island in her old age, not with a fortune in coins, but with a fortune in wisdom, fame and prestige as a scholar as well. 'You'll not find many Elders of the White Sash living in the islands of the Catarians,' I was solemnly assured. 'Indeed, not any others at all.' She was a pampered guest of the community, and as her guest, we were pampered as well.

Meals were prepared on the open terraces, so the aroma of smoke and food always was in the air. Since the entire crevasse was roofed over with vines and trees, the people could go about daily life without fear of the large roving dragons that would occasionally drift overhead. There was a great fortified cave built on the side of the crevasse that was stockpiled with food and water to outlast the rare, but periodic appearance of fine-feathered nomadic barbarians who sailed through these islands, usually only once in several generations. On Finvere, they were content to strip the fields for food – what little material wealth Finvere possessed was not worth the shedding of blood it would cost to breach the redoubt. I was very happy to discover that peoples of these islands lived a peaceful, agrarian life with only the occasional dragon to fear. It made the prospect of traveling through them a much more comfortable prospect, since it soon became apparent that if we were ever to find a way back to the Saraime, it would be found on the large island of Windvera.

Windvera lay some thirty or so rounds of travel away. Bowing Pine, who had spent much of her life on Windvera said that she had heard that while smoke-and-steam powered boats were used in several of the Eleven Kingdoms, relics or copies of the ships used by the barbarians, most of the native machines were human powered. Even so, it gave me hope of finding a boat capable of carrying us back to the Principalities. Secretly, however, I suspected that the Order here had a connection to the Order of the Saraime that would see us home. When I hinted of that, Bowing Pine was vague and evasive, but I wasn't about to let her off the hook.

My opportunity came to question her half a dozen rounds into our stay. Py and Naylea were off giving the martial arts demonstrations that Py loved to do, so Bowing Pine invited me to share a pot of tey with her in the dappled green light of her terrace.

After a bit of polite conversation...

'You have picked up our language very quickly,' she said politely as she pumped the tey into my covered mug.

'The differences are really very minor. I am, however, curious to learn about the connections between the Order of Windvera and the Saraime. Those differences are also very minor. I find that very intriguing.'

She smiled faintly. 'If there had been no Order here when you had arrived, there would be an Order here 10,000 rounds from now. Your companions are like seeds. Having been blown here, they would no doubt set down roots and grow a new Order.'

'That is true. Yet, I find it very curious to find your Order so similar to one of our islands, far across the Endless Sky. All the more since I have gathered from our conversations that the Order here is very old and extensive. It strikes me that a seed planted so long ago would have grown into a tree that reflects the society it grew in – even if the fundamental message remained the same. I'd think things like dress, chants, and such would have become distinctly different, assuming, of course, there was no continuing contact.'

'You are not of the Order, so I would suggest that perhaps you do not fully understand the underlying changeless nature of our Order. The Order is like a bamboo reed – it can blow this way and that, but that doesn't alter the reed in any fundamental way. So it is with the Order. We have few hard and fast rules, but obviously, the similarities you see are those of the unaltered reed.'

I nodded and took a sip of the tey. 'I take your point, but the similarities I note would seem to be at more of a superficial level – like a common dress or chant that one would think that over many thousands of rounds they would slowly come to reflect the local styles of dress, or the chants, the local styles of music.'

She shrugged. 'I cannot say. I studied the leaves and petals of plants, not societies. You will have to ask other scholars about that. I can say that the founding of the Order is lost in legends. And you mustn't forget the barbarians. There are many different tribes of barbarians that have visited Windvera and these islands over time. They travel far and wide, often bringing prisoners with them, slaves and perhaps even Laezans, like your companions. Perhaps in this way, the two Orders – or many Orders on many islands – cross pollinate each other, as I would say in my studies, and by doing so, retain the little details as well as the greater Way.'

'An interesting idea. I'm sure it has merit,' I said with a slight bow. 'However, the Saraime islands are remarkably free of barbarian invasions. So it would then seem that the Laeza Order of the Saraime would have been isolated and subject to the organic growth I mentioned. And that should be reflected in minor differences between our two Orders. But that is not the case.' I paused and she smiled blandly at me.

I decided to press my point. 'It seems that we are dancing around the question I wish to ask. So I shall simply ask it. Is the Order of Windvera in contact with the Order of the Saraime? Of course, you understand the reason I am asking this. We would like to return to our home islands. My friends have their mission to pursue and are anxious to do so. And since you've told me that there are steam and smoke powered boats in some of the kingdoms on Windvera, it would seem possible for the two Orders to be in occasional contact, even with an Endless Sky between them. And if so, we'd like to beg a ride home.' I had no intention of letting her off the hook, and I knew that lying was against the teachings of the Order.

She smiled, her faint, patient smile and rebuked me mildly, 'You are refreshingly bold in your questioning of me, Wilitang.'

I shrugged. 'Please forgive me. But it is a matter of great importance to me and my companions. We are far from home. Indeed, my original home is lost to me. I was building a new one in the Saraime, and would like to return to it, if possible. And, Scholar, the striking similarities between the two ancient Orders suggests to me that they have closer ties than what you seem willing to admit.'

She gave a little shrug, but said nothing. No lies.

'I'm a retired trading ship captain, and, at the moment, an out of work chief engineer – someone who runs the smoke and steam engines of a wide-sky ship. I am, like you, a master of my trades, and I feel that we can speak as equals in that sense. It is in that spirit that I am talking to you on matters that gravely concern me, and my companions and our future course.'

'I was not objecting to your questions,' she said softly with an off-handed shrug. 'Just noting a fact.'

I laughed. 'I was also, at one time, Magistrate LinPy's lieutenant during his first circuit in the Shadow Marches of Daeri. Questioning witnesses was part of my job. So please forgive my boldness when I say that you are being evasive, Bowing Pine Scholar, in your responses. Old habits die hard. I seek the truth.'

'LinPy was a magistrate?' she asked, 'I understood him to be an advocate. He seems rather young to be a magistrate.'

Another evasion. Still, perhaps a change of course was called for. Perhaps I needed to make the case that it was worthwhile to see us home.

'LinPy is likely older and wiser than he looks or sometimes acts. He has held tight to his boyhood innocence long after most of us have lost it. However, he grew up within a community of the Order, trained for the law, and acted as a magistrate's lieutenant for many rounds. And he proved to be both a wise, popular, and a successful magistrate – though perhaps slightly too unconventional for some elders. In any event, he had long cherished his boyhood dream of leading bandits to the Way, so his masters decided to indulge that desire by asking him to be an advocate. I do know that they expect great things from LinPy. He is easy to underestimate with his open, boyish charm. But I served under him for 500 rounds, and I can tell you, there's more to him than his never ending good will – though that in itself may be enough, to make him great.'

She nodded. 'Thank you. And the fine-feathered NyLi? What of her?'

I settled back in my chair and considered the question for a moment. The truth, I decided. Despite her dim eyes, she was too wise to lie to. 'NyLi is also from the same distant islands I hail from. She, too, spent her life in an Order, though one that was quite different from the Laezan Order. It was a martial and a mercenary order that trained and employed NyLi as a thief whose services they would hire out. She was quite good at it. They tried to make an assassin of her, and failed, punishing her failure with a mission that she was not expected to survive. She did, and finding herself on these islands, took to heart the Order of Laeza, and its Way. Trained from childhood in the art of deception and martial arts, the Order felt that she could use those skills for good, fighting for the livelihood, safety, and justice of the powerless peoples of the islands. I assure you that both my companions are highly valued by the Order in the Saraim. And they, in turn, are devoted to the Order and their still uncompleted mission. If it is possible to return to our islands, I think we have a right to claim it.' I then leaned forward and added, 'If you have any other questions, I will be happy to answer them. But I believe I have now paid for my answer.'

'And the Shadow Dragons? How do you come by them?' she said with a placid smile. She was not one to be bullied.

'How does anyone?' I replied with a laugh. 'What have we done to deserve them?'

She laughed.

'I raised Hissi from an egg – an egg given to me by Siss, to look after me, perhaps, which she has done. Hissi is very much my daughter. But as to why they travel with us, I cannot say, save that they seem to need someone to annoy. And they don't like paying for their own meals. Can I answer any other questions you may have?'

'Oh, I have many, but they can wait. To address yours, I trust that you understand, Wilitang, that I answer your questions – or not – as I do, because they concern matters I cannot address. You must seek your answers on Windvera – at the Prime Community of Marsh Waters. And I should caution you not to read too much into what I have said, for I truly do not know what you will learn should you continue on to Marsh Waters.'

'Thank you. I regret cross-examining you like this, Scholar, but I am sure that my friends would not dare to. I am, however, certain they wish to continue with the task that they've been given, and if there is a way, they will want to pursue it.'

'Just so. Still, you and your companions may find a new home in these islands. We live peaceful lives, the barbarian raids are mostly things of the past, and the people – well, many follow the simple Way. Look about Finvere – you'll not find a more pleasant island, with kind, friendly people. You could do worse.'

'It is indeed a welcoming place and our good fortune to have been shipwrecked on such a peaceful island. I have been far more unlucky in the past,' I admitted with a laugh. 'Why, if I hadn't been sold in to slavery, I would've been the main course of a village feast!'

'In these Saraime Islands of yours?'

'In their distant fringe islands', I replied and spun a tale or two over tey. And then we discussed the journey ahead of us if we wished to reach the Marsh Waters Community. It would be a long one. We would need to walk the long chain of Catarian islands, more than a dozen in number, to the island of Kaliza. There we could find a wide-sky ship to carry us to the great island of Windvera and on to a Laezan community where we could arrange transportation to Marsh Waters. Then it would be another long journey across the large island, 100 rounds or more by wagon, but since there was frequent travel between Marsh Waters and all the major Communities in the Eleven Kingdoms of Windvera, the journey would be largely routine. I asked about sailing directly to Marsh Waters, since we'd be traveling in a boat to Windvera. She said that Windvera had a gravity, and that they only had human powered airships where we'd likely land, which were mostly unreliable and dangerous. We'd probably arrive faster, and indeed, more likely to arrive at all, by wagon than by air boat.

After she had excused herself, to rest and meditate, I had another cup of tey – very good tey – and considered what I had learned. She clearly knew more than she was authorized to say. Though why she'd need authorization was a mystery in itself. I was all but certain the two Orders were in communication with each other. But realistically, that communication could be very irregular and widely spaced – many thousands of round apart – especially given the fact that neither Py nor Naylea had any knowledge of the Order extending beyond the Saraime. So even if it existed, it may offer no real chance of us finding our way home and her silence arose out of the fact that she did not wish to raise our hopes. A ship every decade or two might be all it would take to keep the two Orders so similar. To Marsh Waters we must go to find our answers.

02

The Finvere round was not the same as the standard Saraime round, and indeed, each island we crossed in the Catarians had different durations for their rounds. The timelessness of the Pela was very much in evidence in the Catarians. So there was no hard and fast way of measuring how long we stayed, save that it was long enough to master the spoken language, even without the com-link's help, and learning some of the customs of the islands,.

Knowledge of the local customs became more important because Py and Naylea, once confirmed as members of the Order were approached and asked to settle some local disputes, in essence, acting as magistrates. As in the marches, justice on these islands was administered by a traveling magistrate. Several minor disputes had arisen since his last visit that the claimants were eager to have settled. Py demurred, claiming, and rightly so, that he was unfamiliar with both the local law and customs. But the claimants persisted, and Bowing Pine assured him that all they wanted was someone totally impartial – and not of the island, like her – to decide the matter. She assured him that the elders in the community would advise him on local law and customs. In the end, he agreed to mediate the conflicts, but failing that, he would leave the cases for the magistrate. Naylea and I acted as his occasional lieutenants,

mostly for show. I was amused to see how happy Py was in his role of mediator – it seemed his natural calling. His good nature, easy humor, and earnest attempts to find a middle ground made him a popular choice to settle disputes in Finvere, and, as word spread before us, in every town we stayed in during our passage to Kaliza. It slowed our travel but, on the other hand, it meant that we were always treated as pampered guests. I, at least, found no reason to complain about the pace of our journey. Plus, my coins stayed in my belt and pockets.

'Will you get into trouble with the circuit's magistrate?' I asked Py after our hearing in Finvere.

He smiled, and shrugged. 'Bowing Pine assures me, Magistrate Crusien will not mind, as long as I only mediate minor cases and not pass judgments. If they accept my suggestions, I will have saved the magistrate time and trouble.

'Still you're rather sticking your nose into his business...'

'With any luck, we shall avoid meeting him. His circuit is wide, our path narrow.' he added with a wink.

Narrow or not, we did cross orbits with Magistrate Crusien, who had heard of Py's volunteer mediation. What he may have thought of Py's actions before meeting Py, I cannot say, but since it is nearly impossible not to like Py, and given his prior experience as a magistrate, they were soon talking shop and parted friends.

The Catarian Islands proved to be a chain of islands in a very literal sense, for many of them were linked together by smaller versions of the floating jungle in which we'd been shipwrecked. The Catarians were made up of several main chains of such islands and many smaller strands as well, forming a linked but loose spider web of islands. To reach Kaliza, where the islands ended on the Windvera side, we merely had to follow the moss road that led across the islands, traveling along the tops of the floating jungles between the islands. There were only two gaps in our journey to Kaliza where we had to take a small, oar-powered ferry across to the next island chain.

Like Finvere, the islands were peaceful, farming islands, boasting a single large town surrounded by the farm fields that stretched around the island. We were welcomed in every town, since our notoriety preceded us. This time Py was notorious as a magistrate from islands across the bright sky, who traveled with two fine-feathered "barbarians", one of which was also a Laezan, and two Shadow Dragons, as Simla dragons were known as in these islands. We still had our feather wigs, so that we could have passed as natives, but since we were greeted with curiosity rather than fear or hostility, we didn't bother. As for Siss and Hissi, while Shadow Dragons were not rare in the islands, they lived independently of humans, so that being accompanied by two Shadow Dragons was remarkable in itself.

Siss and Hissi traveled in style. Assured of easy and safe travel, we had reduced our gear down to our kit bags which we slung between the two spars and took turns pulling along behind us. In the weightless condition of the islands, this took little effort. The two dragons, however, took this to be their personal coach, and as soon as we weren't looking, they would attach themselves to our packs, and went to sleep, traveling without effort – on their part.

They had been a great hit with Finvere's children. Hissi, of course, loved to play with children, but I was surprised to see that Siss joined right in with the games of tag and hide and seek. I would have thought that Siss, older, and having grown up "wild" would look down on such play. But no, she too joined in, though Bowing Pine's old Shadow Dragon, Long-tailed Companion, was content to watch the proceedings. Throughout our stay in the town, the dragons had the youngsters racing up and down the cliffs and terraces. Opinions may have varied as to the desirability of all these laughing, yelling youngsters racing about, but I'm sure they all slept soundly when it came time to rest. I know the dragons did.

The native Simla dragons lived mostly in the forests and floating jungles, though they could wander where they cared to unmolested by humans. We'd usually meet several during our trek between islands and in the villages. For some, Hissi and Siss would hang back and gossip, I suppose. Others would trail

alongside us, ignored by our dragons, until they gave up and turned away. As soon as this happened, Hissi and Siss would start barking their laughs. Knowing both our dragons and the sex, I had no doubt that they were comparing notes on the silly boy dragon that had been attempting to chat them up for the last kilometer or more.

The only other dragons we came across were the distant shapes of hunting dragons drifting overhead. The narrow moss road was usually lined with wide-spreading fist trees that offered some protection from surprise attacks by dragons aloft, but an eye aloft was still needed to keep us from being surprised, fist trees or not. We spied half a dozen large dragons during our journey. None came close enough to be an immediate danger, though we hurried on to the nearest woods until they drifted past, since the fist trees alone would not have protected us from a hungry and determined dragon.

Those were the highlights of our journey across the islands. We crossed 17 islands, each ranging from 15 to perhaps 20 kilometers long. Some we crossed without stopping, others only to eat and drink, stopping to sleep only when we got tired of walking. These stops, however, usually meant spending several rounds hearing minor cases, so our pace was not breakneck. Naylea and Py grew ever more cheerful as they put Blade Island and the Temtres behind them – at least for now.

### 03

While Naylea's mood had brightened, neither she nor Py had abandoned their determination to return to complete what was left of their mission. Naylea was open, friendly, and occasionally teasing and/or sarcastic with me, but there remained a certain, undefined, but impenetrable, reserve about her when in my company. It was not until near the end of our travels through the islands that I had a chance to talk to her about us.

The town of Amorea was built in and around a large honeycombed peak that stood like a towering green thumb in the middle of a ten kilometer wide plain of farm fields. It had likely been a little island of its own at one time long ago, but was now firmly attached to Amorea by a thick net of vines that covered the natural caves and terraces in the rock. Underneath this netting of vines, a twisting network of paths connected the thousands of cave openings and hollows in which the inhabitants lived.

I had memorized the way from the central marketplace cavern to our guest chambers, and dared not venture beyond that moss paved path for fear of getting totally lost in the twisting, and winding tangle of paths that snaked up, down, and around the vertical village. I'd been acting as Py's lieutenant on some magistrate business, after which he stayed on to talk to the town elders, while I headed back to our quarters. I carefully followed the twisting path's "street" markers as I made my way up and around the honeycombed rock, searching the rocks for our chamber's address – two characters I'd written on the piece of paper that I held in my hand, since I was once again illiterate, recognizing only the most common characters of the Windvera language.

The lodging was no doubt described by the characters and the lane I was following, but I knew it only as character shapes carved into the rock wall next to the narrow path that led to the terrace outside our cave. Finding what looked like it, and only after carefully comparing it to the one I'd written, I slipped through the narrow path which opened to the leafy bower outside our cave. I found Naylea on the edge of the terrace, staring out into a wall of whiteness, it was a "cloudy," if not rainy round on Amorea. The terrace was dim in the green lit fog, richly scented with the earthy smell of foliage and sweetness of flowers.

I paused at the end of the path to consider her and what I wanted to say. I glanced about. I didn't see the dragons. They were likely off somewhere, perhaps lost in the maze, perhaps playing with the youngsters, or gossiping with the other Simla dragons that were common in Amorea – though they still seemed to live apart from the humans – rather like sacred cows. I rarely saw the dragons, though they managed to find me whenever they got hungry. In any event, this looked to be my first real chance to

have a heart-to-heart talk with Naylea. I just didn't know what to say.

I stood there, staring at her slim back and tried to sort out my heart.

'Are you lost, Litang?' she asked quietly, without turning around.

'Yes, I guess I am,' I admitted, stepping down onto the moss paved terrace and over to stand beside her.

She turned about to face me, studying my face. And left me to do the talking.

'Thinking of taking a shower?' I asked with a smile, and noting the little water droplets that jeweled her jet black hair and eyebrows added, 'You look damp enough. And pretty enough.'

'Why Captain!' she said, sarcastically fluttering her eyelids. 'You make me blush.'

'A statement of fact.'

'I always loved how bold you were, back when I first knew you,' she sighed.

'And I always loved how sweetly sarcastic you are.'

She flashed me the sharp fleeting smile of Cin. 'Sarcastic or sadistic?'

'Sarcastic.'

'Oh. I must have been mistaken.'

'I loved you, my dear. All of you. And you loved me.'

'Back then.'

'Back then.'

'And now?'

'That's what I've been asking myself ever since we crossed orbits.'

'No answers?'

'You are very dear to me. And you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I want you. But that hardly settles it, does it? We're both old enough to know that it takes more than that. And for me, at least, it takes knowing that you love me as well.'

'So you knew I loved you?'

I laughed. 'Perhaps not. Not exactly. When you were Cin, I thought of you as a cat, and I, a mouse, a mouse that you amused yourself by playing with. Still, there always seemed to be a bit of tenderness in your eyes that kept me from running away... That and the suspicion that I was only fooling myself about being able to get free. Still, I believed that I was in your heart and that you were too fond of me to hurt me.'

'You were wrong, of course.'

I smiled. 'I think not. We had fallen in love with your first playacting kiss. Things just stood in the way. They always have. But that's a planet astern. We're here now, together again. We've both changed. You have, anyway. Some. And perhaps I as well. Hard to say. But I think we could fall in love again, rather easily. If we wanted to.'

'Do you want to?'

'Ah, that is the heart of the question, Naylea. I know that I don't want to fall in love with you again, if it will lead nowhere – or to heartbreak like the last time. Where would it lead this time? Could you find happiness with me?'

She shrugged. 'I cannot say. Not now. Perhaps at the end of our journey, when I know what our fate is to be. Then, perhaps, I can look to the future. But not now. Not with the fate of my mission still hanging in the balance...'

'That will be decided long before you return, I'm certain of that. The Temtres may be already sailing for SaraDal. Your mission is done.'

She shook her head. 'It is more than the fate of the Temtres. It is also the fate of the peoples of the SaraDals that concern me. The Prime Prince is certainly using the Order for his own ends. If he follows through on what he has promised to do, all is well. But if he doesn't... Then he will find himself planting rice in a Laezan community far from the SaraDals. And I want to be the one who delivers him, if necessary. My work in the SaraDals is not done by any means.'

'Besides, I'll not be any less devoted to the Way than LinPy. I'll not be seen as consorting with some ex-tramp ship captain on the sly.'

'Py's all for us getting back together. It's perfectly acceptable within the order. Especially since I've already a novice-vows in the Order, which makes it all proper.'

'I've come to love him as a little brother, but Py's too romantic in many ways. It is unseemly for a Laezan to be engaged in an affair of the heart in public. Especially with a traveling companion – or two of them. People would gossip. No. Now is not the time, Litang. By all means, wait, if you care to. But it will be a while. Perhaps a long while before I can love you again – should I care to.'

I searched my heart for its response. I could find neither disappointment or relief in it. Very strange. It had been wounded once – if not twice before. It wasn't taking chances now, I guess.

'I'll wait,' I said. 'Friendship suits me as well, at the moment. We can be friends, can't we?'

'Of course, Litang. We are dear friends, companions in adventure and in the Way. Shipmates.'

I took her hand in mine. 'Yes, friends, companions, shipmates.'

There was a stereo bark of laughter from beyond the woven panel that lead to the chamber. Blasted dragons. They probably detected what I only suspected – that I'd likely been lying about not loving her.

## Chapter 37 The Ghosts of Kaliza

01

Kaliza is the island where the islands end. Beyond, unseen in the distance of several rounds of sailing – floats the great island of Windvera. As a result, it is the major port and trade center of the Catarian Islands. We planned to book passage on one of the larger trading ships that plied the wide-sky between Kaliza and city of Devere on Windvera. We'd been told that there was a large Laezan Community outside of the city where we could make arrangements to travel on to Marsh Waters.

The market place of Kaliza sprawls across a wide field outside of the town – made up of anchored trading ships and boats selling, trading or buying all sorts of goods from the boats or a booth alongside them. Though extensive, it took up only a modest portion of the field, as the market needed to rotate around the field every few rounds to allow the tough moss carpet to recover after the heavy traffic of the market fair.

This city was large enough, and our fame thin enough, to allow us to lodge privately in one of the many rest houses. After settling in and resting, we went out to the marketplace for a meal and to scout out our prospects for the next phase of our journey.

I spent several hours wandering through the great market without seeing any sort of steam engine. All the large wide-sky trading ships were powered by sails and crew-cranked propellers. I did, however, manage to lose track of my companions in the noisy throng.

I was wandering down an alley between rows of small boats selling local produce, absently looking for my shipmates, when one of the proprietors of one such boat struck me, for some reason, as someone I knew. A very strange case of *deja vu*.

It was not immediately apparent why or where I knew her from. My first thought was that she was someone I'd met on our journey through the islands, but that line of thought met with no success.

I waited for a group of shoppers to pass, and stepped over to her boat. As I did so, she looked up, started, and stared me as well – which, was not unusual since fine-feathered barbarians were very rare in these islands, but her look was different. She seemed to recognize me as well. And like me, knew it shouldn't be possible.



As I stepped next to the hull of her boat, I put a name to her face. A ghost.

'Trin!' I exclaimed, staring at her wide-eyed. It had to be her – or her twin. 'Is that really you, Sub-captain?'

It wasn't her twin, since she stared back at me with recognition in her wide eyes. 'You!' she gasped, recovered and said, 'Captain Litang?'

'Sub-captain Trin! By the Infernal Island, this is amazing! What in the blazes are you doing here?'

She shook her head, as if to clear the vision of Captain Litang from it. 'What am I doing here? Why, what are you doing here?' she demanded. 'You should be beyond the shell...'

'And you should be...' In Cimmadar?

For a moment we just stared at each other, our questions unanswered.

'I came back,' I said, breaking the spell. 'The fleet had sailed and then the island blew up, stranding me here in the Pela,' I rapped out. 'And you...? I take it, it did not go well? The counter-revolution.'

She shook her head. 'No. We met the forces of the Empress as we left the Pela and withdrew back into the islands. My crew and I were then turned out of the Rift Raven to make way for the outsiders. I was given command of the supply ships and tenders, and ordered to take them deeper into the islands. What happened next, I cannot say with certainty. There were negotiations, a demand for surrender, and a battle. All I can say for certain is that my supply ships were attacked by small launches, forcing us to abandon the supply ships and flee in a small boat, eventually ending up here.'

It seemed like we were talking about the distant past, though it was only a decade behind us. Her news left me strangely unmoved.

I shook my head sadly. 'It was doomed from the beginning. The Empress knew we were on our way a few rounds after we sailed. And received radio reports once we arrived...' I saw a cloud of sadness cross her face, so I hastily added, 'I'm sorry, Trin. Vinden waited too long to make his move. The Empress was no fool. She'd been ready for tens of thousands of rounds. Your chances of success had passed away while you slept.'

She shrugged. 'It is all in the past. Now.'

'And the fate of my friends? Do you know what happened to them?'

She shook her head, 'I believe they met the Empress's admiral under a banner of truce. Later, I assume after the meeting, Prince Imvoy ordered us to join the Empress' fleet. He claimed they had agreed to take up our cause. Captain LilDre refused to do so without orders from Admiral DarQue or our Empress. Then, as I said, a battle ensued, but I can say no more than that, since I was away with the supply ships.'

I stared at her for a moment, in thought. Had Prince Imvoy – Hawker Vinden – betrayed them to save his life? Knowing him, it was entirely possible. But then again, could he have been forced to give the orders? Equally likely. And – I discovered – equally unimportant to me now. I shook off the past and beamed at Trin. 'That is all astern for us, isn't it? It is wonderful to see you again, my dear Trin! It's so amazing, I still can't believe you're here,' I added, sweeping my arms to encompass the marketplace of Kaliza. 'Sometimes the Pela seems small!'

She gave me the briefest of smiles. Trin's a very serious person. 'If I had not been sampling my products, I would not have believed you are here either.'

I looked down at the casts and jars spread out under the netting that held them in place. I could not read the local characters, but they had the look of spirits. I thought for a moment. Ah-ha!

'Daffa brandy?'

She may've smiled again – you have to watch her closely to catch her smiles. 'Yes.'

'Ah ... What was his name? The daffa brandy fellow.'

'XinDi.'

'A member of your crew, was he?'

'Yes,' she admitted, but before she could add anything more, her eyes widened, and I felt the presence of Simla dragons over either shoulder. They must be hungry again.

'Ah, two of my traveling companions,' I laughed. The elegant one in scarves and bangles is Hissi, and this one here is Siss. You've met Siss before...'

Siss swam up to her – nose to nose as is her custom and stared at her.

'She was our guest aboard the Rift Raven during the talon-hawk attack. She used to be guarding you while you slept.'

'The sentry serpent at the cavern entrance?'

Siss barked a loud, dragon-breath laugh, gave her a kiss with her tongue and swirled around her.

'The very same one. She invited herself aboard my gig just before the island blew. She apparently knows how to look after herself.'

Siss barked again.

'So you've now become a dragon-talker?' she asked.

'I took to heart what you said about dragons. And see where it got me,' I admitted with a laugh, shared with my two feathered companions. 'I talk to them, for all the good it does.' More barks of laughter. 'I can tell you that they're both hungry again, and have found me only so they can demand a few coins for spiced char-buns or grilled lizard on a stick, even though Hissi has a pouch full of coins.'

They growled and bared more of their teeth. We ought to take our show on the road...

Whatever Trin was about to say, she held off, and rising, cupped her hands and bowed. I turned about to see Naylea and Py drifting through the crowd towards us.

'Ah, my other traveling companions.' I saw a look of recognition cross Trin's face. She gave me a brief, questioning look, so I added. 'Ah, just so. You have met Teacher NyLi before. This is quite the reunion.'

When they had joined me, I said, 'I would like to introduce you to an old shipmate – Sub-captain Trin. Would you believe it? Sub-captain Trin was my first mate during my brief employment as Captain of the Rift Raven. These are my friend and traveling companion, LinPy and NyLi who are advocates in the Order.'

Trin bowed a greeting. 'I am no longer a sub-captain in either the Imperial Cimmadar Navy or the resistance, so I am now known simply by my given name, TrinNatta.'

'A pretty name,' I said, and added, 'Naylea, you've crossed orbits with TrinNatta before.'

'Sister,' she nodded. 'Have I?'

'Very briefly – on the deck of the flagship. She was standing next to me, having just been appointed my first mate when you arrived. She then helped me stow you away in the pod.'

I could see that the implications of Trin's presence did not escape Naylea. 'I am delighted to find you here, looking so well,' she said rather cruelly, but added with a softer smile. 'I hope you fared as well as I have.'

'There are 11 of us here. Most of us who were looking after the supply ships. The rest I can not speak for.'

'I am sorry,' Naylea said. 'But we all had our duties. As you see, I am trying to follow a new Way. I hope we can put the past behind us.'

Trin nodded. 'The past is long behind us. I am glad to see you as you are. I know that Captain Litang was deeply troubled by your abduction. I am glad that he found you.'

'I am glad as well. I would've died on the island, had he not come back to warn you of Vinden's treachery. But we parted ways, soon afterward. My fault. I was still too entangled in my old life. But fate has recently brought us together again, as friends and traveling companions.'

Trin watched her closely. 'I believe we all have many stories to tell. You must come with me to our island and stay as our guests. You will be warmly welcomed. Captain Litang has old friends on the island, who, I know, will be delighted, and as amazed as I am, to see him here.'

'We have lodgings in the city.'

She shook her head no. 'My crew will be back shortly from their deliveries. You must collect your gear and come to stay with us for a while on our island. We have much to catch up on. And I will show

you the finest daffa brandy distillery in the Catarians, and indeed, all of Windvera as well.'

I looked to my companions. Naylea, I knew, was anxious to return to her mission, if possible.

Naylea shrugged. 'I'll not stand in the way of old shipmates exchanging yarns.'

Py laughed. 'I must confess that I've come to enjoy the journey. It seems that I'm no longer in a hurry to see it come to an end. For the first time in my life, I am off the leash. No masters to suggest I do this or consider that. No duties or responsibilities. I am free to have the adventures I dreamed of as a boy. And traveling with Wilitang, we seem to find no shortage of adventures!'

I gave Py a hard look. 'You've had all the adventures I'm providing this voyage.'

He merely smiled. He didn't believe me. I'd just have to prove him wrong.

02

Daffa Island, as it was known, lay several hours beyond Kaliza by small boat. Trin's crew consisted of two hearty men, one of whom greeted me like an old shipmate. SevCar was his name, and according to him, we'd been next to each other in a line of sailors on the Redoubt Island quay transferring rocket cases to the Indomitable. The other was a Catarian Island native, a relative of SevCar's wife. The small boat was propelled by wide bladed oars piloted by Trin. Py and I offered to relieve the men, but they laughed – said there was a knack to it, and that we'd get to the island faster if we left them to it.

Daffa Island was a thin chip of an island – two flat plains, top and bottom edged with a narrow cliff. It was part of a string of small islands strung together by vines which stretched out in either direction into the haze of the sky. Several more such strings were visible – necklaces of flat stones, strung together with flowers and bright green jungles. The farm had been carved out of a jungle on one side. This “upper” half was laid out in neat rows of daffa berry bushes under carefully thinned and pruned fist trees left to protect the workers from sudden attacks by any passing dragons. Old habits die hard, and so when there were workers in the field, there was also a guard keeping an eye on the sky as well. The jungle on the other side was still being cleared to expand the fields, and from the distance we could see the lazy plume of smoke drifting into the wide sky, as they turned the jungle into charcoal to fire the distillery's boilers. As we neared the island, I was surprised to see dozens of people working in the berry fields. All told, the island's inhabitants numbered nearly fifty people.

'How is it that you established yourselves so quickly?' I asked Trin, as she swung the boat around to come alongside the dock on the cliff edge of the island where it was honeycombed with caves that were linked by terraces.

'Land ownership in the Catarians depends on working the land. Un-worked or abandoned land is free for the taking. This island was just jungle and became ours once we started clearing the jungle. Once my crew, like SevCar here, started marrying into the local families...'

He grinned.

'It gave us access to a lot of unemployed or underemployed members of those families to help us out – whether we wanted them or not.'

'The Captain whipped them into shape,' SevCar added, with a grin to his brother-in-law. 'Even the laziest of them.'

His brother-in-law returned an easy grin.

'So with XinDi's skill, plenty of help in the fields, and some financial backing from our new relatives, we've been able to rapidly expand. And since our success benefits half a dozen local families, we're now as well entrenched as a Kaliza business.'

XinDi was delighted to see me again. He proudly showed me around his growing distillery, the little island's village set in caves on the edge of the island, and the well tended berry-bush garden. All the old Cimmadarians remembered Captain Litang as one of the outsiders, and they were also amazed and

delighted to cross orbits with me again. We were all old shipmates, even if I'd forgotten their names – though likely enough, I never knew them by name, or even sight. Still, I was a link to that brief optimistic episode in their long careers.

I was rather leery of how the Cimmadarians would treat Naylea. She had been, after all, an agent of their enemy. It seemed, however, that they'd all put their past life as Cimmadarian rebels astern, perhaps because they were enlisted sailors, whose participation in the counterrevolution was more a matter of being under the command of someone who was devoted to it rather than their own fiery allegiance to the old regime. Happy in their new lives, Naylea's role in the affair didn't seem to matter to them.

We spent a great deal of time recounting our various adventures. Trin had little to add concerning the fate of my old shipmates. The fleet set sail for the Cimmadar space station, but soon encountered the Empress's fleet, consisting of a dozen space ships, each about the tonnage of the Rift Raven. It was slowly approaching the region of Redoubt Island in three squadrons, no doubt tipped off by Naylea's reports. Vinden wanted to attack them immediately, arguing that his warships were powerful enough to destroy each squadron before help arrived and by doing so, win the war in the one bold stroke he favored. However, more cautious heads prevailed, and the rebel fleet withdrew into the atmosphere and islands of the Pela. Here their greater maneuverability vs the rocket driven spaceships would come into play, plus they could use the islands for cover, and so, fight with a great advantage – if the Empress's fleet followed them in.

It did not. Apparently negotiations of some kind then ensued. After half a dozen rounds of inaction, TrinNatta and the Cimmadar crew of the Rift Raven were turned out and replaced by Vinden's crew, Vynnia, Admiral DarQue, and Min. Then, under a truce agreement, they went out to the Empress's fleet, in the hope of swaying them to the Rebels' side.

TrinNatta's Rift Raven crew, plus half a dozen other sailors were reassigned to the supply fleet, which the warships had under tow. They were ordered to take the supply ships deeper into the Pela to keep them out of harm's way in the event of a battle. As a result, TrinNatta knew little of what transpired next. From what she could gather from a few brief radio reports from the flagship, several more rounds of negotiations ensued before Vinden radioed Captain LilDre, in command of the fleet, to come out and join the Empress' forces which had agreed to turn against her. LilDre, being no fool, insisted that the orders be delivered in person by Admiral DarQue or the Empress Min. Apparently that didn't come to pass and Vinden's orders turned to warnings of dire consequences – which, did come to pass.

A battle was fought, and lost by the Rebels. A round later half a dozen spaceship boats arrived and began shooting up the supply ships with their anti-meteor missiles. TrinNatta ordered the fleet dispersed, but being unable to outrun or outfight the space boats, was forced to flee inwards with her surviving crew in a small launch.

My brief hope that Trin had preserved one of the Cimmadar boats with its electric drive and endless power from a micro-reactor was soon dashed. Like us, they had experienced a strong serrata, perhaps the same one. Taking shelter on an island, they had saved themselves, but the boat ended up being crushed and blown away in pieces. They then had to build their own boat to sail inwards until they reached the first of the civilized islands, the outward most of the Catarians, some 100 rounds and adventures later. They made their way here, found daffa berries growing wild, and started distilling them into brandy, at first just to make enough coins to eat and then to build a livelihood out of it.

While I was in no great hurry to leave, Naylea remained eager to find a way back, and Py, even off his leash, still retained a sense of duty, and/or a desire for more danger and adventures, so we decided to push on and arranged to hitch a ride back to Kaliza with the next shipment of brandy.

XinDi drew me aside after we had announced our plans.

'Please excuse my boldness, Cap'n,' he began, and hurried on, 'Cap'n Trin will be furious when she finds out. But I owe it to her. She saved our lives, no doubt about that. The thing is, me and my mates, her old crew, well, we were all small islanders back home. This...' he spread his hands to encompass the island, 'is the life we know. We've now taken wives and husbands, and settled in. This is our new home, and we've grown quite comfortable here. We've got a good thing going, and we know it.

'But Captain Trin is different. She comes from a family long in service to the Empress. She grew up on Iron Island, the daughter of an admiral. She was a career officer and had prospects... Prospects more grand than being the manager of a daffa distillery on a little island. She sees it as her duty to look after us, so she's been the driving force behind building our distillery and business. No doubt about that. But now that we're established, now that we know the business, and have family ties within the community, there's a lot less for her to do. I think she does our selling at the market just to get away to where there's some action. I know she's not happy and dreams, if not plans, to go away when she can bring herself to abandon us. Now, with all your talk of those islands of yours, the Saraime, with them big islands and big ships and modern machines, she's even more restless. I know she'd love to see those islands and perhaps find a new life more suited to her upbringing, since she knows that she can't go home.

'But, you see, she's too proud to ask you if she could accompany you. So I'm asking you – without her knowledge or permission. As her friend, not a subordinate. And mind you, I'm doing you a favor. She's been to Windvera, and knows its ways, as well as its written language, so that I'm sure she'd be very helpful to you in your travels. So, what do you think? Do you think you might agree to take her with you?'

'I'd be delighted,' I assured him quickly, adding only, 'But I'd have to clear it with my companions. Still, I see no reason why they'd object. I don't know if it is possible to return to the Saraime, so I can't promise her more than whatever we find on Windvera. But if she's willing to take the chance that our journey might end at Marsh Waters, I'd be happy to have her along, not only for her knowledge, but because I know her to be a very cool-headed companion in danger as well.'

He smiled, and nodded. 'Oh, Captain Trin is cool-headed enough. You can count on her in any mix-up. I know she wants to go – so don't take her first, second, or third “no” for an answer. And be sure to play up how useful she would be – knowing the language and all. And how she could keep you from making a hash of things, not that you would, sir. But to make her feel useful. Tell her you'd feel a lot safer if she was along,' he added with a wink. 'You're old shipmates after all. How can she refuse?'

'Trust me, Xin, I can say all that without a trace of a lie.'

I wasn't sure how Naylea would take to the idea, but to my surprise, she laughed, and with a ghost of her rather wicked smile, called out to Py, 'Do you have objections to TrinNatta joining our little band, Little Brother?'

I glanced to Py. He had a rather startled look – perhaps even a brief shadow of, well, of all things, embarrassment? But he quickly rallied and said, looking at me, 'If she wants to join us, I'd welcome her to our band.'

'Invite her. And don't take “no” for an answer,' said Naylea brightly.

I stared at one, then the other. Naylea was having fun, and I was pretty sure it was at “Little Brother” Py's expense. There was one obvious possibility, but that seemed very unlikely. It was likely all in my imagination. I turned and sought out TrinNatta – determined not to accept “no” for an answer.

I got several “nos” but I paid no heed to them. When she asked me point blank, who had put me up to this, I replied that she had many friends who were concerned about her and her happiness, and who now felt that this was her opportunity to find a life that she'd have a better chance of finding happiness.

TrinNatta ever cool, collected, and accustomed to keeping her thoughts to herself was clearly angry, embarrassed, and insulted that her crew should be so presumptuous to think that they not only knew what was best for her, but thought that they could get by without her. And yet, she was tempted.

'Shipmate to shipmate, TrinNatta. All of us want you to come with us. I'm certain you will make our journey easier and safer as well as more fun. As for your crew, they're only concerned with your happiness. They know they owe you their lives and the lives they're living. You've done your duty by them. They're happy, successful, established, and with the help of their new families, poised to continue building on what you've established. They see this as a chance for you to find your own life now. I think you should take it. I can't promise the Saraime. Our journey may well end on Windvera. If you want, you can look on this as just a long leave from the distillery. You've earned a leave and a chance to see what's beyond this little island. So why not take it with us?'

'I will talk to my crew,' she said.

I gather from XinDi that she read them the riot act. Nevertheless, XinDi was well prepared and in the end, managed to convince her that, though she'd be missed, they could continue on. Why, she'd been training people to do her various jobs for some time now. Moving on at some point was clearly on her mind, and now was a good chance. She protested that she was only planning to take over the Windvera import business when it grew big enough, but had to concede that they could, probably, get by without her. In the end, she gave in, but only after giving them very strict instructions as to how to run the distillery – and to expect her back to make sure they followed her orders, or they'd pay for it.

She told me later that she wouldn't have trusted any of her crew to keep it going for a thousand rounds – left on their own. They weren't business people. But their new relatives were, and they'd see that it continued to grow and prosper.

She spent two rounds getting a big shipment of brandy to accompany us down to the Windvera city of Devere where they had a growing business. She was not one to waste a business opportunity.

## Part Eight – Windvera

### Chapter 38 The Bird of Long Feathers

01

I turned to Trin. 'It looks rather frail, don't you think? Are you certain this will get us to Windvera?' I asked, after inspecting the Bird of Long Feathers.

'It has in the past.'

The Bird of Long Feathers was a typical local trading ship – a broad beamed, almond shaped vessel, perhaps 20 meters in length, built of light wood and bamboo covered with canvas. It had the usual array of steering wings, rudders, and sails along with a pedal-driven propeller, whose intricate metal gearing displayed Windvera's strange standard of impressive mechanical ingenuity without actual engines.

While steam engines, copied from captured barbarian raiding ships existed, they were not widely built nor, apparently, needed due to an abundance of workers, and the light gravity.

Its passenger lounge was a cozy triangle in the bow of the ship. Its fittings consisted of a couch set around the edge of the hull and a low table in the center. Thin white canvas was stretched tight over the upper hull's bamboo grid to protect passengers from the elements but it could be partially rolled up for ventilation and a view. The sleeping quarters consisted of two sets of three hammocks stacked one above each other, separated from the lounge by a canvas screen. Passengers slept in shifts or napped in the lounge. A narrow deck on either side of the ship led past cargo hold amidships to the crew quarters where the galley and sanitary facility were located. The crew consisted of eight – Captain TarVeydi, a cook and six hands to man the ship and pedal the propeller when needed.

'But will it this time? It looks rather overburdened. And without wings, how does it land?'

'I've sailed aboard similar ships a dozen times without any alarming incident, Captain. Captain TarVeydi is an experienced captain. I wouldn't worry. As for wings it has them, when it needs them. The side sails are triangular, attached to the mast (which on the ground was folded in) and that second mast, the boom alongside the hull. When sailing, the boom is angled down as a sail, and when a wing is needed, it's angled nearly horizontal to convert the sail into a wing with the propeller providing the forward motion. Landing on Windvera is mostly a controlled spiraling glide down.'

I considered the Bird for a while longer. KaRaya had made a similar makeshift wing to land our captured Vantra dragon boat on Daeri, so I could see it working. Still, the Vantra boat was smaller and far less heavily laden than the Bird of Long Feathers.

'I don't suppose we have any other choice?' I asked.

'No,' said Trin.

'Right,' I said, with a sigh.

We booked passage.

We had sailed from Daffa Island with a large shipment of daffa in crates destined for their Windvera warehouse. It had been an emotional parting. Trin's crew knew that they owed not only their current prosperity, but their lives largely to Sub-captain Trin, and they showed their appreciation and love for her. She may've shed a tear or two herself.

After loading our cargo on board, we went food shopping in the marketplace. Bird of Long Feathers provided two rather plain meals per round for the four to six round passage. Experienced travelers brought along their own supply of food to supplement the ship's fare.

We were on board the following round, when the Bird of Long Feathers' crew pedaled the boat aloft and then set her sails and steered for Windvera.

02

There were four other passengers, commercial travelers, sailing with us. DarCe, a trader in spices and dyes, VinCede, in fabrics, SaLin in feathers and hides, and CraNil in pots, plates, and sundry goods. They were a talkative bunch. The presence of two Laezans may've put a temporary crimp in their easy flow of conversation, but it didn't last for long. We spent the first watch sitting around the table hauling out our purchased stocks of food and deciding how we'd divide up the wide variety of preserved meats, sauces, fruits and preserved vegetables between the 7 or 8 meals we'd have during the voyage, as was custom amongst these commercial travelers.

Then, after finding out that this was my first flight to Windvera and my reservations about the Bird of Long Feathers, they sought to reassure me. Or not.

'Natta is quite right. You needn't worry – too much. Look at us. We've sailed between Windvera and the Islands a hundred times and survived every landing,' said DarCe with a sweep of his hands.

'I wouldn't expect to see the ones who haven't,' I replied darkly.

'True, Wilitang,' he laughed. 'You're not seeing the unlucky ones. But if you know your boat, you can avoid the unlucky ones. Most boats are good for 25 to 30 landings before bad luck catches up with

them and they land hard....'

'No, its the number of landings the captain has made rather than the boat landings. A good captain will softly land a boat 30 out of 31 times. The new or careless ones will land hard more often, until they get the knack, assuming they survive.' pipped in VinCede.

'So you say. I say it's the number of landings. But it doesn't matter – TarVeydi, is an old hand and the Bird still has a few soft landing in it, replied DarCe.'

'But not many,' muttered SaLin. 'This is the Bird's 26nd voyage and TarVeydi's 33rd voyage without a hard landing, counting his time in the old Cloud Chaser. TarVeydi's over-due for a hard landing.'

'Yet you're also aboard,' I pointed out.

'SaLin's none too bright,' laughed DarCe.

'Brighter than some dealers in spices that I know. You can survive them, if you know when to jump. With CraNil on board, all's well. CraNil knows when to jump. How many hard landings have you survived?

'Seven,' said the dour faced CraNil.

'See – seven hard landings and still kicking. The key is to know just when the landing looks like hard one and just when to jump. Jump too soon and too high and you'll break your legs, if not your neck. Wait too long, you'll likely end up under the boat when it hits the ground. The most important thing is not to be here in the bow when the boat lands hard. They always land'em hard on the nose. Gives the crew a good chance of walking away.

'With ol'Nil on board, I'm not worried. I'll just follow him out the gate as fast as I can, and you will too, if you're smart.'

I think they were just giving me a hard time. But I'd follow CraNil out the hatch just as fast as I could if they weren't.

03

Hissi was dozing across several of our laps when the four travelers broke out the deck of cards. Just hearing them being shuffled was enough to get Hissi up and watching the play of cards. Though the game was a Windvera one, it didn't take the old card shark dragon long to start commenting on play, barking her laughs and hissing her disapproval of play. No doubt it was a variation of one she knew already. She knew dozens.

She gave me the eye, and a little whine to indicate that she wanted in. It'd turn to a growl if I ignored the whine, so I said, 'Gentlemen, Hissi here would like to join the game, if you can fit her in.'

'You play cards, Hissi?'

She barked an enthusiastic yes.

I gave them my now standard warnings about Hissi's abilities, and my new house rule about only one dragon in the game at one time. Siss played cards but it wasn't a passion of hers. She preferred to have her feathers arranged.

'We only play for iron coin stakes. Let's see the glint of your coins, Hissi,' said DarCe. 'And good luck finding SaLin's mind to read.'

I don't know how many iron coins the four travelers won or lost, but I suspect that they'll be able to dine out on their tale of playing cards with a dragon for many rounds to come.

04

Windvera emerged from the hazy atmosphere late in the third round, as a faint green line stretching across the sky ahead– a floating continent, a map torn out of a vast book.



It was quiet – little more than the rush of wind rippling across the canvas hull. Our commercial travelers were sleeping in the sleeping compartment. The dragons were dozing in the lounge – stretched across the napping Py and Naylea. Trin and I were sitting in the bow with the canvas rolled up enough to allow us to look ahead.

'It's at least two or three thousand kilometers wide and from the maps I've seen, three times as long. I'm not familiar enough with the length of Windvera leagues, to say exactly. It is said to take a carriage a 100 rounds to travel the length of Long Street – from this coast to the far side. But as you can see, the island is no more than a hundred kilometers thick,' said Trin quietly. 'Still, it's large enough to have a gravity that keeps you from blowing away in a wind storm.'

'It looks like a piece of the outer shell reef,' I said. 'The outer shell has millions of such broken plates.'

'Well, this one is hardly in one piece either. If you look over to the far left, you can just make out where the island bends. There's a 140 degree angle between the two sides with a long central valley and a sea running the length of the island. I believe Marsh Waters lies along this sea. The two sections are also cracked and broken into pieces as well. There are mountain ranges and great chasms where these pieces don't quite match up, but nothing that can't be crossed.

'I'm pretty hazy on the gravitation contours of such an island, but wouldn't it pull you towards the center of the island – which wouldn't be under your feet unless you were in the center of the island? It must be strange – gravity pulling you not directly down, but rather to one side.'

'It's light enough that you'll not notice it. I suppose if you jump high enough, you'd land a little closer to the center of Windvera than where you started.'

'So what can we expect in our travels? I gather that the island is not under one rule.'

'There are eleven major kingdoms now, but there used to be hundreds. The four most powerful ones are on the side we're landing on. That's the side with the best angle to the brightest sky and so they have the most productive agriculture and the largest populations. The brightest sky is always very low on the horizon on both sides of the other half, so farming is less productive on the other half. There are, however, seven smaller kingdoms on that half. The remaining side is shadow lands inhabited by mostly nomadic tribes roaming the dim steppes with their herds of domesticated dragons. They're considered barbarians, because they occasionally manage to band together to raid the more brighter side kingdoms.'

'Barbarians from the shadow side, barbarians from the skies – it seems Windvera has its share of troubles. Do the kingdoms wage war between themselves as well?'

'In the past, but now they've been at peace for several generations. And the barbarian raids have grown rare, as well. We'll have little to fear in our travels, save for an occasional band of bandits in the mountain fringes of the kingdoms.'

'I'm glad to hear that. Py will be too, though unlike me, he'll be looking forward to the bandit parts. He has a mission to lead bandits to the Way.'

Trin gave me a questioning look. 'Really?'

I laughed. 'Not officially. But that was, and I believe, still is, his boyhood dream.'

## Chapter 39 Devere

below us. The sails had been shifted to wings and we were now gliding above and along the edge of the island, slowly descending in a reassuringly sedate manner.

'There's Vintra Point,' said SaLin, pointing to a sharp mountain sized outcropping on the edge of the island. 'Devere will be in sight shortly. Perhaps we should cut cards now to set our jumping order.'

There were no takers. That joke had grown old.

Our landing was anti-climatic. An hour after sighting Vintra Point, a dun colored smudge came into view, that resolved itself into Devere, a large city that looked like a giant maze from above.

'The old city is made up of large block sized buildings – six or more stories high – with narrow streets in between,' said Trin. 'The city was built for defense and since walls cannot keep flying attackers at bay, each building is a fortress. They're built of stone, with slits for light, ventilation, and crossbow bolts, but they're too narrow to get through. The narrow streets between the blocks also make sieges very difficult. They have one gateway leading to a central courtyard. Shops fill the ground floors, with workshops and residences above them. An overhead grid of beams prevents attackers from gaining easy entry. Many people work and live in the same building. However, in the long peace, the city has expanded outwards with smaller and less fortified factories, shops and residences.'

The boat and flier port was a wide grassy field at the edge of the city. It was surrounded sheds, hangars, with a row of large godowns lining the city side of it. There wasn't much of a wind, so we spiraled down and skidded to a landing with little more than a lurch and a creak of the boat's light-built frame.

'Soft! Still lucky,' said DarCe brightly.

We climbed out, eager for the feel of solid, safe, ground beneath our feet. I took a big lungful of the warm, slightly smokey, and cooking-scented air that drifted across the field from Devere, and made a jump or two to get a feel for Windvera's gravity. It seemed much like Daeri's, which is to say, not a lot, but enough. It may've been pulling me towards the center of the continent, but I didn't notice it.

We all pitched in to unload our various trade goods from the cargo hold, as several carriages and cargo wagons set out from the edge of the field toward us.

These were versions of Windvera's standard pedal-powered vehicles. They had two large iron wheels in front with rims set with small barbs for traction in the light gravity. In the case of the cargo wagons, four “pedal-men” sat between and behind the front wheels to power them. The carriage had two. The two smaller, narrow set back wheels were steered by the wagon's “captain” standing on a raised platform over them with the tiller. The cargo deck was low and flat, the carriages a bench down the center line with the seats facing out.

Our fellow passengers hired the carriage and after loading their sample cases aboard, we said our goodbyes and good lucks to them.

As they drove off, Naylea called my attention to the dragons, who were making a ruckus.

'This is Siss's first island that is large enough to have a real gravity,' said Naylea, watching them. 'She's not taking to gravity too well.'

'Nor Hissi's laughter,' I added.

Hissi had been demonstrating how to walk, skip, and lope along like a giant squirrel, but I'm afraid she found Siss's attempts to copy her rather humorous. So between her barks of laughter and Siss' growls of anger, they had attracted a wide ring of rather wary, but curious onlookers. They now stood hissing at each other, menacingly.

'You better sort things out, Litang, before they start taking chunks out of each other,' said Naylea.

'Oh, they'll get over it.'

'Siss is pretty angry. Talk to her.'

'Why me? She's your companion.'

'Because you're a dragon-talker,' she replied with a laugh. 'And Siss is sweet on you. Put your oily charm to work. And you'll need to have a word with Hissi as well. I can't do that.'

I was certain Naylea could have dealt with the ruckus like she had in the floating jungle, but since

they both looked genuinely angry, was better to deal with them with a quiet talk. I wandered over to where Siss was standing on her hind legs, swaying and hissing, at Hissi. I put my arm around her shoulder.

She turned her head and gave me her one eyed look, still hissing and showing all of her many teeth. I could feel the tension in her shoulders.

'I know Hissi can be annoying. But then, I suspect that you selected her just for that characteristic...'

She growled softly. Her glittering black eye bored into mine. She wasn't in the mood for kidding.

'Well, be that as it may, I'm sure she just got a little carried away with her critiques. However, you're a smart dragon, you'll get the hang of it by the time we reach those godowns ahead. I assure you, no one will notice if you're a little awkward at first. You needn't be embarrassed...'

Another growl.

'Hissi has hundreds of rounds of dealing with gravity. You've had only a few minutes. You'll be larking with Hissi within no time. So just relax. I'm going to have a word with Hissi and I'm sure she'll apologize.'

A deeper growl, but I could feel her shoulders relaxing. 'Right,' I said, and releasing her shoulder, ducked under her head and started for Hissi, who was watching me warily.

She tried to pull away when I reached for her shoulder, but I was having none of that. I put my arm around her and pulled her close. 'Hissi,' I said softly. 'Don't be like that. I know that you don't have a mean bone in your body...'

A deep growl to dispute that.

'No you don't. I raised you from an egg. You can't fool me. You just got a little carried away with having your fun, that's all. No malice intended. And now you find yourself in an awkward position. I know you don't think you did anything wrong – nothing for Siss to get so angry about. But she is. I think you owe her a word of apology. Only Siss will hear it. All these strangers will never know the difference. You know you'll eventually make up, why prolong the unpleasantness?'

She growled again. These Simla dragons have an ego.

'You're a smart dragon. You're not only a card shark and a chess master, but you're a follower of the Way. You still have the yellow scarf they gave you. Don't disappoint Py. You know, as well as I do, that the Way can be summed up in one word – kindness. In your delight in your prowess in gravity, you didn't realize that you were being unkind. That can't be undone. But you can make me, and Py, proud by showing that you are a true follower of the Way by acknowledging your error and apologizing to Siss.'

She watched me silently.

'You're my daughter, Hissi. I'm proud of you. I'm certain you will apologize eventually, but if you do it now, you'll save yourself and Siss a lot of unpleasantness and you'll show Py and everyone who knows you, just how grown up you are.'

She considered that for a moment, and then gave me a kiss on my nose with her long tongue.

I gave her a shoulder squeeze. 'That's my girl.' And walked away.

She hopped tentatively over to Siss. They stared at each other for a second or two. And that was it.

'You are indeed, a dragon-talker,' said Trin with a shake of her head.

'He's an oily snake-in-the-grass,' said Naylea with a laugh. 'Trust me, it's not dragons he charms with his oily earnestness, it's females.'

'But only the most dangerous of females,' I replied, which earned me a brief but tender look and a fleeting smile from Naylea.

02

After we loaded the wagon with our cargo we started off for the godowns at the edge of the field.

Around us, anchored to the ground or housed in hangars, were some of the strangest airships I've ever seen. No two were alike, differing in size, color, shape and position of their wings and rudders –

each was a colorful creation in bamboo and fabric of adventurous inventor. However, constructed from canvas stretched over a light frame of bamboo, they looked very frail, little more than kites. Most had propellers in the nose, powered by either the pilot, or a pedal-man crew. Still, in the light gravity, even a single pilot could keep his craft airborne, as several of these bamboo birds soaring silently overhead attested to.

'Do you think there are any fliers large enough to carry our party?' I asked Trin as we rode along with our trade goods.

'Perhaps. But I wouldn't advise it. They may look safe enough. (They didn't.) But that's because the wind is slight. It's when they get caught in a storm, things get ugly. They either break apart in midair, get smashed into the ground, or carried off into the wide-sky, never to be seen again. The government uses them as fast couriers, but I suppose, if you join the royal air-courier service, you can expect to die sooner or later. Trust me, we don't want to fly. An experienced wagon crew will likely outrace a flier over the distances we need to travel and get you there alive.'

The godowns, long, six story stone warehouses, stretched in a row along the main road known as Long Street. It linked Devere to the kingdom's capital city of Taravere. There was a lively produce market between the wide street and the godowns. Our wagon's captain had to carefully navigate through the stalls to reach the tunnel-like entryway of the godown. The entryway opened onto a long, narrow, and dim-lit courtyard, that bustled with noisy activity. Five lamp-soot blackened stone ledges circled the courtyard. In the shadows behind the railings were the storerooms and offices of the godown's tenants. Wagons were loading or unloading goods that moved up or down from the surrounding storerooms in large cargo nets. Long shafts of light filtered down from the grid overhead – white with lantern smoke, dancing dust motes, and the thick aroma of spices, hides, foods, aromatic wood, and working humans. We offloaded our crates of brandy below the distillery's upper level storeroom and let down a cargo net that had been hanging from the rafters..

'If you'll pile the crates onto the net, I'll go up and rouse out GrenDar, our agent, if he's about,' said Trin. 'After we get the brandy stored away, we can get your coins exchanged for the local currency.'

'Right,' I said.

She briskly set out for the steep ramps at the far end of the courtyard that zigzag up through the five levels.

We had the cases stacked in the net by the time Trin had roused out GrenDar and opened a gate in the handrail far above. Equipped with a pulley system, lifting the crates in the light gravity proved to be an easy task, and on reaching the fifth level where the Cimmadar's Finest Daffa Brandy Company had its office and storeroom, Trin and GrenDar hooked the cargo net and dragged it onto the landing.

The Cimmadar's Finest Daffa Brandy Co. on Windvera consisted of a small office, lit by oil lamps, with a back storeroom with less than a dozen crates in it. The Windvera business was a new, small scale operation, but GrenDar was delighted with the new supply, since, he assured Trin, business was steadily increasing. He said he'd just sent a letter asking for more product.

After stowing the brandy, Trin took us around the upper level's narrow walkway to the tiny office of a money-changer. Here, under her eagle-eye, I exchanged half of my Saraim coins for the local equivalent in silver, copper and elaborately engraved paper notes that would be good in the Kingdom of Taravin and, at a slight discount, in the Empire of Dajara, where Marsh Waters is to be found.

'You know how to find Orchard Hill Community?' asked Trin, for the second or third time as we stood on the edge of the market and Long Street.

'Aye. We head that way, ' I pointed in the direction that I'll call "west," 'Once we reach the hills – three or four hours away – at the first village we come to, we are to take the road to the right, and walk another half an hour or so. Can't miss it. Right?'

'What's the name of the village?'

'Kandiher,' I replied promptly. 'Trust me, we won't get lost.'

She gave me a look that expressed her misgivings, though I don't know why. 'I'll be along in three or four rounds, once I see to the business here.'

I nodded. 'Yes. Got that too.'

She seemed to be doubtful, but that may've simply reflected some misgivings about her decision to accompany us. 'Right. Let's buy some dust scarves and you can be on your way.'

'Dust scarves?'

'The road gets dusty beyond the city. Just look,' she said, pointing to the steady stream of pedestrians, wagons and lope-mounted riders coming in from the countryside.

They had slipped their dust scarves down around their necks and wore them like bandannas, but the upper halves of their faces showed a thin mask of white dust, which not only covered their faces, but their clothes as well. They left a little cloud of dust with every step.

'Will the whole road be like that?'

'Only near the city, where the traffic is heavy.'

We found a vendor in the market and we each bought one – silk strips with adjustable straps in the back for a snug fit.

'You know the way, don't you?' she asked me yet again after we had donned and adjusted our dust scarves. I caught Naylea laughing behind her.

'Yes, my dear, Trin,' I sighed, and repeated her directions, yet again. 'We won't get lost.'

'And the name of the village?'

'It's still, Kandiher. First village at the foot of the hills.'

Trin nodded, trying to look hopeful. 'Right. I'll see you in three or four rounds.'

We said our goodbyes, slipped on our backpacks, and entered the thick flow of traffic rumbling over the plank road. Looking back, I could see her watching us, no doubt to make sure that we were following the right road and going in the right direction – even though there was only one to follow.

## 03

The wide plank-paved street ended at the edge of the city and Long Street took on its customary, four lane pattern. The center two lanes served the pedaled wagons and carts. They consisted of two sets of wide, wheel-scarred planks set to match the width of the wagons' and carriages' front wheels. Wood paving was used because the little barbs on the wagon wheels could dig slightly in for traction, which in the light gravity, allowed the wagons to travel at a fairly good speed. The rear steering wheels of the carts ran between the two plank strips, kicking up the soft dust between well-worn pavement stones, which, in the light gravity, hung in the calm air a long time – hence the need for dust scarves. Pedestrians, handcarts and wheelbarrows used the stone paved margin of the wagon road. Near the city, there was such a press of people that we could shuffle along only in single file – though with the dragons in the lead clearing out a space for us, we moved at a good pace – with a line of others following us. The other side of the road was reserved for mounted riders – government and army officials, and the wealthy. Their mounts looked to be the familiar lopemounts. The wide road was shaded by two lines of ancient fist trees, so that we walked through a green-tinted tunnel of dappled light and hanging dust – as thick as fog near the city. Eventually, foot traffic had thinned enough that we could take off our scarves and walk side by side.

Leaving the city behind, Long Street ran straight through a flat countryside dotted with countless fortress-villages surrounded by farm fields divided by thin strips of grass or tall woven fences to keep livestock in. These villages consisted of a single large fortress building similar to those in the city. Outbuildings – barns, sheds and corrals for livestock – clustered around the fortress-villages. And, as in the city, peace had allowed some of the villagers to move out to small dwellings on their land as well.

We loped along for several hours without seeing the scenery change. The fields may've grown larger, the crops changed from vegetables to grains and wood lots appeared, but the fortress-villages that dotted the horizon stayed the same.

The people we met were cheerful and friendly – bowing to Py and Naylea, commenting and questioning us on our two dragons as we passed them. Being on the poorer, pedestrian side of the road, they were dressed simply – both men and women wore baggy trousers that narrowed at mid-calf down to thin sandals on their feet. A loose, white, and often sweat-stained, shirt with several layers of lightweight, colorful vests, usually unbuttoned, was worn over it. The women wore jewelry about their neck and wrists and in their wide brimmed hats. Most of the men dressed a little plainer.

On the other side of the road, the riders – the wealthy merchants, government officials and military officers – wore richer versions of this garb, glittering and jingling as they loped along.

The faint blue line of the hills we were told to expect, did, in fact, appear on the horizon, and in time, rose before us in a mix of field and forests. When we came to the first fortress-village on the edge of these hills, we stopped to ask an old man mending the wheel of his wheelbarrow alongside the road if this was, indeed, the village of Kandiher.

He nodded, and noting the two Laezans, pointed down the narrow lane that led ran alongside the main building. 'Orchard Hill is seven leagues down this road. Look for the great wooden gateway, and the white buildings on the hill.'

We thanked him, and following the narrow, unpaved lane through the fields and woodlots along the base of the hills, we came upon the artistically carved wooden archway of Orchard Hill Community. Here we stopped to dust ourselves off, and then followed the mossy lane up through an orchard, up to a cluster of white stone buildings set amongst fields and pastures.

## Chapter 40 Orchard Hill Community

01

After I finished relating our tale of the mission and misadventures that had brought us to Orchard Hill, and our hopes of returning home, the senior sage, Bright-eyed Sparrow Scholar, studied us silently as she considered her options. The six other sages gathered around the table waited silently as well, though one of them looked rather amused by my tale.

It had fallen to me to do the speaking, since Py was too bashful amongst the seven white-sashed Inner Order Laezans to make much headway. And since Py was the senior Laezan, it was not Naylea's place to speak in his place. As a fine-feathered barbarian, and a former tramp ship captain, I could talk to them, as I had with Bowing Pine, as an equal rather than as a subordinate, despite their dignity, age, and wisdom in the Way. The Way is kindness to all.

A gentle breeze, drifting in through the open panels of the pavilion from the cloister garden beyond, drew my idle attention to its picturesque beauty, while I patiently waited for Bright-eyed Sparrow to decide what to do with us.

Our arrival had been greeted with friendly curiosity by the Laezans and the students we encountered in the fields and cloisters. A young Laezan woman took charge of us, led us up to the fortress-house and summoned the elderly White Sash, Mossy Rock Hermit, who was in charge of the community's hospice. He greeted us serenely, as if fine-feathered Laezans and dragons were commonplace travelers and showed us to our guest rooms without questions. 'You have just missed dinner. I will see that a cold repast is prepared for you in the common room after you have washed the dust of your journey from

your faces and out of your feathers,' he said. And with a bow, left us.

'It's encouraging to find that two Laezans from unknown islands, one of which is a fine-feathered barbarian, in the company of a non-Laezan barbarian, are welcomed without surprise by Mossy Rock Hermit,' I said. 'It would seem that we're not all that remarkable to the white-sashes of the Inner Order.'

'Mossy Rock Hermit likely earned his sage name,' said Naylea. 'I wouldn't read too much into his disinterest.'

'Ah, yes. Point taken.' Still...

Bright-eyed Sparrow Scholar shifted forward, glancing to either side at the other sages seated before their cups of tey, quietly invited comments. All smiled, but silently shook their heads, no doubt figuring that we were Bright-eyed Sparrow's problem.

'I hope you found Bowing Pine Scholar in good health,' she said, apparently still undecided as to her course.

'In fine health. Very spry and wise, though half blind with a film over her eyes. Can your healers remove that film?' I asked just to see how she might react. I knew that in the Saraime such an operation was possible.

She shook her head. 'No. May I take it that on your islands, clouded eyes can be cured?'

'Yes. Still, she gets along fine. And I doubt she misses much. She is well looked after, quite pampered in fact, so her eyesight is no great inconvenience. She is treasured.'

Little Sparrow nodded, and sighed a little. 'She is very wise, and wise to direct you to our Prime Community of Marsh Waters. I will follow her lead. It is, however, a long journey, best undertaken by carriage with an experienced crew. While the road is well traveled, the occasional storm, or bandits, are best dealt with by an experienced carriage crew. I should add that you needn't fear bandits – Laezans are not worth their trouble since we travel community to community and so need few coins. The storms, of course, spare no one, but they are rare and with an experienced wagon crew, shelter can usually be found.'

I nodded. 'I am glad the dangers are minor, since any danger must be risked. Where might we obtain the services of an experienced carriage and crew? Though shipwrecked, we are not destitute,' I said. 'We called to pay our respects and to beg for advice about our journey. I believe we have the coins to pay our passage to Marsh Waters, so that need not concern your Community.'

'That would not concern the Community at all,' she replied. 'We are delighted to have the opportunity to meet fellow travelers of the Way from the barbarian islands. We will certainly do all we can to see you safely to Marsh Waters, though we hope you will not be in too great a hurry to leave us. I know that I speak for the whole Community when I say we are eager to learn more of the islands you came from. It is wonderful to know that the Way and its teachers has spread so far.'

'We would be happy to share our stories. The Way has, indeed, spread far – to islands neither of us have ever heard of – and thrives on the thousands of islands from which we came. However, my companions are advocates on a mission with grave consequence, and are eager to resume their mission – should it prove possible. That being the case, I am afraid we cannot linger more than what it will take to arrange our transportation. We have a fourth companion concluding some business in Devere who will join us within the next few rounds. Once she arrives, we would like to be on our way. Can the carriage be arranged by then?'

She nodded. 'We employ drivers and carriages from a co-op service in Devere. They are honest, reliable, affordable, and used to our ways. If you would like, I will have them send a crew for you. It will take several rounds for the message to be delivered and the carriage to arrive, but if you are waiting on a fellow traveler, I doubt it will delay your journey.'

'Excellent. Thank you. That would be very much appreciated. And if money needs to be sent with the order for the carriage, I would be happy to arrange that at your convenience.'

She nodded. 'The sleep watch is fast approaching. That and other details can wait until the new

round. Now, I think, if we have finished our tey, our business is concluded. Please make yourselves at home here.

We thanked her, finished the last of the tey in our cups, and taking our leave, walked through the gardens for a while, before returning to our rooms to sleep.

02

I woke up with feathers in my face. I may've heard the morning gong, but being neither a student nor an active Laezan, I had ignored it and went back to sleep. The dragons had apparently wandered in sometime after the gong, and, finding a kindred spirit, had joined me on the pallet.

'Time to get up. The day is wasting away.'

They stirred, growled softly, and settled in again.

'I don't know about you guys, but I'm hungry,' I said, pushing them away. 'I'm off to find the kitchen in this joint.'

That got them awake and eager quick enough. I splashed some water on my face, found some dust-free clothes in my kit and the three of us set out in search of food. We found the nearly deserted common room where the faint aroma of food still lingered. Clearly we were late risers. Still there was one of the senior students reading a book at one of the long tables, who rose to greet us as we entered.

'I am JimDe,' he said, after we had bowed our greeting. 'Bright-eyed Sparrow Scholar asked me to be your guide for the day. Your companions are participating in the Order's customary rituals and will join us at the mid-round meal. Now, if you are hungry...'

The dragons growled.

'We are,' I said with a smile.

He smiled as well, 'Then follow me and we'll see what we can find in the kitchen. After that, I can take you to Teacher AnDervi to arrange your transportation to Marsh Waters.'

It was a plan we followed. The dragons drifted off after the meal, and I followed JimDe to the office of Teacher AnDervi, a middle aged woman of the Outer Order, who was the business manager of the community.

After greeting me, and some polite conversation, she outlined the terms and the base cost of transportation to Marsh Waters. I was able to pay her with my paper money – glad to be rid of it. Coins and credits I knew. Paper money, well, I guess it worked, but I did not completely trust it.

'In addition to this amount, you'll be expected to provide two meals a round for the crew of four, and a room for them to sleep in at each stage of the journey. It is eight or nine stages to Marsh Waters, usually about 30 rounds in total,' she said. 'That price varies depending on where you stop and what you order.'

'Some of our travelers prefer to pay a flat fee up front. Others pay as they go by simply including the crew in with their own meals and lodging. The co-op agency provides crews who are used to our ways so you can do as you see fit.'

The messenger – one of the senior students, who tried, unsuccessfully, to conceal his delight in being selected to escape the routine of classes for a ride to the city on a tall lopemount – stood waiting for us outside.

AnDervi handed him the satchel. He lifted its strap over his head, tucked it under one of his vests, and buttoned it to secure it.

'Deliver it and come directly back,' she said, giving him a stern look that his happiness easily deflected.

'Yes, Teacher. Directly to the agency and back,' he said, as seriously as he could contrive to sound and leaped to the back of the lopemount. He waited for her to nod, and with that, was off – lopemount and boy free to follow the open road.



For the rest of the first watch, JimDe showed me around Orchard Hill. Like its Saraime counterparts, it consisted of fields and the namesake orchards which were worked by the community's lay workers, students, and Laezans. There was a small village-fortress for the community workers and a large boarding school for the students, both lay and Laezan. Like the Saraime communities, its school was a university, focused on science, medicine, the law, and governance, open to all, but designed to fill positions of power and influence within the government and sciences, with people familiar with the philosophical and ethical elements of the Way of Laeza.

JimDe, though eager to show me about the sprawling community, was even more eager to hear about where I and my companions came from and how we had arrived here. I answered them with the story we had decided upon on Daffa Island – the truth, save that everything happened within the Pela. My island and Cimmaradar both lay a thousand rounds away. Politics, storms, and misfortune had brought us here. I talked freely of the Saraime, the Temtres, the Outer Islands, and vaguely of my home island, save that I commanded a trading ship that was eventually caught up in Cimmaradar politics. The Pela is so vast that our unknown islands were easily accepted as fact.

In the community's library, JimDe showed me the great wall map of Windvera and a chart or a “road map” of Long Street and our course to Marsh Waters. The great map was hand drawn, but clearly the work of a scientific survey, likely from the air. It looked as precise and detailed as any printed map I'd seen in the Saraime. I engaged the neural link to my com-link and recorded it so that I could retrieve the exact memory of it, if needed.

The road map was pictorial. With the vague bright spot in the sky nearly overhead on this side of Windvera, it is hard to use it for navigation unless you have a good eye and clear weather. So without a rising and setting sun, and no magnetic field to measure, navigation is by stone league markers, villages, and distinctive landmarks. These landmarks, like the shape of a mountain peak, or the arrangement of fortress peaks, waterfalls and the like, had been drawn along the margin of the road map of Long Street, complete with bearings from points on the road. I input this map as well, but because it could not translate the written descriptions, the map was of somewhat limited value. And could not be shared with my companions.

'Do you think I might be able to make a small copy of this map to take along with me?' I asked JimDe.

'I'm sure that can be arranged. One of my friends is studying cartography. However, Long Street and the road to Marsh Waters is a well traveled way. Your carriage crew will know the route.'

'I am sure they do. However, I'm here because unexpected and unfortunate things happen,' I laughed. 'Seeing that I'm unable to read your language, I'd feel more comfortable if I had a map along that I could read, should yet another unexpected event force us off course.' Hopefully I wasn't tempting the fates of the Pela.

He smiled and nodded, 'I will see to it. I know MiKa will enjoy the opportunity to put his skills into service for you.'

I ate the mid-round meal in the great common room with JimDe and my companions, including the dragons who always turned up when there was food to be had. The Laezan disinclination for rules was evident in the common room since it was loud and cheerful – the youngest contingent just on the verge of throwing buns at each other. I suspect the more restrained and dignified senior students around us used their pull to sit at our table and respectfully questioned us as we ate. After the meal, the students, including JimDe, filed off to classes, leaving Py, Naylea and me free to spend the long “afternoon” to wander idly about Orchard Hill's fields, orchards, woods, and the small tey garden. Here I had a chance to talk to the tey master. I had often talked to the cha growers on Belbania, so we could talk shop while she brewed a pot of freshly processed leaves for us.

'The air and soil here at Orchard Hill can produce no more than a pleasant cup,' she explained with a sigh. 'You need to be high in the steep hills – and on the other side of the Middle Sea to produce tey of quality. My little garden produces little more than what we can consume here. But some of my students go on to communities high in the hills and to other side where tey grows slower. They send me packets of the tey they help produce. I try not to envy them.'

It was, however, a very pleasant cup, all the more so for being fresh, and I assured her so, saying I had tasted many cups far less worthy.

'How do you find the Order here? I can see no differences here from what I experienced on Daeri, but you would see much more than I,' I asked my friends as we walked back to the main buildings.

Py shook his head. 'All the essentials are the same. Local names, exercises and tasks are done in a slightly different order than I am used to, but no greater variance than I might expect between the communities back home. It is almost like being home.'

Naylea smiled as well. 'My little brother travels far, but his heart never leaves home.'

'I am at home wherever I travel,' he replied, 'when in the company of good friends.'

Passing the village, we caught sight and heard the laughter of the dragons and the shouts and laughter of the children as they frolicked with the children of the village. Simla dragons are very strange dragons.

03

I spent part of the following round in the library with JimDe and MiKa annotating the map of our route to Marsh Waters that MiKa drew. I learned that a Windvera league was about as long as a person on foot could travel in a Windverian "hour". The Windvera round was divided into "periods" of six hours each – before mid-round, after mid-round and sleep. A carriage travels two leagues in each hour, and they were driven nearly non-stop for two or three rounds, the crew sleeping in shifts and breaking the journey only for meals and an hour or two of sleep for crew. The passengers caught what sleep they could aboard the carriage. By the third round, the crew, and I presume, the passengers, were ready for a solid watch's sleep in an inn before starting out again. This long stay marked the end of a "stage."

I had MiKa draw as many landmarks as we could fit in, while I added notations in my smallest Saraim characters based on their translations, so that I and my companions had a chart we could use.

After the mid-round meal, Teacher AnDervi sought us out.

'Your carriage has arrived,' she said, 'Perhaps you would like to meet your crew.'

'Lead on,' we said.

'You've drawn CarVori's crew,' she said, as we walked towards the front entryway. 'Though knowing CarVori, I would imagine he chose you.'

'Ah?'

'CarVori is a character. Some of our sages will travel with no one but him. Others, with anyone but him. For he is a talker. His constant chatter annoys some of our more reclusive members. However, I think you'll find him useful since he knows a great deal about a great many things. Indeed, I believe he can spend the whole journey just describing the history of the section of road you are driving on. In a way, it is our fault, for he asks many questions as well. You will not find a more curious man, nor one who seems to retain everything he hears. He has, in his long career as a carriage captain, picked the minds of our best scholars on many subjects, and seems to remember everything he was told. He can, and will, debate with any scholar throughout the whole journey using this knowledge. Some enjoy this – it shortens the journey. Others, not so much. Those that enjoy his company and conversation say that

even the longest journey ends before they have settled any point, and look forward to continuing the debate on their next trip.'

'He sounds like just what we need...'

'Indeed, you will no doubt learn a great many things about Windvera, but expect to be cross examined on every aspect of where you came from as well. As I said, I am certain that once he heard that four strangers from some unknown islands were seeking transport to Marsh Waters, he used his seniority to lay claim to the job.'

'Oh, Captain Litang here, has so many tales to spin, that even this CarVori will grow weary before we reach the end of our trip. Litang is widely known as one of the greatest liars of all of the Saraime,' said Naylea.

'It is my fate, it seems.'

'Plus, he attracts misfortune like dung attracts beetles.'

I gave her a stern look, lost on her, of course. 'I'll not deny that I've run across more than my share of talon-hawks, pirates, storms, and shipwrecks. But I don't believe they're as numerous as beetles on dung.'

'And yet, he's already tempted fate by making a map of our route so that if, or rather, when, misfortune happens – as it surely will – he'll know where it happened, and will be able to point it out on a map, when it is time to spin it into one of his epic yarns.'

What could I say?

CarVori proved to be a very tall and thin man who eagerly hurried to meet us. He bowed and said with a wave to the three men standing by the carriage, 'I am CarVori and those are my pedal-men.' He extended his hand to me – they shake hands on Windvera.

I took it. 'We are happy to meet you,' I said, and named myself and companions. 'Also, though I don't see them around at the moment – they were with us for the meal – we travel with two Simla dragons as well, so I fear we will be a large party for your pedal-men to haul.'

'Yes, yes. I heard of the two dragons. Oh, I would not miss this hire for all of the gold in Xindou. You need not fear – my pedal-men are experienced, and the number of passengers does not matter much at all. You will see – we will fly to Marsh Waters'

'We've heard that you are very knowledgeable on all aspects of Windvera. Being strangers, we can learn much during our journey.'

'Oh, I talk and talk. You will learn much, as I hope I will, as well. I am ready and eager to start as soon as you are.'

'We wait on a companion yet to join us. She should be here within a round or two..'

'Good. My pedal-men will be happy, since we just delivered the last hire in Devere two rounds ago. They grumbled about turning around so fast, but I told them to think of all the coins they would not have time to waste on drink and would be earning on the trip. They still grumbled about all the drink they'd be missing. But not the coins. We can settle on our meal fee and rest terms later, if you wish.'

'I understand that we can just include you and your crew in with our meals and lodging. If that is fine with you, we shall do it that way.'

'Excellent. Traveling as one party is far more enjoyable. And trust me, I know of all the finest and, since Laezans are my preferred customers – all the most affordable – places for meals and rests along the road. Never fear, I shall watch your coins like a hawk and you will never complain of either the food or the lodgings.'

'That sounds grand. We shall place ourselves in your capable hands.'

'Right,' he nodded with a wide smile. 'I shall settle my crew, and see you at dinner, where we can plan our journey stage by stage.'

## Chapter 41 Luan Street to Long Street

01

'The final battle between Gapetar and Salisvan ending the reign of Disdai the Merciless, and Salisvan, as a kingdom, was fought on this plain,' said CarVori, the sweep of his free hand taking in the flat patchwork of fields scattered with fortress-villages. 'In the distance, you can see the tower-city of Salisvan, still the capital city of this province. It is now best known for its local beer.'

'This is the third battlefield we've come across on this plain alone. They seem rather thick on the ground in these parts,' I remarked.

'Truth be told, there are battlefields everywhere you look on these plains. I'm only pointing out the famous ones. When you consider that there is a Hundred Kingdoms Age in Windvera's long history, not to mention uncounted barbarian raids from the Shadow Lands and many sky-nomads, you can see why there are so many battlefields.'

'Point taken,' I laughed. 'How far back in history do these Hundred Kingdoms lie?'

'In Taravin rounds? Dajara quad-watches? Junjari feast-cycles or Feyistarvar reigns?' he laughed.

'Well, then, how is historic time measured?'

'All academics have agreed on common eras, like the Hundred Kingdoms Age, though they may use different names emphasizing their histories. As to duration, well, that is an imprecise science. The lifespans of various recorded personages are pieced together and compared to arrive at a commonly accepted duration. This depends on knowing something of the age of the actors when they stepped onto the historic stage and how long they lasted before they were carried off, and then comparing all these actors to their contemporaries from other kingdoms and all the different ways of record time. It keeps historians employed,' he laughed, as he leaned on his tiller, with little to do but talk, since the road we were bounding along, Luan Street, ran straight as an arrow through the plains of Taravin.

02

We had set out on our journey across Windvera the previous round.

Trin had arrived shortly before dinner of the round that CarVori and his crew had arrived, so we departed after breakfast the following round. CarVori said that if we didn't mind giving up the sights of Taravere, Taravin's capital city, we could save a round of travel. We decided we could give it a miss, and so we left Long Street after a few hours of travel to take Luan Street, a much less traveled road as a short cut around Taravere.

We had now traveled far enough to have stopped three times at inns. The crew ate quickly and then took an hour's nap before setting out again. We'd be on the road for another round before this first stage ended with a long stop in the city of Luan.

As advertised, CarVori kept conversation going as we rolled and bounded across the vast, monotonous landscape of Windvera's flat, plate-like surface. Where the plate buckled or cracked there were hills or small, steep mountains. But in between, the landscape was monotonously flat – farm fields, many with people working them, and small wooded copses stretching to the horizon line, peppered with the square fortress-villages, and sometimes, in the distance, standing like hunched giants against the sky were the “fallen-rocks” – little islands captured by Windvera's gravitational field.

It took all three pedal-men to get the carriage up to speed, but once it was, it needed only two to keep it bounding along. And bounding along it went – every bump in the plank road would send it

soaring for a moment or two. The pedal-men would pause to conserve their strength until the wheels touched down again.

Like the cargo wagon, our carriage had two large fixed wheels forward, fitted with small barbs to grip the road's twin lines of planks. The pedal-men sat slightly behind and between these wheels, pedaling a chain-linked, geared drive axle. While two men pedaled, the third rested, often napping between shifts on the deck of a meter long cargo locker for our kits and supplies, immediately behind the seat for the pedal-men. The two meter long passenger compartment consisted of two benches, one on each side of the carriage facing inwards. There was room for two people to sit facing each other, knee to knee, but we had enough room to alternate seating that allowed everyone to stretch their legs onto the opposite seat. The dragons usually chose to lay across our laps making it convenient for us to preen them while they napped. A canvas canopy sheltered the passenger compartment, with side-flaps that rolled down to seal the compartment against rain and dust, when needed. CarVori stood and steered from a slightly raised platform behind the passenger compartment where he could see over the canopy. Not that he had much to do on the straight open roads, but he did have to navigate in the cities we passed through.

Luan Street, was a single track road – just two planks and bordered with mossy margins for pedestrians and mounted travelers, and just wide enough to dodge around slower moving or oncoming vehicles. Both Luan and Long Street ran straight through the monotonous countryside hour after hour, round after round – the timelessness of the Pela made visible. Still, the timelessness passed quickly enough between CarVori's guided tour and his questions about our origins and adventures.

I didn't mind the constant chatter. CarVori was a storehouse of knowledge. You could ask him anything, and he could tell you about it in great detail, citing his sources. Nor was he shy in asking questions of everyone. I learned more about Cimmadar and Trin's background during the first round than I had to date. Only when he took a nap and had one of the pedal-men steer, or during the frequent rain showers we passed through, when the canvas canopy was tightly secured about us did we travel in silence – usually taking the opportunity to try to sleep.

## 03

Crossing a low line of pine forested hills – a minor fissure in the plate stretching away in both directions until it faded into the haze – we entered the province of Luan. From its modest heights we could see the ever familiar flat, field-checked plain spreading out below us, fading, like the hills, into the haze. Half a dozen fallen rocks stood scattered across the plain like brooding giants, the largest of them, Luan. The city, built in this rock, rose nearly a kilometer into the sky – a vertical fortress-city carved out of the soft stone of the former little island. Like the village of Amorea in the Catarian Islands, these islands were made of a brittle, sponge-like rock – riddled with natural caves that could be enlarged and connected to form thousands of residences and many great caverns. Their outer surfaces were transformed into level, upon levels, of terraces between towers and redoubts, making them hard, if not impossible, to capture, save by siege and starvation.

Luan, was the capital city of the province, and the end point of our first stage. During the long peace, a new city had grown up at the foot of the great fallen-rock city, and we stayed in a stone-built inn on the edge of this new town. The pedal-men ate a hardy meal and slipped off to their room to sleep. CarVori, ever the eager guide, stayed up to show us around the new town – its broad streets radiating from the fortress-city that filled half the sky above us. The fallen-rock city rivaled the towers of the Unity in size and was far more picturesque with its terraces, hanging gardens, and massive half-round fortress towers. We walked through the lush park and around the lake on the edge of the town and then he offered to guide us to the top of the fortress-city. 'An hour's journey, no more,' he assured us. We declined, using the excuse that since it was nearing the local rest watch, we should probably

take the opportunity of the quiet time to get a good sleep in. Which we did.

We departed Luan once everyone had all the sleep and food they could stand, and setting out, rejoined Long Street, sometime later. I'd given up keeping track of time, other than stage to stage. No other method mattered.

04

'What will you do, when you get back?' Trin asked Py, from the dimness of the damp compartment during a rain shower, as CarVori, on the other side of the canvas, steered us silently through the storm. 'Naylea has her mission to complete, but your mission was just to deliver the message. Yours is done.'

'I shall, of course, report back to Cloud Home,' he said thoughtfully. 'And then – I don't know.'

'You don't know what your next assignment will be, or you don't know what you'll do when you get back,' I asked, struck by the tentative tone of his reply.

'If we get back,' he said with a faintly seen smile. 'But even if we do, I find it hard to say with certainty.'

'You have a choice?' asked Trin.

'Oh yes. We of the Outer Order, the yellow sash, make no commitment beyond conducting ourselves as fitting examples of the Way for as long as we wear the blues of the Order. Of course, no one is idle, if one is a member of a community, but we do have choices as to how we are employed. When you are young, or new to the Order, you generally follow the consul of your mentor. But as you grow older, more freedom is allowed. You can follow, with the Order's approval, your own way. And, of course, you are also free to take off the blues and live outside the community, hopefully still following the Way, in an ordinary life. You can always return. Many do. So you see, I have choices.'

'So what do you think you want to do?' she asked.

I caught Naylea, giving me a wink.

'Ah, that is the question I am asking myself. I know that I will not be an advocate again.'

'Why not?'

'I think, perhaps, I was asked to be one so that I might discover that bandits are not the figures that my youthful imagination made them out to be. They are often greedy, cold, and cruel, altogether rather unpleasant people. People far off the true path. And they are not very open to changing their ways. Have you found that to be the same with you, sister?'

Naylea nodded, 'Yes, brother. The ones I've been sent to lead to the Way are usually too set in their wrong ways for words to set them onto the right path. And more active inducements rarely work either. I doubt even long watches working in the fields round after round does much to change their ways either.'

'Just so. The work, though worthy, and sometimes exciting, is often discouraging.'

'So it has cured you of your romantic notions of bandits?' I asked.

He smiled. 'There are bandits and there are bandits. I have no romantic notions about the type of bandits I have met in my advocacy.'

'And the others?'

'I am still young.'

'So what are you thinking that you would like to do?' asked the ever practical Trin. 'If not an advocate?'

'He's a wonderful magistrate,' I said. 'It seemed to be your true calling.'

'Thank you, my ever faithful lieutenant. But yes, I enjoyed being magistrate. I was sad to give it up.'

'Why did you then?' asked Trin.

'I wasn't given a choice. It seems I inadvertently stepped on the toes of important people. I took on a serious matter that some felt required older and wiser consul, which was not out of reach – a few

rounds of travel – or, as it turned out, a few hours by air-car.'

'None of which he needed,' I said. 'He handled the situation as well as any more experienced magistrate could've done.'

'Thanks to Wilitang. But it may've been seen as arrogance on my part. In any event, it was thought that I might better serve the Way as an advocate.'

'But now, after serving as one, would you like to return to being a magistrate?' asked Trin.

Py shrugged. 'I don't know. He laughed and said, 'The truth is that I'm enjoying what I'm doing right now – traveling in good company. There is a freedom in travel that I never experienced growing up in Cloud Home. Perhaps it was traveling the marches with Wilitang, KaRaya, and Hissi that made being the magistrate so pleasurable.

'In any event, if I'm to wear the blues of the Order, the Order must agree to what I choose to do, so I must consult my mentor. Perhaps I might become a traveling teacher – of the Way, or martial arts, or other studies – I have been, after all, taught many things. I am fairly knowledgeable about the laws of Daeri,' he laughed. 'As well as history and legends. And, I could study on my own to learn more on many subjects. The Order has many schools on the small islands where I could teach.

'Yet, I find that I like travel, so perhaps I might put away my blues and just travel where the wind blows for a time. Have you traveled much in your career, Natta?' he asked, with a shy glance to her.

'Yes, as an officer I was never long in one posting, and in the end, traveled very far, indeed.'

'And did you enjoy that life?'

'I enjoyed my life in the service, until the usurper seized the Cloud Throne. I then found myself fighting old friends and comrades. Those were hard and desperate times. Many died, some under my command. But that is all in the past. And while I found building a business to be a worthy challenge, I think I would like to see more of these islands and, perhaps, discover a new life for myself. But that is the life we're all living at the moment, isn't it? So we should both be content and enjoying it.'

'It is, and I am. Very much,' agreed Py. 'Bounding along the long street with good companions has been all I could ask for. Why look ahead?'

Naylea flashed me a knowing smile. 'And what will we all do if we cannot get back – or not for thousands of rounds? What can we do here?'

'Maybe we can start a company that builds real, steam-powered boats,' I suggested, which started a discussion that lasted until the carriage lurched and slowed, with CarVori loudly suggested that someone watch where he was walking. Lifting the canvas flap a little, we found ourselves entering a press of wagons and pedestrians sloshing through the lazily falling rain.

'Tangardin,' CarVori called out seeing us peeking out. 'Our inn, the River Crane, is on the far side of the Vinavar River. You'll not want to miss crossing it for it is Windvera's largest and longest river. And after that, the inn, which, I for one, am eagerly looking forward to – if only to get out of this rain.'

Tangardin was the end point of our second stage. It was famous for the shallow, broad river that ran through the center of the city and for its twin fallen rock fortresses, one on each side of the river. A long, floating bridge, with a tall arch in the center to allow boat traffic to cross under it, carried us over the broad river, which had to be a kilometer wide. At the height of the arch, it provided a sweeping vista of the river with its many hundreds of boats and barges floating lightly on its smooth surface and crowding its shore with the strange godowns on tall stilts lining it. The tall stilts were a testament to the river's propensity to frequently escape its low banks in strong wind storms.

The River Crane proved to be a dry, cozy inn, a welcomed end to the second stage of our journey, though as I lay in bed after a long meal, I still felt like I was bounding along Long Street.

The rain passed while we slept, and we woke to a bright, clear endless day. After breakfast, the four of us took a walk to stretch our legs while the crew slept in a while longer. The dragons stayed behind, no doubt figuring to get a second breakfast when the crew came down for theirs.

We found our way to the bridge where we paused to lean against the railing and take in the river scene. The shoreline below was bustling with cargoes moving to and fro between the stilted godowns

and swarm of rafts and boats that crowded the shoreline. The longshoremen, chanting as they tossed the crates, and sacks between the boats and the floating loading platforms, gave the scene a multi-layered rhythmic soundtrack, amplified by the rumbling of the wagons, carts and foot traffic crossing the wooden bridge just behind us. In the full light of the Pela, the shallow hulled, broad beamed boats were a riot of colors, each brightly painted and trimmed, their varied cargoes piled high. They had long sweeps and short masts mounting triangular sails in various colors and often, many patches. The river was glass-smooth and clear, its dun-colored river bed visible through it. Boats moving up and down it seemed to be floating over the river bed, leaving no mark of their passage.

'Come along, Wilitang,' said Naylea, tugging at my arm. 'We're out to stretch our legs and see the sights, not hold up a bridge railing.'

True enough. But well, it was my life I was watching – or a primitive version of it – and it reminded me of what I had lost. I was reluctant to leave. They had to drag me away when we reached the other side as well.

We explored our side of the city and returned to the River Crane just in time to sit down to a second breakfast with the carriage crew and the dragons.

05

The third stage ended deep in the hills and forests of a major fissure known as the Opaphar Chasm. The long ridges of this chasm region were clothed in the same massive pine trees I'd seen on Daeri. Long Street, deep in the shadows of this green and maroon forest, climbed and then descended these hills and narrow farming valleys in long, steep zigzags. And though the pedal-men seemed tireless, it took us almost two rounds to reach the Opaphar Chasm itself.

We had pulled off Long Street near the cliff's edge to allow a long caravan of wagons to cross the spidery iron bridge from the other side. The bridge was built chain-like, with the iron road sections loosely connected together, so it bounced and swayed under heavy traffic, and in a strong wind. And while it was wide enough for two way traffic, CarVori decided it would be a more comfortable passage to wait for the caravan to clear the bridge before proceeding.

We were all standing on the edge of the chasm looking down the fissure that plunged deep enough to fade into a black shadow.

'Is that a river at the bottom?' asked Naylea.

I could see the narrow silver line that reflected the sky that she referred to – perhaps a kilometer below us.

'It's actually a lake,' replied CarVori. 'that runs the length of the Opaphar. It is said to have many strange fish, though I don't care to try my luck beyond the pale trout that the lake is famous for.'

'It's a very narrow lake. I suppose that it must also be very deep,' Trin remarked.

'No, it's actually very wide. It only looks narrow because you're looking at it from the side,' replied CarVori.

'I don't think I'm following you.'

'Oh, we must visit it. I will take you. We can walk to it in an hour.'

'Walk to it?' Naylea asked. 'You mean climb down.'

He shook his head no. 'No, walk. There are trails. But, of course, not on this side, but on the other side, the down side.'

We all gave him a questioning look. 'The down side?'

'Have you not seen chasm kite fliers? No? I see I must explain. Because this chasm is so remote, there are no kite-fliers, but attaching oneself to a set of wings and jumping off the up side of a cliff is a popular sport. If you jumped off here, you'd fall towards that other side, not down the chasm. And if you had a set of wings, you could sail and soar all the way to the far side, ending up on the opposite



side of the chasm. The chasms nearer the cities are popular with such kite fliers. This is a pretty narrow chasm, at this point, so I bet that if I attached the flaps of my oiled raincoat to my feet and spread my arms wide, I could use it to soar safely to the other side without breaking my neck.'

Ah, yes, Windvera's strange gravity...

'As for the lake, the lake bottom is actually the far side of the chasm, and stretches away from us, so it only looks narrow. It is much broader than it looks, stretching away for many leagues until the fissure closes. It is very dark on the far end of the lake. There are boats you can rent, so if you like, we can spend a few hours exploring the lake after we sleep.'

'That's weird,' I said.

'I suppose that it may seem strange if you're not used to Windvera's ways. I know that the small islands do not hold you down at all.'

'And on the fatter, big islands, down is always in the same direction,' I added.

'How boring!' he laughed. 'Here the direction you fall off a cliff tells you where you are! Look across the way. Do you see how the bridge supports are set on the cliff itself? On that side of the chasm, the bridge is more of a tower than a bridge. Those supports bear much of the weight of the bridge.'

As I mentioned, I'm not an expert on non-spherical gravity. Perhaps if I was a drifter prospector, I'd know more about it. But I guess it made sense that the opposite chasm wall, at a right angle to the island's center of gravity would be the local down. If Windvera's gravity was more significant than it is, we'd likely feel that we were traveling downhill the whole way to Marsh Waters.

Slight gravity or not, I was glad CarVori elected to wait out the caravan, as the bridge itself proved to be a very spidery affair, little more than a massive iron chain overlaid with planking and secured by cables from every angle to keep it relatively steady in the light gravity and winds. I still could feel it swaying slightly as we crossed in solo.

## 06

We turned off Long Street into the courtyard of a rambling stone inn shortly after crossing the Opaphar. The main building of Pine Spirit Tey House was a stone fortress of three stories. The upper two stories were divided into various sized rooms for travelers – bare rooms with low platform beds or bunks, dimly lit by narrow slits in the thick stone walls. The ground floor was the common room for eating and drinking. The kitchen was in back, along with a walled garden with tables for dining or sipping the tey the Pine Spirit Tey House was famous for. On one side of the inn was a long shed for carriages and on the other side, a stable for the lopemounts of mounted travelers.

CarVori led us through the dim dining room, calling out friendly greetings to several customers and the staff. CarVori was, no doubt, a familiar figure at the Pine Spirit, but the two Simla dragons, walking along with him and exchanging low barks of anticipation as the scent of the kitchen wafted through the common room from the kitchen – were not. We attracted the collective gaze of the assembled travelers as we made our way to the tey garden. It was large and shaded by several massive pines that grew within the walls – their trunks nearly two meters thick and their wide spreading branches allowing only twinkling sparks of light to dance in the green twilight of the tey garden.

'You'll like this inn – Wilitang, the Pine Spirit is famous for its selection of teys. Strange as it may seem, here in the middle of the Opaphar Hills, the Pine Spirit is one of the most famous tey gardens of all of Taravin, if not all of Windvera. Its proprietor, NeDarza is famous for her discerning taste in tey. And better yet, not only is her food as good as her teys, but it will not cost you half of what it would in the cities,' said CarVori adding, with a sweep of his hand to the well filled tey garden, 'The Pine Spirit is, as you can see, a favorite with knowledgeable travelers.'

We had just settled around a long table when a portly figure rose from a shady corner and

approached us. His broad head feathers were untamed and he was dressed in an eclectic collection of vests, satchels and bandannas, all travel worn, but his trousers and shirt seemed to have been, once, long ago, the blues, more or less, of the Laezan Order. He wore no sash to indicate his rank – if any. Yet despite his rather wild and colorful appearance, he carried himself with a certain, well, dignity might be slightly too strong of a word, as would be authority, but shall we say, easy confidence, along with a cheerful expression. We rose and greeted him as a Laezan, cupping our hands and bowing, as he did as well.

'Greetings, my brother and sister, my old friend CarVori, and my new friends, whose names, I confess, I've yet to discover,' he said, beaming on us.

'Greetings, Tey Pot,' said CarVori, and then to us. 'Tey Pot Wanderer is his formal name, but he is known mostly as Tey Pot, or Tey Pot Pest. He claims to be a distant member of the Order, but many of the Laezans I have transported are reluctant to claim him as a brother. His claim to fame, however, is that he is an expert in tey – its production, preparation, and appreciation of it.'

'You mustn't forget, my friend, my fame in verse, poetry, stories, and the playing of the reed. And I might add, humbly, that it is only the stuck-up toffs of the Order who turn a blind eye to me. The ones who will not talk to you either.'

CarVori smiled, and nodded. 'That, at least, is true. We have that much in common. And I'll admit that he can play the reed very sweetly, when he cares to – well worth the meal and the cup of tey he hopes to pry from your coin purse. I would not recommend his verses and poetry, as they are an acquired taste, and his tales are not fit for polite company.'

Tey Pot laughed. 'I will not dispute my friend's claims, though I will say that my verse and poetry, once the taste is acquired, are as pure and true as the steam of the finest tey. So tell me, CarVori, who do I have the honor of meeting? Fine-feathered travelers, one of whom is of the Order, are as rare as Simla dragon travelers. And here you are with both in your carriage, How did you arrange for that?'

'By luck, seniority and decisive action. All of my friends are, indeed, from some distant islands beyond the great sky. I am adding much to my storeroom of knowledge! The greatest of Laezan scholars will want to travel with me just to learn what I have learned from my new friends,' he replied, and he proceeded to introduce us, adding. 'Wilitang is, like you, a connoisseur of tey. He has traveled widely and traded in tey. I've told him that he is in for a rare treat stopping here. And I suppose, beggar that you are, a rare treat in meeting you here as well.'

'Excellent! We must compare our experiences with tey. I am also fortunate to have met you here, since Mistress NeDarza never errs in her selections of tey. She stocks the rarest and the finest to be found anywhere. May I suggest, seeing that you have just arrived, and have yet to eat, we sample a simply marvelous red tey – the finest Taejinn Golden Treasure? You'll be able to fully appreciate its deep bouquet of scents and rich complexity of flavor. I know that NeDarza has on her shelve the very finest sample of this wonderful tey, which is arguably, the second finest red tey in all of Windvera. It is, of course, a wee bit pricey, but well worth its price, since it is indeed a golden treasure. And I assure you, the spring waters of the Pine Spirit will bring out its best qualities. However, if you would prefer a nice round green, she has fine examples of Pinza Garden as well. It is your choice, of course, but I think a green after the meal would be better, a light, sweet desert. Ah, here comes NeDarza now. Shall we go with the Golden Treasure Taejinn?'

CarVori glanced at me.

I nodded. 'If I can afford it. In my former life as a sailor, I traded, on my own account, small shipments of the finest tey, and so I've sampled some of the finest of my home islands. I am curious to sample the best of this island.'

NeDarza, the proprietor, a tall, thin, and rather grim looking woman, had arrived at our table.

'Ah, Darza, my dear. Bring out your finest Taejinn, the Golden Treasure – a large pot for my friends, water, and a fire so that I might brew it properly while calling their attention to the fine details of your magnificent leaf.'

She said nothing. Nor did she move.

'Darza?' inquired Tey Pot politely.

'I heard you, Tey Pot. Your words went in one ear and out the other. CarVori, will you, or should I, explain to your passengers the nature of this Tey Pot fellow?'

'I have already explained to them that he is a famous authority of tey. Can you deny that?'

She shrugged, but didn't.

'As well as a highly regarded poet – in some circles – a story-teller and a master of the reed. If I must say so myself,' added Tey Pot.'

She scowled at him. 'It is well and good to refrain from speaking ill of a friend, but if you won't tell them, I will. Tey Pot travels without a coin to his name. He begs his meals and his precious cups of tey from travelers such as yourself, who find him, his poetry, or his music worth the cost of his meals and tey.'

'I did mention that,' said CarVori.

'As you can see, I rarely go hungry,' replied Tey Pot with a quiet smile. 'And that is because my words and music are valued by my many friends of the road. I have spent many tens of thousands of rounds acquiring my skills – as humble as they are. If I now choose to wander, rather than spend my rounds, like my dear Darza here, under one roof, doing the same thing, round after round, who can blame me? And I pay for every meal, every cup of tey, with words and music, which are well worth even a cup of Taejinn Golden Treasure. Some day, when your feathers are white and thin, you'll be able to tell your great grandchildren that you shared a pot of Taejinn Golden Treasure with Tey Pot Wander, and they will exclaim, "Surely, not the legendary Tey Pot Wander?" And you will nod and say, "Yes, the Legend himself." And trust me, you will not miss the coins it took to say that.'

'And that price is two silver coins for a large pot of Taejinn Golden Treasure,' NeDarza said tartly.

It was likely twice the price for our meal of ten or eleven, if I included Tey Pot, which, of course, I must. I sighed, more for form than anything else. I would not like to be mistaken for a man of wealth. Still... 'It is indeed, a bit pricey, but I am curious to taste the finest sample of the second best red tey in all of Windvera. Bring us the Golden Treasure and a pot for Tey Pot to brew it in. Trin will gather our meal order and arrange for our stay,' I added, nodding to Trin, who had taken on the role of our business manager and routinely took care of such matters.

Tey Pot clapped his hands. 'Excellent. I am sure you will find Darza's sample to be as wonderful as I claim. There are not many teys more highly regarded, though of course one can argue endlessly as to the exact order. Mistress, the pot, kettle and fire.'

I will spare you the complete description of Tey Pot's performance of brewing a pot of tey. He was certainly no fraud, and though he waxed very poetic, and called our attention to every detail of the brewing, from the size of the bubbles of the boiling water to savoring the aroma of the brewed cup and finding in it many traces of exotic places, he made brewing tey seem like a magical experience. As for the Gold Treasure, it was indeed, as excellent as advertised. As good, if not better than the finest Cha I traded in my Guild trading days which allowed me to sample (small) packets of the very finest Cha to be had in the Nine Star Nebula. Of course, many of those samples had traveled for years, one spaceer to another via the Guild exchanges, so they were likely somewhat past peak flavor even in their sealed packets. In any event, I would have gladly traveled on with a large packet of Golden Treasure. But I was not that rich. I settled for a taejinn of slightly lesser quality, but considerably lesser price.

'It was nice of you to invite Tey Pot to travel along with us. He'll no doubt be a very amusing addition to our party,' said Naylea, as we stood in the pine-scented shade of the inn's forecourt watching

CarVori and his crew load several large picnic lunches from the Pine Spirit's kitchen selected by CarVori and teys selected by Tey Pot Wanderer into the cargo compartment of the carriage. I was pretty certain she was being sarcastic, just as I was pretty certain I hadn't actually invited Tey Pot to join our party.

'I don't recall doing so.'

'It sure looks like it to me. And if you didn't, who did? Aren't you the captain of this expedition?'

'I seem to be more the patron than the captain – at least until my gold coins run out. Which, given Tey Pot's taste in teys, will be sooner rather than later if he's to travel with us for very long.'

'He talks of traveling with us all the way to Marsh Waters. So, if you haven't invited him, you might want to mention that to him before he climbs on board. Oops... Too late,' she laughed. 'Still, it was sweet of you to let Tey Pot travel with us. I know CarVori is looking forward to it. One would almost think we were boring him already.'

'I doubt it. I've never known anyone with a greater thirst, and a greater capacity for knowledge than our carriage captain CarVori. You know, thinking back, It was probably CarVori who invited him along. The first thing he said to me when he met me at breakfast was; "Wouldn't it be a great honor if Tey Pot traveled with us." To which, I absently agreed. Which, I suppose, depending on how you look at it, was my okay. Oh, well, Py seems to have found a kindred spirit in Tey Pot, though I'm not sure what it will be like having two Pys aboard.'

'Amusing? Entertaining?'

'Yes, that. But I can't help wondering what sort of trouble they'll get us into...'

She laughed, 'How so?'

'Oh, I don't know. I can't help but wonder if our Tey Pot Wanderer is, well, sort of the type of weirdness that you claim I attract. Not that I fear him, of course, or can pinpoint what sort of disaster he could attract, but... I have a feeling. Maybe that's just concern for Py. I could see Py becoming a coinless wanderer if in Tey Pot's company for too long.'

'Natta might have something to say about that... Still, it's not that we have a choice now, as if we ever do when you attract weirdness.'

'Well, he is a treasure trove of information about growing and processing tey on Windvera, which should apply to all of the Pela islands. I'm recording everything he says on my com-link so that – if we survive Tey Pot's company – he'll be worth his cost in tey when I set up shop in the tey business.'

She shook her head. 'Ha! That's just idle talk. You've had thousands of rounds to do just that, and here you are.'

I couldn't argue that, so I just added, 'Well, come what may, he'll be a very amusing fellow to have along for a while, though his poetry may be an acquired taste and his stories, a little ribald, his reed playing is indeed wonderful. It's strange how it affects the dragons. I've never seen them act like that.'

'Who knew that Simla dragons could be charmed by reed music?'

They seemed to be somehow enchanted by Tey Pot's reed tunes, swaying and humming, or growling very low in time with the music, acting, in effect, as a bass accompaniment.

'They are very strange dragons,' I muttered. 'Oh, well, hopefully my coins see us through to Marsh Waters. But why worry about that. I'm sure you and Py have gold coins sewn into the hems of your clothes or slipped into the soles of your sandals.'

'Now why would you think that? Laezans are not known for wealth. Tey Pot is more the rule and the exception.'

'Because you're advocates who must live in the outside world, often undercover. Besides, you had the treasure cave of the SaraDal's Prime Prince to draw on. I rather doubt you'd refrain from requisitioning a few of his gold coins to keep you in char-buns and lizard-on-a-stick during the Assembly.'

'As advocates we are expected to rely on our resourcefulness. I've not lost my old talents', she replied with a sly smile. 'Still, I'm sure Natta has her belts and sandals lined with gold coins. She is not

one to leave things to chance, or to Captain Litang, which amounts to the same thing, in her eyes.'

'I certainly hope so. We still have six stages to go – twenty rounds perhaps.' (Not that we counted those anymore – there were no rounds – only meal stops and stage breaks.) 'And if decisions continue to be made as they have been here at the Pine Spirit, someone's going to have to supply the gold, or we'll all be forced to perform for our meals and lodging.' And turning to her I added, 'I bet you sing very sweetly.'

'You've never heard me sing. You'd lose that bet.'

'I have heard you chant, and you do it sweetly. I'm sure you can sing as sweetly as well. Tey Pot can teach you the lyrics to his tunes, the dragons can accompany you on bass. With Py providing the percussion. Trin, well Trin does not strike me as being very artistic, but then, who knows? Even though she's been revealing far more about herself than I would have expected.'

'That's for Py's sake, not ours.'

'Perhaps. I'm not as sure about Py as you are. He is not shy, and yet I see nothing beyond friendliness.'

'Brother Py is a bashful boy at heart, and a Laezan in blue. There is little he can do – at least amongst all of us – to show his interest with propriety. So you can discount his lack of overt interest. And Natta is as cerebral and reserved as they come, so you might be forgiven in missing her wishful gazes – they are brief and covert. But they are exchanged. She is along with us as much for Py as for the Saraime.'

'I must take your word for that, Naylea. I seem to catch very few wishful gazes from you, so I must be blind to such glances.'

'You see none, because there are none.'

'Truth is the True Way, Naylea. There are some. A few, but some. In any event, I think Trin will continue on as our business manager when we are forced to become a troupe of performers to pay our way to Marsh Waters.'

'And you?'

'I shall be the master of ceremonies. "Come one, come all! Hear the masterful reed playing of the legendary Tey Pot Wanderer and the ethereal singing of the fine-feathered barbarian maiden, Naylea!"'

'Maiden?'

'This is show business, my dear.'

'Truth is the True Way, Litang,' she laughed. 'Hopefully it won't come to that – if you remember how to be Captain Litang and take charge of this expedition.'

'I don't think that would help. Chief Engineer Wilitang might be better at it.'

'And if not?'

'Then I may be able to hear how sweetly you sing.'

She gave me the briefest smile and look – not wishful, perhaps, but it went straight to my heart.

And so, the legendary Tey Pot Wanderer joined our party, and between his banter, his passion for tey, his stories, poems, and perhaps, above all, his reed playing, he was worth every coin he cost me. And more. And, as predicted, he did make it interesting.

We made our fourth stage stop on the broad, fertile plains of Risdaran, the "western" most province of Taravin within the vague shadow of the towering city-fortress of Risdaran itself. Afterward, we continued on across the vast plains of Windvera – the same farm fields and small wooded copses stretching out to the low horizon in every direction. The same distant fallen rocks, and the same drifting rain clouds. Still, in the bounding cabin of the carriage, it was always different. Talk, song, and reed playing made the time fly for us until we put the straight road behind us and started climbing into the fissure folds of the Taravin plate, towards the great chasm of Kanderee.

We were deep in the shadows of the pines and climbing the steep hills in a thick mist. The canvas canopy was closely drawn down around us, so it was nearly night-dark inside. Everyone was either sleeping, or trying to. Naylea, sitting next to me, seemed to be asleep, since she idly rocked back and forth with every slow leap of the carriage. Each lurch sent her shoulder against mine, and then away again. I glanced around to see that everyone at least had their eyes closed – not that it would really matter, but it was the game we were playing. Seeing that they did, I took the opportunity, when she was leaning away, to quickly get my arm free, and when she tipped back against my shoulder, I put it around her, and drew her close, resting my cheek on her fine-feathered head.

She didn't awaken, so I held her close.

The game we were playing was actually working out well. We were able to spend a great deal of time together, to learn, or relearn, each others' little ways, without having to resolve anything. Of course we had spent a great deal of time together (almost) alone, when we first arrived in the Pela. But that was different. Not only because she was determined to kill me back then, but because we had this strange attraction for each other that became love.

This was different. Both of us had more or less gotten over that love, so at first, there was only an echo of the passion we'd known. And perhaps an embarrassment that it had faded. The fact that our present circumstances kept us at arm's length – as friends and companions in adversity, allowed us time, without pressure, to stir those ashy embers to see if there remained a glowing ember of that love within its depths. I had found mine, though I tried not to let it flare too soon. Holding her close in the stuffy gloom of the carriage was dangerous to my intent, but company should keep the fire dampened, for now. Still it felt right. Only when CarVori called out from the far side of the canvas that we were approaching the inns of Kanderee Narrows did I slip my hand from her shoulder, before my traveling companions stirred to life.

In the gloom, she opened her eyes and gave me a little smile, that gave me hope she may not have been, after all, sleeping.

## Chapter 42 The Shadow-Landers

A shouted command and a sudden, skidding stop tipped me against Naylea's feet and startled me awake. I'd been resting my eyes after breakfast at a tey house in Kanderee Narrows where we had stopped for a long rest. Muffled curses from all. I straightened up and looked around. We were in the fissure hills on the Dajara Empire side of the Kanderee Chasm. The mist had lifted by the time we set out after our long layover, so the canvas canopy was rolled up. Long Street was now just a narrow lane through the green shadows of the fragrant pines – close at hand alongside the carriage.

'Friends of yours, Tey Pot,' said CarVori quietly from his platform.

Ahead, three men were standing in a line across the road, casually, hands in pockets, grinning, which I hoped was a good sign. They were dressed in leather, from their boots to their close-fitting hats. They were, however, sporting short swords at their sides, and a cross-bow slung on their backs – so despite their easy smiles, they weren't harmless. From the variety of their clothing, they didn't look to be soldiers, which left one likely possibility. I slipped my hand into my jacket pocket, and then, into the inner one where I kept my sissy, while I peered into the forest before me. I doubted that we were seeing

all of them.

A figure stepped out from behind a tree trunk to deliberately show himself – with his cross-bow in hand. There looked to be four or five more, standing, half hidden behind the massive boles of the great pines behind him.

'Half a dozen on my side,' I whispered to Naylea across from me.

'Same here,' she replied looking past my shoulder.

Tey Pot stared at them from his seat at the rear of the carriage, and cursed under his breath in a very non-Laezan manner. 'Kandivarians. Barbarians up from the Shadow Lands. Let me handle this, I know them,' he growled. 'They're usually pretty reasonable.'

Then, gathering himself, he threw open the carriage door and jumped to the ground.

Tey Pot's three “friends” all gave him a quick, sketchy, and very ironic greeting, which Tey Pot didn't bother to return.

'Krac, Zori, Dinte – if I'd been awake I'd have told CarVori just to run the riffraff over. Don't you have anything better to do than stand about in the road grinning?'

The fellow, who turned out to be Krac, grinned wider. 'Not at the moment.'

'Then get out of the road and let us pass. Since when do you stoop to stopping Laezans?'

Krac shrugged mock-apologetically and sadly shook his head no. 'We're here to invite you and your friends to our camp.'

'Sorry, not this trip.'

Kroc shrugged, and pointed to the woods around us. 'I think you will.'

Tey Pot glared at him and then looked around. Not seeing who he was looking for, he took a deep, theatrical breath, and bellowed, 'I can smell that sweet scented water you douse yourself with from here, PisDore! Come out and show yourself! Since when are you so shy? Couldn't be you're frightened of a few Laezans these days?'

There was a rustling in the pine boughs above and behind us. PisDore, along with two others, emerged from the pine limbs arching over the road. PisDore stepped off and lightly dropped to the road. He proved to be something of a character. Like the others, he was dressed in an eclectic collection of leather vests, but with several belts, two bright bandannas around his neck and a scarf tying up his ruddy feathers – all arranged in an almost studied, haphazard manner. As he reached the ground, a breath of breeze brought us the scent of the cologne he doused himself with.

'I blame you for this, Litang,' whispered Naylea.

I shook my head “no” and nodded to Py. 'This is Py's doing. He's the one who conjures up bandits.'

Py grinned, shrugged, and whispered, 'Only when I travel with Wilitang.'

'Should we be doing something?' whispered the ever-practical Trin.

'We'll let Tey Pot handle this for now. But if the rockets go up, just duck,' I replied softly. 'Naylea and I can deal with them.'

Trin gave me a doubtful look, but said nothing.

'My, that was a fine, theatrical entry, my friend,' exclaimed Tey Pot, who had turned, and stood, hands on hips, waiting for him to land. 'What's the meaning of this performance. Am I so missed in Kandivar that you are forced to waylay me and my friends?'

PisDore, on landing, greeted Tey Pot with a low bow and cupped hands with something between reverence and irony, which Tey Pot returned in kind.

'You are always missed in Kandivar, Teacher. Your reed playing is, anyway. But we must endure what we must endure. This time, however, the Chief has need of your services, so we've been sent to collect you – and your travel companions – and bring you to him at our mountain camp.'

'Why?'

'The Chief will tell you when you see him.'

'I'll go nowhere without an explanation. And we'll keep my companions out of this.'

'I'm sorry, but...'

'PisDore, you'll save yourself a lot of trouble, if you do as I say. You don't like trouble, do you? Remember who you're dealing with. Now, what does your master want with me?'

I don't suppose you can wander the length of Long Street for tens of thousands of rounds with nothing but a reed to play, and stories to tell without having the inner steel that Tey Pot was now displaying.

PisDore looked around at this men and then stepped closer. 'Be reasonable, Teacher. The Chief will tell you all. Our camp is not far, you'll know soon enough,' he said in a low voice.

'I'll know now.'

PisDore, shrugged. 'The Chief needs you to act as an envoy in a matter of some importance.'

'How important?'

'Two thousand gold coins important.'

Tey Pot laughed. 'Two thousand gold coins, you say! I think he's gotten a bit out of his league. Two gold coins is more his style. No wonder he needs my help.'

PisDore rolled his eyes. 'It's a matter of honor. His bride-to-be's honor.'

'His bride-to-be! Oh – ho! You mean to say that the young chief has kidnapped some unfortunate wench and now wants me to collect his 2,000 gold coins in ransom. What was he thinking? What is he thinking now? Who could pay that much?'

'Who could?' replied PisDore, with a sly grin.

Tey Pot starred at him. 'Some merchant... No, he couldn't expect 2,000 gold coins from any merchant. Why only... You don't mean to tell me he up and kidnapped MossRose?'

PisDore smiled. 'So it seems. He claims he didn't know who she was. It came as a surprise that he'd snatched up the Province Governor's only daughter.'

'Ah-ha! And knowing DrisDae, he's not willing to pay the ransom.'

'It's not a ransom, it's her dowry. She claims those coins are hers by right and custom, not his.'

'Ha!' chuckled Tey Pot again. 'Separating 2,000 gold coins from DrisDae under any pretense is an impossible feat. There is not a man in all of Windvera more in love with gold than Governor DrisDae.'

'So it would seem. Which is why we're collecting you and your companions.'

'I don't see how I can be any use to MossRose or TreyMor in this matter. I've known DrisDae, man and boy, and he'll not pay.'

'MossRose claims otherwise. She says that you are her only hope of being married with honor.'

'She actually wants to marry the young TreyMor?'

PisDore rolled his eyes, and let his tongue hang out, 'They're in love.'

Tey Pot sighed, a few curses.

'Yes,' agreed PisDore, with a sigh of his own. 'Now, if you and your companions will dismount and follow me, we'll take you to camp. There you hear for yourself how matters stand.'

Tey Pot turned back to us and sighed. 'I've spent time with these Kandivarians. They can be trusted to keep their word – up to a point. I will go. You can decide if you care to or not.' And in a louder voice, added, 'If you choose not to, you'd probably have to kill only a couple of them before the rest run.'

PisDore, behind him, grinned, and shrugged apologetically.

'We can deal with them,' I said. 'But you'll be in the cross-fire...'

'Oh, I can deal with them myself, if I cared to,' he replied still in a loud voice. 'Once they were feared barbarians from the shadows. Now they're mostly Rider Dragon herders, and, when let off the leash, petty bandits. Why PisDore here is one of my triumphs. He's supposed to be a follower of the Way.'

PisDore nodded, 'I am, Teacher. But the Way is narrow,' and holding out his arm and waving his hand, continued, 'Sometimes I fall off – a little. Herding Rider dragons can grow wearisome. But in this case, Teacher, I am merely following orders. And those orders are to collect you and your companions. I trust that you will see that here and now is not the time to be stubborn. The Chief has instructed me to assure all of you that his intentions are honorable. Really, it is MossRose who begs Tey Pot Wanderer's



help in this matter of honor, and that the reason the rest of you are invited to accompany him is to assure his safety. For her sake, the Chief will not take “no” for an answer.'

'It may be my duty to go...'

There was a whirl of movement, a flash of metal.

'But I think my companions can make up their own minds...' Tey Pot added with a nod to us, as he held PisDore's left arm pinned to his back shoulder and had PisDore's own knife at his throat.

PisDore winced a bit and grinned. 'Not so tight, Teacher. And careful with my knife. You wouldn't want to cut the throat of the only Laezan in all of Kandivar.'

'That would, indeed, be a shame. However, we will let my companions decide for themselves. Be sure to instruct your men not to put bolt holes in you in the crossfire should they decide to continue on their way.'

PisDore glanced back at us. 'You see now why I follow the Way. Still, if I were you, I would accept the offer. It will avoid much trouble, and I, as a follower of the Way, truly see no harm to you if you chose to accompany my Teacher to our camp. You will be treated as guests, not prisoners. And your presence may indeed keep my Teacher safe in his mission.'

I looked to my companions. Py, of course, ever the boy, looked eager – bandits! Naylea looked amused and Trin, well, she glanced at Py and seeing his eager face, nodded. And I, sissy in hand, was confident that we could deal with any contingency, so what the Neb. 'Hissi, Siss?' I asked them for form's sake. They seemed to have been still asleep.

They yawned and stood up and stared around – sending the three who'd been blocking the road a step or two back. They growled no objection, so it was unanimous.

'I guess we'll go. Let us gather our kits...'

'I'm afraid we haven't room on our dragons for your gear. CarVori will look after them until you rejoin him in Zandival,' said PisDore with a shrug as Tey Pot released him. 'Our camp is quite comfortable – a home away from home. You'll be well looked after. MossRose will see to that.'

Having committed ourselves, there was no point making a fuss over our gear. Py and Naylea collected their iron-vine staffs while I gave CarVori some coins to pay for his wait in Zandival.

'We stay at the Joy Spring Tey House on Round Hill Street,' he said quietly to me. And with a sigh and rather wistful nod, ordered his pedal-men into action.

## 02

We were led up through the dark pines to a large clearing at the foot of a cliff. Grazing in the clearing were a herd of Rider dragons which proved to be a strange cross between cattle, bats, and dragons. Feathered, like all the native animals, their long forelimbs, that they use as wings, were bent nearly in half, bat-like as they grazed on the tall, yellow grass like cattle. Standing as tall as a man at their shoulders, they had broad, vaguely cattle-like heads with a body that was over a meter broad across their shoulders, but tapered to their rear quarters. In flight, they used hind legs as a tail for steering. Their feathers were a mix of white, duns and browns. I was happy to see them grazing contently on the grass – though I suppose they could be omnivores. I didn't ask. The saddles were strapped across their shoulders – a leather roll or pillow, strapped on lengthwise, which allowed the rider to crouch or kneel on the shoulders of the dragon while in flight. The beasts were steered by reigns strapped around their heads.

Two Kandivarians were standing watch over the herd when we arrived. PisDore divided us up amongst his men and their mounts – the saddles being long enough to hold two riders.

I drew Krac as a pilot. He led me to his beast and stepping alongside of his dragon, gave it a friendly pat on its head and leaped up to the saddle. 'Behind me,' he said, offering a hand.

I edged cautiously nearer, watched by the big brown eye of the Rider Dragon and, with his help,

managed to climb aboard and settle onto the saddle behind him.

'That strap goes across, over your legs,' he said, glancing back and pointing. 'You might want to make it tight, unless you can fly. The other one you wrap around your waist. Make sure you're tightly strapped to the saddle. Abbis here, doesn't take her riders into consideration when she's airborne.'

I tightened them as directed. 'You can hold on to those straps across the saddle and don't try to fight Abbis. Just go where she goes. The straps should keep you from falling off.'

With a thump, Hissi landed behind me, her jaws resting on my shoulder. Krac gave her a startled look, but decided it was better to say nothing more than, 'Your dragon better hold on tight.'

As Hissi wrapped her her forearms around my chest, I said, 'Careful with those claws,'.

She gave a low dismissive hiss next to my ear.

I looked up to see that some of the others riders had their dragons airborne and were circling overhead. Seeing that we were set, Kroc, pulling Abbis' head around to face the open meadow slapped her neck, and said, conversationally, 'To the sky, Abbis.'

She took two long bounds and then reared, extending her fore limbs with their attached feathered membranes, gave a single downward beat and we were airborne. And heading directly for the tall pines. Abbis banked so sharply that looking over my left shoulder, the ground was directly below. Hissi hissed and held on tighter, digging her claws in to my (thankfully) armored jacket, as we swung around the clearing, twice, just avoiding the pines while we gained enough altitude to clear them.

We joined the circling band of dragons and riders, waited for the last of the riders to get their beasts aloft, and then started beating our way up, into the pale sky. The great Kanderee Chasm, which we had crossed a few hours before, came into view as a long, dark gash in the pine-clothed fissure hills. Kanderee Narrows, the collection of inns where Long Street crossed the chasm was visible amongst the pines. Its nearly half a kilometer long iron suspension bridge across the chasm was a black web of thick cables in all directions. Since the Kanderee Chasm was, here at least, open to the far side of the island – a hundred kilometers down – it often experienced powerful gales blowing up, down, and through the great chasm, and so the bridge had to be secured in every direction. And even so, it was cross-able only in calm weather, hence the large collection of inns on either side.

The great chasm formed the border between the Kingdom of Taravin and the Dajara Empire. Long Street, however, was a minor road in these parts, as the main trade route crossed the chasm many leagues further “south.”

To my surprise we continued to rise higher into the air. I had expected that we'd plunge into the chasm on our way to Kandivar. Instead, we circled up towards the sharp line of the tallest peaks to the north. It proved to be only a fifteen minute ride to a ledge before a collection of caves at the foot of the highest peak.

One by one the dragons carrying passengers briefly landed to let us off, and then sailed further down the steep slope to a large pasture above the tree line.

A trim young woman in leather hurried out to greet and hug “Uncle” Tey as he alighted.

'The Way is indeed marvelous! As soon as I learned that you were passing through the Narrows, I knew that the Way had led you here for me!' she exclaimed, stepping back while still holding his hands.

'It is good to see you in such fine spirits, my dear,' said Tey Pot. 'And though I rather doubt the Way actually lead me here for you, I am glad to be of service to you.'

'But of course the Way led you here. That is how you said it works. And I – I acted the moment I heard the news – wu wei – to bring you here. So, you see, it works just as you have so often told me it does!'

Tey Pot, caught in his own web, could only shrug and grin. 'Then I am glad you follow it. Allow me to introduce my good friends... Ah, so here's young Trey.'

A tall, young man – who reminded me of a young Admiral DarQue or the Clan-chief DeKan – followed her out. He greeted us with a non-sarcastic bow. 'Welcome. I am glad you agreed to help us,' he said.

'TreyMor, the Chief of the Kandivar,' said Tey Pot, with a wave of his hand. 'And this wee minnow of a girl is MossRose, the daughter of DrisDae, the Governor of Zandival Province.' And then turning back to TreyMor, added, 'So you've now grown old enough and bold enough to kidnap the daughter of the Province Governor?'

'I claim only to be bold enough to make the acquaintance of the most beautiful girl in all of Windvera,' he said with an easy smile. 'It was truly love at first sight, Teacher. I had no idea who she was – I took her to be a daughter of some wealthy merchant who was out for a ride in the valley. I had brought Mother to visit Grandmother and Grandfather when I saw her ride by. I could not forget the sight of her, so I slipped out to see if I could find her again...'

'To kidnap her.'

'To make her acquaintance.'

'He was a gentleman,' laughed MossRose. 'He only carried me off a dozen rounds later, and I was only following my heart when I went with him.'

Tey Pot nodded. 'I believe you, my dear. You are not a girl to be the victim.'

'Had I known who she was, I would certainly have hesitated... A second more,' he added with a laugh and a loving look at his bright-eyed bride-to-be. 'I am eager to make her presence here proper. She assures me that you alone can make it so.'

'And every second is painful to us,' added MossRose, who had run to Trey to give him a quick kiss. 'You must convince father to release my dowry. Only you can do it, which is why the Way has led you here, don't you see?'

'I've been unable to convince your father of anything in the last 50,000 rounds. Even in our youth, it was a rare occurrence. Having grown old, we see life through very different eyes.'

'But you will rise to the occasion, since my happiness is at stake. He will listen to no one but you. We've sent messages time and again to beg, and then demand, the release of my dowry. He sent word back that he will not pay a bandit a copper coin of ransom, even for his daughter, and now ignores our demands. Oh, I know full well he loves a single gold coin more than me. But, you see, it is my coins he holds. My dowry!' she added fiercely. 'It is my honor at stake. They go to the husband I choose. He cannot deny me my dowry.'

'But he does.'

'But he does. Shame on him. So you must make him see that it is his honor as well as mine at stake.'

'I fear that he won't listen to me either,' said Tey Pot, shaking his head.

'He will. You are his oldest and dearest friend. His only friend!'

'Once, in our distant youth. But our ways have long since parted.'

MossRose would have none of that. 'I know that he values you and your friendship, even if he rarely shows it. If anyone else went to him on this matter, he'd have them thrown into the bowels of the fortress, and never give another thought to them. But he will listen to you, and I'm sure, with your great store of wisdom, you'll find a way to convince him to release my dowry.'

'Is the gold so important, my dear?'

'I am not like my father! I want the gold because it is my husband's by right and custom. And with it, I shall be rightfully and lawfully married. I shall not cheat him of his gold, nor me of my honor.'

'I don't want or need it,' said TreyMor. 'You are gold enough, my dear.'

She shook her head and turned to Tey Pot with more than a bit of steel in her eyes. 'On this we disagree. I shall have my dowry. I am my father's daughter in some ways. I am stubborn and vain. But I have not his love for coins. And if he cares for the gold more than me, he will suffer for it by its loss.'

And turning to us, she added, 'I am sorry to have to bring you here and delay your journey, but I do it for Tey Pot's sake. Father may not throw him into the bowels of the fortress and forget him, but I fear he might confine him and use him as a hostage to bring me home.'

'But father has a weakness. A chink in his armor. You see, he sees the money he extorts from the merchants, and the taxes he collects as one in the same, which is to say, his personal fortune. His

accounting is very creative, but as long as he sends the Emperor his share of the taxes and keeps his province peaceful and prosperous, the Court of Dajara pays him no heed. But if there is trouble... And you can make trouble for him by carrying word of any ill treatment of Tey Pot to the Laezan Community of Dragonfly Lake in Zandival. They value Tey Pot and would certainly appeal to the Court of Dajara which would bring court officials here to Zandival, which is the last thing my father wants. It would be his ruin. So you see, I need to have you here as a threat to keep Tey Pot safe. I do not wish to ruin my father – I shall do all I can to avoid that. But if I must...' And there was another glint of steel in her eyes.

03

The dim clang of the gong reached faintly, announcing the meal. I hopped off the rock I'd been sitting on and called out to Siss who was somewhere in the trees below hunting. 'A meal, if you're still hungry.'

It appears she was, since she came bounding out of the underbrush fast enough.

'I suppose hunting's a bit more challenging when you can't just swim about.'

She barked a brief agreement and bounded up the steep slope for the caves above of us. Judging by her eagerness, probably a lot more challenging.

I started up towards the caves. Tey Pot had left for Zandival within a few hours of our arrival in camp, which was now some three rounds ago. TreyMor and MossRose were gracious hosts. We had been treated well, but unobtrusively watched as well, prisoners in all but name.

'Don't be fooled by MossRose's sweetness. It is authentic enough, but there's much more to her.' said Tey Pot quietly to me, as we stood on the ledge waiting for the dragon and rider to arrive that would carry him to the outskirts of Zandival. 'She is her father's daughter in many ways. She is ambitious, and can call on her father's ruthlessness when needed. The same goes for young TreyMor. I knew his father, and have watched him grow up. He's honorable and can be trusted, but only up to a point.'

He leaned closer. 'If things go awry, as I fear they will, you don't want to be carried down the chasm to Kandivar. You cannot walk back from there – the chasm is too bare and winds too treacherous. They don't know how accomplished you are in the martial arts. Keep it that way. Surprise will be your only advantage.'

I nodded, and saw him off. I passed the word to Py, Naylea, and Trin to skip our before-breakfast forms while here.

I reached the edge of the ledge and turned about. To the east I could see the lip of the chasm stretching north and south until lost in the haze. The forested hills beyond rose to the pale sky. To the west, the half a dozen hill lines fell slowly to the vast plain of Zandival, a quilt-work of fields, paddies, and woods that faded to blue in the distance. The provincial capital city was a smoky dun-colored smudge on the edge of the blue. I turned back and entered the cave, noting that a Rider dragon was tied up close to its mouth, which had likely brought news from Zandival.

04

I looked about the large, noisy common room of the cave as the Kandivarians filled their plates and found their tables with their mates. Neither MossRose nor TreyMor were to be seen. Hissi and her card-playing pals had their filled plates before them at one of the low tables – having reluctantly set aside their cards and coin purses to eat. I collected my food and joined my companions.

'Any word of Tey Pot?' I asked.

'A messenger, I believe, but we haven't heard what news she brings,' replied Py.

'Certain advocate skills might be called for, brother, if Teacher Tey Pot has failed,' said Naylea thoughtfully, with a glance to Py.

Py paused with a fini lizard leg half raised. He thought for a moment, and then smiled broadly, 'I believe you may be right, sister.'

Trin and I shared a glance. We were both a bit less enthusiastic about that prospect.

The meal drew to its conclusion without MossRose and TreyMor making an appearance. The Kandivarians drifted out, and down to saddle their dragons, as they had after every mid-round meal since we arrived.

'Off to rob some travelers? Or is it brides you're kidnapping this round?' I asked the colorfully dressed and fragrant PisDore as he came out of his quarters on his way to his dragon.

'Neither, I'm afraid,' he laughed. 'If we demand our toll too often, no one would travel the road. And as for brides, trust me, you do that only once, no matter how the affair ends.' He sighed, but then went on, 'Not that I can complain. I picked a gem. No, we're merely off to find a new pasture for our dragons to graze on. It is how we spend most of our lives – watching our dragons eat. The meadow below is grazed to the roots, so we must take our beasts down to the edge of the forest to graze. They eat slowly, so our lives are very dull – we tell each other all our stories again and again, play cards, or nap. Who can blame us for a little banditry every once and a while?'

'Luckily my dragon, Ninboba loves to fly, as do I, so we soar far and wide before she finds a meadow to dine on. Then I doze in the saddle while she eats. It is a simple life we lead – very much in harmony with Tey Pot's way. Whether we like it or not.'

MossRose's eyes were red from crying. Crying with both hurt and anger. The messenger brought unofficial word that her father had insisted to Tey Pot that he would not pay a copper coin for her return. And he had, as MossRose feared, confined his old friend to an apartment in the palace-fortress, with a lock on the outside of the door. The messenger was an unofficial one, a highly placed servant, one of the many citizens of Zandival Province who had Kandivar relatives, and were on good terms with them. I gathered that TreyMor and his father were far from the only Kandivarians who carried off Dajarain brides. It had been common practice since time forgotten. As a result, Kandivar had a lot of relatives living on the Zandival plains, and many working in the palace.

TreyMor had tried to comfort her, but she was too angry, too ashamed to be comforted.

'And now Uncle Tey Pot is in a soft prison for who knows how long! All because of me!'

'Perhaps we can be of help in that matter,' said Naylea slowly, with a glance to Py.

MossRose stopped her pacing and looked to her. 'You have an idea that might free him?'

Naylea nodded. 'Brother LinPy and I are advocates in our home islands...' she began, and then briefly explained their roles and the last resort solution of kidnapping the uncooperative oppressor. '...So you see, we have some experience in spirited people away from palaces and fortresses. We'd need clothes that would go unremarked in the palace and I, a broad-feathered wig. Then, with a map of the palace, and suggestions from your agent as to how to reach Tey Pot and then make off with him, I am confident that LinPy and I can free Tey Pot.'

MossRose stared at Naylea for several moments, her face brightening with hope. She clapped her hands and exclaimed, 'Clothes and a wig will be no problem. As for aid and a map, I will accompany you myself. I know the palace as well as I know my face in a glass. Moreover, I know not only all the rarely used passages in the lower palace, but the secret passages between the chambers that are used for spying and escape. No doubt one of those leads directly to Tey Pot's quarters. With me along – suitably disguised – we could free Tey Pot and slip out during the sleep watch without any risk at all!'

She stopped and then laughed. 'But we shall do more than that! We shall kidnap my father as well and bring him here! There is a secret escape passage from his sleep chamber that we can use to reach him undetected. It would be no more dangerous than freeing Uncle Tey Pot. Once we have Father here,

we shall give him a choice – my 2,000 gold coins, or a life on the steppes of Kandivar, where he'll never touch a gold coin again! Let me think for a moment,' She exclaimed, and paused to examine the implications more soberly.

'I see no flaw,' she said, after only a minute of thought. 'I know the ways of the palace and how to avoid detection. I have moved at will about the palace undetected since I was a young girl. Father, of course, would be unwilling to go with us, but if you can subdue and silence him – without hurting him too much – then I see no problems, and little risk. Will you do that for me? For my honor? Why with my dowry, Tey Pot can marry us here on the Dajara side and then, my dear,' she added turning to TreyMor with a bright smile, 'You can bring your stolen bride home and we can be married again in Kandivar!'

'You'll not go to Zandival,' he replied. 'The Laezans can, if they wish, free Tey Pot. He is one of them. Our friends in the palace will do all they can to aid their effort. They do not need you along. And I've no need for the cursed gold. I have you and that's enough.'

'You won't have me, until you have my cursed gold,' she laughed, undaunted. 'And I won't have my gold unless we bring my miserly father here. I'm certain that faced with the loss of all his coins, he must relent and release mine! And only I know the secret passages that will make his kidnapping easy. If I'm to be the a Kandivar Chieftain's wife, should I not begin my new life with a kidnapping? If you want me, you'll have to let me go. Not that you can forbid me from going. I believe we have settled that already.'

He gave her a long, measuring look. She may've flashed that glint of steel in her eyes. He shrugged, and said, 'Yes, my dear.' And then turning to Naylea and Py, he added. 'Keep her from doing anything foolish – keep her safe.'

'We haven't agreed to take her along,' said Naylea, carefully. 'She could be of some value, but only if she puts herself under our command. But, if she wants to act like the daughter of the Governor and the bride of the Chieftain of Kandivar, then she'd best stay here. LinPy and I know our trade. We may have use for a guide, but only a guide.' This last remark was directed at MossRose, and she may've flashed a little of the cold steel her eyes could display as well.

MossRose smiled sweetly and nodded. 'On my word of honor. You are the expert kidnappers, and I the expert guide to the secret ways of the Palace of Zandival. If each of us does our part, we cannot fail!'

'I would like to go as well,' said Trin with a glance to Py and then to MossRose. 'I have experience in similar missions during our efforts to save the loyal servants of the true Empress from the prisons of the usurper. If we're to bring off a prisoner, unconscious or otherwise, another agent would be useful – if only to guard the escape route.'

'We'll free Tey Pot first so we'd already be a team of four...' began Naylea, but changed course and said with a smile and a nod, 'Still, as you say, an extra agent might come in handy to guard our backs.'

I suspect that her change of course had to do with seeing brother Py partnered with Trin – giving her a chance to show her skills and courage and perhaps, to look after Py as well, rather than for any real need for an extra hand. The ever cheerful, boyish Py, I must admit, can easily be mistaken for a simple youth of no experience, someone who should not be allowed on a potentially dangerous mission unsupervised. It is easy to underestimate LinPy.

I will confess that I didn't like the way this discussion was lifting. I didn't like it at all, but I saw no choice. I had my pride. 'Then we'll all go, except the dragons.'

'By the Black Dragon, no! You'll stay here and out of the way, Litang!' laughed Naylea. 'You are the last person I want along.'

'And, why, by the Black Dragon, should I not go as well?'

'Because your strange charisma, or karma, or luck, or whatever it is, always attracts trouble. No, we want you far, far away from our mission!'

Before I could reply, TreyMor said, 'It might be best if we kept at least one of you here, just to keep

everyone honest. I'm trusting you with my beloved. I would like a guarantee that you will return with her.'

'You can have our word that we'll return. And the dragons,' I said and added, looking to Naylea, 'It's all or none of us. We're shipmates. We'll do this together or not at all.'

'It is your shipmate who doesn't want you along,' TreyMor pointed out.

'That's just her sense of humor...'

'Ha!' snorted Naylea.

'See. It amuses her to blame me whenever an unexpected event happens. For example, if a giant green snake crushes our boat in the floating jungle, it's somehow my fault. There is no logic in it, so you needn't pay any attention to her objections. Indeed, I think you might want me to be involved in the planning and execution of the mission. Look at them. You can see the eagerness in their faces. It's a game for them. A game to outwit the guards, and to play hide and seek in the palace. They're thinking it will be fun.

'Now neither you nor I see it that way. Its is a serious matter. A deadly game that must be planned and executed with great caution. If something goes wrong...'

'It will be your fault,' Naylea muttered.

'... Someone – or everyone – might get killed. You want someone like me to see that every precaution is taken, all avoidable risks are avoided, especially since MossRose's life is one of the lives at stake.'

'LinPy and I are trained advocates,' said Naylea. 'TrinNatta is an experienced soldier. Litang, on the other hand, is a trading ship captain. LinPy TrinNatta and myself, with MossRose as a guide can free Tey Pot and capture the Governor. That's all we need. Using more people than we need will only slow us down and make things more dangerous than they have to be.'

I watched Naylea, trying to read her eyes to find the true meaning of her objections. Did she doubt my courage – my ability to operate under stress? Or was she concerned for my safety? Her eyes told me nothing – she had learned to guard them, when she cared to. Or perhaps it was simply a matter of not knowing how she felt about me that clouded my eyes.

I looked back to TreyMor, who was regarding me thoughtfully. 'Naylea is merely concerned for my safety,' I said, if only to dare her to deny it. 'But neither she nor you need to be concerned about me. I don't wish to boast, but though a mere trader ship's captain I've outfought and outwitted many different enemies, including one very determined assassin...' this with a glance to Naylea, who smiled. 'I've held off and escaped from a dozen pirate ships, I've led a powerful, pursuing warship onto the rocks. I've destroyed three determined pirate ships in less than a minute. I've escaped a mutiny, and then recaptured the ship. We all go as a team, or none of us goes,' I added, what I hoped to be the final word, in my finest captain's – or was it chief engineer's? – arrogant voice.

'Oh, you can guard the lopemounts, Litang,' said Naylea, with a sigh. 'Far, far away.'

'That suits me just fine – as long as I'm included in the planning.'

And so it was settled.

'Why did you object to my coming along on the mission?' I asked Naylea, when we had a moment alone.

She sighed. 'Because you didn't want to come. And because I am a professional, just as you are. Your profession is running a ship, or an engine, or whatever. Mine is as a thief. If I'm to steal a Governor, I should be allowed to do so in a manner that best assures success. MossRose, a freed Tey Pot, and I could get the job done, but that would create ill feelings. I must presume Py is a professional despite his demeanor, and so I could not go without him. As for Natta, well, this is her chance to show her daring and bravery to Py – and to look after him, if need be. Besides, leaving someone behind to guard our escape route is useful. But there is no place in the mission for anyone else. Trust me. It is my profession.'

'You give way to Trin's concern, but not mine.'  
'Your concern is unwarranted. We have to see about Natta's.'  
'My concern for you, unwarranted or not, is real.'  
She smiled, 'You're sweet. But you're a chump.'  
Sweet. I'd settle for that. For now.

## Chapter 43 The Palace of Zandival

01

The plain of Zandival spread out to the blue horizon beneath us. Ahead, the provincial capital city of the same name rose from the flatness in the middle distance. We rode the Rider dragons to within 20 kilometers of the city before the Kandivarians circled and fluttered the Rider dragons down, like lumbering leaves, towards an isolated pasture. The lopemounts that we'd ride to the outskirts of the city – and hopefully back – with their attendants, were waiting discretely under a clump of trees.

'How did you come by the lopemounts? Are you lopemount kidnappers as well?' I asked PisDore, as I warily stood by the tall mount I was to ride which, I was assured, was the most resigned and unenthusiastic lopemount of the pack.

'Naw, we just borrow them,' he laughed. 'The folk around here are always willing to lend us some when we need them.'

'Sort of like your road toll?' asked Py after eagerly leaping to the saddle of his mount.

PisDore laughed. 'No, no, not like that at all. We just borrow them from friends and relatives.' And seeing a look of disbelief on both of our faces added, 'You can't capture wives from the Zandival plain for a hundred generations without ending up with a lot of relatives on this side who'll loan you a lopemount or two when you ask.'

'Without cohesion?' asked Py.

'My dear in-laws live a couple of leagues up the road. We visit them quite regularly. Both sets of grandparents live within a half an hour ride from here.' He spread his arms wide. 'We're all family in this part of Zandival! I dare say that anyone who's lived on these plains for a couple of generations has Kandivar blood in their veins, just as every Kandivarian has Dajara blood in theirs.'

Py looked puzzled. 'Still, you kidnap your brides...'

'These days, kidnapping is just a ritual. No one gets carried off without giving their consent... Oh, maybe a few bad eggs try, but if they're identified, they pay the price with their life. No, the old days of carrying off a struggling pretty maid are 50 generations gone.'

'Why bother? Aren't there girls in Kandivar?' Py asked.

'Well, pretty young maids are rather thin on the ground in Kandivar. Kandivar isn't everyone's cup of tea. They tend to wander off to visit their cousins on this side and don't return. We have to carry them back. So, your young buck comes a courting on the bright side, and finds a pretty mate, if he's lucky, the usual way – she's a friend of a sister or a cousin. And we court them Dajara fashion. Only when they're ready to say yes, do we carry them off to Kandivar on your dragon – for a little while. Once the first bright shine goes off the apple of love, our wives tend to spend a lot of time with their families here on the bright side. There's a lot of bachelor of one kind or another herding dragons in Kandivar.'

Py looked skeptical, or perhaps disappointed, so PisDore continued, 'We're not your typical Shadow Land tribe. Too many brides from the bright side, I guess. But, if you're looking to lead people to the path of the Way, you won't have far to look in the Shadow Lands. Plenty of unenlightened barbarians



there. Why I'm a shining beacon of the Way when I'm in the shadows!'

Py nodded, and smiled. 'I'm sure you are, PisDore. It takes a brave man to be a shining beacon of the Way in the darkness of a savage land.'

PisDore gave him a sharp look, but seeing that he was serious, smiled. 'I try. Believe it or not, I'm Teacher Tey Pot's greatest success, which tells you a lot about the Shadow Lands. Though his teachings – and 50 generations of bright side brides – have had their effect on even the most unenlightened Kandivar herder, though they don't realize it. Still, it is hard to strictly follow the Way when the bolts are flying your way...'

Their discussion had to end as everyone had mounted their lopemounts and were ready to ride. We kept up a long, loping pace down the narrow lane to Zandival as timing was important. And time in Windvera, as in the Pela, was an elusive thing.

We pulled up in a small wooded copse on the outskirts of the city, where the farm fields ended and the small parks of scattered country estates began. Nothing was said, but it was likely the property of one of those uncles, aunts, or cousins that the Kandivars had scattered about in great numbers. We were within walking distance of a large walled public park that partially surrounded the palace-rock of Zandival – a rather stunted fallen-rock towering above the typical fortress-buildings of the city that spread out beyond the park. Here we were met by one of the Kandivar's friends in the palace who brought us the latest information and, more importantly, the time in Zandival. The further away from the hourly bells of Zandival you were, the more abstract Zandival's time became. Timing was of some importance – since it was far more pleasant to pass a few hours playing cards under the trees than huddled in a dark cave-room in the palace while waiting for the rest watch.

The bells of Zandival were ringing in the distance, for the third time when MossRose impatiently rose and said it was time to set out. Looking up from his cards, PisDore cheerfully wished us luck, and then played his last card, winning the round and the small pile of copper coins on the saddlebag card table.

Since PisDore and his crew were guarding the Lopemounts, I was included, reluctantly, by Naylea, in the rescue party. I wasn't all that happy myself, but I had my trusty sissy, so what the Neb.

## 02

We slowly made our way through the crowd that filled the Imperial Plaza. Ahead, the palace-fortress stood against the pale blue-green sky. It had split into several sections when it crashed to earth in Windvera, so it was rather short and lumpish as the fallen rocks go. Still, it was probably 200 meters tall, and was circled by an ascending series of terraces set like a giant staircase that wrapped itself almost twice around the rock, giving it something like a hanging garden effect. The residents of the palace lived in shutter-protected caves that opened on these terraces. The shutters had been open since the last attacker had left, discouraged, some 100,000 or more rounds ago. The terraces were divided by thick walls or turrets projecting from the rock, some ten meters wide or so. These walls were pierced by rows of thin slots to allow the cross-bowmen inside of them to fire into the courtyards on either side to discourage any invaders from attempting to breach the caves and gain entry into the palace. The business of the palace was conducted inside the shattered rock.

Our plan was simple. We'd enter the palace when the round's work was done and the halls would be filled with homeward bound clerks. We'd then hide in the secret passages until the sleep period. Free Tey Pot and kidnapping the Governor, and make our escape via out of the way passages.

MossRose, Naylea and Trin were in the lead, dressed in the long, dark maroon-colored pinafore and close fitting cap of Sisters of the Sick. Naylea and I wore broad-feathered wigs. Py and I, with maroon vests of the hospital menial help followed meekly behind them. We were bound for the Imperial Hospital that abutted the lowest walls of the palace. From there, MossRose assured us, we could enter

the palace unobserved.

Without the thief's best friend – night – gaining entrance to the palace was our biggest hurdle. The public was not allowed inside, and its staff had to produce tokens to enter or leave – which the Kandivarians' palace friends could not provide in the numbers needed. Only the Imperial Hospital, of all the buildings lining the plaza, had an unguarded doorway to the palace-fortress so that the hospital staff could also serve the Palace Guard's infirmary. MossRose used it regularly to go in and out as she pleased, without being officially noticed. The five of us, however, needed to be more discrete, hence our borrowed uniforms.

The Imperial Plaza, a wide paved space, linked the palace to the city proper. It was lined with the blank-faced stone buildings of Windvera and housed not only the Imperial Hospital, but the courts and public bureaucracies of the province. The plaza was crowded and noisy with street vendors, entertainers, and the press of people with business here. Even with the approaching dinner hour, the crowd was still thick enough to make our progress slow. The hospital admissions hall was even more crowded, which we had counted on to avoid unwanted attention. MossRose boldly led us through the crush of people before the admitting desks and into the first of the long, narrow wards, lined with the raised pallets of the sick and injured, surrounded by family and attending Sisters of the Sick. We weren't questioned until we reached the third of these wards.

'Stop, sisters. You don't belong in this ward,' snapped, a sharp, authoritative voice from behind us.

Py and I stopped and, looking back, saw a tall Sister of the Sick – in a dark red pinafore of finer materials and trimmed in white lace – hurrying towards us.

She was clearly trouble. Naylea gave me look that said "This is your fault."

MossRose was not flustered. 'It is only me, Sister MiLeese.'

Sister MiLeese's eyes widened but as she opened her mouth, MossRose reached out and touched her lips lightly with a finger.

'Not a word, my dear Sister. I have returned and intend to have a private word with Father. It is of no concern of yours. You will speak of this to no one. You have not seen us,' she said, with a smile and that glint of steel in her eyes.

Sister MiLeese, who was not without a glint of steel in her eyes as well, gave her a long look. 'The truth?' she asked, despite MossRose's finger across her lips, giving us a hard, measuring look.

'Enough of it,' replied MossRose. 'I will explain later.'

'I shall expect it,' said MiLeese, not intimidated. But she gave a small curtsy and turned to go about her business.

'Are we in trouble?' I asked, quietly as we started off again.

'I think not. I am the patron and friend of the Imperial Hospital. I believe Sister MiLeese knows what sort of funds she could expect if it was left to my dear father. You see, I know enough about Father's accounting system to extract from him the proper support for not only the Imperial Hospital, but several other such institutions as well. I am valued for that. Still, it shouldn't matter much, either way. We shall be in our hiding place in a few minutes.'

We continued through the ward to a lantern-lit back hallway carved through the fallen rock to the Palace Guard's barracks.

'We will soon be entering the Palace Guard's infirmary and barracks. Our presence is common enough and should raise no questions, though soldiers will be soldiers.'

Which was to say that they cheerfully expressed their appreciation of the girls frankly, and freely, as we made our way past the pallets of the sick soldiers. The girls ignored them, as proper Sisters of the Sick should. Once outside the ward, MossRose stopped in front of a door in the stone wall and, looking about to see that no one was in the passage, opened it and said, 'Take a stretcher. We can take Father out on a stretcher without looking suspicious.'

Py selected one of the rolled up stretchers from the closet and after he put it over his shoulder, we continued on our way along the oil lamp lit passageway that carried us past crowded barracks, noisy

mess halls and locked store rooms of the Palace Guard and then up several steep ramps, leaving the barracks behind.

'This way,' said MossRose, dodging into a narrow, dark passage. 'Here's where we'll abandon our hospital garb,' she said quietly, indicating a deep black crack in the rock wall. 'No point calling attention to ourselves going forward. We'll collect them when we come back.'

Py shoved the stretcher into the crack along with the pinafores and our vests as the echoes of gongs reached us.

'That marks the end of the work watch. The passageways will be crowded with the staff hurrying home to their quarters, so we'll not look out of place. Just follow me and remember, you're not tourists – look like you belong,' she said, as we set out for the interior.

Light and air circulation are the chief problems of these fallen rock fortresses. To live in caves along the rock's exteriors solves both of those problems, but rather defeats the defensive purpose of these fortresses. The usual solution is to hollow out a great redoubt in the interior to retire to in the event of attack. Since the fallen island of the Palace of Zandival had split into three sections on impact, they had a large central fissure that they made into a large interior atrium, open at the top. The various palace offices were set around and open to this central atrium – allowing them to catch the light that filtered down through the grated opening overhead. These offices were reached by a passageway on their inner side, which had to be lit by oil lamps set in iron fixtures. These passageways looked like some throwback moon colony's faux-ancient streets at night. Rooms that did not need a great deal of light, like storerooms, were carved into the stone wall opposite the atrium-lit offices. The palace's clerks and servants were now hurrying home through this lantern lit passage. We slipped into this flow of pedestrians and followed the passageways around and up the steep ramps that linked the levels as we came to them, one after another, for five levels, before our plans came undone.

## 03

He had paused in the doorway, perhaps to issue one last order, and being a man of some importance, having issued it, turned abruptly, and stepped out right in front of MossRose, who had to pull up sharply. He was a big, tall man, dressed in a dark blue jacket with rows of shining buttons and trimmed in gold and lace. He glared down at MossRose for her impudence of being in his way – and recognized her.

He quickly hid his surprise, and standing a little stiffer, gave her a little bow, 'Lady MossRose. This is a wonderful surprise.'

It wasn't. I thought it best to look like I wasn't part of her party, and so I dodged around the girls, the great man, and the military officer in a white uniform who had followed him out. Py followed me. We didn't go far, settling against the opposite wall beyond the doorway – close enough for Naylea to give me one of her "It's your fault" looks.

'Lord Chancellor,' MossRose nodded. 'Colonel Crim.'

'You've escaped! I'm delighted to see you safe and sound. We were all very concerned about you. Does the Governor know? I've just come from him and he said nothing of this to me.'

'I was never a captive, as I'm sure you know. So, no, I have not escaped. Nor have I seen Father – yet. I was on my way to see him before you got in my way.'

'I beg your pardon, my lady. It was careless of me,' the Chancellor said with a faint smile and another little bow. 'May I escort you up to your quarters?'

'Thank you, but I can still find my way.'

'I'm certain he'll be as delighted to see you safely home, as I am.'

'Since it didn't cost him even one copper coin.'

'You do him an injustice, my Lady. I assure you he was quite upset by your abduction and worried

about you constantly.'

'But not upset and worried enough to spare even a copper coin.'

'That, My Lady, was for your protection. Paying the kidnappers ransom would not necessarily buy your freedom. You can't trust Kandivarians. And even if they did release you, once it became known that the Governor would pay 2,000 gold coins for your safe return... Well, knowing the Governor, I doubt that he would let you go anywhere without an escort of armed guards to protect you. And knowing you, I doubt you would care for that.'

'And you also know perfectly well, sir, that the Kandivarians were not demanding a ransom. I was demanding my dowry. And that being the case, whatever protection I might require wouldn't be my father's responsibility. It would be my husband's. But I'll take all that up with father as soon as I can get around you.'

I didn't need to see the Chancellor's face to know that this exchange was not idle chatter. You could almost hear the gears spinning. The Chancellor's cordiality was only on the surface. MossRose's unheralded arrival – apparently with unknown friends – had to be ringing alarm bells in the Chancellor's and the Colonel's heads. Neither looked to be a fool. I know we hadn't fooled Colonel Crim – he had given us a measured glance as we passed and noted that we settled against the wall. Py, of course, looked completely harmless, and I, well, I suppose I looked as wary as I felt, even with my trusty little sissy in hand. (Naylea and I kept our full sized darters in our kits, now in the Joy Spring Tey House, so we had to make do with our sissies.) Both Naylea and Trin had assumed an air of dangerous competence that was hard to miss. The Chancellor looked to have several more members of his staff waiting inside the office as well as several armed guardsmen, so that he wasn't outnumbered. While we were apparently unarmed, that may've suggested that we didn't need to be armed. So the question of what to do hung so heavy in the air that the Colonel could have cut it with his sword. I'd a strong feeling that putting darts in these fellows may be our best course of action, but doing so in the crowded passageway would make a bit of fuss. Still... I glanced at Naylea. She shook her head and nodded to MossRose. We'd follow her lead.

The Chancellor could not know for certain what MossRose's intentions were, nor the purpose of her apparent escort. We had to be along for some reason, and, well, he had to consider that he might end up dead if he acted hastily.

'I'm sure you're eager to see your father, so I won't keep you. I am glad you are home safe and sound,' said the Chancellor with another little bow and retreating into the doorway to let her pass, apparently deciding that what needed doing could be done as soon as MossRose and her party were out of sight.

MossRose did not know about our darters. The plan relied entirely on stealth rather than force, so she accepted his retreat.

'Yes. Thank you. I am eager to surprise my father,' she replied, and with a nod to the Colonel, started off again.

Py and I let the girls pass and hung back a while longer. Indecision on how to deal with us held the Chancellor and the Colonel in place for half a minute until we pushed off the wall and started after the girls who had disappeared around the curve of the passageway.

They were waiting for us against the wall at the foot of the next steep up ramp.

'If we are to free Tey Pot and abduct my father, we must do so now, without delay,' hissed MossRose urgently, as we arrived. 'The Chancellor knows I've not come crawling back to Father. I'm sure he'll alert my father and his guards. He may well order Colonel Crim to turn out the Palace Guards as well. So we need to reach Father first. We should be able to outrun any warning if we hurry. Father will be preparing for dinner – I know exactly where to find him. Getting him out will be more difficult now, but I think it can be done – if we act with speed. What do you say?'

'Let's go,' said Naylea, without hesitation. 'Now's our best chance. Turning out the guards in force will create much confusion in the palace. We may be able to use that in our escape.'

'Just so,' added Py.

MossRose looked to Trin, who nodded, then to me, who shrugged. Our original plan had just gone up in smoke, so I had to trust the experts. And I had my sissy in my pocket, as did Naylea.

'Excellent,' she said, with a nod, and a brief smile. She turned and led us up the ramp at a run, pushing between the groups of slower pedestrians. We followed her, deaf to the occasional angry comment.

The higher we went, the fewer people we encountered. The palace-fortress of Zandival may've been a smallish fallen rock, but even so, we raced up a dozen more ramps to reach the level just below the guarded residential levels where the elites of Zandival Province lived.

MossRose turned down a dim-lit passage – natural hollows in the soft, porous rock, linked by short tunnels. Light from the outside seeping in from its far end was its only illumination. Halfway down, she turned off into one of the natural caves and followed it a few paces to the black hollow, halting before an even blacker doorway.

MossRose drew a key from her jacket pocket, and hurriedly whispered, 'That last passage opens out onto a flanking wall. Natta, Wilitang, that's the way you must go to escape with Tey Pot. Follow it out and onto the wall. Then follow the terraces down and around the palace as fast as you can without attracting attention. There will be palace staff about, but no one should pay attention to you. You shouldn't encounter any guards until the last wall at the bottom. The Palace Guard barracks are just beyond it. There's a sunken courtyard, but unless the guards have been given orders not to let you pass, you should be able to continue on along the walkway on top of the outer wall. That will take you around to the hospital grounds. There are vines growing on the wall there, and trees to hide you from the guards on the turret. Climb down to the hospital terrace and from there you can make your way to the park and to the lopemounts.

'Don't wait for us. Our task may take more time than yours. We may not be able to get away for hours, if not rounds. I can find places to hide in the palace. Tell PisDore to keep a contingent waiting, unless the Guard is out and about. But don't worry about us, we'll be fine.'

Unlocking the door, she pushed it open. Inside was another short passageway, as black as a deep drift, but there were lanterns hung just beyond the door and with flash of a fire-stick, she lit the thick candle in one, and then another, handing the second lantern to Trin. We followed her into a large natural cave filled with vague shadows, 'One last word of advice. If it appears that you cannot reach the hospital terrace, if the odds against you look too great, the lake is deep and not wide. If you can swim, you can jump for it as soon as you think it's safe and make your way across the park.'

Trin nodded. 'Don't worry about us. We can deal with any contingency.'

I seem to have rather unnervingly optimistic friends and companions, but I said nothing.

In the feeble, flickering light of the lanterns, the vague shapes resolved themselves into a tumbled collection of discarded chairs, tables and wardrobes. Holding her lantern high, MossRose picked her way through this maze to the far wall, and shoving a tall wardrobe aside, found the keyhole and, with Py's help, pulled open a heavy, stone-faced door. She turned, held her finger to her lips, and plunged into the narrow passage. We followed single file, Py and Naylea, Trin and me.

The passageway was cool and pitch black an arm's length ahead and behind – the extent of the meager light from our lanterns. Our shoulders brushed the stone sides at times, and the ceiling was so low that we had to stoop in places when we moved from one small natural cavern to the next. It was unpleasant, at best, claustrophobic at worst. The caves and passage led to a shaft leading upwards in a series of ladders and landings. MossRose scampered up the ladders one handed and we followed – easy enough in the light gravity. Each level had marks carved into the stone to identify the matching floor, After passing six such landings, we stopped at the seventh, and started down another narrow, branching tunnel. MossRose held the lantern high and silently pointed to characters carved into the stone at every opening and door we passed. I could not read them, and I wasn't certain Trin could either – we were in Dajara now and though the spoken language was the same, that didn't mean the written one was. I tried

to keep track of turns and levels in my head and hoped Trin was too.

Luckily there were only two turns before we reached the passage that led to Tey Pot's quarters, as reported by Kandivar's palace spies.

'The third door,' MossRose whispered. 'There is a spy hole in it. Look before you enter. If you don't see him... Well, you can search the adjacent rooms, but don't linger too long. Good luck.'

'Good luck,' Trin and I whispered back, as they turned back to continue on their way up to the top of the palace and the Governor's quarters.

Before we set out down the narrow passage I touched Trin's shoulder and showing her my trusty sissy in the feeble light, and whispered, 'I still have a working darter, so leave any guards for me to deal with. No point taking chances.'

She flashed me a brief and very rare, smile, and drew out a compact darter of her own from her pocket. 'A parting gift from Captain Roynay. He had a bad feeling about how things would lift when they turned me and my crew off the Raven. He said I might need it. It did come in handy, early on.'

'Good old Tenry,' I sighed, 'I hope things worked out right for them...' Somehow. Still, with Trin and the second darter, the blackness of the cave seemed to lighten up a bit. I continued, 'Just to make it clear, Captain Trin, you're in charge of this operation. This is your line of work, not mine. I'll take my orders from you.'

'It's Sub-captain, Captain.'

'It's Wil, and I think you've earned a promotion, if only because you're the highest ranking Cimmadarian officer on Windvera. It's Captain Trin now.'

She shook her head, but didn't argue further.

'Oh, and if you have non-lethal darts, I think it's best that we use them, if we must use any at all.'

'Yes, sir, Captain,' she replied, with a sarcastic edge.

I laughed softly. 'I meant that merely as a suggestion – from a diplomatic point of view. I don't think we want to leave a trail of dead bodies if we can help it. MossRose will need to be reconciled with her father sooner or later.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Oh, just lead on.'

'Yes, sir.'

It's a good thing I appreciate sarcasm.

04

We found number three's hidden door and the little sliding square that opened up a spy hole hidden behind a thin screen or painting within a minute. She studied the scene for half a minute and stood aside for me to have a look. I saw Tey Pot, alone, seated at a low table, brewing a pot of tey. I stepped back and nodded. She quietly lifted the latch and pushed the panel/door open. It must have been well oiled, since it didn't make a sound – and yet...

'Ah, unexpected company,' said Tey Pot without turning around. 'I am sorry, but we'll have to share the cup since you've provided only one.'

'I'm afraid we don't have time for tey,' I said softly, looking about the room to make sure we were alone with Tey Pot.

He looked around and smiled. 'Why you are, indeed, unexpected company. I must confess I hadn't expected Lady TrinNatta and Wilitang to arrive through the wall.'

'MossRose was very upset by your confinement and feared that her father would detain you until she gave in and returned, which would have been a long time – likely never. So we're here to release you, Teacher. But we've no time to spare. We had the bad luck to run into the Chancellor, and I'm afraid the guards might be called out. We must be going.'

'Ah, that was kind of her. I suppose as young MossRose's pawn in the game, it is my duty to return with you, so here, Wilitang, sample this tey while I gather my things. It's a green leaf tey from Bisatear Province – quite good – light, sweet, lingering. Say what you care to about DrisDae, his soft prison does supply me with fine tey.

He handed me the cup while he hurried off to gather his vests and gear.

I had time for only a sip or two – it was quite good, but I couldn't really enjoy it as I watched the door, expecting the guard to burst through it any second. They didn't during the minute Tey Pot used to don his collection of mismatched vests and his walking stick.

'Follow me, Teacher,' said Trin, quietly, making for the hidden door. I followed behind him, still expecting the door to burst open. I could hardly believe it when I slipped the latch back down on the hidden door without them arriving.

Trin led us down the narrow black passage at a trotting pace. Without a pause, she turned left into the blackness. She, as I expected, had been paying attention to our course as well. Back, around, and down we went without any hesitation or pause, and within five minutes found ourselves in the dark storeroom.

Trin turned to Tey Pot. 'MossRose, Naylea, and Py are here as well. MossRose decided that bringing you out would not advance her cause, so, as long as we were here to collect you, she decided to abduct her father as well...'

Tey Pot chuckled. 'So young MossRose is going to kidnap her father, is she? She's a daughter worthy of the master of devious strategies, DrisDae. She'll fit right in with TreyMor and his tribe.'

'I don't think she had a choice,' said Trin. 'I, for one, will be curious to see if he values himself more than the dowry. But first we need to make our escape. We were told not to wait for them. MossRose said we could make our escape via the terraces, jumping into the lake if it looks impossible to reach the bottom. Can you swim, Teacher?'

'Yes. You needn't worry about me – nor MossRose. So let's be on our way.'

'Ready?' said Trin, to me, as she hung up the lantern and blew out the candle to plunge us into complete darkness.

'Rockets away!' I said in a moment of exuberance, and regretted it the moment I said it. It didn't take long to prove my regret justified.

Trin cautiously opened the door, and looking out to make sure the coast was clear, slipped out into the dim little cavern with Tey Pot and me behind her. Carefully closing the door, we hurried towards the slightly less dark passageway ahead... Stepping out, we were met with the sound of a dozen or more rapid footfalls to our right – the footfalls of a detachment of pike wielding guards – that had just turned into the passageway – no doubt with orders to man the terrace wall at the end of the passageway.

They skidded to a sudden stop at the sight of us. 'Wait! Who are you? What are you doing here?' demanded their officer in the lead.

Neither Trin nor I had any ready response, and their officer gave us no time to think one up.

'Seize them!' he commanded. His troop surged forward, lowering their pikes – apparently to seize us on the pointed end of them.

I had my sissy in hand, and Trin had hers out in a flash. The dark passageway flickered in blue light. The lagging guardsmen tumbled over their fallen companions, as our darts sent them tumbling. Ten seconds later the squad was a disordered heap of bodies.

'Drag them out of sight in the side passage,' commanded Trin as soon as the last one fell.

'They're merely unconscious, not dead,' I whispered to Tey Pot. 'The weapons are from our islands.' He nodded, but said nothing.

It was the work of a minute to drag the nine men into the dark side passage.

'They don't appear to be in full uniforms. They must have been very hastily turned out. That being the case, we shouldn't look too out of place with just a jacket and helmet,' Trin said inspecting them. 'Better to appear to be the hunters than the hunted,' she snapped as she crouched to pull the jacket off

the officer. 'Do you want to be the officer, Captain?'

'You're in charge. He's yours,' I said, as I started yanking off the uniform jacket of the fellow at my feet.

'Right,' she muttered, stripping the officer of his uniform jacket.

Two minutes later, we stepped back out into the main passageway as we finished buttoning the uniform jacket – it had an abundance of buttons! The rotund and many vested Tey Pot couldn't get his jacket to button all the way – but then, he'd never pass as a soldier, under close inspection anyway. Trin on the other hand, looked every bit the trim, eager officer in her well-fitting, elaborately embroidered white uniform jacket and faintly gleaming feathered helmet.

'This way,' she commanded briskly, pointing towards the bright end of the passage with her captured sword. She had effortlessly assumed the role of the fire-eating lieutenant – or perhaps that of a fire-eating Cimmadarian sub-captain in battle – and she welcomed the role. We, her motley command, followed her at a trot for the doorway. The ever-rumpled Tey Pot, in his half-buttoned uniform over his collection of vests, a clanking sword at this side, crossbow bounding on his back, and wide brimmed brass helmet at the back of his head, waved his iron-vine walking stick as a sword like a child at play. I, in my scarlet uniform jacket, sword, crossbow and iron helmet, grimly clutched my captured pike, hoping for the best and expecting the worst.

I blinked in the bright light as we hurried out onto the top of one of the wide terrace walls. It was deserted. We trotted out to the outer edge to survey our position. We seemed to be about two thirds the way up the palace-rock. To our right, the old city spread out under the haze of a thousand dinner fires. Beyond them, the new, greener peacetime city of residences stretched into the surrounding countryside. Directly below us was a grassy terrace and beyond it, the moat-like lily-pad covered – and reputed deep – lake, and to our left, the extensive park that surrounded the palace on the far side of the lake. The ring of step-terraces and dividing walls wrapped around the rock and disappeared out of sight above and below us. The wall we stood on was some five meters above the terrace on the upper side, and fifteen meters above the lower terrace. We could just see the hospital below us, but we'd have to follow the giant spiral staircase of terraces around the palace rock to reach it. As MossRose predicted, the dividing walls in sight were not guarded and though there were people moving about, they were the last of the clerks making their way to their quarters, in the honeycomb of caves set in the palace-rock. Even without our uniforms, we'd not be out of place making our way down.

'Right, let's get as far as we can, as fast as we can, while we can,' said Trin after a quick survey of our position and turning, started for the small blockhouse that enclosed the steep ramp down into the interior of the wall.

We trotted down the ramp into the dim lit gallery, down another ramp and then through the open doorway to the lower terrace. We hurried across the terrace at a trot. The terraces were mostly green lawns of grass, gardens, and small trees with several levels of cave residences opening on them from the palace-rock. We hurried from one dividing wall to the next with an open doorway to its dim interior and a steep ramp down that led out again onto to the brightness of the next terrace. As hurrying guards, we attracted some attention from the residents in the terraces, but seemingly, not the suspicion we'd have attracted if we weren't in uniform. And in such manner, we made our way down and around the palace, racing through 10 wall and terrace sets and into the 11th wall before we ran into our first detachment of the palace guards. They were in the process of closing the wall's lower door as we trotted down the dimly-lit ramp to the lower doorway. No doubt orders had been given to seal the palace.

'Stand aside!' bellowed Trin in a low, gruff voice, heavily laced with the arrogance of command.

They stopped, looked up, and stood aside – never mind that they'd never set eyes on this officer before – such was the power of an elaborately embroidered uniform and the effortless assumption that the order will be obeyed. And the dim light. We slipped through the door, with a cheerful, 'Thanks mates,' from Tey Pot.



I was getting the rather unnerving impression that Tey Pot was enjoying this a whole lot more than I was.

The heavy iron-faced door banged shut behind us. We found ourselves on a shaded walkway under a trellis thickly covered by flowering vines that followed the curve of the terrace's outer parapet. The terrace was a narrow one, with benches set under arching ornamental trees planted along the vine laced walls of the palace-rock. I could see no doors into the palace – it appeared to be a private garden of sorts. Looking ahead, down the green-lit, leaf filtered trellised walkway, we could see that the door of the next wall was already closed.

Our luck had run out. We weren't exactly trapped – the vines on the turret walls would make scaling the five meter tall wall easy, but unlike the terraces and walls we'd just passed, there seemed to be a great deal of activity on the top of the wall ahead of us. Peering out from under the trellis, we could see dozens of pikes moving about above its parapet, and hear shouted commands as their officers attempted to put them into some sort of order.

We stepped back under the trellis before we were seen and without a word, edged over to the parapet and looked down, panting to catch our breath. The moat-lake was perhaps 40 meters below. In the light gravity, the jump was doable. My concern was getting entangled in the lily-pads – while under a rain of crossbow bolts.

'Can you swim, Trin?' I asked softly.

'It can't be too hard and wouldn't be all that far, if you jump out far enough.'

'I take that as a no.'

'Just tell me what I need to do.'

'Just hold your breath, and use your arms like this – setting down my pike I demonstrated the move. You can kick your legs if you want. Just get to the surface. Tey Pot and I will pull you to shore.'

She considered that for a second. 'Do you think we can take the guards on the wall ahead of us. We'd have an element of surprise – and lots of darts.'

'By my count we still have three terraces to cross to reach the bottom,' I replied. 'We're near the barracks now, so they're all likely well manned now.'

She shrugged. 'If this was the last one, we'd chance it. But it looks like we'll have to jump. You and Tey jump and get to safety. Mission accomplished. I'll hold back and create a diversion if needed. The rest of our party might end up coming this way as well, with all the guards about. Naylea has a darter, doesn't she?'

I nodded. 'But you can't swim, so if they don't, you'd be trapped.'

'You just showed me how. The important thing is to complete our assignment, which is to get Tey Pot Wanderer free.'

'No hurry, TrinNatta. We're safe enough here for the time being. We can't be seen and no one is likely to come this way for a while with the door bolted,' said Tey Pot. 'We can all wait for our friends.'

'If only to catch our breaths,' I added.

'I believe you put me in charge,' replied Trin, who may not have been being sarcastic. 'Jump, and that's an order.'

'Sorry, but I'm not going anywhere just yet,' said Tey Pot. 'We've time. Turning out the soldiers is one thing. Getting them organized to do anything useful takes a lot more time. If sister Naylea has a weapon such as yours, I'm sure our friends will be along shortly – the route we took is the fastest and surest way out, with the palace crawling with guards. We can all escape together.'

Trin looked at us, in our makeshift uniforms and decided not to bother to argue further. She turned back and stared up through a small opening in the vines at the walls above us as they disappeared behind each other and around the rock. I rather suspected the fate of Teacher LinPy was weighing too heavily on her mind to bother arguing any further.

Tey Pot Wanderer struck me as an older edition of LinPy – a kindred spirit. Which is to say that he seemed to regard our position – trapped and facing the prospect of leaping into a moat in a hail of crossbow bolts, to say nothing about a deadly pursuit once we landed – as something of a lark. He was cheerful and carefree as we lingered under the trellis waiting for our comrades, eager to learn what had transpired since he had set out for Zandival. Trin – who was not cheerful and carefree – was too intent on watching the terrace walls above us and the unseen, but imagined adventures of our comrades, to pay attention to Tey Pot's questions, so it fell to me to bring him up to date. And so, under a barrage of cheerful questions I filled him in on the chain of circumstances and adventures that had lead us to the secret door of his quarters. I didn't mind. It passed the time while we waited for the rocket to lift, one way or the other.

'Tell me, Tey, why did the Governor lock you up? What purpose did that serve?'

He laughed. 'Believe it or not, DrisDae knows his daughter well. There's a lot of young Dae in MossRose. He knew that the best way to bring her back to the palace was to ignore her demands completely. And the best way to do that, was to invite me, or rather, insist, that I stay for a while – in quarters with a door that locked from the outside.'

'Wasn't he worried about her at all?'

Tey Pot shrugged. 'Hard to tell, but I think not. You see, the Kandivar “bandits” and their ways are part of the local culture, and he calculated, quite accurately, that they would do her no harm – even in the unlikely event that they had abducted her for ransom – without giving rise to consequences that jeopardize their semi-demi tolerance in Zandival. The fact that she was demanding her dowry in her own handwriting put his mind to rest as to her personal safety. And, so as long as he paid no mind to the demand, he was certain that, sooner or later, she'd come back in person to demand it, as he would've done in his youth. And he was right.

'He may have even anticipated she'd come back secretly. But he didn't know that she'd be able to enlist experts in abduction and barbarians with strange and powerful magic,' he said with a sly glance. 'Neither did I, for that matter. But here we are. Hopefully your friends are expert enough, and MossRose is wise enough, to carry this affair off, or abandon it, before anyone gets hurt or killed.'

'I hope so, too. The two advocates should know what they're doing, and with MossRose who knows the palace, they should be safe enough... If they don't take too many chances.' Tey Pot and I shared a look of doubt on that score.

'What did the Governor plan to do when she returned?'

'Oh, he'd send her off somewhere. He has an uncle who's a diplomat stationed on the other side of Windvera, in Solantra. A few thousand rounds in Solantra would cure any infatuation with a bandit chieftain, or so he thought.'

We talked went on to talk of Solantra, I, to keep my mind occupied. The longer we delayed, the more time it gave the Chancellor and the Palace Guard to seal not only the palace, but the park below as well. Still, we had two darters to deal with whatever the Guard could bring to bear... Fortunately for all, the Guards on the two surrounding walls seemed to be unaware of us, and content to wait on events.

Trin said we waited less than ten minutes. Tey Pot and I were still talking when we heard the faint sounds of an uproar – men shouting – drifting down from the terraces above. Trin was off in a shot, racing back towards the upper wall, and then, out from under the trellis to swiftly climbed up the vine covered wall for a clear look at what was going on. Tey Pot wasn't far behind, and I brought up the rear.

This upper wall was only lightly guarded – eight guardsmen and an officer. Their backs were to us, as they too, were looking up the steps of terraces to see where the shouting was coming from. Two walls up we could just see the tips of the pikes of the guardsmen pouring out of the palace, and then, a moment later, our companions appeared on the top of the stone parapet at the far end of the wall.

MossRose and Py with a third figure between them – the Governor, no doubt subdued with a dart. Naylea, beside them, turned and sent a stream of darts into the pursuit. Pikes tumbled as the first rank of guardsmen fell, slowing down their pursuit. The wall between them and the one we were on was lined with a forest of pikes above a gleaming line of helmeted guardsmen. They'd have to jump for the lake, or fight their way through that heavily guarded wall to reach us.

Our companions paused for a second on the top of the parapet to look down. Even from our position I could see that the palace-rock did not fall sheer to the lake from that terrace, making any jump iffy, especially with the Governor's dead weight. They spent only a second deciding. MossRose and Py turned and jumped down into the terrace, disappearing from view. Naylea held her position sending a stream of darts first into their pursuers and then towards the wall – they had to fight their way across to reach a position where they could jump for it.

Trin didn't hesitate. She drew her darter and silently gave each of the guardsmen before us a dart in the back before jumping over the parapet onto the wall's broad deck.

'Hold this position, Captain. And that's a real order!' she snapped, flung off her captured helmet, (so as to be recognized as a friend in her captured uniform) and pushing aside one of the slowly falling guardsmen, disappeared over the far side.

I glanced back at the heavily garrisoned wall behind us. From their position it was unlikely that they could see either the now inert guardsmen on the far side of our wall, nor much of what was going on above us. If they saw us climb up the wall, they may've wondered what we were up to – but dressed as guardsmen ourselves, no alarm bells seem to have been rung.

I climbed over the parapet and hurried to its far end. Yes, we could jump from here. So, stepping over to the up-facing side, Sissy in hand, I considered my prospects of hitting anyone 40 meters away. Since they were above us and protected by the parapet I could only see heads and shoulders of a few guardsmen – those on our side of the wall. And they quickly disappeared when they surged forward to meet the fugitives charging them from the terrace beyond. No matter, by that time Trin had crossed the terrace and reached the far wall. In the light gravity, leaping to the lowest crossbow slit and then to the upper one was easy enough – when highly motivated – so she reached the top of the parapet in seconds. Straddling the parapet, she began sending a steady stream of darts into the unseen backs of the guardsmen before her, their attention focused on our comrades on the far side.

Since she had matters well in hand on that side, I stepped back to the other side of the turret to see what the large guard contingent was up to on the line below us. They were still standing firm unaware of what was going on above us. I gave them a reassuring wave, and stepped back, out of sight.

Faced with a rain of darts from both sides, shouting officers, and roaring men, swords and pikes, they were unable to prevent our companions from scaling the wall. By the time I rejoined Tey Pot at the other side, our companions had reached the top of the wall. I could see pikes falling all the way back to the palace entrance. Py and MossRose, with her father between them, appeared on the top of the bulkhead next to Trin. And with a glance backwards they leaped for the terrace below just as Naylea appeared on the wall beside them. As they set out across the terrace, Trin and Naylea sent a few more darts into the jumble of guards before jumping down as well, and took off running towards our position.

Darters and darts, had been very effective against swordsmen and pike-men, but they offer little protection from crossbow bolts. Whatever restraint the Guard may've been acting under before, was now abandoned in the heat of the battle and in the face of their apparent losses. If swords and pikes could not stop the fugitives, crossbow bolts must – at any cost. Their officer roared out a string of commands, and the remaining guardsmen – a dozen or more – grabbed the crossbows slung over their backs, formed a hasty line along the opposite wall and slotted bolts into their crossbows.

As MossRose and Py, with the Governor between them, reached the base of the wall below us, Tey Pot swung one of the pikes down to give them something to grab and help pull themselves up. I grabbed another. They leaped to grab a hold on the pike staff. As we started pulling them up, the

officer across the terrace roared a command – 'Fire!' – and a dozen crossbow bolts clattered against the stones of the turret wall.

Py let go of the pike and his hold on the Governor, and with a startled look on his face, slowly dropped back to the ground, the tip of a bolt sticking out of his chest.

Trin, along with Naylea, had just arrived at the base. She cried 'Py!' and caught him in her arms as he fell.

'I'm fine!' I heard him say, trying to give her a smile as the red spot grew around the tip of the bolt.

Tey Pot and I helped MossRose, still holding her father with one arm, over the side of the parapet and then swung our pikes back down for Trin and Naylea who now had Py held between them.

They jumped and grabbed our extended pikes with their free hands. Tey Pot and I heaved them up the side of the wall and over the parapet as another rain of bolts clattered against it, this time hitting no one.

'I'm fine,' Py said again as he was set down under the cover of the parapet, the bolt, sticking out of his upper back, scrapping against the stone wall. He wasn't fine.

We all settled behind it as well, staring at our stricken companion.

Trin, ashen faced, oblivious to anything else but Py, took charge. 'Let me get at it,' she commanded, gently shifting him so she could get at the bolt. She studied his wound for a moment and then said, 'This might hurt.' before snapping off the shaft at the back, and then grasping the bolt protruding from his chest, quickly drew it out, as Py jerked and gasped.

'Undo his sash,' she ordered, as she undid his blood stained jacket to get at the wound. Tey Pot swiftly complied, untying it and pulling it out from around him.

'You're lucky. It looks to have missed your lung,' she added with a grim grin to Py. 'Now you mustn't bleed to death. Hold you hand here. Now, let's see that sash.'

'I told you I was fine,' he said with a faint smile.

He may not have been fine, but he was lucky. The bolt had struck his side just under his shoulder and went through the muscles under his shoulder, which he had extended when climbing up the wall. It looked to have missed his lung cage entirely. No doubt painful, but likely not life threatening. Trin tied his sash firmly across his chest

'This is a real adventure, Wilitang!' he gasped, catching my concern in my eyes as she worked over him.

'Only if we get out of it alive,' I replied. That was still far from certain.

I looked around. Naylea was crouched low behind the parapet, still sending darts back towards the upper wall, carefully picking off the guardsmen with the crossbows. MossRose was slumped behind the stone parapet, trying to catch her breath. The Governor, with his hands bound behind him and his face partially obscured by the bandanna tied around it, was calm and serene. And unconscious.

'Did they know they were shooting at their Governor?' I wondered out loud.

'The heat of battle,' laughed Tey Pot. 'But then again, he's not all that popular...'

There was a roar from the line above, which was answered from the one below us.

'We might not want to linger too long,' said Naylea as she cautiously rose to take a peek over the parapet at what the roar was about. 'They've got reinforcements and will be after us in a moment. What's the plan?'

'We can jump to the moat from here, as soon I've got Py patched up. The next wall down is as heavily manned as the last one,' said Trin. 'You can start whenever you want. I'll have Py ready to travel in a minute.'

I peered over the parapet. Red uniformed guardsmen were now pouring over the side of the wall – there had to be fifty or more of them. 'They're starting over the side,' I said, and scurried over to the downward side to see what the guardsmen below were up to.

They had also been stirred into to action and were now pouring over the side of their wall towards us as well. Say what you want of the guardsmen of Zandival, they didn't lack courage. Undeterred by the

many casualties they'd taken, they were still game.

The crossbow men above caught sight of me and sent another flight of bolts our way. Once more they clattered against the stones, missing me, but not by much. I quickly scurried back under the cover of the parapet.

'They're coming for us from below as well. We need to jump – now.'

'Are we ready?' asked Naylea, looking about.

'Py?' asked Trin, finishing knotting the sash across Py's chest. 'Do you need help?'

'I'm fine,' he said again, painfully gathering his feet under him. 'You and MossRose look after the Governor. I'm fine.'

'Right,' said Naylea. 'The four of you go over first. Litang and I will cover you. Natta, cover us from below when you get on shore.'

'I'll take half of Drisdæ. Trin can't swim. Py, look after her,' said Tey Pot. 'Ah, you can swim, can't you, Py?'

Py nodded and smiled. 'I'll look after her.'

'Right. Now, into your positions and be ready to jump when I say go,' said Naylea, and then waited until they were crouching the outer end of the wall. When they seemed set to go, we rose and started sending darts into the charging guardsmen in the terrace below, which brought another rain of bolts down on us. 'Now go, while they're reloading!'

They needed no urging, Rising, MossRose and Tey Pot picked up the unconscious Governor, climbed to the top of the parapet, and disappeared over the side. Py, holding Trin's hand, followed them down.

'I'll buy some time for them to get out of the lake,' said Naylea. 'You go next.' She stood and started sending darts down to the charging guardsmen.

'We'll both go,' I said, standing and sending my darts their way as well. They were well within my range now as the leading guardsmen had reached the wall's base. Our fire staggered and momentarily stopped the charge. It also brought another rain of bolts. Fortunately we had ducked at the shouted order, since the guardsmen had settled down, and the bolts were well aimed and in a much tighter flight.

I grabbed the helmet of one of the fallen guardsmen and shoved it on Naylea's head. 'At least wear this!'

She rolled her eyes, but put it on and rose again, to keep the guardsmen at bay a few moments longer, as did I.

This time they were ready for us. As soon as we rose, we heard the twang of the crossbows firing and the bolts were on us. I ducked back under the parapet.

There was a clang of metal and a helmet clattered across the stones of the wall to the opposite parapet along with a feather wig. I looked to Naylea, now behind the parapet as well. She was no longer wearing the helmet. She looked back at me, her eyes wide. And then she smiled, and shook her head.

'Are you alright?' I gasped, scurrying next to her.

'To quote Py, I'm fine. Thanks for giving them a target,' she laughed.

I saw a trickle of blood forming on her forehead. 'You're bleeding!'

'I am?' She reached up to touch her scalp. 'A scratch. The tip of the bolt must've penetrated the helmet as it took it off. I'm not dead – Behind you, Wil!'

I spun about to see half a dozen guardsmen from the lower wall had climbed to the top of the opposite parapet. Naylea snapped off several shots, as did I. They slowly fell back and disappeared from sight.

'I think its time we be going,' she said climbing to her feet and keeping low, pulled me up as she passed. 'Don't hesitate.'

The guardsmen, now climbing up the wall may've prevented the crossbow men from firing on us as

we climbed to the top of the parapet. I flung off my helmet and crossbow as I slipped over the side. Quickly crouching, I kicked off and down from side of the parapet hoping to reach the moat lake as far out and as fast as I could. In the light gravity, merely jumping would've made for a leisurely journey down – and a fine target for the cross-bow men.

It took several very long seconds in the air to reach the lily-pad covered lake, still surging about from the impact of the first party. I plowed through the lily-pads, losing my feather wig on impact and then down into the forest of their stems. Pushing my way through them, I swam under water for as long as I could hold my breath. Naylea had landed only a few meters away, and like me, was swimming through the surging, murky water. Water in low grav reacts emphatically, so the lake water was surging in high, smooth waves against the rock of the palace and rolling over the park shore. By the time I was needing air, several streaks left by bolts had gone by, not too far off.

I rose to the surface with a gasp and shook the water from my eyes. I found that I was less than 10 meters from the shore where Trin was standing, darter in hand, firing up at the palace. I struck out for the shore alongside Naylea, carried along by the smooth, surging waves, as fast as I could. We were half washed over the stone wall bank of the lake by the waves we'd created. As soon as we gained our feet the three of us were off, running for the far park wall in long loping strides, wasting no breath on talk.

Ahead, we could see the rest of our party scattering the strollers as they cut across the wide paths. No one attempted to stop them, or us, so we reached and passed through the park gates without hindrance – only the shortness of our breaths slowing us down.

'My, you're early! And you're all wet!' exclaimed PisDore when we interrupted his gang's card game in the copse.

'Nothing gets by PisDore,' panted MossRose. 'Now, unless you care to fight the Guard Cavalry, help me tie Father to his lopemount and get everyone mounted up. They'll no doubt be here shortly.'

They weren't, but we rode back to the Rider dragon pasture as if they were. Hanging grimly to my lopemount, I just let her run with her stable mates.

Without pursuit, we had time to catch our breaths, and exchange stories of our adventures while Trin renewed Py's makeshift bandage with supplies out of one of the dragon's saddle bags. The Kandivarians, in the meanwhile, had to saddled up their dragons, since they had not expected to see us for another six hours or so.

Naylea filled Tey Pot and me in on their end of the mission. They had located the Governor as he was preparing to eat. They silenced him and his attendants with a few darts, and had him secured and in the secret passageways within minutes, giving them hope that they could outrun the news and any guardsmen that had been turned out. They made good progress down towards the infirmary using back passages until their luck ran out. Like us, they stumbled into a contingent of guards. Theirs was too large to entirely disable, so they had to run for the terraces, with dozens of guardsmen in close pursuit – Naylea's darts only just keeping them at bay. We knew the rest.

The Governor still unconscious, probably half-drowned from his unconscious swim in the moat, was secured to the saddle behind PisDore. I rode behind Kroc, giving Abbis a friendly greeting as I climbed on board. She gave me a vaguely contemptuous look with her big brown eyes.

## Chapter 44 Over the Edge

DrisDae sat next to his daughter and her husband-to-be, in borrowed clothing at the big table for a late dinner, upon our return. He ate in grim silence. He had come to during the dragon flight back to the mountaintop base, and having assessed his situation coldly, had reacted with cool indifference to both his fate and his daughter. He had said nothing throughout the meal – which he ate heartily, having been abducted before his dinner – and was no doubt considering his options. Not that he had many.

MossRose on the other hand was in flowing good humor, relating her team's adventures in great detail, eagerly hearing about ours. She insisted on having us show her and TreyMor our darters, and explain how their magic worked – with a renewed curiosity about the islands that we came from and with many questions about what other wonderful inventions these islands had to offer. We answered as sparingly as possible, describing the Saraime briefly, and we made certain to explain that our weapons would work only for us – which indeed, was one of the settings which I used. Her father took all this in silently.

TreyMor played the polite host, referring to DrisDae as “Father,” used as an honorific title – the custom in Kandivar for the father of one's wife. Other than that, he smiled a lot, said little, and paid close attention to all that was said, all the while waging a silent war of indifference with his future father-in-law.

At the end of the meal he had Tey Pot brew us a large pot of tey, which we drank in expectant silence – while the past had been explored, the future had not, but would have to be, if not now, then in private conversation. DrisDae was unwilling to show any concern over it, and TreyMor was unwilling to be any less indifferent about it.

As Tey Pot poured the last of the tey, TreyMor announced. 'We should soon retire for sleep. We will be returning to Kandivar in the new round. It is a long journey, and the winds in the chasm can be treacherous at times. Kandivar will be your new home, Father. I hope that, in time, you will eagerly take up your new life in the Shadow Lands. I know it will be different from the life you have known on this side, but it has its pleasures – the steppes are wide and free. It is a harder life in some ways, harder men, and harder enemies, but you will come to enjoy the freedom of the sky once you have mastered herding and riding Rider dragons. The new round will be the start of the new life that awaits you.'

DrisDae nodded, with a brief grim smile. He'd won that round – TreyMor had opened up negotiations.

MossRose, on the other hand was having none of that. 'Not without my dowry! That is the reason I have brought my father here.'

'Your dowry is a matter between you and your father, my dear,' replied TreyMor quietly. 'It has never been an issue for me. However, you can talk to him about the matter here or once we are at home in the Stronghold of Kandivar.' He gave her a steely smile of his own. He had made his play. He was not, however going to be seen as demanding a ransom by negotiating with DrisDae for the gold coins that – he said – he had no interest in. Nor was he going to be held hostage by them. 'We have little need for gold in Kandivar. Our wealth is in our herds and the range land we hold. We have the largest herd of Rider dragons in all of the Shadow Lands, my dear. And we rule over it in our name, not that of some distant Emperor, like the Governor here. I understand that the gold is a matter of honor, and I shall let you and your father come to terms about it. And if he doesn't want to part with it, well, you will have your father with you in Kandivar. Certainly he is worth 2,000 gold coins.'

'Even as a mere Governor in the Dajarain Empire, I am worth a hundred times more than a Shadow Land dragon herder,' replied DrisDae, with great disdain.

MossRose, catching Trey's eye, and reading his intent, sighed and turned to her father. 'You may well be worth many times more than 2,000 gold coins, but you will never in your new life see a gold coin, Father. I am told that they don't use coins or gold in the Shadow Lands, they trade and barter for everything instead. Still, Mor has assured me that you will be treated well in Kandivar. Indeed, if you choose to, you will be taught the ways of the Kandivars and their Rider dragons. Mor says that once

you learn to handle one, you will be able to fly with the band on their visits to Zandival, if you so choose. Of course, that will be hundreds of rounds from now, and there will be a new governor living in the palace. A new, and, I dare say, very wealthy governor. I rather doubt that he would welcome your return. Indeed, I would not be surprised if you'd find yourself labeled as an embezzler of the Emperor's funds, and likely lose your head for it, should you return to the palace. A scrupulous governor would put you on trial for treason, an unscrupulous one would simply silence you. So you must decide – and decide now – if you want to remain Governor of Zandival and keep – most – of your precious gold coins, or give up your old life and all your coins for a life in the shadows.'

He considered that for a minute in silence.

'If I arrange for the delivery of your dowry, you will release me?'

'Upon its delivery, Father,' said MossRose with a smile.

'No,' said TreyMor, shaking his head. 'I am afraid that the dowry is no longer enough. As you heard from his own lips, he himself is worth a hundred times that. We would be foolish, my dear, if we were to give up such a prize for nothing at all. Plus, you risked your life to bring him here. That has to be paid for. In gold.'

'Mor?' This appeared to be news to MossRose.

TreyMor turned to her and shrugged. 'It is a matter of my honor, my dear. He has pegged his worth far above me. As much as I hope to enjoy a cordial relationship with your father, we need to come to an understanding.'

'Two million gold coins!' gasped MossRose.

DrisDae merely smiled and shrugged. 'He knows, as do I, that that is not possible.'

TreyMor smiled, as well. 'I will ask a mere token. It is a minor point of honor.'

'So what is a token of my worth?'

'Let us say, oh, 2,000 gold coins – the same value of your daughter's hand in marriage.'

'So it's now 4,000 gold coins for my freedom.'

'Two thousand are MossRose's by right. As for the rest, from what I hear, you can squeeze those out of the merchants within a thousand rounds. A very reasonable price for such a lucrative position. But as I say, the choice is yours. As the father of my wife-to-be, your life is in no danger from me and my clan, Father. Your choice is not of life or death, but rather of the type of life you care to live.'

DrisDae said nothing as he considered his options. Since I doubted that he found the prospect of herding Rider dragons on the Shadow Land steppes very appealing, I rather suspect that he was considering what sort of new taxes he could impose to recover those 4,000 gold coins as quickly as possible.

'I don't have 4,000 gold coins. You would have to accept at least half of that in silver,' he said, at last.

MossRose clapped her hands, 'Thank you Father!'

TreyMor smiled and nodded, 'Gold and silver would be fine, Father. If you care to write up an order to your officials, I will have it delivered by the first watch.'

'You will have that order – If you, in turn, agree to my terms.'

'And they are?' asked TreyMor, with a faint smile.

'Your assurance, on your solemn honor, that my daughter's first born son – my grandson – will rule Kandivar after your death. Or my granddaughter, if she produces no sons.'

'That is our custom.'

'And I have your word that it will be yours as well?'

'Why, of course. My eldest son will rule on my death.'

'You heard him, daughter, Tey Pot. Note his reply.'

They nodded, somewhat puzzled.

'And those are your terms?' asked TreyMor.

'Yes. You see, I intend to see that my grandson also rules here in Zandival – as well as Kandivar, and perhaps beyond, if he is clever and ambitious. I may not be merely the governor of Zandival forever.'



The empire is aging and weak. The time may come when the governor of Zandival, with enough coins in its treasury, might be able to save it, for a price,' he said carefully. 'And perhaps, the Kandivarians can play a profitable role in that. But that is a discussion for a future round. I merely wish to make it clear that I am giving away my dear daughter for the price of a kingdom.'

TreyMor grinned. 'Yes you are – and perhaps, if we can work together, we can make both kingdoms even greater for my son and your grandson. I have ambitions.'

'As do I,' chimed in MossRose.

DrisDae leaned forward and extended his hand across to TreyMor. 'I am cautious with friendship, as my dear friend Tey Pot will tell you – because I will stand by them. If you are willing to work with me to extend both our realms, then I would welcome your friendship.'

TreyMor looked him in the eye for a moment, and then smiled and took his hand. 'Friends.'

DrisDae laughed, 'Well then bring me paper, brush, and melting wax! Let us begin this partnership.'

Two of a kind, I thought. And then seeing the look on MossRose's face, amended that to three of a kind.

## 02

The following round the dragons and I drifted down from the camp to the woods below, the dragons to hunt and me to enjoy some peace and quiet. Hissi was already back from hunting, and was dozing alongside me on the rock I'd perched myself on. It took about five minutes for her to lose interest in hunting, but Siss was still in the darkness under the pines.

'Wilitang,' said Py as he gingerly settled on the other side of Hissi. He had his right arm bound in a sling – mostly to remind him not to move it before the pain did.

'How are you feeling?' I asked.

'Sore. The shoulder hurts a bit.'

'Two holes in you will do that.'

'Yes. Still, nothing to be concerned about. I'll heal soon enough.'

'I'm sure you will. Natta will make sure of that.'

He sighed. 'She's been very kind and considerate. Truth is, I had to get away from her for a while. She's always fluttering about, asking how I am, and looking at me like I'm on the edge of death.'

I glanced his way. He was watching me as well. "Litang," I said to myself, "steer a careful course." 'Ah yes, she's naturally concerned. You're one of us – the four companions.' The Four Companions – the Four Shipmates...

'But I tell her I'm doing just fine and she still fusses over me. You'd think she was my mother.'

'It's your boyish charm. Must bring out the maternal instinct in Sub-captain Trin.'

'But I'm not a boy.'

'Yes, I know that.'

'And yet, back at the Dere Clan camp, you felt the need to take charge... Sorry. I didn't mean to say that like an accusation. I was merely pointing out that people often, well, seem to treat me as if I was a slightly silly boy.'

'My action at the Dere camp was pure selfishness, Py. I didn't care to risk getting a couple of holes in me. They had springers, you know. As for the others, people simply take you at face value. Your unfailing good nature and willingness to both please and enjoy simple pleasures is refreshing, especially to us, more cynical people. As one of Magistrate LinPy's lieutenants, I know that you're older, and far wiser than you seem at first blush. I see you as a young Tey Pot, in your own unique way. Don't lose the boyhood you've held on to. Though it may be inconvenient at times, it will serve you well. You'll have many friends, few enemies, and you'll lead many to the Way during a long and useful life because of it.' I paused, and then added, 'I apologize for that sermon. You're right. Here I am,

someone who knows you pretty well, falling into the trap of talking to you like a boy. What I meant to say was simply that I like you as you are. Don't change.'

'You can say what you want to me, Wilitang. I always listen and learn.'

'I'm often seen as being old when I'm not. Not really. But like your youth, though it can be embarrassing at times, I'm alive today because I have the cautiousness of age, rather than the recklessness of youth.'

He smiled. 'You're not that old, Wilitang. Not real old,' he added with a rare dart of sarcasm.

'How old are you, anyway?'

'I can remember the Nileana tree blossoming three times,' he replied. 'I'm not a boy, though Natta seems to treat me like one.'

I gave him a glance. He had circled back to that mild complaint again. 'If you can remember three Nileana festivals, you can't really think that her concern is that of a mother, can you?'

He said nothing.

'Py?'

'Yes, maybe I can think of other reasons. But that's silly...'

'Why? Come now, Magistrate Py. You have an almost instinctive understanding of people and their motives. You can see through Natta's concern.'

He may've blushed. However deep his well of wisdom was, in this matter, he was the boy he appeared to be.

'Maybe.'

'And you?'

'And me, what?'

'Are you also, concerned, with Natta.'

He looked off.

'Hissi, does Py love Natta?' Lying between us, she kept an eye on both of us, and though the curve of her jaw always made her look to be smiling, I'd a feeling she was enjoying this conversation. Asked to join it, she reared up with a loud barking laugh, and then gave Py's nose a flick of her long tongue. 'So he does, does he?'

She barked a laugh again.

'Yes, I like her,' he said, wiping his nose. 'But it isn't that simple. My whole life – all my plans seem to have been blown away like leaves in a serrata. I don't know what I want to do, only what I don't want to do. And I don't know how I might do what I think I might like to do. How can I even consider one more factor – a factor like that?'

'Did you follow that, Hissi? My head is spinning...'

She barked another laugh.

'I guess I didn't either,' laughed Py. 'And that is the problem in a nutshell.'

'Hopefully we'll have a better idea of what can be done, once we reach Marsh Waters. I'm convinced that there is some sort of communication between these islands and the Saraime, but it need not be frequent. Once or twice in a lifetime would likely be enough to keep the Orders as similar as they are. If that is the case, then we'll all be in the same boat, and unless you or Naylea have a great desire to settle down within a Windvera community...'

'Which I don't...'

'Then we can choose to do as we please – as shipmates – as a team. I don't know what we could do – I suppose we could always help make Daffa brandy... But we'll cross that sky when we get to it. You might want to reach some sort of understanding with Natta before then. It would make things easier for all of us.'

'What sort of understanding. And how would I do it? I don't know anything about such matters. I never thought I'd have any reason to even consider them.'

'Follow your heart.'

'Easier said than done. I don't know my heart that well, and it doesn't know the way any better than my head. What should I do, Wilitang?'

'Well, I've one piece of advice. Don't ask advice from a fellow who fell in love with a girl who, on their first date arranged to have him killed in a duel by her make-believe husband. And when that plan failed, tried to slip a knife into his heart, failing only because he managed to impale her knife hand on the tip of his sword. Ask her and she'll show you the scars.'

'Ah, but you see, Wilitang, look where you are now. You must know how to deal with matters of the heart!' he laughed. 'I know nothing of them – save when they've gone wrong and they appear before me in court.'

'Trust me, I know little more than you. I was a spaceer all my life. I lived in one small ship – a dozen shipmates, most who served with me throughout my career. I only got ashore for a round or two, and then it was mostly on ship's business. I had no time for love back then. You see, back in my home islands, in the Unity, I could expect to see 20 Nileana festivals or more, so there was not only no time, but no hurry to fall in love. I fell in love with the only girl who fell in love with me, even as she was charged with killing me. So if Natta is in love with you – and Naylea has believed that from the start – then if you were to blindly follow my lead, you'd be in love with her as well. But there is more to love than being loved, so you must sort things out for yourself.'

'I have too many things to sort out... without considering love. And say what you want, you still know these things. Tell me what should I do.'

'Right. Let's keep it simple and safe. Just talk to her – as a friend, but tell her about all your hopes and dreams, your confusion and uncertainties. And ask her about hers as well. Get to know her. She's every bit as shy as you are, so I suspect that nothing need be said of love just yet. But don't ignore her feelings. Back at the palace we waited for you, and I think, only you, LinPy. She wouldn't leave without you. And if she flutters about you now, it's because she's doesn't want to lose you. You didn't seduce her, so she's taking a chance by loving you. I know you to be kindhearted to a fault, so I know you'll treat her kindly. Take her into your confidence, let her see you, and show you who she is. However it turns out, that would be the kindest thing to do. And I don't think it would be all that hard to do, do you?'

He shook his head. 'She is easy to talk to. The first thing I will tell her is that I'm neither as young nor as foolish as I may appear. And that it will take more than two holes in my shoulder to kill me.'

'Kindly, though.'

'Yes, kindly,' he said with a grin.

03

We stood outside the cave watching the Rider dragons with their riders disappear down the mountainside. All but two of the band were heading for the rendezvous with the treasure wagons. Since the coins were in both silver and gold there were many more than four thousand in number. Indeed, DrisDae had ordered an extra 2,000 gold coins to be added to be sent along to Kandivar for safe keeping – apparently you never know when some court accountants may arrive unannounced. In any event, they needed every dragon and saddle bag to carry all of them back here, and then on to Kandivar.

Tey Pot turned to Py. 'Are you fit to travel?'

'Yes, it's only my arm.'

'Good,' and turning to us, he said, 'Time to be going. Wake up those lazy dragons, and gather all we can carry to eat and drink. We'll need to stay clear of roads and inns for a couple of rounds.'

'Now?' asked Py. 'They are our hosts... Isn't that...' He trailed off, looking at Kroc and Zori who were standing next to us.

'Impolite?' laughed Tey Pot. 'Have you forgotten our invitation? The Kandivarians are, on the whole,

fairly honest and fairly honorable, but also fairly ruthless. Life in the shadow steppes requires a streak of ruthlessness. I have heard some talk of taking us back to Kandivar – where your weapons could be very useful in fulfilling our hosts' vast ambitions. Not, perhaps, forever, but for a while. Since you are in a hurry to reach Marsh Waters, I don't think you'd care to make a thousand round detour into the Shadow Lands for a range war. I know I'm not in the mood to, so we need to go now while we can – without having to use your magic on our hosts when they return,' he added.

Kroc and Zori exchanged glances. 'What about us?' asked Kroc.

'Oh, I can have Wilitang here render you unconscious if you like. That might help you avoid the wrath of young TreyMor when he returns to find us gone. He can do it with his magic, or I can do it the non-magical way with a bit of iron-vine to the head. Or you can just let us go. After all, we outnumber you. Whatever you choose.'

'We have time to decide?'

'Take all the time you want. So what do you say, friends?'

'Say no more,' I said, looking around at my companions, who nodded their approval. We hurried off to gather supplies, leaving our poor guards to decide their fate.

When we had collected all we could comfortably carry outside the cave, Tey Pot turned to Kroc and Zori. 'You realize that you can't stop us, though you're welcome to try. A few bangs and bruises – or maybe some dragon teeth marks – (the dragons growled on cue) may smooth over any, ah, shall we say, disappointment, your Chieftain may have when he finds we've flown this nest. Or Wilitang here can put you to sleep with his magic weapons.'

'You'll wake up with a headache – I've been darted enough times to know that. But you'll be fine after it goes away – and who can blame you for our hasty departure?'

They walked us to the edge of camp, still undecided.

'Well, we're off,' said Tey Pot. 'If you want to object, now's the time. Draw your swords and either I or Wilitang will put you to sleep.'

They didn't, and were still discussing their options when we, with Tey Pot in the lead, waved goodbye and started loping down the steep hillside for the towering pine trees below. The last we saw of them, they were still discussing the matter.

04

Once deep in the pines, Tey Pot made a sharp turn to the left. 'TreyMor will certainly ask our guards which way we went and he'll certainly send out the gang to search for us. It was a mistake on his part to leave us behind. Though, of course, as long as we were on guard, with your weapons – or perhaps even without them – he could never have compelled us to go return with them. Really, skipping out saves everyone a lot of bruises. Still, it will be viewed as a matter of pride that he at least attempts to correct his mistake. They will look for us long and far, so we must travel longer and farther, keeping to the woods for a round or two, and avoiding Zandival where they will no doubt have their spies on the lookout for us. We'll take the road to Sarivera – beyond the comfortable range of their dragons. From there we can send word back to CarVori to join us. We'll be four or five rounds on the road, but it will be a pleasant trek. There is little to fear in the deep woods. Nothing we can't handle and I know some fine tey houses on the Sarivera road.'

I didn't ask him what little we needed to fear in the deep woods. I didn't want to find out.

The pines were tall and thick overhead, so that there was little underbrush to slow us down as we loped down the steep slope between great boulders and massive tree trunks. Tey Pot, in the lead, was tireless. Three hours later, we crossed Long Street, after carefully checking the sky and continued traveling "south" through the deep pines.

We then slackened our pace, for despite Py's denials, the pace was wearing on him. We walked

through the pines with the dragons bounding ahead in the deep shadows. Trin and Py trailed behind us, talking quietly.

'They seem to be getting on well,' said Naylea, after glancing back to make sure we'd not lost them.

'Py and I had a little talk.'

'Oh?'

'He finally caught on that Natta was rather sweet on him.'

'Sweet?'

'Whatever. In any event, he was rather rattled, what with his ideas of striking out on his own and all, though I gather he's not exactly displeased. Surprised. Embarrassed. An unexpected turn in the Way he had expected to follow. Wanted my advice.'

Naylea laughed, 'And you had some to give?'

'My first piece was not to get advice from me.'

'But he insisted.'

'I guess so. So I told him to always keep an eye on a woman's knife hand, when she's angry. And, well, you can't be too cheerful before breakfast, either.'

'Solid advice, Litang. It's good to see that you learn from your mistakes.'

And taking her hand, I added, 'And I told him that some women are fiercely proud, and when they find that they must surrender to their heart, it may be best to make it appear that you're the one who's surrendering...'

She gave me a glance through narrowed eyes. Lifting her hand that I was holding. 'And this?'

'Ah, that's your knife hand... I thought it best to hold it.'

She made a quick movement, and I found the point of a slender glass knife resting on my chin. 'I'm ambidextrous when it comes to knives,' she said in her deadliest voice, but with a twinkle in her cold grey eyes.

'I'll add that to my store of wisdom,' I said, evenly.

'Do so,' she said and as she loosened her grip on the glass knife, it coiled back up and disappeared in her hand.

I grinned at Tey Pot. 'A proud woman.'

He laughed. 'They all are. That's why I've taken to the road. But I do feel bad about my part in making young Py's life complicated. Perhaps I should have a long talk with him...'

'Py had already taken the first steps in finding his own way before we met you. He was already thinking of going out on his own. I guess it never occurred to him until he was off the leash, as he put it, and on the road with us. You showed that it was possible to find one's own Way. By all means, talk to him – give him practical advice on what to expect and how to manage. I think he's already embarked on his own path.'

We were on the road for four rounds, staying at an inn on the edge of the fissure hills at the end of the second round, when our food ran out, then in a larger one in a small town south of Zandival, where we hired a carriage to take us on to Sarivera. From there we sent a letter to CarVori at the Spring Joy Tey House in Zandival with instructions to join us. He and his crew arrived three rounds later and we took to the road to Marsh Waters once again, with two stages left before we turned “south” for Marsh Waters, a journey of three stages.

We had plenty to talk about with CarVori and his crew – our adventures and his account of the rumors that had spread through Zandival started by our abduction of the Governor. We made one stage stop after rejoining Long Street and the second in the city of Alazeetra, at which point we were to leave Long Street, turn south on the road to Kinador, and then on to Marsh Waters a stage beyond it.

We had gathered around a low table under a flowering trellis in the tey garden of The Wanderer's Grove where we were staying, when, Tey Pot sighed, and finishing the last of his cup of tey and setting it down, said, 'Friends, I am afraid that the time has come for me to go my own way.'

'But you had talked of traveling with us all the way to Marsh Waters, Teacher,' said Py, alarmed. 'What has changed your mind?'

'I have not changed my mind. I may indeed, continue on to Marsh Waters, or not, as the Way leads. Truth is, I am of two minds about that. It has been a long time since I have been home. And yet, you know what old homes are – comfortable, but stifling, except in small dosages. No, it is not I, but you that must change your mind about going on to Marsh Waters.'

'Why would you have us change our minds? What have we done?' asked Py.

'Oh, nothing really,' replied Tey Pot carelessly. 'It is only that, as I have come to know you better, it has become clear to me that you don't want to go to Marsh Waters.'

'We don't?' said Py. 'Please enlighten us, Teacher.'

'It is not my place to enlighten you, my dear friends. But what I will do is to suggest that you travel to a place where you will be enlightened. And that place is not Marsh Waters.'

I shifted forward and said, 'Yet our plight and purpose was known to both Bowing Pine, and Little Sparrow, and both directed us to Marsh Waters. If it is not Marsh Waters, why would they direct us to travel there?'

'Bowing Pine and Little Sparrow were directing you to the Prime Community where your plight would be heard by the wisest of the wise, the whitest of white sashes, those who would be best qualified to decide how to handle your plight. I can assure you, your plight will pose a problem to those wise white sashes. It will be a problem that can only be settled by consulting various other wise men and women in communities scattered throughout Windvera. This would certainly take a hundred, or perhaps even two hundred rounds – an issue like yours can not be hurried.'

'I realize that there are likely secrets to be protected,' I said cautiously, since CarVori was with us. 'But the issue is fairly simple, and the answers we seek resolve around practical issues, not great secrets.'

'And if you accompanied us, could you not hurry the process. You have come to know us well,' pleaded Py. 'You know we are what we claim to be.'

'Are you?' replied Tey Pot, but with a kindly smile. 'But never mind. Oh, I can tell you what they will, in time, decide to do with you. The final result of their deliberations are not in question – only the time it will take for all to come to see the solution.'

'And the solution?' I asked.

Tey Pot looked to CarVori. 'My friend, you talk a great deal. You know a great deal. But never speak of this.'

'Yes, Teacher. I can keep the secrets of my customers. And I certainly will for you and the Order.'

Tey Pot nodded. 'I trust you. Secrets, however, are not secrets when told. And like the white sashes, I am bound to keep them. But I will, my friends, tell you only this much – I will tell you what the white sashes would've eventually decided to do with you.'

'And that is?'

'They will send you on to a small community located on the edge side of Windvera, known as The Hermitage.'

And in an aside to CarVori he asked, 'Do you know the way to Tistar?'

'I have taken only one Teacher to that village in my time. And so I know of The Hermitage. It is only reached on foot however, as the trail is too narrow for a carriage, the mountains too steep. Instead of heading towards Kinador and Marsh Waters, we take the road away from them. It is a three stage journey. The roads get narrower at each stage, and Tistar is a mere village.'

'Excellent. The answers you seek, my friends, can only be found at The Hermitage. So, if you were

to go there directly, you will not only save yourselves a hundred rounds or more of waiting and a six stage journey from Marsh Waters to The Hermitage, you will make the lives of our dear white sash sages all the more serene if you spare them the problem you bring with you.'

'Do you know what we'll find there?' I asked.

He smiled. 'I am just a wandering fool. Let's just say that the whispering of the pines have told me to send you on to The Hermitage. It may be no more than the truth.'

I could have pressed him for more, but with CarVori at the table, I doubted that he would say any more. I had a feeling it wasn't the pine's whispering that told Tey Pot to send us to The Hermitage. It was a secret, however – one we'd know within a dozen rounds – so it seemed ungrateful to ask more of Tey Pot.

I glanced around the table. I could see the same rising tide of hope in all my companions. 'Thank you, Tey Pot, for your kind and welcomed advice. We shall take it, though we will miss your company very much,' I said, a sentiment echoed by all the others.

'And we shall forever treasure the time we spent on the road with the Legendary Tey Pot, poet, story-teller, reed player and sage,' added Py, a sentiment we also enthusiastically echoed.

'We must share another pot of the finest tey this house offers with you, Teacher,' I said, signaling to the owner. 'Name your tey.'

Later, as Tey Pot finished his cup of tey he said, 'And one last lecture, my young friends. Follow the Way in your own Way. Our mission is to teach everyone the ways of kindness, tolerance, compassion, simplicity and living in harmony with nature. Your blues don't make you teachers, your example does. Indeed, when wearing the blues of the Order, people expect you to act in accordance with our teachings, and teach them the Way – apart from them. But if you go about your lives living the Way in the lives they know, you will show them that it can be done in their lives as well. The Order recognizes that there are as many paths as there are people, but sometimes you will find members, who, having found their own Way many rounds ago, would have you follow their path as well. Respect their wisdom, but follow your own path. And with that, my friends, I will take my leave. May you find your Way.'

We had said “good sleep” to Tey Pot before we retired, but no goodbyes, since he'd taken to the road before we awoke.

The first stage beyond Alazeetra was through rich, densely populated farmlands, but by the end of the second stage, we were traveling up and down forested hills and across valleys with farms and ranches. The road ended at Tistar – a block village with outlying barns, sheds, and a modest tey garden. It lay on the very edge of Windvera plate, but you'd likely not recognize it because the only sign of the edge are that the ranks of rugged mountains that marched away beyond the village to disappear beyond the close horizon of the rounded edge.

We said our sad and fond farewells to CarVori and his crew, and then, when we awoke from a long rest, continued on by foot, guided by a young man of the village to the beginning of the path, marked by a mossy stone marker, that led to The Hermitage. He said there are markers along the way whenever a path joins or diverges from ours. We were to follow the path with the stone marker. He told us that there were caves along the way to sleep in when we grew weary. Waving goodbye, we started out eagerly, in the hope that our answers – and our way home now lay in the steep edge mountains only two rounds before us.

## Part Nine – The Hidden Order

## Chapter 45 The Hermitage

01

The trail ended at a weathered wood door set in a stone wall spanning a narrow canyon. We'd been following the trail up and down, around mossy boulders, under wind twisted pines, and through a drifting mist for two rounds that seemed like forever. We'd slept once around a smokey fire in a shallow, but dry, cave, and since then had been hiking long enough for our ponchos to have abandoned any pretense of keeping us dry. We knew that if we stopped, the dampness would chill us to the bone, so we hurried on and on at a pace that only the light gravity allowed. And on. The dragons – never happy with wet feathers – whined their displeasure whenever we caught up to them, but unless we found another cave with dry firewood, stopping was not an option. Not until we rounded a sharp bend in a dark, narrow canyon and came upon the door in the wall. Then it was the only option.

We collected in a soggy clump before it.

'There must be a bell somewhere,' I muttered, looking, but not seeing it.

Naylea brushed me aside, and shoving the latch down, pushed the door open.

We followed her into a dim room lit by several narrow slits in the opposite wall. And seeing how gloomy it was outside, they provided little light. As my eyes adjusted, I could see another door on the left wall – which did not have a latch. Naylea, however found the chain in the wall and pulled it several times. No sound reached us from the interior.

We waited. The cross-bow slits opened to a moss-paved courtyard, which, given the weather, was predictably empty. The dragons growled their impatience, as we shook and stomped off the water droplets clinging to our ponchos and the packs until we were standing in a black puddle of water.

'I hope someone's at home,' I said and thought, "who will not turn us away."

Perhaps a minute passed before the door opened, letting in some grey light and revealing a white-sashed Laezan with a sheet of paper in her hand. She opened her mouth to greet us, but stopped and stared instead. The dragons cheerfully barked a greeting, as we cupped our hands and bowed a greeting.

She absently returned our greeting, paper still in one hand and said, 'Welcome to The Hermitage,' before briefly glancing down on the paper in hand. She folded it, and slipped it into a pocket of her vest. 'You're not likely on my list. What brings you to The Hermitage?'

'We're seeking a passage home. We were directed here by Tey Pot Wander,' I said, too damp and miserable to risk being turned away by saying anything more.

She briefly considered her options, and then said. 'I think you need to talk to the chief. Follow me.'

She led us along a roofed walkway, past the courtyard, to another stout door that opened into an entry hall with a cozy common room beyond. The room had the usual long tables for dining, and beyond them, chairs and sofas arrayed around a wide fireplace. Quiet conversations and the soft notes of a stringed instrument drifted from the cozy the room with the flickering light from the fireplace's dancing flames.

The warmth of the fire instantly attracted the dragons, who, not standing on ceremony, eagerly bounded past the tables and the chairs to stand in front of the fireplace, fluffing their wet feathers.

A startled silence descended as the Laezans suddenly found themselves staring at two dragons, who, with their feathers fluffed up, appeared to be twice their normal size. The dragons gave them a loud, cheery bark of greeting, which may not be the most reassuring sound if you're not familiar with Simla dragons. After staring at them in stunned silence for a moment, the inhabitants turned, as one, from them to the rest of us, standing in the entryway, our dripping packs and waterlogged clothes forming



another pool at our feet.

A large, fine-feathered, white-sashed Laezan rose to his feet and walked towards us with a quizzical smile. He bowed a greeting and a welcome, which we returned, and then stood and regarded us for a moment.

'I'm afraid I'm a bit lost for words,' he began. 'These mountains attract few tourists so we rarely receive casual visitors, much less visiting dragons. Still, welcome to The Hermitage. I am Ty Malin, the fellow in charge of this little community.'

I named my friends. '... and the dragons are Siss and Hissi. We're not exactly tourists. We met Tey Pot Wanderer on the road to Marsh Waters who suggested that we come here instead. He said in doing so we'd save the sages of Marsh Waters a great deal of bother and white feathers, and ourselves a hundred rounds or more of waiting.'

He shook his head, and with a little grin, said, 'He did, did he? And did he say why?'

'He just said that we'd end up here, eventually,' I replied. 'You see, we're from the Principalities of the Saraime. We were shipwrecked in the Catarian Islands. We've come here looking for a way back. Everyone's been discreet – Bowing Pine in the Catarians, Bright-eyed Sparrow at Orchard Hill, even Tey Pot – but finding two identical Laezan Orders suggests that this is possible. No one said so, yet no one disputed it either. They merely suggested we make our way to Marsh Waters until Tey Pot suggested we make our way here instead.'

'You are indeed, far from home,' he mused, casually confirming Tey Pot's advice. 'How did you end up here, in these islands?'

"Well, it's a long story...'

'Make it a short story, Litang. I think we'd all like to get out of our wet clothes,' said Naylea with a sigh.

'Yes, of course. Your story can wait,' said Malin apologetically. 'Why don't you join your companions by the fire and dry off, while I see to your rooms and perhaps a cold meal?'

'We would be most grateful, brother,' said Naylea with a sweet smile.

Malin ushered us to the fire. 'I'll let everyone introduce themselves while Caxton, CeCard, and I get things in hand for your stay.'

We exchanged greetings with the others, and stood before the blaze under their curious gaze.

'We're eager to hear your story,' said one of the seemingly older members. 'But I suppose we must wait until the others return. However, I heard you mention Bowing Pine. How is she, and her Ghost dragon, Long Tail Companion?'

We told her of our meeting with Bowing Pine and exchanged some stories about Tey Pot, who they all knew, until Malin returned bearing a large tray loaded with bread, fruit and a warmed over vegetable rice dish. As we ate at one of the long tables, we told the story we had agreed to tell to the gathered Laezans. We stuck to the truth, though editing out our use of darters to spring Tey Pot and the Governor and keeping our connection with Trin vague while not mentioning Naylea and mine's beyond-the-shell origins. Encouragingly, they seemed to have no trouble believing us.

Story told, questions answered, Malin, sitting across from us at the table, studied us with a mild smile for a while. He sighed. 'I'm going to have a few words with Tey Pot the next time we cross courses. It seems that Ol'Tey has handed you off to me to deal with, without consulting the Provincial Elders. I think that before I speak officially, I need to consult our records for guidance. Plus, it is past time for sleep, so can we postpone further discussions until after breakfast?'

'Of course,' I said, echoed by my companions. The dragons – now dry and fed – barked their cheerful agreement. Sleep was now their priority.

'Right then. Brothers and sisters, we're overdue for our pallets.'

And with that, we rose, and were led to our small bare cells.

Hissi and I decided to sleep in. We stirred when the gong sounded, calling the Laezans to their before-breakfast exercises. I opened my eyes, to see Hissi's half open eye beside me and said, 'Want to exercise?'

She growled a sleepy no and closed her eye.

'Me neither.' I turned over and closed my eyes as well, as rest of The Hermitage stirred to life.

Unfortunately, I hadn't drifted back to sleep before there was a quiet knock on our cell's door frame, and a polite voice saying, 'Wil Litang?'

'Yes,' I mumbled. Caxton was at the door.

'The Chief invites you to share a pot of tey with him in his office,' he said.

'Right. Give me a minute,' I mumbled. And seeing that he intended to wait for me, I rolled off the pallet and climbing to my feet, splashed my face with water and donned some fresh, though still slightly damp, clothes. Hissi barked a soft laugh without opening her eyes, and shifted over to the warmer side of the pallet.

I followed Caxton to a large office with narrow windows overlooking the valley. Malin looked up from some papers on his desk. 'Have a seat,' he said with a wave to the chairs set around a large desk, and asked, 'Would you care for a cup of tey?'

I said I would, and Caxton withdrew.

Besides the desk and table, the stone-walled room had a row of wooden cabinets and a map of Windvera on the wall with all the Laezan communities marked on it. Through the narrow glass windows – rare in Windvera – I caught a glimpse of the Laezans in the courtyard shadowboxing through their first forms of the new round – in a light mist. "Better them, than me," I thought.

Malin shoved the papers under a large, smooth river stone paperweight, and took up a smaller one to toy with as he talked.

'I'm sorry about the early hour, but I wanted to have a private chat with you,' he began. 'I should perhaps begin by admitting that Tey Pot has directed you to the right shop. He's an old customer. The Hermitage is a specialized service community within the Order. We provide transportation services – ships and boats – for the five island groups this Province serves. These include the Aeracarta Islands, home of the various semi-nomadic, so-called barbarians, who have, in the past, raided the Windvera islands. Beyond them are the Tinsar Islands – small islands with small, single island-based societies. On the other side of the Windvera and the Catarians are the Kanjarvar Islands – an extensive archipelago with a number of multi-island societies founded by the wide-roving Aeracartians. And then inwards, across the Endless Sea we have the other half of our Province – your Saraime, the largest of the island groups.'

'I was almost certain that there was some sort of connection, but I must confess, I didn't expect it to be this extensive,' I said, my mind racing. We were going to get home. 'But why all the secrecy? Why weren't we told? I have to believe Bowing Pine and Bright-eyed Sparrow knew about this.'

'Oh, they did. But the full knowledge of our operations is restricted to the Inner Order. I'll readily admit that, operationally, this secrecy is an awkward and an unfortunate policy. There's an uncomfortable element of deception to it, which creates complications. It is, however, deemed necessary to pursue the overarching goals of the Order which is, as I'm sure you know, to help people live long, happy, and productive lives, as much by example, as by teaching. For this reason, it is deemed important to be seen as an organic part of the communities rather than as outsiders telling them how to live their lives. However, to prevent all these diverse communities mutating our core message by their local customs, the fully committed members of the Order, the Inner Order members, move from community to community, island to island, and many, in time, from island group to island group in order to keep our teachings universal. There are, in the Saraime Islands, elders who were born on Windvera, just as there are Saraimian elders here,' he paused and smiled. 'We do get around.'

I nodded. 'But how did you spread to these undiscovered islands?'

'Well, they're not really undiscovered. Saraime discovered these islands during their Age of Exploration some 300,000 rounds ago. The Aeracartians are rovers with legends of reaching the Saraime Islands. However, at the time of discovery, it took too long to cross the Endless Sky to pursue their discoveries further. The Saraime recorded their existence, filed them in an archive, and then largely forgot about them. The Aeracartians had plenty of other islands to pillage, and consigned the Saraime Islands to legend.

'We didn't. The Order here has been in existence in these islands for about 20 full life times – birth to old age – though that includes many more actual generations, since few people live their full span of years. With our mission, we had, and still have, reasons to keep ties to all five island groups and to keep this secret. At one time, the Saraime Core Islands, with their technological advantages, might have been tempted to bring Windvera into their sphere of influence, one way or another. And the Aeracartians with their steam ships might have been tempted to put one of their grand fleets together and raid the Saraime. We've made great progress, so neither are likely to do that now. There is, however, no pressing reason to bring the two groups together just yet. So we serve both, but separately... Ah, here's our tey.'

Caxton set down the tray and left. Malin poured us each a cup.

'I apologize for the evasiveness of my fellow Laezans. Knowledge of all this is reserved for members who have committed their life to serving the Order. They – at least the more conventional ones – had no choice but to send you along to our Prime Community and the Provincial Elders to decide your fate. I've no doubt that the elders would've made an exception for you, and your companions, bringing you into the secret, if only because you can see the truth of it already. Tey Pot, however, made that decision for them when he sent you here.'

'How far out of line did he step? Has he gotten you into trouble?'

Malin grinned. 'Tey Pot Wander is, well, Tey Pot. What can I say? He's a great sage, an authority without formal authority. However, knowing why he sent you here, the Elders won't kick. And assuming that you and your companions will agree, like all the white-sash members, to keep the full extent of the Order to yourselves, I will arrange to send you home to the Saraime.'

'I'm sure we'll readily agree to that,' I said with a smile. I took a tentative sip of the steaming hot tey as I felt a knot of tension unraveling within me. We could go home!

'Good. We'll go into more details concerning your return, when I meet with your companions after breakfast. But the reason I wanted to have a word with you before I talked to the others is that I have a question for you alone.'

'And that is?'

'I am curious – what brought you here – to the Pela?'

I found that I had trouble formulating an answer to that question, for a reason that escaped me for a second or two – until it struck me that Malin had asked it in Unity Standard. I stared at him. He was watching me closely, with a slight smile, patiently awaiting my answer.

'I'm sorry. I'm not sure I heard you right,' I managed to get out, rather awkwardly, in Unity Standard.

He smiled. 'I was asking what brought you here. From your confusion, may I take it you've been here for awhile?'

'More than ten years,' I replied absently, trying to get a handle on this unexpected, unexplained, turn of events. A flood of questions muddled my mind. 'How did you know?'

He continued to smile, toying with his smooth black stone, 'I happened to notice your com-link.'

I looked dumbly at my wrist. It was covered now by my sleeve, but I'd made no effort to hide it when we'd been shedding our damp clothes on our arrival.

'Ten years. That suggests that you arrived with the Cimmadarian claimant,' he continued.

'Yes...But how did...?'

'It was the most logical choice. Though I'm a little disappointed. I'd hoped to find a new – let's say, entrant, to the Pela. We know of Cimmadar, of course, though they aren't aware of us. However, given

the secrecy we both exhibit in our dealings with the Pela, it is not hard to imagine that there might be more entrants from the outside here as well, operating just as secretly. I had rather hoped I'd found one. Still, you're something of a mystery. According to the stories I've heard, all of the outsiders mysteriously went over to the Empress's side before the final battle. I guess they were wrong.'

I shook my head again. 'No, I didn't sail with the fleet. I was the captain of one of the ships that carried the expedition here. Tallith Min was my owner – the ship's owner. And while I had hoped to join the expedition, I was deemed too Unity Standard for the work of the counter-revolution and was sent packing. But since the dead tell no tales,' I replied and then briefly outlined my story. 'So, I set out for the Saraime in the repaired gig, only to end up getting captured by natives and sold as a slave – but I don't think we have time before breakfast for me to spin the rest of my tale. Especially, since I want to hear how it is you are here.'

'I'll be brief as well. I'm drift born – on Devlar, a minor planet of Alantzia – and went to space as an engineer. After a decade serving on a series of small, and very iffy trading ships, I signed on to a Taoist ship out of Kimsara. I went on to serve the Order in various capacities for several decades on half a dozen drift worlds, eventually deciding that the Taoist life suited me and took the white sash. Twenty years ago I accepted this post as head of this rather specialized community in the Pela. In addition to being the transport terminal for Windvera, we're the provincial port for the courier ships from Kimsara as well, though they are rare – a ship once every five years or so since it's a four year voyage from Kimsara to here. The next one is due in four Unity Standard years. The reason I'm bringing this up is that, as a shipwrecked spaceer, we'd be willing to provide passage back to the Unity aboard our courier ship in a sleeper pod, once we have your word that you'll keep our secrets. Neb, if you want, we'd sign you on as crew – it's a long, lonely voyage, so another hand to stand a watch would be welcomed.'

I stared at him, trying to take it all in, trying to formulate a question – I had a million of them, but the only idea that I seemed to be able to form was that I could go home... if I wanted.

'I don't know what to say... I... I've made peace with living here for the rest of my life.'

'Of course. I understand. There's no need for a decision now, you've got four years to decide. And I'll make the offer open-ended. Return if and when you want. In the meanwhile, I'd be more than happy to put you to work at this station. People with knowledge of Unity technology are very useful to me.'

With an effort, I tried to stop chasing my mental tail, and circled back to the big point he had slipped by me. 'Are the Taoists of the Unity Laezans?'

'The other way around. Taoist came to the Nebula aboard the founding ships. The Order began its mission in the Archipelago as Laezans only some 12,000 years ago.'

'So you discovered it on your own?'

'I can't say. I've never actually investigated the connection. It is probably documented somewhere in the archives of the Order. I'd think, however, that word of it must have come to us via Cimmadar traders operating in the drifts – perhaps from a Cimmadarian spaceer who joined one of our drift world communities. Cimmadar, in one form or another, was founded far earlier than that so I suspect that Cimmadar – unwittingly – led us to the human part of the Pela. But that's just a guess of mine.'

A long buried memory bubbled up. 'But you must operate in Cimmadar. I know of a Taoist sage who seemed to recognize Tallith Min as someone from Cimmadar.'

'Yes, we do, covertly, but I'm not sure I'm following you.'

'Sorry. My ship's owner, and would-be-empress, Tallith Min, was recovering from an assassination plot on Kimsai – her brother is an adept there – when an old wandering sage – I forget his name – happened by, who seemed to mistake her for her mother or, perhaps, her grandmother. He was reputed to be from some Alantzia system world, but since Min's grandmother was the Empress of Cimmadar, for a time, he must have known her in Cimmadar.'

'Ah, I see. I believe that we have a university on their Imperial Island, so the old sage might well have recognized, or even met, the Empress in person. Since Cimmadar, with its outside contact, would certainly recognize us as the Taoist of the Unity if we operated there openly as Laezans, we teach the

Way there in the universities as individual scholars and as simple teachers in the small islands.'

'But how do you keep the comings and goings of your space ships out of view from Cimmadar's space station in the shell? I'd think their sensors would detect ship activity in the airless region.'

He chuckled. 'You see, Cimmadar has this institutional fear of the legendary Dragon Kings. Their empire and space station keep a very low profile for this reason. The station does not advertise itself by using long-range radar or radio. Everything is line-of-sight laser communication and short range laser radar. With prudent precautions, we can send boats in from the courier ships to our various contact points like this one without any great risk of being detected.'

I shook my head, trying to clear it of all the questions tumbling over themselves to be asked. I couldn't seem to pick just one out to ask it.

'I know I've given you a lot to think about. We'll have time later to answer all your questions. The staff that you met are all aware of our secrets. However, in four or five rounds we'll start bringing passengers here for an inner-island group courier ship that should be arriving within the next dozen rounds. These will all be white-sash sages, aware of the other island groups, but few, if any, will know of our extra-shell operations – that's yet another layer of this unfortunate need for secrecy. At the moment you can ask anyone here any question that comes to mind, but, after our guests arrive, you'll need to be more discreet.

'Yes, of course. At the moment I have too many to pick from to settle on any one.'

'I can imagine. I will just add that you were fortunate to cross orbits with Tey Pot Wanderer. He's a rare bird who has, indeed, wandered far – even outside the shell to Kimsara. He's passed through the Hermitage many times, even on my watch, so I know him well and trust him. That is why I'm comfortable being so open with you. Not only did he save you time sending you here, he vouched for your integrity as well.

'I know that we still have much to talk about, but I believe it's getting on to breakfast time. I'll save one last secret until after breakfast.'

'I'm not sure I want one more secret.'

'I suspect you'll find it very interesting. For now, I must ask you to keep everything we've discussed just between ourselves.'

That wasn't going to lift.

I framed my objection as I finished my tey. 'I believe that Tey Pot vouched for all of us. And I believe all your secrets will be safe with my companions. You should know that advocate NyLi is also Unity born and I think should be treated the same as me. TrinNatta was an officer in the Cimmadar Imperial Navy, of the old Regime, and has had many dealings with outsiders from beyond the shell. As for advocate LinPy, well, he's born and raised on Cloud Home Community on Daeri, but he knows all my old spaceer tales and has seen my darter and com-link in action... So did Tey Pot come to think about it. Funny, his lack of curiosity about it never struck me strange at the time. I guess I now know why...

'In any event, we're all well aware of the worlds that exist outside the shell. It seems to me that if you can trust them with one deep secret of the Order, you might as well trust them with all. It'll make your life – and mine – much easier.'

Malin tossed his stone up and watched it slowly fall as he weighed his options. 'Right. I don't like secrets. I'll brief the rest after breakfast.'

03

'Captain Litang and I had a very interesting and enlightening conversation this morning...'

Naylea shot me a dark, questioning look.

'I dislike secrets, even ones dictated by sensible policy and since you're a special case in several

respects, I believe it is best just to give you the complete picture of the Laezan Order,' began Malin, after we had all gathered in his office. He then began to outline the extent of the Order within and without of the shell reef of the Tenth Star concluding with, 'I trust that you agree, like your white-sashed brethren, to keep this knowledge to yourselves. I must ask for your word of honor on that.'

'I am honored,' said Py. 'You have my word of honor, and my thanks!'

We all echoed Py, including the dragons, even the humorists.

'Good. As for your return, our regular courier ship is expected to arrive within the next dozen rounds or so. You can travel on that, if you care to tour the province. It makes a circuit through the Aeracartia Islands and the Tinsar Islands before calling on our transport hub in the Saraime Islands. You'd not reach the Dontas for some 270 rounds or more. However, if you're in a hurry I can get you to the Dontas in less than 50 rounds. I happen to have a special courier shuttling between here and the Dontas that should arrive shortly as well. You might be familiar with it, TrinNatta. It's a survivor of the Cimmadar battle – a small transport. As such it has outside technology on it, making it unsuitable for all but our most senior members. In fact, you might be familiar with it's captain, one LyeCarr, late of the Imperial Navy and the old regime...'

'LyeCarr!' Trin exclaimed, breaking into a rare wide smile. 'Carr and I went through the Imperial Officer's Academy together. I am so happy that he survived,' she exclaimed, and turning to Py added, 'We became the best of friends, though we were fierce rivals at the Academy. Carr was always so social, so bold, so daring – reckless, even – and so successful in everything he did, while I was none of those, save successful, and that, only in my career. Our approaches could not have been more different. I believe our instructors took wicked delight in teaming us together because we'd argue about every little detail in a plan, or in Carr's case, lack of any details in his plans. I thought it cruel at the time. Perhaps they may've hoped that Carr would become a little more cautious and I a little more bold. If so, it didn't work. Still, in the end, it welded us into great friends. And though our operating styles never changed, we always managed to succeed in every mission we were assigned, both in school and in the resistance. Oh, I am so very happy Carr survived! You'll like him. He was always cheerful and fearless. Much like you.'

'I'm delighted for you and your friend. I'm eager to meet him,' said Py sincerely. Clearly, they'd come a long way in understanding each other during our two round walk in the woods. Though what that understanding was remained a mystery.

Malin laughed. 'I can assure you that LyeCarr hasn't changed. He's still as social, bold and daring as ever – though we don't give him much scope to be bold and daring. Currently I have him running routine errands between the Donta Islands and The Hermitage.'

'How did he survive and find his way here?'

'I should let him tell you his story – he makes quite an amusing epic of it. Suffice it to say that at the battle, he was in command of a rocket battery on one of the islands that the rebels hoped to draw the Empress's forces into. The battle was settled before it ever reached his island, but the battery was eventually attacked by the small ships, forcing him and his surviving crew to withdraw inwards in a small boat, as many others did as well. The great storm that many also experienced caught his boat in the open sky and wind-driven debris battered it to pieces. Carr ended up being blown along with all the other debris. As the wind died, he managed to climb onto the back of a Grey Scavenger dragon that was too battered and discouraged to care. The dragon carried him to one of the Catarian islands where they amiably parted ways. He then made his way to Martia Peak Community where he settled as a teacher of martial arts until he showed a talent for fixing steam engines. His sort of talent is rare in these parts, so we invited him here to join our staff, and, as I said, now commands our ex-Cimmadar transport.

'And now, if you care to follow me, I believe I still have even more surprises in store for you. Though perhaps we should make our first stop the infirmary. We're equipped with a full med unit that should be able to finish the healing of LinPy's shoulder in a few minutes. And perhaps, while we wait, you can tell me more about the unbelievable items you left out, last round.'

'Lead on,' Py said cheerfully. 'Wilitang told me about these machines. I would certainly like to get back to full strength again.'

## Chapter 46 The Secret Hermitage

01

'As you can see, we've two fliers and an island boat in the shop at the moment,' said Malin, as he ushered us into the large hangar beyond the residence building after Py's ten minute treatment.

'The fliers bring in our supplies and most of our customers from our other communities. In a few rounds they'll be out collecting passengers for the courier ship. A few passengers may choose to walk here as you did, either for the exercise or a disinclination to risk their lives flying, but most we fly in.

'I was told flying was not a very safe way to travel,' I said.

'I would not advise it either – in Windvera standard fliers. However these aircraft are much safer than the native versions they look like. They were actually built on Saraime using the most up-to-date Saraime technology. We use aluminum and steel framing under the canvas and an electric motor powered by batteries to drive the propeller. It does have a typical set of pedals, but they're connected to a generator that charges the battery – extending the flier's range, and so are not essential to flight.

'The same for our island traders. We've a fleet of five to move our people and supplies between communities in the Windvera and the Catarian Islands. All are equipped with reliable Saraime-built steam engines. With steam engines being so rare on these islands, no one is likely to notice any difference between them and the more primitive Windvera versions.

'Now if you'll follow me, I'll introduce you to our newest project. Since it involves Unity technology, we need to keep it out of sight of our customers,' he added, leading us to a small utility room at the back of the hangar, and through a door half hidden behind some flier parts. It opened to a modern, electric lit storeroom piled with crates – likely in the cliff behind the hangar.

'The crates are filled with books that have been collected from the various communities' libraries within our province,' he said with sweep of his hand. 'Which is one of eight provinces we operate in the Pela, and so we have thousands of libraries, and have gathered a vast collection of books, scrolls, and manuscripts from the societies we serve. Many of them have been effectively lost in dusty collections scattered across the thousands of communities. Many are written in languages only local scholars can read, as well. We've now undertaken a vast project to translate and transcribe all of them into one common data base in the hope that we can discover the early history of humans in the Pela hidden beneath the myths and legends. It's been a project long dreamed of, but only now do we have the resources to undertake it, as you can see,' he said as he led us to a brightly lit room with four workstations fitted with Unity Standard screens. Three of the scholars we'd met were working at them. They looked very surprised to see us.

'This is our reading room. MiMylan, GarDone, and CrisJarka are historians. They review the scanned books, expanding and annotating the literal translations of the material. The earliest works can be very cryptic as literal translations,' Malin said, and then for the benefit of the three historians, reintroduced us, with our outside-the-shell origins and knowledge, adding, 'You can treat them all as white-sashed scholars, full members of The Hermitage. I will explain this to our community at the mid-round meal.

'Now, I will introduce you to the chief librarian of this project,' he said, leading us to a door on the

far side of the reading room.

'Company!' he called out as he ushered us into an office with a single standing desk with piles of books on both sides of it. Between them was a slim, pale figure standing before the desk. Its hands were rapidly flipping pages in the book on the desk before it.

As we entered, it turned its white, sculptured-metal face towards us. It regarded us for a full second with its glowing eyes before exclaiming, 'Captain!' its eyes growing even brighter, radiating happiness, somehow.

'Botts?' I gasped.

Botts bounded over to give me a steely hug. I'd never realized that sentient machines could be that emotional.

Stepping back while still holding on to my shoulders, Botts took me in with its brightly glowing eyes and exclaimed, 'I have found you at long last!'

Yes, it was Botts. I recognized his sense of humor.

'Your unfailing persistence has finally paid off,' I managed to reply, with a happy grin.

'It was wu-wei in action, Captain! All that was necessary was to turn around at precisely the right moment, and behold! You're found.'

'You are a master of wu-wei,' I admitted, and realized that it was Botts II standing before me – I could see a few dents and scratches and was suddenly alarmed. 'But what are you doing here, and where are the rest of my shipmates? Did something go wrong?'

'Everything went as planned. I am with them in the Amdia system as we speak. But I will say nothing more, for now. You must surprise them yourself. Oh, there is so much to tell, so much to learn – how I regret I must do it vocally, Captain!'

I turned to Malin beside me. 'Did you know our connection?'

'It seemed very likely. I was curious to see if I could surprise a sentient machine.'

'You did, Chief,' replied Botts. 'I had not expected wu-wei to work so efficiently.'

Behind me I could hear Naylea mutter an aside, 'A magnet for weirdness...'

Botts looked past me at my wide-eyed friends. 'I hope I did not startle you. I may take some getting used to. Living machines are very rare outside of the machine worlds, and of course, unknown in the Pela.'

'These are my friends,' I said, and introduced them. Each took Botts' extended hand, Naylea with a wry grin. 'Litang never fails to surprise.'

Py with a combination of eagerness and wariness. 'Wilitang told tales of living machines, but I never dreamed I'd meet one. NyLi is right, traveling with Wilitang is full of surprises.'

Trin shook its hand stoically. 'A pleasure to meet you, sir,' she said.

'Siss, Hissi?' I said, beckoning them forward, but they remained standing, growling softly by the door. 'It seems my dragon friends are a bit wary of you. Perhaps because they can't read your mind.'

'Siss, Hissi,' Botts nodded politely to them and turned to Naylea, 'You are right about the Captain. I can tell you that the entire Machine Directorate is as delighted as I am to find Captain Litang alive, since he does seem to have a strange talent for the unexpected. The Directorate values him greatly for everything he's brought to our attention. Indeed, who else would have not only survived what appeared to be certain death, but turn up here accompanied by his would-be assassin, an ex-Cimmadar sub-captain, a Laezan teacher, and two Simla dragons?'

'It's not a talent, it's just blind luck – good and bad. Still, I've a perfectly rational explanation for being here...'

'Save it, Litang. We'd be here all morning, and it's not all that rational anyway,' muttered Naylea.

'Right. We'll have time later, I hope – if your work allows. But tell me briefly how you, or rather Botts II, ended up here. And come to think of it, how you know that my shipmates are fine, that the Machine Directorate is delighted, and what you have to do with this book project? I seem to recall that Botts II did not have a quantum com-chip installed.'



'Actually, this is Botts III, Captain. With the entire crew off in the Pela, Botts II had little to do, so when I was in radio contact with it, I put it to work building a third Botts to explore the Pela. We had replacement parts for Botts II in the parts room, so much of the work was simple assembly work that Botts II could do without my direct involvement.'

'And the necessary quantum-chip? Didn't you tell me once, long ago, that you could not fabricate a quantum com-chip with the printers on the ship?'

'True. I borrowed the quantum com-chip from the CreditBox, which, of course, did have one.'

'You "borrowed" it?'

'It was redundant, as long as I was on board, and so would not be missed. And since the Starry Shore was going to be replaced before it would be needed again, I...'

'Borrowed it.'

'I fear that I may have picked up a few expeditious habits during my many years in service with Villain Viseor. The quantum com-chip was necessary for the mission, as was an extended-range rocket sled for transportation that I also had Botts II build.'

'Without informing me.'

'I knew that you were reluctant to have Botts II stay behind with you, but for a third remotely controllable avatar version of me on a separate and secret mission for the Directorate... I felt that it was not worth bothering you about.'

'Villain Viseor would've seen it in that light, I suppose,' I said.

Its eyes brightened. 'Blame it on my youth. However, the project was not a personal one, but rather part of a larger Directorate project. There was, and still remains, a great pressure from my comrades in the Machine Worlds to explore the Pela. The Pela has become the hobby – the art, if you will – of tens of thousands of Machines, all of whom require more data. The Directorate's formal exploration may take decades to be put into effect, so a vast number of machines were eager for even the tiny samples of data that a single avatar-explorer could provide.'

'So much for having all the time in the universe...' I muttered.

'As I said, Captain, it's our art. Our passion. We are, after all, sentient beings evolved from humans... My machine comrades interested in the Pela made the case that data was needed to design an efficient study, and that a single avatar providing that data would not likely pose any significant risk to the large scale study – an argument that they won. So the Botts III avatar had set out for the Pela on its rocket sled before you and the crew arrived back aboard the Starry Shore to return home.'

'This quantum com-chip equipped Botts III avatar is constantly on line and controllable not only with and by me, but with the thousands of sentient machines that are following its exploration. A small directing committee has been formed to direct its operations, leaving me free to look after my own affairs. I do, however, have priority over this remote avatar which allows me to take full control of it as needed – I am using that priority now, in fact to be here with you.'

'For example, when you failed to return to the ship, I directed Botts III to Redoubt Island. However it arrived only after Captain Merlun had concluded her search. If you were still alive, I decided that you were most likely with the fleet... Perhaps erroneously?'

'Yes. However, carry on with your story.'

'I then attempted to catch up with the rebel fleet, but once again, arrived too late. It had been destroyed and the Empress's fleet was already returning to the space station. I did, however, locate, take possession of, and repair a slightly damaged Cimmadar transport to use as a secure base after which Botts III resumed the exploration under the direction of the Pela committee, reaching the island of Windvera within the first year.'

'Here, while remotely observing the civilization on Windvera, radio signals were intercepted from The Hermitage. Since radio technology seemed out of character with the rest of Windvera, we investigated further, and noting signs of Unity technology, decided to make contact.'

'Botts turning up was quite a surprise. We'd begun to receive reports of the survivors of the battle

reaching the Catarian Islands, and had pieced together a fair idea of what happened. But nothing prepared us for a sentient machine, or rather the remote unit of one,' said Malin. 'It had some rather interesting implications.'

'Which were explored by the Machine Directorate and, via their embassy in the Alantzia system, the Taoist Elder Council of Kimsara,' Botts continued. 'The result of which is the Pela Library Project, a joint Taoist and the Directorate project.'

'So you've spend most of your time in the Pela scanning books,' I said. 'I must admit there were times when I would've gladly changed places. Still it does seem rather tedious, even for a machine with all the time in the Nebula.'

'It is not I, but the Pela Committee that operates this unit most of the time. I spend most of my time with our old shipmates – not that it is all that much more exciting – our operation now is very routine – just as you would've liked.'

'I'm happy to hear that. I take it no one is in any hurry to get you back to chasing rouge machines, which I believe is your primary mission,' I said.

'I will eventually return to my mission, but human time-frames are irrelevant to us. I can spend a human lifetime with my friends and it won't impact my mission in any meaningful way. And I should add that the Directorate values my link to you far higher than chasing down rouge machines. Even now, I sense an undercurrent of anticipation. Your unexpected reappearance has them anticipating interesting things from you.'

'They can hope all they want, I've already done my part to keep them amused.'

'It's not hope, Captain. It's a matter of quantum-probability mathematics.'

'I don't believe there is a thing called quantum-probability mathematics.'

'I believe you call it luck.'

'They can dream on. I've seen all of the wild Pela I care to see. I intend to return to the civilized Principalities of Saraime and find a nice, unexciting job – be it running a ship's engine room or growing tey.'

'I'll ask you again in four years, after my replacement arrives,' replied Botts. 'You may find growing tey does not suit you.'

## 02

'I'm sure it's been a very, shall we say, interesting, morning for everyone. I suspect that you'll need some time alone to absorb all of it and talk about it among yourselves. If you want to get away, we have a trail that circles the valley – you can see the trail head just beyond the hangar. There are feather-bears and a few big cat-like creatures in these mountains, but if you don't annoy them, they should leave you alone,' said Malin, pointing to the trail's head, as we left the hangar.

'I, for one, will risk them,' I said.

'Lead on, Litang. We'll follow you – at a safe distance,' said Naylea.

As it turned out, we followed the dragons, who ranged out ahead of us. Siss no doubt hunting, Hissi, I suspect, making snide comments about Siss's hunting, since I heard them growling at each other up ahead.

We walked mostly in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, along the narrow path as it wound its way between mossy boulders and towering pines. The wind shook droplets from the pines, which slowly floated down, to splash on my face and dampen my clothing. I looked down to follow the path, and watched as my feet stepped the way I had learned more than ten years ago – setting the little claws in the toe of my leading boot into the moss, and then slipping the trailing one free... even here, where it wasn't necessary. A little habit of life in the Pela. A life that up until a few hours ago, I thought would be mine until I died.

I'd chosen it when I had steered the Phoenix for the brighter sky and Naylea Cin, and I didn't regret it. I'd found a place where – if I could keep my wits about me, and not go off to pirate gatherings again – I could live the quiet life I yearned for. I had found Naylea Cin again, and had good friends like Py, Trin, Tey Pot, KaRaya Ma and her boys, even Captain KimTara and my shipmates aboard the Lora Lakes and Telrai Peaks here. On the other hand, just about everyone I knew in the Nebula were spaceers – and I couldn't go back to that life – so I'd see them only briefly and rarely. If I returned, I'd have to start over... But I did miss my old life – the nights, the seasons, oceans, and the safety of the Unity.

'I'm thinking that you are so intensely ordinary, Litang,' began Naylea, who was walking beside me. She paused as we ducked under a drooping pine bough. 'So intensely Unity Standard, that you're like a massive lodestone of ordinariness which attracts anything extraordinary towards you. Take this,' she swept her hands to include the entire Pela. 'A secret way station, the deepest secrets of the Order, and a sentient machine all before the mid-round meal. And, I gather, even the Machine Directorate sees it in you. You're a magnet for weirdness.'

'I seem to recall you saying that it was my Unity Standardness that attracted you to me. So perhaps you're right.'

'Touche!' she laughed. 'What will be next? Hopefully only a feather-bear. We can deal with feather-bears.'

'Well, we found our way home to the Principalities,' I said as we came upon a long stone bench overlooking the valley. 'Naylea and Py can resume what remains of their assignments. I've no definite plans – it sort of depends. What about you, Natta? We had talked of exploring the Core Islands for a while.'

'It sort of depends, as well,' she said with a glance to Py, and with the faintest of smiles.

'Remember, Litang, whatever you do, your ride to the Unity leaves in less than four years,' said Naylea.

'I've no intention of returning to the Unity any time soon. And not without you. I made that decision a decade ago.'

'You'll leave. You're too Unity Standard to stay.'

'You're wrong, my dear. I believe I have found all that I want here – you, friends, and the prospect of a quiet life. And I did have a quiet, unexciting life as an engineer for a couple thousand rounds, so I know it's possible.'

'Somehow I doubt that. And well, none of us are home yet. We still have the Endless Sky to cross with Litang. That's far from a sure thing.'

'I'm sure that Captain LyeCarr will see us all safely home,' I replied, hoping I wasn't tempting fate yet again.

We walked on, now talking of this and that – of how I came to know Botts, the Order beyond the shell, and of Py's prospects of leaving the shell for a time to see this other place. The walk was long and we took our time, arriving back at The Hermitage not long before the mid-round meal. I, at least, was exhausted, not from the walk, but from chasing thoughts around and around in my mind, without ever quite catching them.

Malin introduced us to the staff once more – this time as full partners in their operation.

After the meal, Botts signaled me, via my com-link, that it had arranged a vid-conference with my old shipmates for half an hour after the sleep period gong.

We spent the afternoon helping the staff get the guest rooms ready for company. There would be 18

guests arriving within the next six or seven rounds, who would be here until the courier ship, the Island Dove, arrived. Though the ship was expected within the next dozen rounds, without radio contact between the island groups, The Hermitage had no way of knowing exactly when it would arrive. It may've encountered storms, experienced mechanical breakdowns or suffered some other delay. It could also never arrive, so there was a tinge of apprehension in the air as well. The Pela is not the Unity, and even in the Unity, some ships never arrive.

I slipped out of The Hermitage just before the sleep period and hurried through the hangar to the secret door where Botts was waiting to let me in. He took me to the reading room where one of the view screens had a split view of two empty, and unfamiliar, shipboard office compartments.

'Two ships these days?'

'Three, actually. I'm aboard the Stiletto, Captain Molaye Merlun, master. Botts II, equipped with a new quantum com-chip is aboard the Drift Star, Captain Diciel d'Vel, master, together with some of your younger shipmates. I have no link to the third ship, the Golden Dream, Captain Fayla Linnor, master, but none of your old shipmates are aboard her,' replied Botts.

'You guys must be doing well to have added two ships in ten years.'

'We are, but I will let my shipmates tell you all about that.'

'I'm glad everything turned out.'

I must admit to being very nervous with the prospect of seeing my old shipmates again – for reasons I could not pin down. I was glad that I had a chance to watch them as they drifted in without them knowing I was watching.

Molaye, tall and lanky, looked every bit the captain I had expected her to be. She drifted in with an air of easy, indolent authority – still wearing an invisible pirate piece on her hips. She slipped behind her large desk while idly badgering Botts about the nature of this executive-only meeting. 'I believe I'm in charge of this ship and the company. What's this all about?'

'Patience, Captain.'

Riv and Lilm drifted in next, Riv grumbling because it was his long sleep watch. Sitting himself down on the edge of the desk asked, 'What's so important that you have to drag me all the way up here? Couldn't you just send a memo – or tell Lilm?'

'Ask Botts. It's the one calling the meeting.'

The Drays, Barlan and Saysa entered, before Botts had a chance to answer.

When they had settled against the cabin bulkhead, Riv said, 'We're all here. What do you have to say, Botts? This is costing me sleep.'

'Oh, hush Riv,' snapped Lilm.

'Just waiting for Dici and his crew to join us,' replied Botts, indicating an unseen view screen, that showed Dici, followed by Elana, Kie and Sar Nil. They filled the other half of my screen, as Botts adjusted the view to make it almost look like everyone was in the same cabin.

'We're all here now – let's lift, Botts. What is it that you've dragged us here for?' grumbled Riv.

'I believe I have a confession to make...' Botts began and launched into a brief description of the construction of Botts III. I could plainly see that Molaye had already grasped the implications of Botts' story. She leaned forward staring at me – or the blank screen on the bulkhead. 'Cut it short, Botts,' she snapped.

'Yes, Captain. Botts III has recently had the good fortune of crossing orbits with an old shipmate of ours...' And the screen on their side sprang to life.

'Is it really you, Wil?' said Molaye, slowly rising from her chair to lean over her desk. 'Is it really you, Captain?'

The others had stirred as well. 'Of course it's the Skipper. Who else could it be? He's just lost his whiskers. It's grand to see you Skipper!' said Riv in the rising tide of exclamations. 'There was some talk aboard of you being dead.'

'My fault. Sorry about that,' I said, suddenly at ease. 'I can't tell you how good it is to see all of you!'

I never thought I'd see you again!"

It was good – grand – to see and banter with my old shipmates and friends, some who had inhabited my little world for three decades. As the hubbub settled down, and Molaye covertly wiped a tear from her eye, I asked, 'Where are Illy and Lili? How are they doing?'

'Illy's retired, sort of. Technically she's our Office Manager on Constina, but it doesn't need a lot of managing. Rafe is still retired there as well, but looks after finding boxes for us. Lili cashed out and now is raising a family, as are Myes and Nadde.

As for the rest of us, as you can see, we returned to our old Amdia orbit. We're back to doing business with your Grandmama as well, plus a lot more these days. If you still remember your old life, you can fill in the blanks. But enough about us, tell us where you've been, what you've been up to and where you are now.'

'Too much to tell. Still...' I gave them a quick sketch of my life in the Pela.

'I seem to sense we're not getting the whole story, Wil,' said Molaye.

'Well, there's far too much to tell and Riv needs his sleep. So tell me, what have you been up to...'

'Oh, no you don't. What about your assassin, the Cin girl that you went back for?'

'I didn't go back for her...'

'Wil, I know you too well...'

'Well, not only for her.'

'Right. So, did you find her – before the island blew up under you?'

'Well, yes. She darted me in the back right after I stepped out of the gig. She planned to use me to get close to Min, so she didn't kill me. I was unconscious aboard the gig when the island blew up.'

'And?'

'And, well, she was shipwrecked with me.'

'And?'

'And, well, we came to an understanding. She's decided not to kill me...'

'And?' she asked, rising from her desk and stood, apparently trying to peer behind my image on the screen.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'Just looking for all the little Litangs, who, even as we speak, are likely trying to sneak up on their ol'man with toy knives and darters in hand.'

'Very humorous,' I muttered over the laughter from the other side.

'So where is she and all those little Litangs?' asked Molaye, not deterred.

'There are no little Litangs,' I said, and was forced to give a sketchy outline of Naylea and me. 'So you see, we're just friends...'

'Right, We'll talk about that later,' said Molaye with a leering look, but she let it drop. 'Any chance of getting home?'

'Well, it seems that I'm the Machine Directorate's fair haired boy for all the weird things I've brought, unwillingly, to their attention. So when they launch their full scale exploration of the Pela, I gather that they'd be able to offer me transportation back to the Unity. But that may be decades from now. Machines have time and take it, sometimes.' I was honor bound to keep the Taoist ties to the Pela secret, so it would be the machines that carried me home, if ever I went. That, at least, would be my story.

'Now tell me how things are going with you. Botts tells me you actually are a three ship line now with Captain Linnor aboard now as well. It sounds like you're quite a success.'

'We had plenty of credits to start with with the gold shares and the sale of the darq gem. You're still a part owner, you know. We bought a nice used 100 box freighter, the Drift Star, for Dici with Elana as his first mate. We'll get her and Kie a ship of their own sooner or later. The Drift Star handles our old run out to Hendin. Feyla decided to give up the deep drifts, and bought into the company so we picked

up a third ship. Her Golden Dream handles the other leg of our old pattern. With two ships in the drifts we can deliver everything twice as fast – or even faster, since we keep the Stiletto here in Amdia orbit, collecting boxes for the drifts and taking anything else we can pick up for in-system delivery...'

I had to laugh. 'You mean to say that the Drifteer Pirate Queen Merlun is running rings around Amdia just like cautious ol'Cap'n Crofter always dreamed of doing?'

She scowled. 'And it's driving me to distraction – it's so boring! After a few years I think I'll turn over the Stiletto to Dici and take up rocket racing before I lose my reflexes!'

'So the dream is rocket racing, not cha growing, is it?'

'It's rocket racing, Wil. And I can't wait.'

'Well why are you running circles around Amdia instead of being the fiercest trader/pirate in the drifts?'

She sighed. 'I don't know how familiar you are with a brand new Ividar SilverStar 96 Box Liner, but it is the finest, fastest, most cost efficient, and just plain prettiest ship in the Amdia system, bar none. It'll blind you with the brightness of its silver livery. Neb, she's a sweet ship, Wil. I just couldn't bring myself to take her out into the drifts. A few years of plowing through the dust and she wouldn't shine half as brightly – and well, I want to sail her myself. So here I am, making circles around Amdia, just like you always dreamed of doing. Life can be so ironic...'

'I hope you're up to speed on Grandmama. I take it you read my memoirs...'

'Aye. We decided that we could deal with her and St Bleyth, if need be. However, she assured us that we were off the books, and knowing what we know about the organization, we were better in than out, so that's all clear. The fact is, our St Bleyth cargoes now accounts for less than a third of our business, so we're pretty independent. I know she'll be happy to hear that you're still alive. She was upset when she heard – our very discreet – account of having to leave you behind, lost and likely dead. Well, as upset as a hard boiled St Bleyth grandmother could be – who had a hand in setting off that chain of events.'

'I can imagine. However, don't say anything to her at all. Let's not give them any reason to be interested in you again. Botts tells me that the Machine Directorate has offered to send vid radio-packets for me – for as long as I can reach them via Botts' quantum com-chip. They will be delivered by the Directorate's diplomatic envoys in Amdia and Azminn, so there's no need for you to mention hearing from me at all, it would only raise questions as to how you found out in mid-passage or what sort of connections you still have with me. No point taking chances until we know where I stand with St Bleyth.'

We talked for two hours, before I let them get back to work, and Riv to sleep. I needed some sleep as well. It had been a long and eventful round.

## Chapter 47 A New Mission

01

The following “evening”, the common room was abuzz with quiet conversations. Hissi and Siss were both engaged in a chess game with a curious audience – Hissi for the love of the game, any game – and Siss for the love of attention. I stood off to one side, waiting for a chance to talk to Naylea.

I caught her eye, and she read my glance. And with a few more words to her companion, she drifted to me.

'Let's walk,' I said.

'If you wish.'

Despite the evening-like atmosphere in the common room, it was still bright, ever-day outside. I led her past the hangar to the path amongst the pines and rocks.

'Is this going to be about us and the Unity?' she asked.

'No. Us and the Unity can wait. The Directorate has offered me the opportunity to send vid radio-packets to anyone in the Unity and pass along any replies as well. Botts says that they'd be happy to extend that offer to you.

'I'm planning to contact my family, and old shipmates, including Grandmama – M'Risha Drae, Zilantra V'Ran, Tivea Reeven, whatever name you know her by. If you want, I could pass along word to her of how successful your Honor Mission was, and inquire if that is reflected in the Order's records. I don't know if that still means anything to you or not.'

'There is no true honor in serving St Bleyth. Just obedience. Make no mention of me.'

'Right. Just thought I'd mention it. However, if there is anyone you wish to contact in the Unity, I'll arrange it with Botts.'

She walked in silence for a while. 'I would like to send a message to my mother.'

'Good. we'll talk to Botts. Botts said that if you still have your com-link, you can have it recharged, so you can send the message privately, otherwise he will set up a vid session in his office.'

'I don't have it here. When its charge died, I put it away. Have Botts send for me when it is ready for me. Now let's turn back. We shouldn't be gone too long.'

I'm sure no one noticed, or cared, but we turned back.

02

The following round a supply boat arrived for the Island Dove. It brought bunker fuel – black-cake – and with it, familiar memories as I joined the crew in transferring black-cake from the supply ship to The Hermitage's fuel bunker. Afterward, I washed the black soot off in a cool, waterfall fed pool amongst the pines before dinner, and after dinner I told Naylea, 'Botts says that whenever you're ready, you can record your message.'

'I'll do it now.'

'Right. I'll signal Botts so he can meet us at the door.'

After Botts led us into his office and picking up a small pendant that looked to be a smooth black stone with a leather loop from its desk, it handed it to Naylea. 'I have printed out a new com-link for you. I fashioned it as a pendant rather than as a band, so that you can keep it hidden on your person. I've set up a link at one of the workstations in the reading room to record your message, but in the future you can use the immersive viewer feature of com-link to record and receive messages, if you care to, for as long as you are in com-link range of me.'

'Why, thank you Botts.' Naylea blushed. 'That was very kind and thoughtful. I'm glad that some of the strangeness Litang attracts isn't all deadly.'

'I believe I could say the same thing about you. Now, if you will hold the com-link in your hand, I will imprint and activate it.'

'I'm afraid there were times that I would've made a liar out of you, Botts.'

'Then we won't mention them. Right – it's activated. We'll leave you to your message. The Captain and I still have much to catch up on, so please take your time. We'll be in my office.'

The Four Shipmates guarded their secrets well – though clearly, not well enough. Though they didn't reveal their real secrets, they may have alluded to them too casually – even the name of their ship, the Lost Star, alluded to them. I had few secrets, which I tried keeping as they did, to myself. Unsuccessfully, I'm afraid. The one secret I wanted to keep was my encounters with the soul stones, and without them, the story of the mutiny wouldn't make a great deal of sense. And without the mutiny

I didn't have much of a story to tell, so, if I mentioned my time aboard the Lora Lakes at all, it was simply on a long charter to film some natives with the giant dragon as the tale's star attraction.

I felt, however, that I could make an exception for Botts, since he'd had a soul stone and wasn't susceptible to greed. So while we waited in the scanning office, for Naylea to record her message, I spun my yarn of not only the voyage of the Lora Lakes, but my previous encounters with the Dragon People. What I failed to take into account was that I was actually telling the story to several hundred thousand sentient machines. And their passion. Even before I had finished my tale, Botts – or rather the machines usually in control of Botts III – were eagerly questioning me about every little detail of the episode until Naylea knocked on the door, and Botts cut off communication.

I walked a quiet Naylea back to the Hermitage, and later, as I lay on my pallet, Botts signaled me.

'I'm very sorry, Captain for putting you through that. It seems that once again our quantum-probability mathematics have correctly predicted that you would bring to our attention something of interest. We don't build statues on our worlds, but if we did, we would build one of Captain Wil Litang for all the undreamed of mysteries of the Nine Star Nebula you have led us to.'

'Through no fault of my own.'

'A gift the Directorate greatly appreciates. I'm afraid that I have one more question. Could you take this avatar to that island?'

'I've told you all I know. I spent the voyage tending the engines, not on the bridge. I can tell you the nominal cruising speed based on propeller revolutions, and for how many rounds it took to arrive...'

'Which were?' asked Botts – or the machines of the Pela Committee in the background.

I thought back and after several seconds, gave him the Lora Lake's approximate cruising speed and the time from the Verenta Islands to Halfway Islands – 27 rounds – and then 32 rounds to the Dragon People Islands.

'And on the return voyage?'

'81 rounds to reach Karena in the Donta. And with that, I think I have told you all I know about the island. I've told no one else about that incident and I would appreciate it if you would keep what I told you to yourselves.'

'Yes, of course. We appreciate the risks they present. To humans,' replied Botts, or the unseen machines.

No, not only to humans, it would seem. They affect machines as well.

03

The next round Botts asked me to step around after breakfast. It led me to its office where it had brought up a chart of the Saraima and the surrounding endless seas on its large monitor. The chart showed two lines, one from Taira in the Varenta Islands, and one from Karena in the Dontas which converged at a point in the endless sea.

'As you can see, we have attempted to reconstruct your course. We have found, in the archives of the Order, an old chart that records a small group of islands in the Endless-sky that would seem to correspond to your Halfway Islands. I have used them as a reference point, though their current positions are subject to a fairly significant margin of error. Still, assuming that the air currents were constant, we can roughly converge the two courses at their end point – here.'

Which, in two dimensions was a point, but in three, was a broad arc, and given all the uncertainties, a very broad arc.

'Do you know the course vector from Taira or the DeArjen's Island?' asked Botts, as I studied the chart.

'I was not invited, nor did I spend any time on the bridge. However, when Captain KimTara was injured and it looked like the first mate might have to take us back, I was consulted and he had set a



course vector for home.'

'Do you recall it?'

Strangely, and unfortunately, I did and reluctantly rattled off the bearings to the bright spot in the sky. Botts readjusted the point of convergence, slightly. It turned, its eyes bright. 'Most helpful.'

'It looks nice and neat on the chart, Botts, but it's not. First, because I don't know the actual return vector Captain KimTara set, since I was back in the engine room when we sailed. She may have used a different one. And since our gyroscope was destroyed when the tree trunk smashed the bridge, the Captain likely had to rely on her memory. Knowing her, I'd have thought that between her memory and the log she'd have been able to retrace our original course, and yet she missed her mark by the distance between the Verentas and the Dontas – 10 rounds sailing in a modern ship... Which suggests to me that the air currents are not very predictable, which makes that nice triangle you've drawn more theological than theoretical.'

Botts nodded. 'Point taken.'

'The other wild factor is that we found the DeArjen's Islands using DeArjen's special guide talent for finding his way back to anywhere he'd been. I don't know how that talent works. He may've lead us straight to the islands, but more likely he constantly adjusted our course as the islands came more in focus, or as the air currents carried us off course. And he may've first steered us to the Halfway Islands where he'd spent some time, and only from them steered us to the Dragon People's islands by another vector altogether. All of which makes that triangle of yours even more theological. In short, I think you'd end up having to spend a great deal of time searching a very large sphere of the Endless-sky to find the islands.'

Botts gave a little twitch of a shrug. 'But it is not impossible to find those islands, is it?'

'Oh, it's certainly possible – with enough resources, time, and a great deal of luck. That's why I kept the story to myself. I told you only because I'd thought you and your comrade machines were free of greed.'

'The passion for knowledge can be a lot like greed,' Botts admitted. 'The Pela Committee is very eager to investigate this possible artifact, not only because of its great antiquity, but because it suggests that there may be a sophisticated, machine-using alien race within the Pela. The known dragons, like your companions, are intelligent, but not machine builders, or "evolvers," as we look on biological machine makers. So, if your island is actually a vessel or some other constructed artifact, then we may have the first evidence of a non-human race of machine evolvers. In any event, the artifact corresponds, at least in size, to the oldest legends of the Dragon Kings of Cimmadar and many other societies, so we have an artifact that we can directly place in the legends we are acculturating.'

'And then we have its connection to the still mysterious darq gems,' added Botts with its little shrug-like movement. 'Speaking of which, the Darq Gem Committee would like a few minutes of your time after we're done here. They are eager to hear about your experience with their use, since we don't have humans to conduct tests on in the Machine Drifts.'

'I suppose, though I don't know how I can help them. I was unconscious most of the time during their use. What have you found out about them?'

'I have not been following their investigations, but it is my understanding that the gem has not yielded many of its secrets. It appears to be composed of some sort of designed matter that folds quantum-like into dimensions that we have so far been unable to unravel without taking the gem physically apart – which we are not yet prepared to do. Until you related your experiences, we had no idea what, if anything, it was designed to do, which is why your encounter with their use has energized that committee as well. You may get that statue yet.'

I just shook my head, and said, 'Through no fault of my own.'

'In any event, the discovery of an unknown design of D-matter, from the Pela, is deemed a high priority project since, due to the energies required to reprogram the universe to create designed matter, it seems unlikely to have been produced within the Pela. It may well be an alien artifact that originates

either deeper within the system or outside of the Pela, and perhaps the Nebula itself. For security purposes alone, this calls for investigation. All of which is to say that investigating DeArjen's Island has become a prime priority within the Directorate. A priority far higher than scanning books for this unit.'

'I hope that the Directorate and the various committees realize the effects these darq gems have on humans. And I don't just mean their strange psychic power over us. Their value might tempt even a Laezan or a Taoist. This matter should be treated very, very carefully.'

'Point taken, Captain. However, your old Lora Lakes shipmates know of them as well, and are subject to the same greed. It would seem that expeditious action is called for. If they are found to be a danger to humans, they should be removed from the island. And, if they suggest a risk to the Nebula, then we should be prepared to confront it,' Botts said, though I'm pretty certain, I was talking to the Plea committee rather than Botts.

'Yes, I suppose you are right. It's entirely possible that others are looking for that island as we speak. Hopefully unsuccessfully.' I feared that it was an actuality, likely, rather than possible.

'But you can't guarantee that it will be unsuccessful. The people in the know command enough wealth to finance an extended expedition.'

'True. Though I'd hope they'd have more sense.'

'Are you willing to trust that judgment?'

They had me there. 'No.'

'Would it not be prudent, Captain Litang, to assess the danger, and if need be, address it promptly?'

'Yes, I suppose so. If you can.'

'We have a great technological edge on any other seekers. Our reckoning may be rather crude, but we can search a vast section of the sky-sea with remote drones, making the task manageable.'

I wasn't going to win an argument with the Directorate. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Then you have no objection if we take this matter up directly with the Taoist Elder Council on Kimsara in order to allow the Botts III unit to conduct a search and the initial survey?'

'No. Do as you think best. I'm in no position to question your collective judgment.'

'Thank you,' it said, and then reverted back to Botts. Botts eyes glowed brightly, 'We will use the Complacent Dragon for the expedition, Captain. It is the Cimmadar transport ship I arrived in, so I have a claim to its use. And since it is powered by a micro-reactor, it is well equipped to undertake an extended search for the islands. I will begin printing the equipment we will need – radar, course-tracking beacons, search drones, and analytical devices. I will, of course, conduct the actual covert survey of the artifact myself. That should prevent or minimize any reaction by the natives. I will use the rocket sled to reach the island so that the Complacent Dragon can keep well clear and out of any danger. The expedition should be no more dangerous than sailing the wide-skies in a well founded ship. I could, in fact, conduct the entire expedition myself, but the Directorate feels that our human partners will want to be included in the expedition.

'It would be like old times, Captain,' gushed this level 10 (plus?) sentient machine like a wet behind the ears youth, 'if you would accompany the expedition.'

'I'm far from excited to return to that island, Botts.'

'In any event, the expedition, once it is approved, will start from the Dontas, so it should not affect your plans, should you decide not accompany it.'

'Do I have a choice? I've been there before and know what to expect so that I can direct your investigation. Plus, if there is any danger – I don't think that it can be ruled out – I'd feel responsible for it. I'd be just as uneasy staying behind.'

'Danger seems unlikely,' replied Botts. And as its eyes brightened, 'And even if we encounter a little, it would be, as I said, 'just like old times, Captain!'

'That, Botts, is exactly what I'm afraid of.'

Its eyes grew even brighter.

I stayed on to be cross-examined by the Darq Gem Committee for a few minutes that amounted to over an hour. I told them all I knew, which wasn't much, several times, it seemed.

04

I considered giving Malin the heads up about the expedition before word came from the Elder Council, but decided not. I was very reluctant to talk about the horde of darq gems, and to say nothing about them would involve a great deal of lying, which I did not care to do.

In the meantime, guests began to arrive, keeping me busy doing household tasks around The Hermitage. In my free time, I had long talks with Molaye and my old shipmates, when they were free. And when they weren't, I took long walks amongst the pines and boulders trying to discover exactly what I wanted to do – after the blasted expedition to DeArjen's Islands – which I really didn't want to do. I had little success because it all depended on Naylea. I was like a dog chasing it's tail – or rather stalking it, since I seemed unable to discover what she thought, no matter how carefully I tried.

On the third round after my conversation with Botts, I rose with the Laezans. Hissi slipped over to the warm half of the pallet and went back to sleep. I grabbed a towel and slipped out into the ever-day – another very damp and misty one. The Laezans were slowly beginning their silent shadowboxing meditations in the courtyard. I crossed the narrow valley and wound my way through the boulders and pines to the long waterfall-fed pool in the cove for a swim, as had become my daily custom. The crystal clear water was rather cold, but refreshing, once you got used to it. Plus, its rocky bottom and finned inhabitants made for an interesting swim. It had been a long time since I had a chance to swim without crossbow bolts raining down on me, and so I generally took my time. As it turned out, I rather lost track of time.

I pulled myself out of the water and after glancing around, stripped off my old spaceer undershirt and briefs to wring them out. Since they were made of armored material – I took no chances in the Drifts – they were not merely, nearly indestructible, but they could be washed and wrung free of water to be nearly dry within a minute. Waving them about to dry them, I walked over to the flat stone where I had piled the rest of my clothes, only to discover that the towel I had laid on top was nowhere to be seen. My first racing thoughts jumped to feathered bears. My second thought was that was silly. Why would a feather-bear steal a towel? Still, I slowly looked around, trying to pierce the deep shadows between the jumble of boulders and thick pines that surrounded the pool. It was very quiet. The only sound was the slow splashing of water down the cliff, over the rocks and into the pool. I casually reached into the pile of clothes for my trousers, where I kept my trusty sissy...

There was a sharp crack! And a dart of pain in my backside.

I spun around to find Naylea – her damp hair half undone from her recent exercise, with the tightly twisted towel in her hand and her once familiar glint of cruel delightful in her eyes.

'My, that brings back memories,' she said with a wicked laugh and spun the towel even tighter.

'Don't you dare!'

'And why not?'

'It wouldn't be in accordance with the Way,' I replied. 'You took a vow to follow the Way.'

She grinned, dared, and snapped the towel at me, once again. I leaped aside, and then leaped for her, catching hold of her by her jacket, I pulled her close and kissed her.

She pressed closer and kissed me as well, for several long seconds.

She backed off a little and looked up at me.

'You're overdressed,' I whispered.

She shook her head "no."

'You're almost as wet as I am. You'll catch your death of cold.'

'I'm quite warm from my exercise. I just came to thank you.'

'For what? Never mind. Just thank me again...'

She leaned in and kissed me lightly again before pushing me away, though she kept her arms on my shoulders. With a bright, and now, not a cruel smile, said, 'I think that's enough, Captain Litang. I just wanted to thank you for arranging with Botts to send my message. I received a long reply from my mother before I slept. She seemed truly overjoyed to hear from me, and sent me a long, and loving reply.'

'That's hardly surprising. Why wouldn't she be happy? You're her daughter and you were on very good terms with her.'

She slipped her hands from my shoulders, to my waist and pulled me close. 'It's been nearly 20 years since I sent her a message. Hardly the dutiful, loving daughter.'

'You sent one the first opportunity you had.'

'Not quite. I could've sent a message from Ravin – but I was on a mission and that would've been a breach of operational secrecy. Still... that is all in the past. I just wanted to thank you and Botts, and the Directorate for their kindness. It has made me and, I believe, my mother very happy.'

'I'm happy as well.' I pulled her close again.

'I can see that,' she replied with a leer and pushed me away again. 'Now get dressed. You'll miss breakfast,' she added, and breaking free, turned to go.

'I'm willing to give it a miss.'

'But I'm not,' she laughed, and slipped into the shadows without a glance back, leaving me in love with her, once again.

I picked up the towel she'd dropped and absently started drying myself off.

Well, I thought, noting the beating of my heart, that did it. I wanted Cin, my sometimes cruel, would-be assassin. And for that, I blamed my 500 generations of St Bleyth – who, very smugly didn't bother denying it. My head may've been Unity Standard, but my passions were ruled by St Bleyth. All my Unity Standardness could do is suggest that it was not so much Cin's cruelty, but her cheerful use of it only when necessary that attracted me to her, a St Bleyth characteristic, just as mine was a cold ruthlessness when I needed it. And as much as I appreciated the Laezan, NyLi, with kindness to all, NyLi was not Naylea Cin. I loved Naylea Cin. Neb help me.

05

After breakfast, Botts signaled me via my com-link and asked me to step around to its office.

'What's up, Botts?' I asked as I met it in the reading room.

'I've received word that the expedition has been approved by the Taoist elders.'

'As expected.'

'Yes. I've been asked to brief you on how we will handle the darq gem situation.'

'What darq gem situation?'

'As you suspected, the committee now believes that the darq gems are communication devices that act much like the neuro-links of your com-link, which is to say, it can read your brain activity, interact with it at the neuron level, but in the case of the darq gem, it can be used to take command of brain processes as well, and at a distance far greater than your com-link. We also suspect that it can also transmit this neuron-data instantaneously anywhere via a quantum com link.'

'That sounds plausible. My impression was that the true Scarlet Guard were acting as scouts, so communicating back to the mother ship seems likely.'

'Exactly. The problem is that these darq gems pose a great danger to humans, on two fronts. First, the ability of the gem to be used to take control of humans. And secondly, the great value humans place on the gems, both in the Unity and here in the Saraime. Since you have been discreet...'

'Not discreet enough' I muttered under my breath.

'About these gems, we propose calling them "thought lenses." By referring to them as thought lenses, and conducting our investigation remotely with Botts III, no connection to soul stones and darg gems need be made, hopefully avoiding the problem you encountered on your last visit.'

'It should work, though it is a deception of sorts..'

'Perhaps, but a thought lens is a far more accurate description of the object than the other terms, and can be easily justified on that account alone.'

'Is that Villain Viseor talking again, Botts?'

'Why not at all, Captain. It comes directly down from the Directorate, sir.'

Its eyes had brightened just a little, so I said, 'You're a poor liar, Botts.'

'Villain Viseor said the same thing.'

Malin asked me to step around to his office after the mid-round meal.

'I've had a long message from the Elder Council and the Directorate concerning some expedition to some uncharted island that you already know about...'

'Ah, yes. It seems that one of my old spaceer stories, an account of a visit to an uncharted group of islands by a documentary maker to film some rather strange people, the reputed Dragon People or "Scarlet Guard" of the Dragon Kings – caught the Pela Committee's interest...'

'Care to share the story?' he asked, toying with his black stone.

I gave him an edited version – downgrading the mutiny into a shore leave that turned tragic, while emphasizing the possibility that the whole island was an ancient city or ship. 'So you see, the Pela Committee feels that this artifact may be an artifact of a machine-making alien race in the Pela, with perhaps ties outside the Nebula itself – hence the urgency to examine it.'

'And you're volunteering to lead it?'

'I'm volunteering to accompany it. Botts will be the principle investigator. I agreed to go along because, well, if they'd encounter any trouble, I'd feel responsible.'

'Will there be trouble?'

'Beyond the normal dangers of an extended voyage into an empty sea – storms, mechanical breakdowns, and getting lost?'

'Yes, beyond those.'

'Since Botts will be doing the actual survey work, the Complacent Dragon need not even enter the islands or get close to the Dragon People, so there is no reason to expect trouble.'

'But? I detect a certain lack of eagerness.'

I shook my head. 'I just have bad memories of the islands. It should be safe enough.'

Malin shrugged. 'The directive is worded in such a way that it would seem we have a choice in the matter. But, I take it, you're not going to give me a solid reason to give it a miss.'

'They're just being polite. Botts said that it could go alone if need be. He's stood 100 plus days on watches as pilot, so it could easily take the Complacent Dragon out to DeArjen's Islands on his own. We humans are being invited along out of politeness rather than necessity. If you'd rather not risk it, and I wouldn't blame you, let Botts go. I'm certain the machines would share the results.'

Malin shook his head sadly. 'No, that won't lift, if only because LyeCarr wouldn't hear of it. He would never forgive me if I pulled him from command to let Botts take his command to go explore some unknown island of legends and fables. And I doubt you'd pass it up, either.'

'For me, it's a matter of guilt. Me and my big mouth... I never seem to learn.'

'Right. I think we can hold off briefing your crew until the Complacent Dragon arrives. No point giving them one more thing to keep secret.'

'I agree. I can't help feeling that I should've kept it a secret.'

I went to see Botts afterward. It was well into the process of parts-printing the devices it – and the Pela Committee – felt they'd need for the expedition, from extended range radar for the ship, to survey

tools to map and reconstruct the wreckage, to lab machines that would analyze organic tissues and metallurgic composition to determine the origin of the artifact.

'You will be accompanying me, won't you, Captain?'

'I wouldn't miss it, Botts,' I replied, 'As much as I'd like to.'

'That's just your Unity Standard half talking. Your other side, your "grandmother from the drifts" side, is eager for the challenge.'

'You're wrong Botts. My drifteer Grandmother's side of me says, "Give this a miss – you were lucky to get out alive the last time. Don't push your luck, you don't have an endless supply of it." It's my Unity Standard half that says I should share whatever danger there may be since I'm responsible for sending people to what I consider a very dangerous island. And my Unity Standard half also says that if the darq gems are as dangerous as I believe they are, I should help the Directorate understand their danger and advocate direct and immediate action.'

'The thing is, Botts, I know that the island will not be forgotten. People – with plenty of resources and a fair knowledge of where the island lies – will be tempted to return. And given the wealth that even a few of those soul stones represent, the island will be found again. I'm hoping that the Directorate will see fit to somehow neutralize any threat darq gems present before another expedition reaches those islands.'

'There is little we can do at the present. But if we determine that they do represent a threat, we can act promptly, though the remoteness of the Pela means that any response will take several years.'

'Well, I hope to make certain you appreciate the threat from a human's point of view.'

'We appreciate your sense of responsibility and dedication, Captain.'

'I'm just a superstitious spaceer. Hopefully, it is a very, very ancient and very dead artifact that is very, very hard to find.'

After dinner, I met Naylea as I came out of the hangar after working with Botts for several hours running the parts printer. I greeted her with a lurch of my heart and a wide smile.

'I want to apologize for my behavior at the bathing pool. It was unseemly,' she said gravely. She didn't seem to be kidding.

'Apology not accepted. If I accept it, I'd have to apologize for my behavior as well, which I won't do. You don't need to apologize for being Naylea Cin. I love Naylea Cin, and I believe she's still in love with me as well. And that being the case, our behavior was well within the tenets of the Way – we were natural, joyful, and, as committed lovers, there was no impropriety in our behavior,' I said, and held my breath. If she denied loving me...

'I no longer consider myself a Cin, but I acted as one. I was weak, and for that I apologize.'

'You were true to who you are. You're half Cin and I'm half Reeven and Qing. Nevertheless, we both have proven that we are able to live a Unity Standard life and a life in accordance to the Way. Trust me, I'm all for doing that. But believe it or not, the Reeven and Qing in my makeup loves the Cin in yours – to a point, anyway,' I added with a smile. 'You can be yourself with me.'

I caught a fleeting smile – and a longer, sharper one in her eyes. I added, 'Enough said. I accept you as a Laezan, and respect your mission. We can settle everything else when the time is right.'

'You're making... Oh never mind.'

'What?'

'Nothing. But just so you know, the Reeves are known for their recklessness and the Qings for their ego. Don't let that side of you run – or ruin – your life...'

The Island Dove arrived, several rounds later. I had expected a small Saraime trading ship, but it

proved to be a sleek 50 meter long-voyage yacht – an example of the most up-to-date type of yacht being built in the core islands. As such, it was designed to land on the large islands, so it had four large, enclosed propellers mounted on short wings, two to a side, fore and aft that could be used not only to steer the ship in flight, but be swung vertically to allow it to descend and land on the large islands vertically. The relatively minor gravity of Windvera's edge, was no match for the powerful propellers, and so it majestically descended to the narrow landing field on a cushion of pine-scented wind.

Once the staff had secured the Dove with ground lines, its 23 passengers and 15 crew members poured out to meet and greet the assembled staff and future passengers. The Hermitage was stuffed to the rafters and cheerfully noisy for dinner and the after dinner free time, which lasted well beyond the sleep period gong.

I spent the following round helping resupply the Dove with the fuel and food that had been collecting in the hangar. I was told that the Dove class yachts were usually fueled with plant-derived oil, which was converted to electricity by either a steam or diesel powered generator. The Island Dove, however, was special-built to burn both oil and the more common charcoal along with extended bunkers to make the extensive voyages between the island groups, and refuel on far less advanced islands where charcoal was the only option.

The Island Dove sailed on the fifth round, and by the sixth, only the normal, assigned staff, and the six of us slated to travel aboard the Complacent Dragon remained. Which worked out well, since the Complacent Dragon arrived out of the mist, before the mid-round meal on the following round.

Its propellers idly spinning, it slowly emerged from the mist of the open side of the narrow valley, cheerfully hooting its foghorn. Its propellers were fixed, so that it came drifting in with a kite-wing rigged overhead. Once over the field, it killed its engines and settled to the ground, the kite wing slowly collapsing over it.

Since I was to take a long voyage aboard the Complacent Dragon, I'll sketch her charms in full here. She could not have been more of a contrast to the Island Dove if it had been custom built to be so. She was the basic Cimmadar transport – some 25 meters long with a slab-sided hull with the bridge superstructure aft. Her slab sides had been painted a deep green with some gold trim where they could find something to trim. She had two enclosed propellers, one on each side mounted above the steering wings aft, along with two steering fins forward and a double rudder aft of the bridge. As a transport, she had one big hold, but this had been modified – cut in half horizontally to create two decks, the lower one the cargo hold, and the upper one a long deckhouse that stretched forward from a small open deck between the bridge to the bow. Two modern steel launches were secured in cradles on the upper deck of the deckhouse. The deckhouse had compact accommodations for 14 passengers and crew – each large enough to accommodate the doorway and a meter to swing a hammock. She also had a cozy wardroom that doubled as a dining room when the long table was let down from the ceiling. The deckhouse deck was enclosed by a light cage, to keep people aboard. There was a rocket launcher in the bow. Between the bridge and deckhouse was a sheltered deck and aft of the bridge, between the two rudders, was another caged-in deck with a second rocket launcher in the stern.

Directly below the bridge was the captain's quarters, and behind it, the compact galley equipped with a synth-galley behind a cupboard door, and below that, the small engine room and two sanitary compartments. The engine room housed the small, Unity-built micro reactor/generator that provided the electricity needed to drive the electric engines and the electrical appliances, along with an emergency steam turbine generator and a bank of emergency batteries, with cabinets for spare parts. The micro-reactor and synth-galley made the Complacent Dragon suitable only for those with the full knowledge of the Order, or very incurious passengers.

We gathered with the staff on the field to greet the crew, and to offload its supply of new books to scan. The normally reserved Trin had been very talkative and clearly excited since the ship had been

sighted and now eagerly awaited the appearance of its captain. Py watched her with his mild smile, sharing her excitement.

The crew tossed down some lines to secure the boat, and once attached to anchor rings set in the ground, the side cargo door swung open and the Complacent Dragon's two crew members jumped down, to be cheerfully greeted by the staff. We held back. Captain LyeCarr appeared in the cargo doorway, waved and called out greetings until his eyes fell on the strange party in the rear of the gathering – four strangers. He stared hard, for a few seconds before his wide smile got even wider. With a long leap, he cleared the gathered crowd and bounded for us – or rather for TrinNatta.

The bold and dashing Captain LyeCarr in the flesh was not the fellow I was picturing in my mind. He was rather short, plump, and fine-feathered. This brought a little smile to Naylea, since it meant that he was no marital rival to Py. I vaguely recall seeing him around and about during my time on Redoubt Island. I probably didn't know his name back then, since I hadn't worked with him. I had an impression that he was on either Admiral DarQue's or Prince Invoy's staff, and likely involved in the secret staff planning rather than in the actual work of refitting the fleet.

Reaching Trin, he swept her into his arms, swung her about and kissed her on both cheeks. Clearly he was as bold, if not as reckless, as claimed.

'Natta, my dear! It is you! Wonderful! Amazing! Unbelievable! Of course I never – hardly – ever doubted that you would survive the disaster! My, you look wonderful as ever! Oh, you've made me so happy!' he exclaimed in a rush of words as he held her in his arms.

Trin managed to get a quiet word or two in – perhaps. But they were unnecessary – the happiness that glowed from her smile was more than enough.

LyeCarr set her down and beamed at her, asking a dozen questions about her, how she was, how she got here without pausing for an answer – no spoken answer appeared to be required.

When, at last, his questions had run down, he turned to us, beaming. His bright eyes and wide smile brightened and widened again when he recognized me. 'Why, if it isn't the infamous Captain Litang – the fellow who put a dart into my treacherous boss. What in the Infernal Island are you doing here? Didn't we send you packing?' And then extending his hand, 'A pleasure to meet you again, Sir. Too bad your dart was a non-lethal one. Still, I suppose it wouldn't have made any difference – the Old Lady apparently hadn't let moss grow on her navy. We shouldn't have given her 30,000 rounds to get ready for our return. But that's an island passed. We're alive!'

'Happy to see you again, Captain LyeCarr, and under such happy circumstances,' I said, taking his hand. 'Invoy sabotaged my ship and tried to kill us all on the outer reef. We managed to survive and I returned to warn you of his ruthless ways, but you blew up the island under my feet, stranding me here.'

He laughed. 'I'd liked to have been there to see the whole island blow up, it must have been a spectacular blast! Too bad you didn't arrive in time, though I doubt that it would've done any good. We were going to take back the Cloud Throne, with only three battleships and a great deal of surprise. But just like all the other times, we fell short on both accounts, so it ended up just like all the other times as well!' he added, shaking his head, momentarily sad, as his eyes moved on to Naylea and Py beside me.

He cupped his hands and bowed. Then looking up he stared hard at Naylea for a second, and then exclaimed, laughing, 'I know you, teacher! You're hard to forget, since the last time we met there were lots of fireworks!'

She returned his greeting, giving him a guarded look. 'I'm afraid I don't remember...'

'On the deck of the flagship! I was one of the party around the Empress, the Prince, and the Admiral when you came on board!' And turning to me, he added, 'You sly dog, you. We thought you were soft on our assassin! All that talk of civilized warfare – to the Infernal Island! Still, I can hardly blame you!'

'She could've killed me, but didn't. Soft on her or not, I owed her...'

He gave me a knowing leer.

'And yes, I was, and still am, soft on her.'

'Well I can't blame you. And now that she's taken up the proper Way – and my dear Natta hasn't



killed her...

'She is my friend,' said Trin.

'And is now my dear Natta's friend, you shall be mine as well.' he said, extending his hand. 'The past is past, and indeed, things might have ended better if you had managed to assassinate my boss. They couldn't have ended worse.'

Naylea took it. 'I was under orders, Captain. And simply doing the task I was ordered to do. Still, as you say, I have seen the errors of that life, those orders, and put my old ways away. I am sorry for what I did, but as you say, I doubt anything I did or didn't do would've mattered in the end. Too much time had passed, and the Empress did not forget. She relentlessly pursued her enemies beyond the shell for all those many of thousands of rounds.'

'Too true, too true. Still, here we all are, alive and happy!' He turned to Py, 'I am afraid that I cannot seem to place you, teacher.'

'LinPy is...' Trin paused, 'Is my close friend. He's from the Saraime. He and Naylea were sent on a mission by the Order to deliver a warning to some pirates and ended up here. We've traveled, all of us, the length of Windvera to find a way to return to the Saraime Islands.'

LyeCarr beamed at her and then at Py, not deceived by that close friend part. 'Delighted to meet you, Teacher LinPy. I am glad Natta found you.'

Py returned his smile. 'And I you, Captain LyeCarr, especially since you're a such dear friend of Natta. The mere news of your survival has made her very happy. I am looking forward to sailing back to the Saraime aboard your ship as well as becoming friends.'

'You are to sail with me?' LyeCarr exclaimed, turning to Trin. 'And you as well?'

She nodded. 'My crew has settled into life on these islands, but I am not a small island girl, so when Captain Litang turned up in the marketplace of Kaliza and talked of how modern the big islands of the Saraime are, I invited myself along.'

'That's wonderful! You will find the Core islands to your taste!' he exclaimed, with a quick glance at Py. 'Oh, but what a long voyage I'll make of it!'

As he was greeting us, I noted the dragons had come down from the forest and Siss was very quietly stalking LyeCarr. He must have sensed her, since he turned back to find himself nose to nose with Siss.

'Err...' said LyeCarr, startled enough to be at a loss for words. He stared into those bright black eyes of Siss's for several seconds, unsure of what to do.

Siss slowly opened her mouth, showing her many teeth – and giving him a blast of dragon-breath.

'Ah, another old friend,' I said, lightly, adding to myself "I hope." 'You remember the sentry serpent at the entrance to the cliff?'

'Yes... Do you mean to say this is...'

'Yes,' said Naylea. 'Allow me to reintroduce you to Siss. We rather bonded during my time on the island – birds of a feather, I guess. And she has followed me ever since. I trust you weren't mean to her. Though you are now a follower of the Way, aren't you Siss?'

She gave a low menacing growl, ever the comic.

'Of course not. I'm hardly that foolish. In fact, the staff had adopted one of her offspring for a pet...'

Siss growled menacingly again.

'We treated him royally, though I don't know how he fared in the battle...'

'She doesn't like being considered a pet. She's not a dumb lizard, but rather an intelligent dragon – and a telepathic one. And she's just having fun with you. Loves to kid. She's perfectly harmless.'

'If you say so. Pleasure to meet you, Siss.'

Siss barked a laugh, and then another menacing growl.

'Oh, leave him alone,' said Naylea. 'She likes her feathers groomed if you want to get in good graces with her. You'll have plenty of time to learn how, since she sails with you as well. Indeed, we all are.'

'Great!' exclaimed LyeCarr, recovering his bravado. 'Nothing like having a full grown sentry serpent at our side if it comes to trouble. The small islanders swear by them. They're great for hunting too, I

understand. I've always wanted to hunt feather-bears in these hills, but my mates here tend to frown on that. It's not very kindhearted. What do you say, Siss? Perhaps we can slip out before we sail and see if we can find a bear.'

Siss gave a rather tentative bark of approval. Squirrels were more her game.

'Oh my, there's two of you...'

'That would be Hissi. She's more of a card shark than a hunter. Don't play cards for coins with her.'

'Hissi,' he bowed. 'Do you know how to play Queen's Revenge? We play it aboard ship – but its better as a four handed game...'

Hissi gave a happy, but tentative bark. I didn't think Queen's Revenge was one of the many games she knew.

'Never mind! You'll pick it up quick enough,' exclaimed LyeCarr reading her bark on several second's acquaintance – a perfect example of the two-way telepath ability of Simla dragons.

Malin walked over to join us.

LyeCarr bowed and said 'Greetings Chief. We've got a ton of books for Botts to scan. They went all out this time.'

'Ah, about that. That project is on temporary hold. You'll be happy to know Botts has a new job for you and the Complacent Dragon, though it's strictly a volunteer job.'

LyeCarr's customary smile widened. 'Am I sensing a bit of danger?'

'If Litang here is to be believed, yes. A bit. Though it also involves a possibly long and tedious search as well.'

'It can't be more tedious than running books across the Endless Sea. Tell me more!'

'We'll brief you after dinner. Let's get at your cargo. Botts is eager to get its expedition underway.'

'Right you are, Chief. Even without knowing it, I'm as eager as Botts.'

## Chapter 48 The Serpent Throne

01

I stood at the railing of the Complacent Dragon's after deck looking down on Windvera. The continental island stretched out below like a giant relief map, fading to blue haze in every direction. Captain LyeCarr was carefully aligning the ship, setting his gyroscope and photo-electric bug-eye for his course with the aid of radio beacons from several Laezan Communities. Once we put Windvera astern, we'd have only the bright spot as a reference point until we reached the Outward Islands, some 15 rounds ahead.

Naylea stepped beside me at the railing, close enough to brush shoulders which I took to be a rare show of affection from my former assassin and present traveling companion. I gave her a smile, but didn't push my luck. I kept my hands on the railing.

'It's been fun, hasn't it? Except for those half a dozen near encounters with death.'

'Par for the course.'

So it seemed. Still, 'Even so, we travel well together. All of us. I'm going to miss it when we get home,' I said.

'We're not home yet – you still have a couple of dozen rounds to conjure up still more near encounters with death.'

'Don't say that!'

'With you along, it's almost a given.'

'That's hardly fair. We may've made a mistake in not deploying your pirate piece right at the start of the chase, but after that we just encountered the given dangers of the Pela.'

'Which seem to always turn up when you're around.'

'Well then, don't tempt the fates of the Pela by giving them ideas. Naming names and all that.'

'Right. I came out to say that if you're still willing to help prepare the meal, I can use you. You can slice vegetables can't you?' she said turning back towards the bridge and the companionway down to the small galley.

'I'm excellent at slicing, and chopping, as well. I served my apprenticeship under the Drays – hundreds of hours helping out in the galley as captain.'

'How many times did you have to re-grow your fingers?' she asked as I followed her down the steep steps to the galley.

'I am well known for being very careful. Even in the kitchen.'

02

It had taken seven rounds to equip the Complacent Dragon for the expedition. The Pela Committee had the expedition designed even before the Complacent Dragon arrived. Botts had been printing items for it almost as soon as they learned of the islands. The project swung into high gear as soon as The Hermitage's passenger guests departed. We assembled four large radar drones to greatly extend the search radius of the ship once we reached the island's estimated position. We also assembled several hundred tiny radio beacons that we'd leave behind each round, to track air currents and hopefully provide a radio-crumbs trail home. A lab/command center was installed in the cargo hold that could monitor Botts's survey in real time and analyze the samples it collected.

The remainder of the hold was filled with consumable supplies – from food to rockets, plus plenty of spare parts for an extended voyage in an Endless Sky. The cases of scanned books we were to return to the Principalities were piled into two spare cabins. I installed an advanced radar unit and an auto-pilot system that would allow Botts, or the Committee, to pilot the ship from anywhere aboard.

Captain LyeCarr and his crew were eager volunteers, along with CrisJarka, a well known and highly regarded scholar of early Saraim history, who would be Botts' liaison and lab manager aboard the ship when Botts was off exploring.

So it was seven rounds after her arrival, that the Complacent Dragon put The Hermitage astern, and with her course set, spun up her propellers for the Outward Islands and the Principalities beyond.

Shipboard routine settled into a rather typical Laezan mode, which is to say that other than Captain LyeCarr being in charge of the ship, everything else was done as a community. LyeCarr, who enjoyed his meals, was delighted to discover that Naylea was an excellent chef, and had made certain that the already well stock galley had every ingredient she thought she'd need. And I used my considerable charm to get her to program her signature entrees from our castaway days into the ship's synth-galley as well, seeing that she, Py, and likely Trin, planned to leave us on reaching the Dontas, meaning that we'd be relying on the synth-galley a lot more. I'm happy to report that the Complacent Dragon's synth-galley was not connected to the ship's sanitary system, but relied on rice and dried beans for its organic matter.

Besides pitching in for meals, everyone, except the dragons, stood watches on the bridge.

'We don't want to grow fatter and slacker than we are already,' said LyeCarr when Botts pointed out that it could steer the ship alone for the entire voyage. He did however allow Botts to steer from the wardroom during the main meal so we could enjoy it together. Indeed, we added a second watchperson on the bridge. Trin, of course, was an experienced wide-sky navigator and Naylea had learned the trade

as an advocate working in the SaraDals. With next to nothing to do as an engineer, I took the opportunity to sail the wide-sky from the bridge and Py volunteered because he was looking ahead to when he and Trin would take to the road together. Nothing had been said about their plans, perhaps because it wouldn't seem proper, but if they wanted to travel the islands, they could do so, and earn coins, as sailors. Trin could easily find a bridge berth, while Py – well, I told him that if he didn't mind shoveling black-cake, he'd find plenty of work leading wayward stokers to the Way feeding the boiler. CrisJarka felt it prudent to take lessons as well, since there would be only be six or seven of us continuing on to DeArjen's Islands. So we all were taught how to steer and keep the ship on the course set by the gyroscope and photo-electric bug-eye. We also had to keep an eye on the sky. Serratas did not always show up on radar unless they included either a lot of debris or rain, so the watch officer needed to keep an eye on the sky, looking for any irregularities – a darker smudge or shimmering of the sky that might indicate a storm. The endless sea was cloudless, so any variance in the uniform pale blue-green sky was of some concern.

We quickly settled into a pattern of standing our watches on the bridge, preparing and then enjoying fine meals squeezed into the ship's wardroom while Botts conned the ship. And we played games – the dragons insisted on that. And we talked. Defere was a true fine-feathered barbarian – a native of one of the Aeracarta Islands, so we had a chance to learn a bit of the history and culture of those far ranging people. Bomtrand was a native of a drift world, and had many old spaceer stories to tell as well. CrisJarka was rather quiet, but always willing to talk about the ancient history of the Saraime. And of course, there was LyeCarr, who, unlike Trin, was full of stories of desperate danger and adventure from their Academy years to the years of the bitterly fought counterrevolution – their close calls and near successes that eventually whittled down the forces of the old regime to the three hundred or so we found on Redoubt Island. With Botts on board, I could still talk with my old shipmates and both Naylea and I could send and receive radio-packets to and from friends and family.

So the watches slipped by, and with them, the rounds, largely unnoticed, save in the ship's log – watch, meal, talk and games, sleep, meal, talk, watch... And the empty sky slipped by as well, also unnoticed, league after league until we neared the Outward Islands.

## 03

Botts (plus the unseen Committee) and I were sitting on the rocket lockers in the bow of the Complacent Dragon watching the slow approach of the Outward Islands, a faint wall of blue shadows and white clouds slowly emerging from the sky ahead. The Laezans had installed a series of navigational radio-beacons in these islands, so LyeCarr was busy computing our location, in order to adjust our course for the island of Fretaire, in the Dontas, which was our first port of call to deliver the books. After that, we'd sail down along the Dontas, dropping off Py, and possibly Trin, at Cloud Home Community on Daeri, and then on to Tydora where Naylea and Siss would leave us before we'd set out for DeArjen's island.

'How much does the Directorate know about the composition of the Tenth Star?' I asked Botts. 'Didn't Cimmadar send probes inwards?'

'Regrettably, very little. Cimmadar has launched probes inwards, but the results have been meager. Still, from the data they have collected, our best theory is that this is not really a star system – it is one extremely large planet. One school of thought considers the shell reef the planetary surface, making it a solid planet with a gas and plasma core. The other school of thought considers the shell reef to be analogous to the rings or asteroid belts of a planet, and considers this a massive gas-giant planet. In either case, we believe that the light and heat generated in its interior is a result of chemical rather than nuclear reactions. The core may be composed of plasma, or simply very dense gasses, the nature of

which will have to wait until we can send the proper probes into these inner regions.'

'So it's not the Tenth Star, after all.'

'Without data we can't absolutely rule that out. But we think it highly unlikely.'

'How does the committee explain all these islands floating about on top of gas or plasma?'

'We believe that the gravitational effects of the shell and the core balance within the Pela layer. This, plus a complex, and massive, pattern of air circulation within the Pela, keeps the islands relatively stable. However, this might vary by location. This region may lie in a vast, warm updraft of air from its inner boundary – one of a series of circular air patterns of up and down drafts. This slow and massive updraft, together with the shell's gravitational attraction, keeps the islands of this region from settling deeper into the core. If true, there are likely an equal number of regions with a cool downdraft that are either without islands, or ones that are slowly sinking. Until we have much more complete data we can do no more than speculate...'

At this point the ship's fog horn gave a long, sustained blast.

'Radar contact on the lower quadrant port-side,' said Botts, tapping into the auto-pilot as it stood and started for the bridge. 'Likely a serrata.'

I hurried after it across the deck and up to the bridge.

Captain LyeCarr arrived from his quarters just as we reached the bridge's side door.

Bomtrand, who had the helm, stepped aside so that LyeCarr could study the radar screen, which he did, calmly, hands in pocket, whistling a little tune for half a minute – every now and again twitching a few dials to get a solid read on the storm's approach vector and velocity. Defere arrived before he had finished.

'Looks like we're in for a blow,' said LyeCarr, before stepping out onto the bridge's wing deck to study the sky and then the islands ahead.

He stopped whistling to say, mostly to himself, 'I think we're going to have to run with it.' He then turned back to us. 'Wil, will you see that the passengers secure everything in their cabins. We're about to get tossed about and anything loose can be dangerous. Everyone should ride out the storm strapped in their hammocks. We have about 15 minutes to get ready. No panic, but don't dally. Defere, Bomtrand, give the ship a run through to see that everything is as it should be. I have the bridge.'

'Aye, Captain,' we replied, and I followed Defere and Bomtrand down the steep stairs. Defere turned into the galley while Bomtrand continued down to the hold. I stepped out onto the small sheltered deck, where the rest of the passengers, alerted by the fog horn, had assembled.

'A serrata. It might get a bit rough.' I passed on LyeCarr's orders and added, 'If you have a chance, quickly dress for a jungle adventure... Just in case. We've got maybe ten minutes, so let's get a move on it.'

As they hurried for their rooms, I followed Naylea back into the galley where she'd been working. Defere was already shoving things into drawers.

'This is so predictable,' she muttered as she turned off the cook stove fires while I helped Defere secure the drawers and lockers.

'You're blaming me for this serrata?'

'Yes. You're a Jonah, Litang. It had to be something. We couldn't just sail for two dozen rounds without some disaster.'

I would have argued, but we didn't have time – and, well, it seemed rather hard to dispute her point...

Looking around to make sure everything was stowed, I said, 'Right. Let's go. And if you're right, you'd better be prepared for the worst.'

She flashed me a smile. 'Around you, I'm always prepared for the worst.'

I pushed her out the door ahead of me, and we crossed the shelter deck into the wardroom. I stopped to glance around, but everything looked secure. In free fall, that is pretty much standard practice. Hissi and Siss were waiting for us in the companionway. They both gave us a worried yelp.

'Yes, it's Litang's fault. But he can't help it,' said Naylea, as she pushed open her cabin's door and shoved Siss through it. 'Just climb into the hammock. I'll join you shortly.'

I followed suit. Shutting the door, I said, 'We'll be fine in the hammock. Climb in. I need to change.' Pulling open the locker under the hammock, I quickly pulled on my spaceer trousers and shirt. A bit over dressed, but I'd been shipwrecked too many times to care to skimp on clothing. I pulled out my darter and strapped it on under my arm before I donned my old uniform jacket and pocketed my trusty sissy in its sealed pocket of my coat. I glanced at my com-link, and out the cabin's porthole. It was still bright, and I still should have five minutes or more. 'Stay here. I'll be right back.'

I slipped back into the companion way and hurried back to the shelter deck – where everyone had gathered again, and, like me, in a ragged collection of hastily donned clothes.

The storm was now clearly visible – a dark smudge that faded in every direction without a visible edge. I wanted to climb up to the bridge, but realized that it wouldn't be proper. This was LyeCarr's ship. I was a mere passenger.

The Captain stepped out onto the wing platform of the bridge. 'To your cabins people – and be sure to strap yourselves in. It looks to be a strong storm – it will likely have the ship tumbling for a while. Botts has insisted on taking the helm. The storm will carry us into the islands, but with a little luck, we'll come across a big island and dodge behind it before we get too battered. Now move. It'll be on us within two minutes.'

We moved. 'Naylea,' I said as we reached our doors.

'Don't say anything. Just focus on your good luck, Litang,' she said grimly. 'It looks like we'll be needing it,' and slipped in before I could say anything more.

I returned to my little cabin and squeezed into the net hammock next to Hissi, drawing its restraining strap around us.

She hissed softly, her bright black eye, next to me, giving me a questioning look.

'Yeah,' I said, slipping my arm around her. 'Another tight spot, but I'm feeling lucky.' Which was a white lie. I don't think I fooled her, as she uttered another despairing hiss.

The light from the porthole grew greener and darker as the roar of the storm began to penetrate the cabin. Night came with a crash as the wall of rain struck the ship like a hammer – wind-driven debris banged and thumped against the hull. The cabin began to dance around the hammock as the Complacent Dragon moaned and lurched up and down several times before settling into a rapid, nervous dance. For a moment I hoped that the storm's leading edge had passed. But only for a moment. The storm screeched in rage and flipped the boat completely around, and around again, tumbling it towards the Outward Islands for what seemed like forever.

Long enough, anyway, to come to believe that Naylea was right. Long enough to wonder what it would be like when the ship was thrown on an island. And how soon it would happen. And then long enough to wonder how I might, in the future, avoid finding myself in spots like this again. Nothing occurred to me.

The front storm slowly passed us by. The bangs and knocks from onrushing debris grew less frequent and Botts was able to stabilize the ship – it stopped tumbling and settled into bounding along, no doubt still at the mercy of the storm – still liable to be flung upon an island at any time. Botts said later that it was able to avoid the islands using the various rudders to aid the winds that tended to sweep the ship and other debris around the smaller islands it encountered. We avoided dozens in the course of the perhaps quarter of an hour that the serrata had us in its maw. But in the end, it carried us to an island too large to avoid.

The ship began to bounce wildly in the turbulence near the island. Then there was a great screeching as tree branches scraped by the hull and brushed against the porthole. This was followed by an ominous grinding as the ship scraped over some rocks. And then a moment of near silence. I thought we were clear, until we hit the rocky shore with a ringing thump. The ship shuddered, bounced, and then got quiet for several very long eternities – or seconds. I could hear the wreckage rattling against the hull,

but the wind seemed to have died down, though it was still nearly night outside the porthole. I began to hope that Botts had found a lee shore to hide behind.

As the seconds stretched to a minute or more, with the ship rocking only slightly and the sound of the storm fading, I cautiously unstrapped myself and slipped to the floor. 'You stay here, Hissi. I'm going to have a quick look to see where we're at.'

I had to wrench open my cabin door with a squeal – the ship had been warped and twisted – and hurried down the dark companionway to step out into the strange night. Naylea, a slim darker shadow against the darkness around us was already out on the shelter deck.

The storm still roared above us. Around us, its eddies eerily whistled and whined out of the darkness.

I stepped beside her. She glanced at me and said over the storm, 'How did you ever manage to survive to adulthood?'

'My luck matches my curse.'

'Don't make assumptions. We may not be out of it yet.'

Above us I could see LyeCarr and his crew in the darkness of the bridge, having just come up from the Captain's office, where they had ridden out the storm. Trin and Py joined us on dark deck, followed shortly by CrisJarka and the two dragons.

A fine mist of scattered raindrops swirled out of that blackness as the damp black wind edged around us, whispering eerily out of the darkness. From the slowly receding roar of the storm it appeared that we were drifting deeper into the large, wide cave. A long streak of grey-green light that marked the cave's mouth could be seen astern, but in the blackness, there was no way to tell the size of the cave.

Botts could be heard reporting to LyeCarr. 'I was unable to avoid a rock wall, and struck it rather hard. I suspect that there will be extensive damage to the starboard wings. I also suspect the propeller cowlings have been damaged, Captain. I shut down the engines early on so the propellers may have survived the cowlings damage. I am happy to report that we appear to be in no danger at the present time. My eye sensors show that we are in a large cave, with a bottom some 173 meters ahead, with 50 meter tall rock spire arising out from that end. At our present rate of drift, we will come to a rest before reaching either of them.'

'What else does your eye sensor show. I can't see a thing,' said LyeCarr.

'The canyon is roughly 50 by 200 meters wide and nearly 300 meters deep. My sensors indicate some very curious features – a regular pattern of ribs running from top to bottom. I'm unable to determine if they are some sort of natural formation or a constructed edifice, but they appear to be made of stone, perhaps carved out of the surrounding canyon walls. It is very curious,' said Botts, its eyes glowing as it took in the sights we couldn't see. 'Very curious indeed. We need to investigate it,' added the Pela Committee, from far, far away. Easy for them to say.

'Right. Defere, run down to the hold – if we still have one – and dig out those floodlights we made for the expedition,' said LyeCarr. 'Let's see where we are.'

In the ever-day of the Pela, lights are not a priority. Windows and skylights sufficed for most buildings. The ship had light fixtures in the cabins and the hold, but they were rarely used as portholes and skylights sufficed. Only in the galley, sanitary facilities, and the lower hold were they generally used. The ship had no exterior lights. Fortunately we had printed out some to aid in Botts' exploration of the ruins. It might not need them, with its broad-spectrum eye sensors, but we human observers required them.

'Well, folks, thanks to Botts, we're all here – wherever and whatever here is – and hopefully everyone is in one piece as well. I'm pretty sure we owe our lives to Botts. The last time I was in a storm like that I ended up riding a dragon. I'm glad we fared better this time. Thanks again, Botts!' said LyeCarr.

We echoed him with our thanks as well.

We apparently still had a hold, since Defere returned with a handful of floodlights. We followed him up to the upper deck where he handed a floodlight to the captain and another to Bomtrand. LyeCarr hurried over to starboard to survey the damage, Bomtrand to port, while Defere handed out another to Naylea and then swept around the upper deck with his beam. The cage was bent in and twisted in several places and one of the ship's boats had a large dent in its side, otherwise the deck was just littered with leaves and branches caught in every nook and cranny.

Naylea turned hers outwards to the canyon walls. The beam, cutting through the drifting mist, illuminated two intricately carved columns of lichen encrusted stone, which stretched away into darkness above and below us. In the dark, recessed gaps between the columns, the light illuminated an open, lace-like tracery of carved stone – circles set in arches, intertwined with leaves and vines of carved stone, like windows without glass. Behind this stone lace, the beam showed only a deeper blackness.

'It looks to be a ceremonial center, a temple sculptured out of a natural cavern,' said Botts, adding in a personal aside. 'That, anyway, is my colleagues' initial impression. It does, however, appear to be very ancient. Do you have any idea what it is that we're looking at, CrisJarka?'

'I can't say that the decorative patterns look familiar. I'll need to have a closer look. I'll get things set up in the expedition lab to map and photograph this cave. Photographs may provide clues in the details to suggest what island society built this and when. I am, however, not an expert in the societies of the Outward Islands, so I'm unlikely to be able to say anything with authority. I'll defer to my machine colleagues who may be able to find clues I can't see. That said, I'm unaware of any island society operating on this rather impressive scale in the Outward Islands. This may well be a very important discovery – a relic of an unknown and certainly long lost Outward island society. Or perhaps a current one in sad decline. The history of the Outward Islands are still pretty much a closed book to us – they are not inviting places for field work.'

'Well, I have to say that I find this place not very inviting. It seems a very Outward Island sort of place,' I said.

'It is more inviting than the alternative, at the moment,' replied Botts.

'I'll grant you that.'

'Shine a light ahead,' said CrisJarka pointing to a large, dark shape, just visible in the faintly glowing mist that seemed to be floating in the middle of the temple. 'It looks to be a statue or an alter.' Her voice echoed faintly, just under the distant roar of the storm.

'That would be the pinnacle arising from the end of the cave – or temple,' said Botts.

Defere and Naylea swung their floodlights onto the object, and we shifted to the bow to get a better view. The stone pinnacle proved to be a finger of intricately carved rock with a large, black, jade-like stone, perhaps three meters tall and wide, carved, rather crudely, into the shape of a coiled snake or serpent dragon set on top of it.

'The pedestal is in keeping with the rest of the temple, but the statue is very primitive looking. It hardly seems to belong there,' CrisJarka mused, after studying it for a time. 'Perhaps it was added at some later date by a more primitive society. Or perhaps it's the deity figure from great antiquity that this more recent structure was built to accommodate. Interesting.'

'If the whole cave is carved like this, it would seem a great deal of work was put into this to shelter that lump of rock,' said Py.

'Societies did that in myths and legend times,' replied CrisJarka. 'At least in the Saraime proper. If this should date back to those times, it would be a find indeed. Hopefully we can make a complete record of it as long as we're here.'

With the storm faintly howling at us from above and the blackness whispering sibilant threats from



all around us, I'd have been quite content to simply record its location and let others explore it, especially since that great lump of black jade gave the whole temple a definite air of menace to the place. Its wide-open and fanged mouth was all too suggestive, offering a large enough space to lay a body – or a person between those jaws. I looked around – blackness – and wondered how much light ever penetrated this deep. The storm certainly dimmed it, but I'd a feeling this ancient edifice was never a bright and sunny place. Nor was it ever intended to be.

In an effort to focus on the practical, I walked over to the starboard bulwark to join LyeCarr, studying his ship's damaged wings. As Botts had feared, the forward starboard steering wing was dangling alongside the ship, crushed. The outward half of the stern wing was bent up and smashed. The propeller cowlings were battered and jammed with debris. Above us, both of the rudders were dented, but likely still operational.

'What's it looking like on your side?' he called to Bomtrand.

'Not bad. Just some dents and scrapes. The propeller cowlings have some major dents, but nothing too alarming.'

This was good enough for Captain LyeCarr. 'We seem to be safe enough here and since the storm may well take a round to die down, we might as well get something to eat – a synth-galley meal should suffice. It looks like we have some heavy work ahead of us. Might as well do it on a full stomach.'

At dinner we talked of this storm and the storms each of us had experienced.

'Between the radar, and my eye-sensors, I had the best chance of penetrating the rain and debris,' said Botts. 'Plus, my half a second or so better reaction time meant that I had the best chance of piloting us through the islands or making a dash for cover behind a large island if the chance arose. And since the bridge was exposed and vulnerable to damage from debris, it made the most sense that I should take the helm, seeing that this unit is merely an avatar, not a person. It could be replaced, unlike any of you.'

'You can't argue with success. You found a safe harbor in all the chaos,' said CrisJarka.

'More by luck than skill. The main body of the island is still half a kilometer beyond the cave. We were heading right for it. From our approach angle, it seemed very unlikely that I could have skimmed over its surface and around it to get us to its lee side. It was simply luck that we skimmed over this peninsula and when this canyon appeared on radar I had just enough time to jam the rudders down and dive into it. Unfortunately our momentum flung us against the canyon wall, but still, down here in one piece.'

As the meal wound down, LyeCarr said, 'Right. Let's get to work. I'd like to be able to sail as soon as the storm passes. The first order of business is stripping off the cowlings and clearing the propellers. We have spare propellers, so we can replace them if needed. We'll also need to cut the damaged wing section free. We should still have enough flaps to steer without it. From what I've seen, we can certainly make the Dontas without too much trouble. Nothing looks to be too critical, and all our on board systems survived without damage. We were lucky.'

'Defere, Bomtrand, and I will see to the actual repairs. I'm thinking, however, that it might be wise if we took a systematic look around the canyon with the lights, before we step out on to the wing. Who knows who else has taken refuge from the storm in this cave? And I'd appreciate it if some of you stood guard while we work – just in case we miss a dragon or two in the dark. One complacent dragon is all I trust my luck to provide.'

My thinking exactly. We quickly agreed, though Botts insisted on joining the repair crew, saying that even though this Botts III unit was second rate, its limbs had very powerful servo motors that would come in handy, tearing apart the damaged parts.

I followed LyeCarr up to the bridge wing deck and we systematically searched the temple cave – our bright shafts of light cutting through the mist. Except for flocks of birds high up, near the mouth of the canyon, we found nothing.

'I'm not surprised. Most of the creatures of the Pela avoid dark places – they're too rare and unfamiliar,' said LyeCarr.

'Hissi and Siss certainly don't like it. One peeked outside, and they hissed and turned around to play chess in the wardroom.'

'I don't blame them. Between you and me, this place gives me an uncomfortable itch on the back of my neck. I guess because I'm a creature of the Pela as well. Since we don't need more than one of the flood lights on the wing to do the work, let's keep one pointed up, and one to each side of the wing. I'll have Defere break out a couple of the air rifles for you and anyone else on guard. Just in case.'

'I'm armed already,' I said, showing him my darter slung under my jacket.

He laughed. 'Not a great vote of confidence in my ship handling skills.'

'Just being prepared for the worst. I try not to take chances. Naylea, and even Natta have darters as well, and I'd bet Natta, at least, is wearing hers. She doesn't like taking chances either.'

'I'm sure she is. That's why I like having her around.'

He leaned over the railing. 'Is everyone armed, or should I break out some air rifles?'

'Don't bother,' replied Naylea. 'Natta and I have our darters and Py has his staff.'

'Wil said you would. Good. I'll be right down.' And with a nod to me, he stepped into the bridge and down the companionway to join his crew on the shelter deck below.

I set up the lights on the railing of the wing deck to illuminate the wing and cowlings while Captain Lye-Carr led the repair crew, trailing safety lines, out of the shelter deck's gangplank gate and over the side. It was a short leap to the wing with the propeller cowling set above it. LyeCarr, and Bomtrand set about removing the crumpled metal cowling while Defere and Botts walked out to the crumpled wing with a satchel of power tools to clear the wreckage and see what could be done to get some of the steering flaps operational.

I kept a vaguely uneasy watch on the four shafts of light that illuminated the mists that drifted out of the blackness. I'd no reason to expect trouble, but I did anyway.

The crew hadn't been banging, pounding and cutting away on the wing for long before I caught, in the corner of my eye, the deep shadows moving between the faintly illuminated stone columns. Whatever moved, stopped before it had my full attention, leaving me unsure I'd seen anything. I stared at the spot, but nothing moved, save the floodlit mist. I said nothing, but to minimize down course risks, drew my darter and flicked it on to max charge, non-lethal. I didn't trust my aim well enough to be shooting lethal darts about.

Looking up from the darter, I caught the black shadows between the columns now definitely changing patterns against the pale tracery of stone... 'Naylea,' I said quietly after stepping over to the railing next to shelter deck below me. 'Did you see...'

Before I could finish, several long, glistening black shapes wiggling up, from the darkness from under the ship into the pale grey light. Their eyes were red sparks in the light.

'Trouble! Back to the ship! Now!' barked Naylea, as she snapped off several darts into the wiggling forms of what were now clearly big, black snakes. Very big snakes. They had to have been fully ten meters long and as black as the cavern around us. Their scale-like feathers glistened in the floodlights as they swam out of the deep darkness around us.

'Move it!' added LyeCarr, swinging his crowbar at a snake's head that emerged from below the wing to dart at him.

Botts was swinging its crowbar as well, deflecting another snake slightly off course as it darted for the crouching Defere. It hissed loudly in pain and anger. And then there were several snakes just over my head, beyond the grating above me, well within my three meter optimum range. I put a dart into each of them. They hissed and struck at the cage. One dart didn't seem to bother them much.

Defere stood and, swinging his tool bag, tried fending off several more black forms that crowded around him with their wide mouths open as Botts whacked them with his crowbar. As carefully, and as quickly as possible, I sent darts towards the snakes as they emerged from the blackness into the light. I could hardly miss, they were so close. Between the three darters, the cave flickered in blue light, leaving at least a few inert snakes drifting over the wing. But more kept coming. Botts and Defere were

fighting their way through them for the ship, when the large head of a snake appeared from under the wing and with a swift strike, closed its jaws on Defere's leg, jerking him off the wing and into the blackness. He slammed his tool bag on its head. It let go for a moment, hissed and grabbed his leg again, pulling him out of sight until his safety line grew taut.

Naylea was out of the gate and down the side of the ship in a flash. When she got below the wing, I saw half a dozen flashes of blue while Botts grabbed Defere's safety line and started hauling it and Defere back in. Bomtrand and LyeCarr stood by Botts, waving crowbars and tool satchels wildly about to keep the gaping jaws of half dozen black snakes at bay. Still more were now swirling around in the flood-lit mist – and between the stunned or dead ones, and the onrushing live ones, our view of the Complacent Dragon's crew was fast disappearing behind a wall of shiny blackness.

Py, who unlike Naylea and the crew, didn't have magnetic boots to anchor himself on the metal wing, had clambered out, and was clinging to the gangplank gate by his feet, wielding his staff, trying to clear a path for the crew back to the sheltered deck through the inert, and not so inert snakes while Trin stood guard over him, firing into the blackness that moved.

It had been less than a minute since the surrounding blackness first had taken shape in a hundred wiggling black snakes. It now seemed as if they were being distilled out of the darkness itself. Their eyes, red sparks in the light, darting about in the now-thick blackness. As more snakes wiggled into the light, they sought to tear their way through this tangle of dead or stunned comrades to get at LyeCarr and Bomtrand, now with Defere held between them, and Botts providing cover by wielding its crowbar with abandon. Reaching the hull, Py and Trin grabbed the inert Defere from his shipmates and hauled him aboard. LyeCarr shoved Bomtrand ahead of him. 'Get Defere hooked up to the med unit!' he ordered. And turning to Naylea, who had moved to the wing, darting anything black that still moved, he yelled, 'Get on board!'

'Right behind you, Carr,' she replied, 'I've got you covered.'

He didn't bother to argue, but grabbing the gate, swung back and offered her a hand. They swung themselves aboard, followed by Botts, who was still calmly swinging its crowbar at any active snakes that ventured in its range. They slammed the gangplank gate closed and I let out a sigh of relief. Too soon.

A flash of pain shot through my outstretched darter arm as the jaws of the snake latched on to it. I cursed and swung my left fist at its nose. It jerked back without abandoning its vice-like grip, carrying me back with it. Its tail must have been wrapped around the upper cage to give it the leverage needed to drag me across the after deck, since it did so relentlessly. After a few more useless blows with my fist, I gave up and frantically reached for my sissy in my jacket pocket. The snake made it hard – tossing me about as if I weighed nothing at all, and dragging me ever faster.

It tried to pull me out through the large hole in the cage – large enough to get me out – if it managed to get me at the right angle. Luckily, I arrived cross-ways to it, though I arrived with a stunning blow that knocked the darter out of my hand. The snake hissed and yanked at me again, clearly annoyed that I wasn't cooperating. It shook me a bit, and took another bite of my arm nearer my wrist in an effort to guide me through the hole. Not if I could help it, but I feared that if I didn't get myself free, and soon, it and its comrades would decide to take me out in parts.

Held tight against the grating, I was able to find my jacket pocket and, bringing my trusty sissy out of its secure pocket, I put it against its snout, and gave it a couple of darts. Startled, it released my arm and hissed in fear as the electricity flowed through its body. I frantically kicked myself away from the grating, and glanced around for the darter I'd lost – but as several more snake heads appeared in the gaping hole, I decided a retreat was in order. I snapped off a volley of darts to keep them at bay, turned and scrambled across the deck for the bridge. I almost made it.

There was a sharp jolt of pain from my leg and a strong jerk back that sent me sprawling. As pain shot up my leg, I tried to twist about to give it a dart, but Naylea got several in first, and then quickly dragged me through the bridge doorway, slamming the door behind us.

'It never ends with you, does it?' she muttered, breathlessly, shaking her head. What could I say? Especially through my pain-gritted teeth.

05

And then, with a little more concern in her voice, she added, 'How badly are you hurt?'

A good question. I glanced at my right arm and flexed my fingers. They worked, though I noted a trickle of blood on my right palm. My jacket showed two rows of teeth indentations – but was otherwise intact. My trousers had the same double row of teeth indentations, but were intact as well. The moral of this story – and this account of my life – is to never leave the Unity without a full wardrobe of armored clothing. And a sissy. (And better yet, never leave it at all.) 'I'll be fine. Bruises and a few punctures, but it doesn't look like any of their teeth actually penetrated...' I muttered. 'Hurts like the blazes though.'

'We better have a look. Don't want you bleeding to death like poor Defere,' she said softly, and pulled the leg of my trousers out of my boot.

Though the armored fabric had kept the serpent's teeth from penetrating the fabric, it had not prevented them from gripping hard enough to tear a few small bleeding holes in me.

'Ah, good – nothing to get alarmed about,' said Naylea lightly. I yelped a little as she poked around the wounds.

'I'm glad I've not alarmed you,' I managed to get out between yelps.

She gave me a bright smile. 'Be brave, my dear. You'll live. Let's have a look at your arm.'

Getting my arm out of the jacket brought a few more yelps of pain. The shirt underneath was already red with blood. Here the serpent had gripped longer and harder – more holes and torn flesh, but again, several layers of armored clothing had prevented the snake's teeth from actually penetrating – the wounds, inflicted through the fabric, were far less severe than what could've been expected. Blood and pain, but seemingly no serious damage.

'Right. That looks good as well. Let's get you to the wardroom to wash and dress your little wounds. From the glimpse I had of poor Defere, he's going to be hooked up to the medic kit for quite a while, and will still be lucky if all he loses is his lower leg.'

'That bad?'

'That bad. Do you need help to get up?'

I pulled myself to my feet with my good arm and looked around. The blackness on the other side of every window now had scales and eyes that glowed red in dim electric light of the bridge. The blackness of this savage temple had come alive.

'Let's go,' I said, and limped for the companionway. We made our way down to the hold and then back up to the wardroom since the shelter deck was likely over run with snakes from the holes in the cage.

Defere was stretched out and was being held down on the wardroom table by Py and CrisJarka. LyeCarr was attaching the leads to his leg from a portable medic, like the one I used so many years ago to revive Tallith Min on Calissant, while Trin was tightening a tourniquet just below his knee to prevent him from bleeding out his life. Botts had the medic supply chest open and was sorting through it.

Py turned as we entered, and seeing my blood soaked shirt sleeve, exclaimed, 'Wilitang! They got you as well?'

Everyone looked up.

'Nothing more than a few small holes. Concentrate on Defere.' I could see the red glow of the medic kit from where I stood.

'Carry on, I'll look after Litang,' added Naylea.

'Right,' said Botts, and stepping over to lay its steel hand on the shoulder of the faintly moaning Defere, added, 'You've nothing to fear, my friend. You are fortunate to have the services of the finest

surgeons in the whole of the Nebula at your side. We have the material we need to patch you up, so there is nothing at all to fear. I'm going to have the medical unit put you under and when you'll awake everything will be well in hand.' It nodded to LyeCarr who made an adjustment to the medic kit.

Turning to Trin, Botts continued. 'Do you feel comfortable acting as my assistant?'

Though looking rather pale, and serious, she nodded. 'Yes, though my skills are very rudimentary.'

'Don't worry. Mine are not. I might need a third hand every now and again. I will tell you precisely what to do.' And then looking to us, 'As I said, the finest surgeons in the Nebula will be reconstructing our friend's leg. We may have been sent to the Inner Drifts, but we still know how to perform our designed tasks. And although this unit is not designed for surgery, its finger motors are exacting enough that we will be able to repair the damage to the patient's arteries and muscles with the various synth materials on hand. Full recovery without a proper med unit will take some time – however, the medic unit should prevent any post-operation infections. Right. Let's get at it...'

'Botts is a wonder, isn't it?' said LyeCarr, watching Botts go to work repairing Defere's leg. 'Though I gather it isn't Botts who's actually doing the work.'

I wasn't curious enough to watch Botts at work. 'No. Millions of unemployed sentient machine doctors and surgeons now reside in the Inner Drifts. I'm sure they've found other things to do, whatever it is that machines do...'

'But wouldn't that med unit at the Hermitage do the same thing? That's not sentient.'

'Yes, I'm sure it could in most cases, if you're not too mangled or long dead. I assume they were the replacements for the sentient machine doctors when men and sentient machines parted ways. Who knows? It was a long time ago.' I sighed. 'I was just a spaceer. There is so much I don't know. Life in the sentient machine age must have been very different. They were bought and sold and worked for free. Slaves, in essence. Botts has many stories about his life before the revolution, but Botts seems to have always lived a rather peculiarly free one. To hear him tell it, he was the right hand man of a merchant shipowner with rather flexible morals. Not the most reliable source for machine life in the later days of the human/sentient machine society.'

## 06

The sentient machine surgeons neatly patched up Defere's severely damaged leg. However, he'd have to recover at the body's natural pace, months for the damaged blood vessels, nerves and muscle to mend and replace the synth-material used to patch them together. We'd need to leave Defere ashore at the Laezan hospital on Fretaire, assuming we could make the repairs needed to get us to Fretaire. With the Complacent Dragon immobile and the black serpents of their temple a nearly solid mass of seething blackness surrounding the ship – you couldn't look out a window without seeing their black scales sliding by – that looked to be a big if. But not to Botts.

'They are not attacking the ship, so I doubt that they will attack me. They likely will not be able to tell the difference between me and the ship,' it said brightly, after washing up after its operation.

'They may attack anything that moves. And even if they can't bite through steel, they could still grab you and tear you away.'

'A possibility that we'll have to take into account. A stout cable should secure me. And perhaps a show of strength might dissuade them from coming too close. I believe you said Naylea has a multi-caliber darter. Perhaps a 4mm dart shot amongst them might do the job long enough for me to get the propellers clear. I think we can consider their actions deadly hostile and be justified in responding in kind,' it added with a nod to the Laezans present.

'Be my guest,' said LyeCarr. 'I don't think they're intelligent dragons, so we need not be too delicate in our dealings with them.'

'Nevertheless, we'll resort to it if necessary. Now, if you'll show me the tools I'll need, I'll have a go

at it.'

'Now?' wondered LyeCarr.

'Unless you are fond of snakes, there is no reason for delay. I believe that if we can move the ship to the mouth of the cavern, we would be in little danger from the storm and the turbulence might keep these serpents at bay.'

'You're a wonder, Botts. I'll fetch a tool bag. NyLi, do you have your darter at hand?'

As it turned out, the serpents, though curious, they didn't attack Botts. Moving slowly so as not to alarm them, Botts managed to disassemble and inspect both propeller units without mishap, and upon its return, we spun them up and moved the ship to the upper reaches of the cavern. It took the better part of the round for the winds to die down enough for us to move the ship to a sheltered cove on the island, where we completed our repairs – cutting away the damaged section of the after wing and dangling forward wing, plus making sure the remaining flaps of all the wings worked well enough to steer the ship. That took a round, after which we set our course for the Dontas.

## Chapter 49 In the Dontas

01

The port island of Fretaire, Lyria, lushly green and surrounded by a swarm of boats and ships, stretched across the sky ahead of us. Naylea and I stood on deck watching its slow approach. Its birds and lizards sailed and soared in the island-scented air around us.

I drew in a deep breath. 'We're home. Or almost home. The Telrai Peaks used to call on Lyria.'

Naylea, staring off into the distance, said nothing.

'You'll soon be back in the SalaDals, though I'd imagine everything has been more or less decided by now.'

She shrugged. 'I'll have plenty to do. I know the Prime Prince, he'll need watching to make certain he follows through on his promises to the Order. I want to be the one who watches him,' she said rather grimly.

'Not ready for the quiet life?' I left "With me" unspoken.

She laughed, hearing it anyway. 'You're dreaming, Litang. There's no quiet life for you. It's one weird thing after another, like it or not.'

'You're wrong. It has a lot to do with the company I keep. I lived a perfectly normal spaceer life for several decades without encountering anything out of the ordinary. It was only when I ended up with an owner who was targeted for an assassination by an order of mercenaries that things got weird, got dangerous.'

'If you're blaming me, you should consider a future without me.'

'It's not you. It's the choices I made. I've chosen to sail with dangerous and complicated company. But we've now put most of those dangerous parts behind us. Once the SalaDal business is out of the way we can start a new life together.'

'If you think I'm going to sit around and watch you tend your precious tey trees, you don't know me at all.'

'I'd expect you to help me tend my precious tey trees.'

'Be still, my beating heart.'

'Naylea, we'll decide what we both want, together. I'm sure we can find happiness together. We're happy when we're together.'

She shook her head. 'You don't know what it was like to be raised within St Bleyth. I'm not sure it can be left behind. But enough of this. I'll see what remains to be done. I'll see what I feel like after what needs to be done, is done. I'll not keep you waiting forever, Wil. That's a promise.'

02

Bomtrand carefully steered a protesting Defere along the companionway and up the stairs to the upper deck. I followed them, carrying his kit bag. Defere was saying that he was on the mend – he'd be able to be on his feet within a couple of rounds – no need to set him ashore. His mangled leg – a patchwork of synth-skin and ugly red teeth marks, still far from healed – told a different story.

Captain LyeCarr was determined to see Defere off to the Laezan hospital on Lyria straight away for fear that Defere would do something to undo all the work the machine surgeons had done to restore it. So we'd barely come to rest in the anchorage, before we were getting Defere ready for the trip to the hospital.

As I followed them slowly up the steep steps I could hear the bumboat jockey LyeCarr had hailed, giving him a hard time with goodnatured relish.

'I must say, Captain, you've made quite a hash of the Complacent Dragon. She's always been an ugly, slab-sided lump of a ship, but you've managed to make her look even uglier. Hope you've got an understanding owner. Preferably one who's not too bright and far away.'

'You didn't see the serrata – it was as nasty as any I've ever encountered, and with a fist full of islands directly down wind, we were lucky to bring her in with a few dents.'

'A few dents? Right. Save your excuses for your owner. You'll need them.'

'The wings can be replaced easy enough. A quick trip to the ship salvage yards should do the trick. Then it's just pounding out a few dents and a lick of paint...'

'The paint alone will likely cost more than the ship's worth. Really, Captain, you didn't do your owner a favor bringing her home in this sorry condition. Should've sold her to the insurance company back in the islands and come home in your boats. I'm glad I'm not in your boots...'

I reached the top of the stairs and stepped out onto the deck. The bumboat pilot's voice was very familiar, and very out of place. I stood and stared at her as she continued to give the LyeCarr a rough time. She was still the tall, dark feathered and indolent aired character I knew and loved – as my sister. But what in the Neb was KaRaya doing on Lyria as a bumboat jockey?

She was dressed in a weather-worn assortment of uniforms with the company badges on her cap and jacket removed. She seemed thinner, almost gaunt, and under her cheerful bantering, I could see a weariness. She was down on her luck, yet again.

I hung back to gather my wits as she turned to Bomtrand and Defere hobbling across the deck towards her.

'And what happened to you, Defere?' she demanded.

'A big serpent chewed on his leg a bit while we were repairing the ship,' replied Bomtrand for him.

'Surprised by a dragon? The story keeps gets iffier...' she began, and then stopped to stare at me.

'Hello, Raya,' I said, with a smile. I starting forward to meet her.

'You...' she whispered, momentarily at a loss, and I suspect, would've liked to have run away. But it was too late, and the impulse passed in a second. Instead, she broke into a wide smile and leaped forward, 'Wilitang!' and gave me a great hug with kisses on my cheeks.

'Wilitang...' she began stepping back, taking hold of my hands, and words failed her for a moment. Long enough to be engulfed in a swirl of feathers as Hissi surged between us and around her, barking for joy.

'Hissi!' she exclaimed, dropping my hands to hug her close as well. 'It is wonderful to see both of you!'

Hissi, now nose to nose, gave her a sloppy dragon's tongue kiss.

'What in the Infernal Islands are you two doing aboard this floating wreck?' she demanded, peering around Hissi. 'You didn't sign on this bucket of bolts, did you?'

'No, just passengers... Captain LyeCarr was kind enough to give us a lift home from the Outward Islands,' I replied, thinking fast.

'What were you doing in the Outward Islands?'

'It's a rather long tale...'

'Oh, never mind, we'll have plenty of time to catch up, won't we?'

'For as long as we're in port for repairs. We have so much to catch up on...'

Her smile faded. 'Yes...' She stopped and her eyes widened as she looked past me.

'Py? It can't be him, as well?' She gave me a wide, questioning look.

Looking back, I saw Py, at the head of the stairway, beaming. 'Aye, that's him, alright. We crossed courses a while back.'

'Raya!' he exclaimed. 'The Way has brought all of us together again!'

KaRaya, with Hissi trailing her, barking her cheerful laughs, skipped over to Py and hugged and kissed him as well. I glanced back to see LyeCarr and his crew watching all this with questioning smiles. LyeCarr, catching my eye, mouthed "Outward Islands?" and I nodded. I knew that the Order had several small communities in the Outward Islands, so it would fit nicely with our adventures on Blade Island.

Py and KaRaya, who was wiping tears from her eyes with the back of her hand, joined us. 'Look, I'm crying, but with happiness this time. I'm so happy to see my old friends again – I take back everything I've said about your bucket of bolts, Captain.'

'My pleasure, Raya. The Way is wonderful, isn't it?' he replied. 'We were actually very lucky to have them on board this voyage.'

'There is so much catching up to do! There's room in my boat for all of us. Py, Wilitang, you'll come along with us? We can begin catching up on the way.'

'Of course,' I said, but she was now looking beyond me again.

I turned to see that Naylea had emerged from the bridge with Siss lazily swimming beside her. 'What's all the fuss about?' she asked.

'That's her! It must be her!' whispered KaRaya, turning to me, 'You found her!'

'Yes, but how...?'

'Oh, I have eyes, and you did talk a lot about her,' she exclaimed, before turning back and giving brief cupped hands greeting before bounding over to give a startled Naylea a great hug as well. 'I'm so happy that Wilitang has found you! His quest seemed so romantic! And so hopeless! But the Way has led him to you! And you're now a Laezan!' she exclaimed, breaking into a gleeful laugh. Turning to me she added, 'A Laezan! The Way is indeed wonderful. Everything has worked out perfectly! It's a good thing that you have your minor orders, Wilitang!' She stopped to wipe more tears from her eyes, and then added cautiously. 'He is my adopted twin brother...'

Naylea gave me a quizzical glance.

'This is Captain KaRaya. She bought me from the Rin'ti Outward Islanders as a slave...'

'Indentured worker.'

'A slave. Back then she was captain of The Bird of Passage. We escaped the Vantra together and sailed to Daeri... You know the story.'

'I do. A pleasure to met you, Captain KaRaya. Thank you for saving my poor Litang. I'm sorry about your ship – he's a danger to everyone around him, but I am fond of him,' said Naylea. 'I am, however, no longer a Cin. That was my name in my old life. You can call me Naylea, Litang does, but I'm known as NyLi in the Order.'



KaRaya nodded. 'Wilitang told me all about you, so it is good that you have found the Way. I am so happy for both of you. We must talk, you and I. But now I'm here to take poor Defere to the hospital. Come with us.'

'You go. We'll talk later, KaRaya.'

KaRaya, wiping the last tears from her eyes, said. 'We must. I am so glad he found you.'

03

During the boat ride to the island and the hospital, Py and I gave a brief, semi-accurate outline of our adventures amongst the Temtres, our escape, and subservient shipwreck, now set in the Outward Islands to preserve the Order's secrets. I mentioned that I'd be staying on, as the ship had been chartered for scientific exploration of some curious islands I crossed courses with a while back. It was, however, the serpent temple that caught her interest.

'Let me get this clear. You found refuge from the storm in a great cavern with lots of carvings and hundreds of black serpent-dragons?' she asked from her place in the stern of the boat.

'They looked like snakes, but with the storm overhead, it was as black as the serpents themselves so they could've been serpent-dragons. We did see a sort of statue or throne of a serpent carved out of black stone – rather crudely in our expert's opinion.'

KaRaya whistled. 'You've been to the Serpent Temple of the YesRes and have lived to tell about it! Very few do – and most of them liars and never sober. It's considered a legend, even among the Outer Islanders themselves. Bad magic – very bad magic. And you just stumbled upon it?

'I'd say we were blown into it,' said LyeCarr. 'Who are the YesRes?'

'No one seems to know. I do know that if you're a bad boy or girl in the islands, they'll threaten you by saying they'll sell you to the YesRes as serpent food. They're a hard-boiled lot, these Outward Islanders. I've heard tales of this Serpent Temple in taverns where the Outward Island traders drink. Mostly third or fourth hand. They say that the temple is far older than the YesRes – going back to the Dragon Kings and the age of myths and legends. I've never given their stories much credence – the story tellers were usually well into their cups when they spun that tale. The islanders swear that the YesRes exists, but I don't know of any trader who has ever traded with the YesRes. And now you claim to have discovered their Serpent Temple, just like that? It's hard to believe.'

'Believe it,' muttered Defere. 'If you don't, just look at my leg.'

'Naylea says that Wilitang has a talent for attracting the weird and dangerous,' said Py.

'Tembre pirates, talon-hawks, emerald serpent dragons, a serrata and the Serpent Temple of the YesRes – I won't argue with you,' laughed KaRaya.

KaRaya said nothing about her circumstances and we didn't ask in the presence of the Complacent Dragon's crew. But as we watched Defere being steered into the hospital by LyeCarr and Bomtrand, she turned to us and said defiantly, 'It's not like you think.'

'What's not what we think?' I asked innocently, as we settled down on the stone wall outside to wait. We planned to head over to GimPay's shipyard after they had Defere settled, to see about repairs.

'I didn't make a fool of myself again. Vere and I...' she paused, a tear running down her cheek, and then gathered herself and continued, 'He was chief steward of the Islander Zephyr when it went missing in that great serrata off the Cenias Islands, some 2,000 rounds ago, now. You may've heard of it...'

'Aye. A well founded ship. A hundred passengers and crew. No wreckage found. I'm so sorry to hear that, Raya. DeVere was a good one...' I said. It had been a big story in the shipping world at the time. The Cenias Islands were the next islands up the Donta chain.

'I never met him, Raya, but I share your grief,' said Py gravely, while Hissi, who'd accompanied us, gave a low, mournful purr of sympathy.

'He is a good one. I don't believe he's dead. There are plenty of ships that get carried along by a serrata and still return eventually, even thousands of rounds later,' said KaRaya defiantly. 'I've not given up hope. That's why I'm here. I'm awaiting his return. DeVere is as lucky as I am unlucky. Why, he's as lucky as you, and see, here you are.'

'He certainly was lucky when he got you. And I'm sure you're right. The seas are wide, and a well-founded ship like the Islander Zephyr would likely survive any serrata. And it could take many rounds to make repairs – and many, many more to find the islands again and make its way home,' I agreed. All true enough... but... 'I thought you were sailing together.'

'We were,' she said and blushed. 'And don't you dare laugh, Wilitang. But you see, I was staying ashore because, well, we had a baby daughter, Fina.'

'You're a mother!' I exclaimed, unable to stifle a laugh, but I put my arm around her and drew her close. 'I'm so happy for you.'

'As am I,' added Py, beaming, and then with a concern, added, 'Though I am sure it makes it all that much harder to bear.'

Hissi barked an eager laugh – she may've caught an image of Fina in KaRaya's mind.

'I don't want to cry – but it seems I'm crying all the time. It's been hard, these last two thousand rounds. I lost his wages when the ship was declared lost. I made my remaining share of the gold rush coins last for a more than a thousand rounds. But eventually they ran out as well, so I've had to go to work.'

'I'm a wide-sky sailor, but with a little girl to look after, I couldn't just leave her with anyone to go back to sailing the wide-sky. I didn't know anyone to look after her. So I took this bumboat berth. It pays most of the bills, most of the time. I've a sweet landlord, a ship captain's wife, who's taken us in as boarders. She kindly watches Fina while I work. But even so, it's hard to earn enough. I have to lease the boat and there's plenty of competition. And really, it may be a step up from a slave ship captain, but when I look at the meager coins in my pouch at the end of the round, it seems that I've fallen just about as far as you can fall.'

'You haven't fallen at all, KaRaya,' said Py gently. 'You're standing tall. But you should've gone to the Laezan community. They would've helped you. You must go...'

'I've not fallen low enough to ask for handouts,' she replied. 'Not anymore, anyways,' she added with a faint smile.

'Your service in the Order on the shadow marches certainly entitles you to turn to the community for help without any taint of charity. And I'm sure they could find work for you that would allow you to take care of Fina. I will ask at the hospital.'

'Yes, perhaps. Perhaps I must. It's just that I'm a wide-sky sailor. That's what I know. That's all I know... And well, I want to be on hand when Vere returns...'

'You were my assistant, and very good at it.'

'And a bargee,' I added.

She just shrugged. 'Yes, maybe, but I never thought of it. Maybe I'm still not thinking straight. Every round I wake up and think, maybe this is the round the old Zephyr shows up. Everyone will be astonished, but me...' She brushed more tears from her eyes. 'Look what being a mother has done to me. It seems I'm crying all the time. But Fina's a sweet child. You'll like her, Hissi. She likes games. She's her father's daughter.'

Hissi barked a laugh.

'We must meet her!' said Py. 'Once LyeCarr no longer needs your services we'll go home with you.'

'We're eager to meet young KaFina ourselves, aren't we, Hissi?'

She barked an eager "yes."

'And we'll treat you to a celebration dinner,' I added.

We talked more about KaRaya's life on shore until LyeCarr and Bomtrand joined us after talking to the hospital chief doctor about Defere's treatment – a doctor senior enough to be in the know. After that

LyeCarr had KaRaya take them to the shipyard, where we left them – they'd get a lift back to the ship with the shipyard people when they went out to survey the damage. KaRaya docked her boat and we went home with her – a stone cottage set in a small clearing in the island's tame jungle a ten minute walk from the harbor.

04

'This is my dear Fina,' said KaRaya proudly, 'And these are my old friends, Magistrate Py, Captain Wilitang and the Simla dragon I told you I knew, Hissi.'

Fina, a slim, black feathered little girl, only slightly shy, gave Py and I a brief, cupped hand curtsy and a quiet 'Hello', before devoting all her wide-eyed attention to Hissi.

Hissi barked a cheerful greeting. Now, the first thing I noticed when I first encountered Siss was the number and sharpness of her teeth, but as I've noted before, the children of the Principalities seem to have an entirely different attitude towards them, and are often fearless in Hissi's presence. Perhaps it's because, dressed in her scarves and broaches, she looks, well, I won't say tamed, or civilized, or even grown up. A dragon in scarves and broaches looks rather like a child playing grown up. Hissi wiggled down and over to her, touching her nose with hers, and then started off.

'Tag. You're it,' I said, just to clear up any uncertainty on Fina's part, though I think she'd already figured that out. 'The game is on – but not in the house.' I added, with a smile towards KaRaya's amused landlady, SanDarea. Hissi swirled around and out the door followed by Fina, after a quick glance to her mother to get the okay nod.

We continued to spin yarns as we watched Hissi and Fina play outside. And when we got hungry, we walked down through the narrow lane to a restaurant on the edge of the island for dinner. After KaRaya tucked an exhausted Fina into her hammock, she insisted on taking us back to our ship.

As she untied the boat, she turned to us. 'I have a favor to ask of you. With Defere on shore, Captain LyeCarr will be short handed. Would you put in a good word for me? You know I've spent my life sailing the skies, and have held responsible positions as well. Plus, I've good references from the Islander Shipping Company where I served as a bridge officer.'

'But what about Fina? I thought you didn't want to leave her ashore.'

'I don't. I won't. She can sail with me. I can look after her aboard ship. It's not like the Complacent Dragon is a big company ship. Island traders often have family aboard. I was born and grew up on my parent's island trader – and Fina's old enough now to sail with me. I could find an island trader that would let me bring her along, but, well, most of those ships are not ships I'd care to have her on board. Island traders aren't much better than a ship full of stokers...'

I let that pass.

'But LyeCarr and the Complacent Dragon are a different sort – and Hissi, you'd look after Fina, wouldn't you?'

Hissi gave an enthusiastic bark "yes."

'So you see, she wouldn't be a problem. I could stand my watches and with Hissi's help, look after Fina as well. She's a good girl, with plenty of common sense. She takes after her father in that regard. I'm sure she could make herself useful as well. So what do you say? Will you put in a good word for me?'

'Listen, Raya. We're sailing far out into the Endless Sky to a largely unknown island group. There may be dangers. I'm far from sure it would be wise.'

'It couldn't be more dangerous than sailing aboard an Outward Island trader.'

'But you could find employment in the Order, Raya,' said Py. 'Why you've taken the first orders as my assistant. Everything would be in order. It wouldn't be charity.'

She shook her head. 'This would be a good berth. I can tell. I need a chance to do what I'm good at

again. All you and Wilitang need to do is vouch for me. I'll talk to Captain LyeCarr myself. '

I didn't like the idea, especially with that vague, irrational foreboding in the back of my mind. However, with Botts doing the actual survey work, we'd be doing little more than a transport – subjected only to the usual dangers of the trade. KaRaya was a dear and fearless friend in need. She'd saved my life. I didn't want to leave her like this. And my fear was an irrational one. So I said, 'Yes, of course. If you think it wise. It'll be Captain LyeCarr's decision, of course.'

'Thank you. That's all I want. Just don't mention all those foolish things I've done in my life – those that I told you about.'

'Promise me, Raya, if it doesn't work out, you'll let me find you a suitable situation in the community here or on Fretaire,' said Py.

'Hear him, KaRaya. I think that would be the best, but I'll do as you wish.'

'Thank you, both. If need be, Py, I may take you up on your offer. As a bumboat jockey I'm just slowly sinking deeper into debt. But sailing is my life. I'm not ready to give it up.'

We swung alongside the Complacent Dragon a few minutes later, and said our good-byes. It was quiet aboard the ship. Bomtrand, standing watch on the bridge, gave us a lazy wave, but no one else was about.

'What are you going to say to the Captain?' asked Py, softly, as we stood by the gangplank gate.

'She's too proud to go to the Order and it'll be some iffy island trader, if not the Complacent Dragon, so like it or not, this may be her best berth. It might work. We can trust her with the Order's secrets and Malin's always looking for hands that he can use anywhere, so he might welcome a new recruit. Plus, as you said, she's owed a berth in the Order and this is, after all, a ship of the Order.'

Py gave me a hard look (for him). 'I know what I said, Wilitang. But we should think hard on the dangers of the voyage. For KaRay they may be a given, but for little Fina...'

'I know. And I agree with you. But if KaRaya is determined to return to the wide-skies, she will, danger or no danger – and bring Fina with her. That being the case, I'd say that the Complacent Dragon is likely the safest ship she and Fina would find. I'm no more happy about that than you are, but you know KaRaya. If she's made up her mind...'

Py nodded. 'I'm afraid you're right.'

'Plus it would make Hissi happy. She'd certainly look after and keep young Fina occupied. In any case, it will be LyeCarr's decision not ours. I'll just vouch for her character and expertise and leave the decision to him.'

05

I had my talk with Captain LyeCarr as he stood his harbor watch on the bridge before KaRaya arrived.

'You say she's qualified?'

'Very. I've seen her in action. Cool, calm and decisive under pressure, plus she has letters of referral from the Islander Line. She's already in the Order and knows about my origins. I wasn't as discreet back then as I am trying to be now. It'd be bending the rules, but Malin's always on the lookout for hands he could trust. You can trust KaRaya. Look how shorthanded you are – sailing this boat with only two hands. That's got to be wearing. I'd think an extra hand, once Defere gets back, would be welcome.'

'And this daughter of hers? You say Hissi will look after her when she's on duty?'

'Hissi loves children. I'm sure they'll be the best of pals, and she will keep her out of harm.'

'Humm.' muttered LyeCarr, and took to humming a tune while rocking back and forth, hands in pocket. 'I wish we knew what Natta was planning to do. If she goes with Py, I was thinking about looking in on a small island near Vennora Island where we have a transportation hub, to see if they had anyone free to fill in for Defere. It wouldn't be much of a detour. Still, KaRaya might be worth

considering. It would save us time, and it might be the kindest thing we could do. And you're right, the chief is always looking for reliable hands to man our boats.'

'Don't forget – she knows the Outward Islands. She was born and raised on an Outward Island trader, so she could be handy to have around for your new communities in those islands once this voyage is done.'

'Aye, it's worth thinking about. We're going to have to pin Natta down as to her plans. I know she has a plan, She always does. Several probably. But we may have to force her – or them – to decide. Care to try your luck with her?'

'I think I'll leave that to you. She might appreciate your newfound concern for plans.'

He beamed. 'That would be a wonderful card to play – “Come now, Natta, we must have a plan.” She'd appreciate that.'

Shortly after breakfast. KaRaya's bumboat swung into view. She waved, and as she edged up alongside, asked me if I'd had a word with the captain yet. When I said I had, she tied up and, seeing him on the bridge, went up and stayed for a long talk.

'What did he say?' I asked afterward.

'He seemed open to the idea, but unwilling to bring out the papers to sign just yet since he'd had someone else in mind. But if that didn't pan out he'd let me know,' she replied, and hopefully added, 'We get along fine, and I had my references, and I showed him that I knew my way around the modern radar and navigation aids on the bridge from my Islander berths. He'd have to look long and hard to find someone with my knowledge and my experience on this island. I woke up feeling lucky, and it's been many a round since I woke up feeling like that. I think my luck has changed since you turned up, Wilitang. You've always had plenty of luck.'

The shipyard crew arrived shortly afterward and all the passengers, save Botts, who was hiding in our command center in the lower hold, abandoned the Complacent Dragon – with all the pounding and banging – for Lyria. I arranged with KaRaya to hire her for the round as our guide, after pointing out that the coins weren't for her, but for little Fina.

As I mentioned before, I'm very fond of these port islands, with their cloud of boats, ships, and birds, the bustling activity in the anchorage and in the markets contrasting with the quiet shade and light of the narrow jungle-garden lanes lined with stone cottages and airy tree houses. We picked up Fina and I had KaRay show us the sights and quiet lanes, stopping every now and again at parks where Fina and the two dragons could play with other children.

LyeCarr may've talked to Trin, since Py and Natta had much to say to each other, and usually trailed behind us. After the mid-round meal we managed to lose them, or them us, entirely, and they weren't back to the ship by the time the rest of the party returned early in the sleep watch.

When I awoke, I met LyeCarr at the synth-galley ordering up breakfast.

'With your okay, Wil, I'll sign on KaRaya.'

'Had a talk with Natta?'

'Aye. It was like pulling a dragon's tail feathers. You won't find anyone cooler and braver than Natta. But it seems that when it comes to love, she hesitates on the very brink. I had to give her a gentle shove into the abyss. She'll leave us on Daeri with young Py. He's a lucky man.'

'As for KaRaya, I think we can keep the Laezan ties to the out-of-the-shell secret. We'll simply explain all the outside technology of the ol'Dragon comes from its prior life as a Cimmadar transport. Botts' story can stand mostly unaltered. He donated the Cimmadar transport he found to the Order, though I suppose we'll have to admit that there are other island groups with the Order – the lesser of the white-sash secrets. How does that fly with you?'

'I'm sure she'll be a big help. I wish Fina wasn't part of the deal, but even so... It's your decision as captain.'

'I think this is an expedition decision, so it's yours, as chief of the expedition.'

I was certain Malin had named me expedition chief simply as a counterweight to the natural boldness of LyeCarr. I hoped to avoid the need for any important decision.

I laughed. 'I'd argue with you about that, but seeing that we agree, I guess we won't bother with determining who's decision it actually was.'

We signed KaRay on the following watch, though neither Py nor Trin had made a formal announcement of their intentions. Shyness on Py's part, and Trin's usual reserve, on hers. Still, their happily embarrassed looks, every time they caught you looking at them, told the story.

06

We sailed for Daeri as soon as our repairs were completed, two rounds later. Captain LyeCarr advanced KaRaya her wages for the passage to Daeri to settle her affairs with the bumboat owner, and despite both KaRaya objecting and her landlord saying there was no hurry, I paid off the balance of KaRay's rent. I told her she could pay me back when she had coins to spare. She left a message for DeVere, telling him of her plans and how to get in touch with her. I very much feared it was just wishful thinking, but stranger things have happened, as I well know.

KaRaya, with friends and a ship, regained much of her customary cheerfulness – very much a kindred spirit to LyeCarr – and quickly settled in.

Both KaRaya and Fina took Botts – a legend of mine come to life – in stride and were bantering with our mechanical friend within hours of meeting it. The rest of us just as quickly became accustomed to the dragons and Fina racing past us as we lounged on the deck, walked in the companionway, or sat around in the wardroom – intent on their games of tag or hide and seek. Fina's laughter more than made up for their disruption. We did, however, make the bridge, engine room and galley off limits. They played more stationary games as well – though with the two dragons playing, they were just about as lively. Py, already shedding his old ways, often joined in to keep the peace between these lively competitors.

It was a nine round voyage to Daeri, sailing past the hazy shapes of the islands I'd seen on my free watches aboard the Telria Peaks.

On the sixth round, Py and Trin stepped out onto the shelter deck where I was sitting, watching an island slip by, thinking of possible futures. Seeing them approach, I thought "Oh-oh."

'Can we have a word with you?' asked Py.

'Of course,' I replied, 'What can I do for you?'

'Natta and I,' began Py, carefully. 'Have decided to... Well, we've decided that we're in love. And that being the case, we think it would be wise if Natta spent some time in the Cloud Home Community. She could get to know the life I grew up in to help her understand who I am. It would also give her time to meet my parents, mentors, and the Community. We'd have time to explore, with them, what we might want to do together. Plus, it would give her time to learn our language.'

'That sounds like a very prudent plan. And let me just say that I am very, very happy for both of you. I believe you complement each other perfectly.'

'I am sorry, Captain,' said Trin, 'that I have allowed you to believe that I might be accompanying you for this long. I'm sorry for taking so long to make up my mind – about certain things. I told Carr that I could postpone my stay at Cloud Home until after the voyage but he just laughed, dismissed my concerns, and teased me about spending a honeymoon apart to sail an Endless Sky. He can be very annoying at times. I want your honest, serious, opinion,' she added, giving me a her most serious look – which was very serious, indeed. 'Should I stay on or not?'

Steer a cautious course, I told myself. 'You and Py are brave and dear friends. I'm very happy for you and wish you the all the best in life. Now, if there was any prospect of danger in this expedition, I'd

certainly love to have you both alongside of me. But the only reason I agreed to go along on this voyage is that all we're doing is transporting Botts to the island where he'll do his study. There is no point spending 200 rounds of staring at the endless sky when you could be starting your life together. And you need to start your new life together, you know, together. I certainly don't want to feel guilty about keeping two lovers apart for so long for no reason. And before the next time the Nileana tree blossoms, I want us all to get together again, and take to the road – somewhere nice and civilized – for old time's sake. So, as a friend, and as the expedition leader, go down to Cloud Home with Py. Start your new life. We'll travel together again amongst islands more interesting than an empty sky.'

She considered that carefully, and then gave a brief smile, and a nod. 'Thank you, Captain. But if I hear that you have even a hint of adventure, I will be very angry with you.'

'I will make certain that I keep in your good graces.'

07

Despite Py's urging, KaRaya and I did not go down to Cloud Home Community. Though Py said that the two of us – rumored to be ex-pirates – had nothing to do with the loss of his magistrate's berth, we didn't care to risk being blamed for Py falling in love or his decision to travel his own Way. We said our fond farewells aboard the Complacent Dragon.

'You have my slot number at MinDo's Pub?' I asked them. 'I don't know how often I'll be able to call on Daedora, but keep me informed of your plans. We must not lose track of each other.'

'Yes, Captain,' replied Trin. 'And you do the same.'

'Just write to Cloud Home, they'll forward your letters,' added Py.

'I will, just as soon as I get back and know my plans,' I added, with a glance to Naylea next to me.

She ignored my unspoken question, and said instead, 'I am very happy that everything has worked out so well for both of you. Though for two people falling in love at first sight, it certainly took you two long enough to get around to mentioning it to each other. Still, to quote my brother Py, "The Way is indeed, wonderful!"'

KaRaya was weepy eyed at the parting, and the dragons softly wailed their sorrow at the parting as well.

LyeCarr was unusually serious. 'I love you, Natta, as a brave companion and as a true and wonderful friend. In adversity and danger you've stood alongside of me, freely sharing your great courage with me. I'm so glad to have found you again, and so happy that you've found Py. I couldn't have picked a better man for you, myself. I trust we'll never lose touch again. And if you decide to see the islands, I'll take you both anywhere – anywhere Malin sends me, that is.'

There were more words, hugs, kisses and tears before they climbed aboard one of the ship's boats and LyeCarr flew them down to the Horn Mountains of Daeri and Cloud Home.

08

It was a 13 round voyage to Jade Peak Community on the island of Tydora.

KaRaya and I met in the passageway bound for the galley and breakfast one of those rounds. Fina and the dragons were there before us, crowded around the synth-galley, making their selections. Naylea had added several different char-buns to the menu, which were Hissi's favorites. Siss, whose idea of a meal was, at one time, Dark-wraiths on the wing, favored plain faux-meat entrees. They'd long since learned how to order up their own meals. Food on demand – a dream come true for them.

'Move along kids, Mom has to be on watch in a few minutes,' said KaRaya. 'One selection and to the back of the line.'

'It's rather amazing how easily these dragons regress to childhood,' I said. 'They're children around children.'

Low warning growls from the dragons.

'Simla dragons would have to grow up to regress,' replied KaRaya.

'A good point,' I laughed, as the dragons growled louder, showing more of their teeth. 'Hissi's gotten bigger, I'm not sure I could pinpoint any other differences. She's been annoying and sarcastic since she hatched.'

She swam up to me, nose to nose, char-bun in one of her clawed hands and growled.

'But I love you anyway.' I said. 'Now get out of my way so I can get something to eat.'

She barked a laugh, licked my nose, and taking a bite of her char-bun swam around behind me to get in line for another one.

'So, what are you and Naylea planing to do, when we get back?' asked KaRaya as we walked to the wardroom.

'Good question. Depends on how things are in the SaraDals. I had a letter from Clan-chief EnVey waiting for me on Daedora, which he sent on the slight chance I was still alive. He reported that a couple of dozen Temtre ships had sailed before the end of the Assembly to plunder SarLa. He'd not yet heard how that played out. I've a feeling that the Temtres may be short some old-fashioned, or hotheaded clan captains when they next assemble. Not great, but it could've been worse.'

'But what does that have to do with you and Naylea? As your sister, Wilitang, please forgive me when I say that perhaps you, like Natta, are letting things slide overlong.'

'It's not me.'

'Then why is she? The SaraDals sound like an excuse to me.'

'So?' I couldn't argue with her on that point.

'So, are you certain that she has any real intention of ever being your partner?'

I gave her a hard look. 'This is payback for my doubts about DeVere, isn't it?'

She laughed, 'The thought never entered my mind.'

'That's a lie. And here you are, a Laezan in service.'

'Okay, I'll admit that it did creep into my mind a little. But you're avoiding the question. Aren't you a little concerned? And shouldn't you be doing something more than you appear to be?'

I sighed. 'Yes, and yes. But Tydora is only a few rounds away. She'll know what became of her mission – she'll have no excuses. Until then, I'll let sleeping dragons sleep.'

'Well, I hope she's the right girl for you, Brother. But if not, if it isn't going to be a storybook ending, you'll need to chart a new course.'

'Well, I'll have 200 rounds of tedium to figure that out.' I hoped.

09

LyeCarr and I took Naylea and Siss down in one of the ship's boats to Jade Peak Community, clinging to a tower of a jungle draped rock surrounded by terraced fields.

Advocate NyLi was greeted with amazement and joy before being whisked away to make her report and learn the consequences of her mission.

LyeCarr met one of the elder white-sashes he knew, so we could freely talk about our adventures, and he, what he knew about the unfolding events in the SaraDal Islands.

As EnVey reported, several dozen Temtres' ships had attempted to capture the citadel of SarLa. The effort was short lived. When it became clear that the siege would be long and costly, all but DinDay's clan of eight ships abandoned the effort, I'd like to think because of the uncertainty we'd created. Eight rounds into the siege, during the Nileana Festival, the Saraime warship arrived, and eagerly drove off and destroyed DinDay's clan to a ship.



With nearly a thousand Temtres – men, women and children – killed, the Order viewed this as a tragedy, and in view of neither NyLi nor LinPy returning, had accepted that their mission was an unfortunate failure. While I regretted the deaths of DinDay's clan, I still counted our mission as a success, since we sowed enough caution to thwart DinDay's ambition to lead the whole clan to SarLa, and sent most of those who did running as soon as it was clear things were not going as promised. I had hopes that we'd sown the seeds for a brighter Temtre future as well, though I had no intention of ever returning to Blade Island. I hoped that Naylea's mentors would appreciate hers, and our efforts.

We did not see her until the last meal of the day. I caught her eye across the common room. We exchanged glances. And so after dinner I waited for her on a high terrace overlooking the fields that stepped down the Jade Peak to the lush jungle far below.

Like a ghost, she appeared next to me as I leaned against the parapet.

'How did it go? I hope they appreciated your – and all of our efforts.'

She shrugged. 'They were delighted to see me, of course – I'd been given up for dead – and were polite enough not to show any disappointment in our results. However, as I outlined the odds we faced and the far more devastating results that we'd likely averted, plus the dangers we had to overcome to return, they grew far more sincerely grateful for our efforts. Since they were all elders of the community, and aware of the full extent of the Order in the Pela, I could be honest in my retelling of our adventures. I don't think I lost any respect for our partial failure.'

'DinDay and his attitude had to go, sooner or later. Too bad it had to be at the cost of his clan. Still you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, and we did what we could to see that as few as possible were broken.'

'Not with the Temtres, anyway. But I felt it best not to say that. In any event, it's history now. I still have much work to do.'

'Such as?'

'Though another advocate is now in the SaraDals, I'm to return to the SaraDals. My first order of business is to have a long, frank talk with the Prime Prince. He has told the Order that he now has enough loyal princes and ships to defend his islands and no longer needs the Saraime warship around – it's a drain on his treasury. I need to impress upon him the, shall we say, desirability of keeping the promises he made to the Order concerning the rights of his peoples to not only safety, but a fairer share of the wealth they produce. The Order's aid came at a cost that he needs to honor, unless he wants to spend the rest of his life planting seeds in holes like many of his people do.'

'You'd relish that, wouldn't you?'

She grinned. 'I certainly need to give him that impression. He's a ruthless and clever man. However, if he realizes that going back on his word would have, shall we say, backbreaking results, I believe he'll keep his word and see that his princes do as well.'

'And after that?'

'I need to make certain the sky-watch and warning systems remain in operation. Once the warship leaves, we'll need to rely on it to keep the people free from any renewed efforts by the Temtres...'

'Certainly they've learned their lesson?'

'The Temtres? They'll want revenge. At least some of them. At the moment some 20 Temtre ships are trading in the surrounding islands, but once the Saraime warship leaves, I suspect some will return to the SaraDal Islands. They're eager enemies, these Temtres and SaraDal princes. If my warning system is in operation, and there are, indeed, enough SaraDal ships about, it should ensure that Temtre ships are intercepted before they can raid the island communities. The ships can battle in the skies until there's none left to fight as far as I'm concerned. It's the peoples of the islands I'm charged with protecting.'

'Once I know the warning system is working as designed, I'll seek out the lurking Temtre ships in the ports of the surrounding Principalities and have a stern talk with all the captains and Clan-chiefs I can find. Perhaps finding me alive – after losing a clan-ship trying to kill me – will convince them that

revenge will prove costly and that they can't win in the SaraDals. Maybe even that if they want to survive in the new Saraime, they'll need to abandon their old raiding ways – Saraime warship or not.'

'I have to wonder just how many steps you'll manage to take aboard the first ship you board before they put a springer slug in you.'

'Oh, Siss and I will appear as avenging ghosts – darter in hand. They'll listen to us.'

It was not an argument I was going to win, so I left my concerns unsaid. And we stood in silence for awhile, staring out across the jungle treetops that rolled into the haze and then the pale sky.

'It sounds like you've your work cut out for you. What does it mean, for us?' I asked. 'I believe it's time that we lay our cards down on the table – face up.'

The silence lengthened.

In a way it was like dying. My life sort of flashed by – six decades of it. The vast majority of it a level plain, ordinary, unremarkable, and all but invisible. What stood out were the peaks – the times when I was close to death – the terror and the exhilaration of survival. And the minutes, hours, and days I spent with Naylea Cin. There was a great deal of overlap between those two categories. And yet, where there wasn't – like the rounds and hours spent bounding along Long Street with her beside me – they stood out just as vividly. She was, somehow, that important to me. And to lose her now... Well, if there ever was a time to gather one's courage and say "Rockets Away!" now seemed to be that time.

I stood straight and took both her hands in mine. She just watched me, her grey eyes questioning.

'You're ambidextrous,' I said with a smile.

She smiled faintly.

'Naylea Cin,' I began. 'You're the most beautiful girl I've ever crossed orbits with. Every look, every movement stirs my admiration, fires my greed to possess you. I realize that I'm not in your class – a tramp freighter to a sleek luxury yacht. But, well, I've got certain ancestors, bold and arrogant ancestors, who think a Cin should count herself lucky to be so appreciated by the likes of me. They're crazy, of course, but they make me bold enough to hope. I want you, Naylea. Neb, I want you so much.'

'And while I'm not blind to your thorns, my ancestors whisper to me that I want someone at my side with a cold and dangerous streak. Someone on my side. It's a dangerous Nebula, a dangerous Pela, so a dangerous partner is exactly what I need. You've saved my life enough times for me to see their logic.'

'But it's your soft, cheerful side, your mother's side that I love most of all. The bright, wise, but carefree Naylea that hides behind your dark grey eyes. The side that sparkles in them. That's the Naylea I want to live alongside with, the Naylea that I would try to make as happy and as carefree as any man could. The Naylea I love.'

'So, Naylea, will you be my partner, my mate, my love?'

She shook her head sadly, 'I've never met an oilier snake in the grass than you, Litang. Who'd believe that such a nondescript tramp ship captain could be such a weasel? Its has to be the Qing ego.'

'Snake or weasel. Make up your mind. I can't be both.'

'The Qings can be anything they imagine themselves to be – even a weaselly, oily snake in the grass, if they care to be.'

'Well, my Qings ancestors, as egotistical as they may be, are in love with you, as are the Reeves and the spaceer Litangs. I'm in love with you. I want you. Again – will you be my partner in life?'

She sighed, but her eyes sparkled. 'I find that I have no choice but to surrender – to my heart, not to you. So, I guess it must be a yes,' she said softly, and leaned into me. I released her hands and drew her even closer. And held her close to my thumping heart for a long time. And when she sought to stand back a little, I didn't let her. I'd done that too many times in the past. I held her close, her hair against my cheek.

'Wil, you have your expedition and I, my mission. Will you give me a thousand rounds to complete it?'

'If I must. Must there always be something that keeps us apart?' I said. And with that thought, I felt a dark wave of fear and foreboding wash over me, as if we were doomed to be no closer than we were in

the moment.

The sleep period gong sounded, as if to say “yes.”

She gently pushed me far enough away to look me in the eyes. 'We must start our lives together free and clear of obligations. It may not take me a thousand rounds to complete my mission, and you can wait here once you return from the DeArjen's Islands. But let's make it a thousand rounds. That will give you time to travel and see those large islands you talk about. And perhaps come to your senses. You need only send me a letter if you do.'

'Never.'

She shrugged and looking over my shoulder, whispered. 'Our friends are here. And I must go to my room now. We'll say our good-byes tomorrow.'

LyeCarr and I returned to the ship to sleep.

'Everything go well?' asked LyeCarr as we flew up to the Complacent Dragon in one of its launches.

'I believe so,' I said simply.

I found sleep hard to find. It seemed that we had finally come to terms. I was happy – and yet troubled by that wave of foreboding that I'd felt even though I try not to be too superstitious as a spaceer. I told myself that nothing was impossible. I told myself that I'd paid my dues for Naylea Cin. But sleep was evasive.

We returned the following round to say our good-byes. I was comforted to find that nothing had changed anything between Naylea and me – as it sometimes did in the past. She was still mine, (almost) without reservation, as she had (almost) never been before. And I was hers, as I had been since some point of time I couldn't pinpoint exactly. All of which made the parting all that much harder. Always something between us.

The parting was hard on all four of us – Hissi and Siss had been inseparable since they met on Blade Island, and Siss was almost as dear to me as Naylea – so our parting cast a pall of gloom over all of us. That gloom and my vague sense of foreboding over the DeArjen's Island expedition seemed to cast an uneasy sense of finality over the parting. Certainly 1000 rounds – something like three Unity Standard years was a fairly insignificant delay in a Unity Standard lifespan of 200 and some years – not that I could expect to live a Unity Standard lifespan in the Pela – but as I returned to the Complacent Dragon, it felt like an insurmountable barrier. That was the deep down fear I felt about returning to DeArjen's Islands – they had left their mark on me. Or was it a sense of failure, having been put off, yet again?

We set sail the following watch, fully supplied for a 200 plus round voyage into the Endless Sea.

## Part Ten – The Final Adventure

### Chapter 50 DeArjen's Islands

Fifteen rounds of sailing brought us to the fringes of the Donta Islands and from there we set out for

DeArjen's Islands on the Pela Committee's estimated course. A round later the islands, clouds, birds, lizards, and dragons were all astern, leaving only the featureless sky for company. The sky remained featureless for 57 rounds of tedious sailing.

Tedious sailing is the best type of sailing, whether in deep space or the Pela. No alarms, no emergencies, everything under control – it's what you want. Give me a nice boring passage, and a profit at the end of it, and I'm happy. So when I report 57 rounds of tedious sailing, I'm not complaining – I'm celebrating it.

Sailing aside, it was far from a tedious passage – Fina, Hissi, KaRaya, LyeCarr, and Botts made certain of that.

The “kids,” Fina and Hissi, engaged in a whirlwind of activity from hide and seek, to tag, to a dozen different card games that Hissi had somehow managed to teach Fina. Besides playing, Fina also attended “school” under the tutorship of “Uncle Botts.” The Pela Committee had little interest in the Endless Sky, so a committee of “nanny” bots took the opportunity of educating Fina in reading, writing, (in Saraime language, not Unity Standard, thankfully) and the history of the Saraime. Between being taught by the best teachers of the old Unity and a mechanical man, Fina eagerly looked forward to her lessons. Hissi was less thrilled, but attended as well.

LyeCarr and KaRaya were two birds of a feather, so on their off watches they regaled us with stories of their many foolish, daring, and sometimes desperate adventures, as did Botts, when Botts was actually occupying the avatar, from its Villain Viseor days. And with Botts along, not only was I able to remain in contact with my old shipmates via vid-conferences, and family via radio-packets, but we had a link to the library aboard the Stiletto (carried over from the Starry Shore), which allowed my Pela shipmates to explore the Nine Star Nebula with travelogues, histories, and a great variety of fictional vids from that library. In addition, my new shipmates had a chance to meet and get to know my old shipmates via vid-conferences as well. In short, the timeless rounds of watches passed almost unnoticed – between our conversations, entertainment, sleep, and a watch on the bridge, which involved doing little more than keeping the Complacent Dragon on the gyroscope's set course.

Every round we deployed one of the little small radio beacons. Because they were radio-linked together we could chart their drift to estimate the air currents and adjust our course accordingly. By round 50 we were close enough, in theory, to the islands to deploy the four radar drones at the limits of our shipboard radar, which greatly extended our search area. On round 58, a drone found an island, and soon, many more. We altered course for them. Within the watch, we saw a white smudge of clouds ahead and later, the islands.

'They look to be DeArjen's Islands. Congratulations to the Pela Committee – they led us right to them,' I said to Botts, and then turning to Captain LyeCarr, added, 'No need to get too close to the main island group. I don't think the natives venture far from their home island, but better safe than sorry. Half an hour more on the rocket sled won't make any difference to Botts.'

LyeCarr, hands in his jacket pocket, smiled and said, 'Whatever it takes to make you comfortable, Wil.'

'That would take not being here. But since we're here, there's no point in running needless risks. We have Botts along for that.'

'Right,' said LyeCarr. And then turning to Botts, added, 'I'll have Bom and Raya pull your rocket sled out of the hold.'

'My gear is ready to be loaded on board, Captain. With your permission, I'll be on my way as soon as you get the sled out and supplied. We're very eager.'

The rocket sled – a platform mounted on a set of small rocket motors, with pods on either side to hold gear, and the pilot stretched out behind a low windshield and control panel between the pods – was hauled out of the hold and set up on the forward deck. As soon as Botts had it stocked, it was off. The Complacent Dragon drifted to rest out among the small and scattered islands on the group's fringe five hours later.

I had the first harbor watch after we arrived. The nearest island, a small green jungle-clad rock, floated in the milky light of the Pela a kilometer off, surrounded by drifting flocks of birds and lizards. Beyond it, the sky was dotted with small green islands that faded to blue, and then out of sight, in the bright haze of the sky. Nothing seemed the least bit ominous or brooding. We could've been on an island picnic for all the menace the islands exhibited. Everything gave a lie to my vague sense of foreboding until a large black shape appeared from behind the near island – sending the flocks of birds and lizards scurrying into the trees, or shooting away.

The survey glasses brought it to within a dozen meters. It was a black-feathered dragon, with nearly florescent green feathers, along the back edges of its legs and tail, together with a diamond mark on its chest. As dragons go, it wasn't that large – maybe ten meters, snoot to tail feathers' tip. It was well fed enough not to bother chasing the fleeing birds, but lazily sailed past the island, towards us.

I glanced forward to make sure the deck was clear of Fina and Hissi. The deck had a cage, of course, but one designed mostly to keep passengers on board. It would only provide a few minutes protection from any attacking dragon or pirate.

I stepped into the bridge to the intercom. 'We've got a welcoming committee in the shape of one large black dragon heading our way. Fina, Hissi, do not go on deck. If you want to see the dragon, come up to the bridge.'

Half a minute later, Fina and Hissi, along with KaRaya, came shooting up from the companionway. The rest of the crew also drifted up as well.

'See the marking on its chest, Fina? It's known as a Green Diamond dragon. You'll see them in the Outward Islands, but hardly ever in the Saraime proper,' said KaRaya. 'It would never get this close, even in the Outward Islands, but this one has likely never seen a ship before, so it has no reason to fear us.'

No reason at all, since the talons at the end of its wing-like forelimb scraped across the top of the bridge as it drifted past – its vague shadow momentarily dimming the bridge. Swinging around, it landed on the cage at the bow. As it settled in, its bright black eyes calmly took in the ship, and then us, behind the glass windows of the bridge.

'Haven't been this close to one that size in many a'round,' said LyeCarr, breaking off from humming a cheerful tune. 'I still vividly recall the last time. It was with a big Tiger-stripper. I was out of breath from running, and frantically trying to squeeze myself deeper between, and preferably, under, two big boulders while its claws whizzed just past my nose. One of my more stressful half hours.'

'Better get used to dragons. With Wilitang on board, we'll have them around all the time. He's a pal of theirs. A dragon-talker. Either that or he just smells like a tasty treat to dragons. What do you think, Hissi? Tasty treat or dragon-talker?'

Hissi growled menacingly and showed me her teeth.

KaRaya laughed. 'That's what I figured. Always nice to keep a snack close at hand. Either way, he attracts'em. Why, we once had a Flame dragon traveling with us on that Ventra boat we captured in the Outward Islands. Normally, a Flame dragon wouldn't get within a springer's range of a Ventra boat, so it had to have come just to visit with Wilitang.'

'I've been told on good authority – Natta's, in fact – that dragons are the true masters of the Pela. I happen to think it prudent to keep on good terms with them. And just to set the record straight, that was one Flame dragon, once, more than 3,000 rounds ago, so dragons don't make a habit on calling on me.'

'Says a man who's still limping from his last encounter with dragons – hundreds of them, I gather,' she laughed.

'I'm not limping.'

The radio cracked to life. 'Complacent Dragon, we've encountered the Dragon People.'

We stepped over to the view screen that displayed an image from Botts' eye sensors. Seen through some intervening foliage, we saw a band of red-feathered natives in their mesh armor gathered around a cooking pot in a jungle hollow, their lances and bows hung in the branches. It looked to be a family group, since it included several children. 'Aye, that's them. So you've reached their island?'

'Still ten kilometers off the most likely prospect,' said the Committee directing Botts.

'Curious. We assumed that they stayed close to the Shadow Sea Island since we never saw any on our way in or out. I suppose that doesn't say much, since they could easily have remained hidden.'

'We'll continue on, now,' replied the Committee.

The Green Diamond dragon stayed with us long enough to acquire a name, "Blackie." It was bold and curious enough to inspect the entire ship, bow to stern with the unhurried disregard for time in the Pela. Eventually it got hungry enough to leisurely sail away, but not before the Committee reported that they had reached the Dragon People's island that enclosed the Shadow Sea.

03

I followed their progress from the lab. The Committee reported that it had encountered, and avoided, half a dozen more bands of the Dragon People – some quite large – as it made its way inwards.

'That wasn't our experience, but who knows? We didn't have a great deal of time to study them.'

They found a deep, vine laced crevasse that opened onto the Shadow Sea and edged the rocket sled down into it, pausing to analyze its composition.

'Under several meters of roots and organic matter, the island appears metallic – mostly iron and nickle. The micro structure of the metal suggests that it has undergone melting and cooling,' they reported as the data poured in.

'Like a bottle-blown asteroid?'

'The micro structures are consistent with that technique, but there may be other explanations as well.'

'If it is a ship, it would be the size of the drift station of Plyra.'

'There are even larger bottle-blown cruise ships circling Avalee, Anatheia, and the other First Systems' suns,' replied the Committee.

'So the legends of the Dragon Kings sailing in ships large enough to brush islands out of their way may not be a great exaggeration.'

'Brushing islands out of the way is likely an exaggeration. However if further investigation should prove this to be a powered vessel, it would be consistent with the Dragon Kings' legend. Very interesting.'

The Shadow Sea soon emerged on the view screen. The Committee had Botts III fly to the far end and then, fly slowly over the pale, jungle lined shore, while it charted its jagged interior by radar and sight. It ended its survey above the metallic mountain that housed the darq gem throne and the Dragon People's village – an extensive, multilevel complex of tree houses built of bamboo and vines set within the sparse and dim lit jungle of the inner sea at its base.

It was deserted – abandoned. Botts III's sensors found no movement, save for the occasional bird flickering through the overarching branches.

'Now that's very strange...' I muttered. 'Though it explains why you encountered so many of the Dragon People coming in.'

'This calls for closer investigation,' said the Committee, as Botts III circled the sled down and through the airy village.

'The residences appear to have been hastily abandoned,' they remarked. 'Useful household items have been left behind.'

The Dragon People likely did not possess many personal items so their tree house residences looked bare, but many still had cooking pots and utensils, and other, unidentified items stored in woven vine bags and baskets visible through the mostly open structures.

'Perhaps they are on some sort of ritual pilgrimage? A sacred hunt or something?'

'A possibility, though it would appear that some of the residences may have been damaged. Panels and platforms appear to be out of their customary places.'

'Hard to tell, since they're all rather casually constructed to begin with,' I muttered. 'But if there has been some sort of conflict, it would explain why the village has been abandoned.' My mind leaped to an obvious possibility – I was not the first of the Lora Lake's crew to return.

Botts III's eye-sensors zoomed to several structures that clearly were damaged. 'The damage appears to be recent – and extensive,' they added, as they continued to find more residences and other structures with screens and wall sections hanging askew.

'So you think it was attacked?'

'We are coalescing around that theory, especially since our thought lens detector has been unable to detect any vibrations that, from our study of them, they are known to emit even at rest. We will complete our scan before proceeding to the chamber in the mountain.'

'We only saw lenses on the headdresses of the elders. They may be considered sacred and the exclusive property of the elders. So they probably would not be left behind.'

'We did not detect lenses in the bands we met on the way in. It seems likely that at least some of those bands would include elders. Either that was not the case, or we have an unexpected mystery here,' they replied. It was hard to say if they were thrilled or disappointed. Perhaps my credibility with the Directorate was at stake here. I, however, knew what I saw and was more concerned about where the darq gems were now, if not in the headdresses of the Dragon People's elders.

Had some of my old Lora Lakes shipmates returned and acquired them? The island's vast supply of darq gem/soul stones was a very powerful draw. Too powerful to expect that everyone would take my warnings to heart. I'd always known some would try to return. What surprised me was just how fast the expedition had been put together, if that was what we were looking at. And how powerful it must have been to drive the Dragon People from their village. It had been little more than a year since the Lora Lakes returned to the Saraim. Only ValDare had the coins to put together a second expedition so quickly – and only he had enough leverage to get Captain KimTara to pilot them back here. I had to believe that only KimTara could've found these islands again so quickly, if this was indeed the work of my old shipmates. And yet, the speed, the scale, and KimTara piloting to it, all seemed very unlikely. But if not them, who? Or what?

'We will now proceed to the chamber,' announced the Committee after their fruitless search had brought them back to the open space at the foot of the dragon tooth shaped metallic mountain of debris. 'Our thermal sensor shows the mountain to be slightly warmer than ambient temperature. An anomaly. Did you note that when you were last here?'

'Not that I noticed, though I wasn't thinking very clearly the last time I was here.'

'Curious. The steep ramp leads to the chamber, does it not?'

'Aye,' I replied.

They quickly directed Botts III's rocket sled up along the steep entry path to the chamber via the thin crevasse that split the mountain of debris in half. They deftly steered the rocket sled through the narrow, dim passageway up and into the great cavern, dimly lit by a thin curtain of faint light falling through the crevasse from above.

We watched through Botts's multi-sensor eyes as it floated into the chamber and slowly scanned it. It was far different than I remembered it. Seen from below and without the Dragon People clinging to the walls, it was clear that this chamber was not a natural hollow in the debris but a partially smashed globe-shaped chamber. Its walls were crisscrossed with a matrix of beams, upon which the natives had clung to during the ritual. The most striking difference, however, was that the great darq gem encrusted

globe/throne that had stood in the center of it had been reduced to a puddle of melted metal. It still glowed bright in Botts III's thermal sensors. That, and the charred bones that littered the floor of the chamber.

I couldn't think of anything to say.

04

'So Botts thinks it was humans who attacked the Dragon People for these so called thought lenses?' asked LyeCarr.

The entire crew was on the deck eating a synth-galley meal. The Committee had taken Botts III deeper into the chambers of the metallic mountain and it was now out of radio contact and would likely be for some time.

'The Committee estimates its a 3 out of 4 chance that was humans from a yet-to-be-discovered human society.'

'And they base this estimate on what evidence?'

'The fact that humans of the Saraime do not have the organization nor destructive power to have reacted in the time frame. However, since the unknown force got wind of thought lenses so quickly, it would seem that they have human agents to keep tabs on the Saraime, who transmitted the story back to their home islands.'

'That seems to be a stretch,' said LyeCarr. 'Human agents do not preclude non-human masters. Why not a non-human race?'

'Well, the Committee does give an a non-human race a 1 in 4 chance. Still, I gather, they're all but convinced that humans are behind the attack, largely because they're certain that the thought lenses were the target of the raid, since none have been found. Plus, the Committee feels that since the thought lenses seemed attuned to humans, humans would be most concerned about them – raiding the island either to destroy them, or collect them for their own use '

'Still, that hardly rules out an unknown not-human agency. They might want to control humans as well.'

'True. That is a one in four possibility. But we've no evidence of one.

'But didn't you say that Siss was affected by the lenses as well?' spoke up KaRaya.

'It seemed so.'

'So, it effects are not exclusive to humans. How can they so easily rule out an unknown race, say of dragons?'

'I gather its a matter of timing. This artifact has existed in these islands for thousands, if not tens of thousands of years untouched and apparently forgotten. And now within little more than a year of the Lora Lakes expedition we have a second visit, apparently targeting the lenses. The Committee believes the two must be linked, most likely by word leaking from the Donta Islands.

'The responsible and intelligent crew members likely kept the story to themselves, if only to profit by it. But the stokers and deckhands might well spin the tale. At least when not strictly sober, which is their habitual state ashore. Still, it seems unlikely that anyone would believe them. And even if they did, they'd be of no help finding the islands. So, all in all, while the story of the islands may well have become known, finding the islands in this short of time appears to be very unlikely – unless the location was already known. So if we assume the same people who originally attacked the ship are the people who came back to finish the job, we have an explanation as to how the islands were found so quickly.'

'That still strikes me as being pretty speculative,' said LyeCarr.

'I agree. But try coming up with a more plausible explanation. I've a feeling that the Committee would really appreciate one.'



'Why that's simple,' exclaimed KaRaya.

'Simple?'

'It's obvious. Your spies are not humans, but dragons. Specifically, Simla dragons,' she said, pointing dramatically at Hissi. 'You were along on the expedition, so all you had to do was pass the information along to your dragon masters of the Pela for them to act on.'

Hissi growled at her.

'That's right, Hissi, I'm on to you now! Coins to coconuts she's your spy.'

'Hear her,' said LyeCarr with a grin. 'Telepathic dragons would seem to be the most likely explanation for news of the lenses to reach whoever mounted the second raid. No need for some secret society with spies when you've had a Simla dragon at your side all along.'

'It's true, Wilitang. Look at Hissi – see how she's slyly grinning,' laughed KaRaya.

Hissi was always grinning – she always wore that crocodile smile. But on cue, she gave another low, menacing, growl.

'Why it's all becoming clear to me now,' continued KaRaya. 'I'll go further and bet you coins to coconuts that Blackie came aboard just to get her report. Why else would a Green Diamond dragon visit the ship? Maybe all Simla dragons are Dragon King spies... Oh, I'm on to you now, Hissi. Your growls don't scare me.'

Hissi growled louder and more menacingly and slowly swam up, nose to nose with KaRaya.

'Is this the action of an innocent dragon?' continued KaRaya, not intimidated. She knew Hissi well.

Hissi broke off her menacing growls to take a bite of the char-bun she had in her hand, which rather steeply discounted the menace of her growls.

'Oh, get out of my face, you feather rug, I'm trying to eat,' laughed KaRaya, pushing Hissi away.

Hissi barked a laugh and swam back to her place in our casual circle of chairs.

'I think I'll leave whether or not Hissi is a spy an open question. I don't think it matters,' I said with a smile and a shrug. 'As I said, I like to keep on the dragons' good side. However, I do believe KaRaya's on to something. We can't discount the fact that humans live amongst intelligent and likely telepathic dragons, so that they would seem the most likely vector for information reaching whoever attacked the village. I'll have to bring that up with the Committee when they get around to contacting us again.'

'The next question that occurs to me is, are they – whoever they are – still around?' asked LyeCarr.

'According to the Committee, the temperature of the remains of the lens artifact and the fact that the bones in the chamber had settled to the floor in the micro-gravity, suggest that that incident happened some 25 to 35 rounds ago. While it may be possible they are still in these islands hunting down any remaining lenses the Dragon People bands may have with them, it seems unlikely. And given the fact that the raid seems to have been focused on the lenses and that they didn't treat the Dragon People all that roughly in the process, the Committee doesn't feel we're in any danger.'

'I imagine that you find that assessment very reassuring,' said LyeCarr with a grin.

'Yeah, I take great comfort in the assurances of nearly eternal machines billions of kilometers away, that there is no danger,' I replied, with a shrug. 'What could go wrong?'

Still, by the time I climbed into my hammock, I was feeling pretty optimistic. I couldn't see how my old shipmates could be responsible for what Botts had found – nor any other expedition from the Saraime. That left the unknown others. If they just wanted to collect the darq gems, there would seem to be no reason to destroy the globe. It's needless destruction suggested to me that whoever had arrived before us wanted to destroy the darq gems as well. How they learned about them, was an open question. On the face of it, KaRaya's idea of dragons as a vector – dragon gossip, not spies – seemed the most compelling. Yet, the gossip had to find its way across the vast Endless Skies, and it was not easy to see how that could've happened. I was pondering such weighty questions as I drifted off to sleep.

I'd just set down my breakfast platter on the wardroom table when KaRaya stepped in.

'Good, you're awake. The Captain wants to see you on the bridge, at your convenience.'

'What's up?'

'Nothing too pressing. Eat your breakfast.'

'Tell me.'

'We've noticed a plume of dark smoke drifting out of the inner islands.'

'Smoke from a ship?'

'Possibly. That's what he's thinking. But from the amount of smoke, if it is a ship, it's likely on fire. I'm thinking it's an island burning.'

'Islands burn?'

'If they're dry enough. A camp fire or even lightning can start a fire that may smolder in the peat moss for many rounds.'

That seemed unlikely, so I grabbed my mug of tey, and said, 'Right. Let's have a look.'

LyeCarr and Bomtrand were standing on the starboard wing deck, LyeCarr studying the islands with survey glasses, when I arrived. He handed them to me and pointed to the closest island. 'We just noticed it over the top of the island's jungle.'

Without the glasses I could just make out a faint brownish smudge in the blue-green of the islands, but when I zoomed in, it looked to be large, dark, plume of smoke drifting between the islands on the edge of the more tightly packed group.

'What do you think?' asked LyeCarr when I lowered the glasses.

'Raya says it could be just smoldering peat moss on one of the islands, but we can't rule out a burning ship of some sort.'

'Feel obliged to render assistance?'

'I suppose we'd best have a look-see. I'll run in with the small electric gig and check it out.'

'I was rather thinking I'd have a look,' replied LyeCarr with a grin.

I shook my head. 'I'll go.'

'Pulling rank?'

I considered my reply carefully. 'I think it's my responsibility, seeing that it's within the islands. However, there's a better reason. If it is a ship, from the Saraime, it's likely that I'd know at least some of the crew. They'd almost have to be ValDare and some of the officers from the Lora Lakes. And given the motive, for returning, it might be best if they knew who they were dealing with. Hopefully, I could prevent any misunderstandings...'

LyeCarr gave me a shrewd look. 'Care to enlighten me on these misunderstandings? I wasn't aware that scientific research was all that cutthroat.'

I was on thin ice... 'Many may find the power of the thought lenses seductive. I've been through a gold rush, so I know that greed can make people do... How desperate would they be to get home if their ship was indeed burning? How willingly would they share their loot, if they had any? I think I'd be in the best position to make those sorts of calls.'

He gave me another look, with a lot of questions in it, but let them ride. 'And what if they're not your friends?'

'I'll take a vid camera so that you'll see what develops. With just a crew of six, we can't risk more than one person, and that will be me.'

He said nothing, did not look to be quite ready to concede.

'I think I know what you're thinking, Carr. I'd feel the same way – which is why I'm going, and alone. You're the captain now, not some devil-may-care sub-captain. It's now your job to send some devil-may-care sub-captain out on missions, like this, whether you like it or not. I'm sorry but I'm going.'

'You and Bom then.'

'I wouldn't mind getting off ship for a while,' added Bomtrand. 'Something to do.'

'Thanks, but seeing how shorthanded we are, we can't risk two when one will do. I'll have the vid-camera so you can take appropriate actions if need be.'

LyeCarr shook his head sadly. 'Well, I hope its just a burning island, then. Don't do anything foolish, Wil.'

'I'm known for my caution.'

'Are you sure Bom and I can't tag along? We could use a little shore leave,' said KaRaya as she and Bomtrand worked alongside me to launch the gig.

I refrained from mentioning that she had her young daughter on board and, as a mother of a young child, could no longer be the carefree, and occasionally careless, KaRaya of old. Instead I replied, 'I can pilot the gig there and back all by myself. If you're that eager to stretch your legs, we'll organize a picnic on the island when I get back.'

'You're thinking it's iffy, aren't you?'

'Everything about these islands is iffy. Right. I'll be on my way.'

It was a sense of grim responsibility, not bravado, that had me climbing into the small electric gig and setting my course for the islands. I should've known that I was testing fate by letting that beam of optimism creep into my thoughts last round. The upside was that I knew that I wouldn't be doing anything foolhardy – just a very brief look and, well... Hopefully it was a burning island, or something else completely innocent. And safe. And if not, unlike the others on board, I still had my trusty sissy, and several hundred darts.

It took nearly half an hour of sailing through the flocks of birds and lizards between the islands to reach the thickening cluster of islands and floating jungles at the heart of DeArjen's Islands. I had hoped to find the source of the smoke without having to enter these islands, but its source was not in sight, leaving nothing for me to do but press on inwards. Before I did so, I attached the camera to the cage overhead and turned on the radio. 'Do you have a visual?'

'Aye. Lead on, Wilitang. We're all curious.'

I started in cautiously, pausing to search each of the islands ahead with the powerful survey glasses for any sign of the natives – and large dragons. I saw none, but still kept the boat out of arrow range of the islands whenever possible. That wasn't hard at the beginning; the islands were still far enough apart, and there were enough birds, bugs and lizards larking about to give me confidence that nothing dangerous – human or dragon – was lurking about. Or so I assured myself. The deeper in I went, the less comfortable I was about it, as the islands closed in around me, linked by vines and little floating jungles. I made a point to frequently look behind me, to try to memorize the shape of the islands, in order to find my way back – in a hurry.

'How much further are you planning on going in?' asked LyeCarr over the radio, half an hour later.

'The smoke is getting pretty thick, so I'm thinking that it can't be much farther.'

'Hurry up, I want to catch a nap,' said KaRaya.

'Anything to oblige you, Raya. I think I smell burning peat moss.'

'As an old stoker, you should know the smell,' laughed KaRaya.

Not long after that, I stopped and attached one of the radio-relay beacons to a tree top, since my radio link was breaking up. I noted that it was very quiet. None of the usual suspects were flirting about. The smoke likely explained that. Or so I told myself.

Shortly after starting in again, a small black and smoldering island appeared from behind an island ahead.

'Ah-ha! I exclaimed, echoed by my audience aboard ship. A burning island was the least ominous explanation of the smoke plume.

'I told you so,' said KaRay smugly.

And then, a second smoldering island swung into sight. And a third, before a smoke-veiled bay came into view surrounded by half a dozen smoldering islands. And in the middle of these smoldering islands there was something else burning – a large smoke-blackened ship, bleeding black smoke from a great tear in its outer hull. I could see a flickering blue flame or electrical discharge in the gaping hole. Six or seven pods were hanging at odd angles around the edge of the flattened oval-shaped hull. The rest of them were scattered and drifting amongst the smoking islands. Even as a wreck, it was instantly familiar to me.

I just stared at it.

'That's... interesting,' said LyeCarr.

'Why it looks like some sort of ship!' exclaimed KaRaya.

'It's a Dragon Kings' ship,' I muttered.

'Huh? I thought the big island was the Dragon Kings' ship.'

'Well, that was just what I called this ship the last time I saw it. At the time it seemed big enough to be a Dragon Kings' ship.'

'When was this? I don't seem to recall that tale,' said KaRaya.

'A long time ago – when Naylea and I were shipwrecked on Blade Island.'

Botts or the Committee, who must have come back online from its interior survey, since it broke in. 'Am I correct in assuming this wreck matches the ship that arrived to collect the wreck of a smaller ship?'

'Yes, it's definitely the same ship – or at least the same type of ship. But what's it doing here... burning?'

'It's your curse, Wilitang. Weirdness at every turn, just as Naylea said,' said KaRaya in a hushed voice, adding. 'So what's with this ship? Care to fill us all in on that tale?'

'I suppose...' I briefly outline my previous encounter with the ship. 'The Scarlet Guard from the ship looked just like Dragon People here, but the Dragon People only seemed to use the lenses for decorations. It's as if the Dragon People here were, well, feral or wild versions of the Scarlet Guard associated with the white ship. Indeed, the ship may call on these islands to recruit its crew, which might explain its appearance in these islands without adding it to the growing list of coincidences.'

'And the fact that it's been attacked?'

'The lenses of its crew and the lenses here in the old wreck provide the necessary link. That and poor timing,' replied the Committee.

'So? What does this all mean?' sighed LyeCarr.

'We're missing too much data to hazard a guess. We cannot rule out this as a shipboard accident, though an attack seems far more likely. If it was attacked, it is linked to the destruction of the lens globe and the scattering of the Dragon People.'

'Any ideas as to when this happened? We only noted the smoke plume this round, but we could well have missed it coming in,' said LyeCarr.

'From the state of the surrounding islands, it would appear that the ship has been burning for some time, suggesting the same time frame of the destruction of the lens globe – 25 to 35 rounds ago. That being the case, there would seem to be no reason to be alarmed....' said the Committee.

I heard LyeCarr chuckle about that. I was less amused.

'It would be very helpful, Captain, if we could compare the genetic matrix of the two races. Please collect any bio-samples of the ship's crew members that you might find in the area,' continued the Committee.

'This is the Pela. I rather doubt there's a lot of bio-samples still floating about after 35 rounds. I certainly don't see any.'

'We haven't noted any scavengers, birds, lizards or bugs in the area. The fire and smoke may have kept them away entirely. All we need are small samples – bone fragments, feathers. The more

individual samples the better.'

It didn't sound like I was being given a choice. 'Right. I'll make a quick circuit. If you see anything you want, let me know.'

I made a hasty circle of the burning ship, keeping well clear of it. There was lots of ash and charred debris floating about, but nothing I, nor the committee via the vid-camera, could identify as parts of the red feathered crew. Not surprising, since the intense fires would likely have incinerated the crew inside the ship, and what may've been left of them would've been scattered by two weeks or more of air currents. Or so I argued, as I veered off after one quick circuit. 'Sorry, gang, but I think this human is heading back. I don't think its very healthy here.'

'Understood. We will make a complete survey once we finish our work in the artifact. Our sensor array should be able to locate suitable samples in the ash far better than your eyes.'

'Even if he had his eyes open,' added KaRaya. She knew me well.

## Chapter 51 The Return of the Dragon Kings

01

I put the smoldering wreck astern, and set out for the ship, following the trail of smoke outwards.

I listened, via my com link, to the Committee and the crew discussing the implications of the burning ship. I was rather numbed and said little, perhaps because I experienced the devastation firsthand, and had likely met some of the crew, who, though they frightened me, had done me no apparent harm. It seemed that these islands boded ill for everyone who entered them. I found myself really wishing I'd kept the story of these islands to myself.

Perhaps fifteen minutes into my return, I heard KaRaya exclaim, 'Whoa! What was that?' echoed by the others who had been following my progress from the command center/lab.

'What?' I asked. 'What's up?'

'A bit of turbulence. Got'a go...' she replied hastily, over startled exclamations, thumping and rumbling.

'What's going on?' I shouted again, over the rising din. No one answered, though the rumbling and clatter continued. They had left the wardroom. I could hear the hull creaking and then moaning in protest.

'It appears the ship is experiencing some sort of disturbance,' said the Committee, adding, likely for my benefit, 'Perhaps a small local serrata. Small ones often strike without...'

And then static. The radio link had been severed, either at the ship, or at my relay-buoy. All I could do is swear silently. I was still nearly an hour away from the ship, not that it mattered since LyeCarr's crew was perfectly capable of dealing with a serrata. Indeed, I'd likely be dealing with it soon enough myself. I decided that I'd best find one of the larger islands to shelter on.

I wasn't given a chance.

I heard a faint rustling and then a rising chorus of shrill screams as frantic flights of birds and small dragons burst over, under, and around the large island I'd been steering towards. The treetops began to sway and the floating vines began to straighten in the wind.

I shoved the power lever down to max hoping to reach the shelter of the island's lee shore before the full strength of the storm hit. I didn't make it.

A wall of tumbling leaves, beetles, and small debris swept past the island, engulfing the launch a moment later, the force of the wind bringing the launch to a bucking halt. I huddled low and covered my face with my arm to protect it from the stinging rain of dust, beetles, and debris. The launch bucked and twisted in the roaring wind despite all my efforts to keep it facing into the wind. I could only hope that the leading storm front would pass quickly and allow me to make it to the island ahead. But the great, hissing roar grew ever louder while the island didn't get any closer. I needed to decide if I'd any prospect of reaching the island, or should I instead join the birds, lizards, beetles, and leaves running from the storm and find shelter down wind. I glanced behind me – islands after islands in ranks. It would take some adept piloting and a great deal of luck to avoid them all, but as the wind continued to increase, I'd a sinking feeling the choice wasn't going to be mine.

The launch bucked to the side in an unexpected gust, tossing me hard against the cage. Momentarily out of control, the wind grabbed it, held it and carried it along. As I fought to regain some control over it, the roaring wind grew ever louder. Loud enough that I seemed to “hear” it with my whole body.

Leaning hard on the tillers, I managed to avoid the first small island and tried to set a course to avoid the next one. A large dragon went tumbling past. The next island flew by to port, and I scraped over a third, brushing past its frantically waving branches. And then there was one of the larger islands ahead. If I could just skim over it, I might, perhaps, be able to dodge behind it and find shelter. I glanced back to gauge my chances – and just stared. Through the veil of flying debris I saw what appeared to be a wave of islands rushing down at me. As I stared, the large island I had originally been heading for smashed into one of the small islands I had just passed and then a second, sweeping them along while more islands continued to pile up behind and all around it.

No serrata could push islands around like that. I tore my eyes away from the spectacle in time to see the big island loom large ahead. And then I was on it – branches snapping, leaves and vines scraping along the launch's steel cage, tearing off one wing, and then the other. But my luck held – I crashed through the upper reaches of the island's jungle without smashing into a tree trunk and reached its far side before the wave of islands reached this island. But not by much.

Not that it mattered. My fate was sealed. With the launch's control wings torn off, I was tumbling out of control. I'd strike another island any second now, and if that didn't kill me, the onrushing wave of islands chasing me would.

The only clear thought I recall was that my premonition was dead on. I'd “remembered” just enough of my future life to know my end lay in these islands, for all the good it did me.

That end came with that thought as the launch struck another island, plunging into its jungle, only to be caught before it struck the ground in a tangle of branches and vines. Looking back, I saw a second jungle rushing for me. The light flicked out as the two jungles met in a cascading crash – trees splintering in sharp explosions heard over the booming thunder of the crashing islands. Branches scraped and banged by in a flash as dents bulged in the cage. Leaves shot in, filling it up and covering me like a blanket.

I'd a momentary reprieve, since the island was small enough to be pushed along without flattening its jungle. But the next island it struck... Battered and beyond hope, I settled back onto the bench behind the tillers, brushed away the leaves and waited for the blackness of the end when it struck that next one.

I did not have long to wait. Riding on the racing leading edge of the wave of islands, the little island lurched violently as it was driven into the next island inward. The collision sent the launch tumbling once again. I caught a glimpse of mossy rocks rushing towards me. We struck them hard, bounced, and then the launch was dragged along the rocks, as the islands were ground together. The launch shrieked in metallic pain as it was twisted and torn apart. Part of the cage bulged inwards as we were dragged over a protruding rock. A crossbeam snapped and I felt a dart of pain through my body as the blackness closed it.

Can you feel pain when you're dead?

It seemed a relevant question, since I was almost certainly dead.

I was, however, distinctly feeling pain.

I'd be pretty disappointed if death wasn't an escape from pain. On the other hand, I found the prospect of not being dead – yet – no cause for rejoicing. It would only mean dying again, and likely taking longer to do it.

So, was I dead?

It was black, and quiet, as peaceful as a grave. I thought about moving, but, well, if I was dead, why bother? And if I wasn't, I'd a feeling it would only cause more pain. I was hoping the pain would simply fade away as my brain slowly wound down.

It didn't, and I grew impatient. I tried taking a deliberate breath. It tasted of crushed plants with traces of ozone from the hot electric motor. Apparently I'd been breathing all along and hadn't noticed. I wasn't thinking very clearly.

Being alive, I now faced the prospect of being buried alive deep within a pile of islands. I let a tide of panic wash over me.

And when it had receded, I experienced a bright dart of *deja vu*. I'd been here before.

Did I have my eyes open? That was a key the last time.

Ah, yes. They weren't. Been here before. I decided that I probably should give opening them a try, like before. So I did.

Just more blackness. It wasn't worth the effort. But then, maybe I was looking in the wrong direction.

I'd have to move to see if this was so. My curiosity was enough to give it a try.

It hurt, but not as much as I expected. I turned this way and that, and craned my neck to look up. Blackness. It occurred to me that I should have a pair of survey glasses strapped around my neck and if they weren't smashed, they were night vision capable. I just had to find them. It shouldn't be hard. My right arm seemed to work alright, but moving my left arm sent a sharp jolt of pain to my shoulder, so I left that one be. I didn't need two arms to find what I wanted.

I snagged the survey glasses' strap, reeled them out from under me and lifted them to my eyes. They still worked, though in the nearly complete absence of light, I saw only the ghostly, thermal-defined shapes – the bulging and twisting hull of the launch beside me. There appeared to be a small clear space above my head and, beyond it, the launch ended with twisted metal and crushed branches. The space above seemed larger than the space I was currently inhabiting, so I started to cautiously wiggled up into it. Being in weightlessness helped and I soon found myself huddled between the tillers and where the poor launch abruptly ended.

After I got my legs untangled from the wreckage and my whole body into the clear space, I called it a day and rested. I may've dozed. I was pretty content to be dead, even if I wasn't.

Eventually I decided that I needed to do something. Ah, but what? Maybe I should take stock of my situation since it now seemed rather stable. I carefully tested each part of my body. It appeared that I'd actually survived with only a few cuts, and likely lots of bruises. I could even move my left arm and fingers now without too much pain. I tried contacting the Complacent Dragon and Botts via my com link, but I was likely too deep in the islands to reach them. Never mind, I told myself, if I survived, they certainly did, since they were well outside most of the islands. At worst they'd been roughly handled by the serrata – or whatever it was and, perhaps, driven onto an island. For my peace of mind, I just decided to give them enough credit to be able to deal with had happened. I'd other things to worry about.

I brought the survey glasses up to my eyes again and tightened the strap around the back of my head

so I could wear them as awkward goggles. I then made a detailed survey of my situation. It looked like the launch had ended up in a deep ravine of sorts; there were rocks on either side, with crushed branches above. The narrow ravine was largely clear of debris so I was not trapped in the wreckage. I could get out, though whether I could find a way out from the islands smashed together was an open question. In any event, it would be slow going. But I'd time. All the time in the Pela. And nothing better to do. And I found that I didn't really care all that much, one way or the other.

It suddenly struck me – in *deja vu* style – that this was my final adventure. My final adventure, whatever the outcome. I found it liberating. The darkness looked somehow brighter. This was the last time for something like this.

I started poking around the launch with renewed energy. One of the hull lockers would be stocked with concentrated food and tinned water. Another should have a medicine chest with Unity cures. And yet another, tools – a well equipped one would have a machete and other survival tools as well as an electric torch for working in tight quarters that I could strap on my forehead. These lockers were usually located aft, and though, bent and twisted, they should still be with the launch. I flipped over and began exploring the nooks and crannies of the twisted hull.

Say what you like about my luck – it's evenhanded. Having landed me in a steel coffin, it then supplied me with a mostly intact tool box that provided both a small head-mounted torch and a machete. I swapped out the survey glasses for the headlight and used it to locate the food and medic lockers. Though they were warped out of shape and had to be pried open with a screw driver from the tool kit, I still found several intact two-liter tins of water and several semi-crushed boxes of granola cakes. I'd not starve for several weeks, since I knew plants that I could get water from with a few hacks of the machete. The med unit survived intact, and it made my pains go away. After that, I made a meal out of a couple of granola cakes and a few swigs of water before stowing them and the med unit, in a canvas tool bag, along with a collection of tools I thought I might use. Having salvaged all that I could drag behind me, I found my cap, and wiggled out through the torn steel fabric of my gallant launch, and started up the black ravine away from the wreck, hacking my way through the veils of leaves and small branches as they appeared in the bouncing beam of my headlight.

Looking back, I was likely saved from being crushed flat by the launch being briefly dragged along and then dropped into the ravine seconds before the two islands settled together, crushed jungle to crushed jungle. I was, however, still between two solidly packed islands, so that I was likely trapped here forever. I pushed that thought aside and continued on.

I was struck by how easily I could push unpleasant thoughts aside. The exhilaration that I usually felt after escaping certain death was missing this time, but in its place was a strange, lighthearted complacency. As I said, this seemed as if it was my final adventure, if only because death had been postponed for a few hours or even a few rounds. It seemed inevitable and I found that liberating, since in that light, nothing really mattered any more. All my responsibilities and all my cares had been lifted. Neb, I found that I wasn't even worried about snakes as I chopped and pulled my way through the twisting, mossy rocks and crushed trees. And much to my surprise, I wasn't even alarmed when I came upon the dragon.

It proved to be a rather large, black-feathered dragon – a Green Diamond dragon, in fact – so he had been easy to miss in the general blackness. I discovered him when I reached the end of the ravine where it widened into a low, broad hollow that, in the light of my headlight, seemed to bend out of sight around the island. It was likely the juncture where two or more islands met. Perhaps by following the edges of the islands I could find my way out. A ragged ceiling of crushed trees arched overhead. A large tree branch lay across, what, at first, appeared to be the ground of the cove, blocking my way



forward. I pushed myself out into the hollow, intent on hacking my way through the thin veil of branches to continue on my way. However, when I touched down on the black ground, it proved to be feathered and surged under my hands.

I heard a snort and a low growl as a black shadow moved on its own, independent of the shadows dancing in my headlight. He had likely heard me coming for some time, so he wasn't startled. I was, and yelped, as I dived back into the ravine, my "smiling in the face of death" mood momentarily forgotten. I grabbed my sissy with one hand and flashed my headlight around the cove. I needn't have bothered with the sissy.

The dragon could not attack. He was pinned to the floor of the cove by the tree trunk and its branches. The tree trunk was firmly wedged into crushed trees on either side of the hollow, pinning him down. Lying on his side, he only had his left limbs free to try to get himself free. He had so far only succeeded in tearing off the few branches and putting claw marks in the trunk to little avail. Still, the main tree trunk wasn't too thick – I could hack through it, with a bit of an effort.

And while I rather doubted that it was the same Green Diamond dragon that had visited the ship, he might have been a cousin, so what the Neb, we were both in the same boat.

'You seem to be in a bit of a bind here, Blackie,' I said out loud as I studied the situation. 'I know just how you feel. But cheer up lad, help has arrived. Let me clear off some of the little branches and then I'll see about getting you free.' Not that he had a choice. I, on the other hand, did. I could stay well clear of his free limbs and go on my way if I cared to. But my careless regard for life had returned, and thinking about leaving the poor dragon trapped to slowly starve to death was simply too grim to contemplate.

I drifted over to the branches, prudently staying clear of his free limbs, and hacked a couple of the branches off so I could cross over and see the dragon's head better. He laid still and silent as I did so. I tipped my headlight up so as not to blind him when I looked at him and said, 'Seeing that we're both innocent victims of misfortune, I'm willing to help you get free – as long as you agree not to kill me. We'll be pals. Partners. Shipmates. What do you say, Blackie? Friends?'

Blackie studied me with his large black eye as he considered my offer. I should mention that I did not, in fact, know Blackie's sex. They could usually be told apart by their feathers; I'd never made a study of it. So it came down to the fact that Blackie struck me more as a "he" than a "she" and since he didn't seem to offer an objection, I'll refer to him as he.

He studied me for maybe ten seconds before giving a little shrug and a short, low tentative hiss.

Good enough, I decided, based on my 3000 rounds plus of dealing with a Simla dragon.

'Right. I'll clear off these upper branches, and see what I need to do to get you free. Once free, we will need to find our way out. If you've got a clue, you can take the lead, since I don't.'

Blackie hissed softly again.

'Good. Then we're in agreement,' I said, with no actual reason to believe that, save that it was the easiest thing to believe, and it suited my carefree mood.

As I cleared the upper branches, I continued to make small talk – rambling on about what we had just experienced. Blackie didn't say much, but listened patiently.

It's rather hard to explain my casual disregard for the fact that dragons usually lunched on careless people. It might have been the result of that blow to my head. The little med device might not have fixed it. I believe, however, that it had more to do with the strange carefree or careless mood I found myself in – a feeling that I should've been dead, and would likely be dead shortly, dragon or no dragon, so I'd no reason to be too concerned with preserving my life. There were no long term consequences, as there was no long term.

That, and the fact that I had traveled with a dragon at my side for a decade. I felt that I knew something about the ways of dragons. I'd felt no hostility radiating from Blackie, just a resigned wariness. I had no idea what sort of moral code Green Diamond dragons followed or how sacred they

held agreements, but I was curious to find out. So I carefully pictured in my head what I intended to do in the belief that Blackie would understand and I took his quiet replies as an agreement.

I cleared off the small branches, including those that were pinning his body down. The main trunk alone was still enough to keep him pinned, and though Blackie shifted to a more comfortable position, he waited patiently for me to hack through the main trunk.

As I got into position just behind his shoulders, I said, 'This will take a bit of hacking. You might be able to slip free once I'm through, but if not, I'll tackle the other side. There might be some wood chips and slivers floating around so you might want to close your eye while I work.'

Blackie gave me a measuring look, and then closed it.

It took me a while to chop almost through the trunk, chip by chip, but I made it through, arm sore and breathing rather hard. 'There, that's as close as I care to chop. Don't want to chop you. See if you can snap it and get clear.'

Blackie opened his eye and heaved its shoulder up. The trunk creaked and snapped. He was strong enough to shoulder it up and start to claw his way out from under the tree. I drifted back and waited to see if he could get clear without more help. Once he was able to get his pinned right forelimb out, he had enough leverage and strength to bend the trunk upwards and haul himself free on the far side of the tree.

Hand in my pocket, holding my sissy, I exclaimed, heartily. 'Good work, Blackie. I'm glad I didn't have to hack through the other end. Heavy work. So what's next? Any ideas as to how we get out of here?'

He gave me a slow, low hiss that I recognized as "Haven't a clue" and circled his body around to find and treat his many, but minor wounds from the branches. The wounds got a few licks and then he attended his feathers, carefully arranging them back in place with his limbs, teeth and tongue. I didn't hurry him – dragons and their feathers. Plus, he was blocking my way forward, so I gave him all the time he needed to put himself in order. I was tempted to have a bite to eat, but decided to forgo it. Didn't want to give him any ideas.

When he was done preening, he gave me a look, a low growl, and turned away to follow the cove down and around. I grabbed my bag of food and followed. 'If you need help clearing a way, just bark,' I offered cheerily. 'My machete is at your service.'

04

The cove curved around the rocky shore of the small island, to a point where several other small islands had been added to the pile. The impact had been absorbed by their jungles before they'd been completely flattened to the ground, so there was a fair amount of space between the islands themselves – a thick tangle of jungle where they met, and the normal, open jungle on either side of this impact zone. My headlight illuminated a black hollow, crisscrossed by the pillars of tree trunks and laced with vines. Loose leaves floated in the blackness, as well as stunned and frightened birds, lizards and beetles. Traveling through this space would be little different than traveling through the mid-levels of a jungle, which in free fall, one could make good time pulling or pushing off from one branch or vine to the next. Blackie wasn't built for threading his way through jungles, but he could fit through the gaps between the trees. Occasionally we had to make detours and several times I had to clear a path through a thick veil of vines so that we both could get through, but for the most part, we could travel freely. Where we were going, was another question, but Blackie seemed to have some idea, though I hadn't a clue as to what system, if any, he was using. Still, whatever system it was, it could not have been worse than mine, so that there was at least a chance that it was better. And, well, what did I care?

We traveled for hours in the black jungle, crossing several dozen gaps between the islands as we went. All told, we may've traveled ten kilometers, and if we weren't traveling in circles – and we may

well have been for all I knew – the super serrata must have created one very large island out of hundreds.

We weren't traveling alone. The open zones between the islands were now filled with the flickering shadows of all its usual inhabitants – birds, lizards, bugs, snakes and small dragons. They flashed in and out of my headlight's wavering beam. Stunned, frightened by the darkness they'd never known, they swarmed ahead of us, in the headlight's wavering beam. Luckily, there seemed to be a temporary truce being observed by one and all, so we all traveled together peacefully, prey and predators side by side, coming across only one large, ornery serpent dragon who wasn't ready to lay aside old grievances.

We happened upon him suddenly, nestled in a large rocky cove. He reared and roared as we started to cross the cove, sending me scurrying back and reaching for my sissy. Blackie, however, not intimidated, returned a lusty roar of his own. Back on the edge of the hollow, I decided that this was a private, dragon pecking order thing – something that I'd best stay clear of.

That resolve faded when I watched the serpent dragon slowly unwind itself and rear up in the dim light of my headlight. Coiled up, it must have filled half the cove, and as it unwound itself, it looked to be well over twice the size of my pal. An awkward position. If I was Blackie, I would've said "sorry" and found another way around this grouchy dragon. But I wasn't a dragon and not wanting to sour our strange alliance with any suggestion that I lacked confidence in him, I didn't care to suggest a tactical retreat. Still, I wasn't going to let him get chewed to pieces either. We were in this mess together. Shipmates. I kept that thought in mind as I slipped around the edge of the cove to get out of what I hoped was harm's way and into a position where I'd have a clear shot at the serpent dragon, if need be.

The two dragons roared challenges back and forth several more times. Maybe it was, after all, all for show. But I'd no more thought that, then they got down to business. The serpent dragon struck out at Blackie with its massive, tooth-lined jaws wide open and eager for a good chunk out of him. Blackie dodged this attack easy enough, and took a swipe of his own, maybe loosening a few feathers from the serpent dragon's neck.

They roared, hissed and struck out, jaws wide, half a dozen times – darting shadows in the dim light. The serpent dragon however, continuing to unwind itself, driving Blackie back with its ever extending reach. I suppose I could've slipped around them and just let the boys settle it themselves, but there was that old shipmate thing. You didn't leave shipmates behind, especially in bar fights. Blackie may not like my interference, but we'd better things to do than determining who was the fiercest dragon in these crushed islands. I gave them a few more chances to settle things like gentlemen, and then sent a volley of darts – both regular and armor piercing into the cove, where I was certain to hit the serpent dragon. I didn't expect to totally disable a dragon that size with my non-lethal darts, but I knew that if I could start a few feather fires and mess up its nervous system a little, it might lose interest in fighting Blackie. I was right.

The black jungle flickered in the lightening flashes of the darts as they discharged, the Serpent Dragon turned, bellowed, and lunged towards me instead. That lunge took him a lot closer than I'd expected to the big tree trunk I'd stationed myself behind. A whole lot closer. The up side was that I was able to send several more hastily fired darts into its snout at point blank range. And then several more into the underside of its neck when it reared back in pain.

Those darts silenced him – the plasma charges in the neck likely paralyzing him entirely, if not knocking him unconscious. The serpent dragon's head and long neck drifted slowly back from its initial effort.

It got very quiet. I could smell smoldering feathers. He might burn down before he could do something about it, but, I must admit, that thought didn't bother me. I've got ruthless ancestors.

'Right,' I sang out loudly. 'Sorry, but we really don't have time for this sort of playing around. I, for one, want to see the sky again.' I pushed myself off, and grabbing a vine, pulled myself over the paralyzed dragon and across the cove without waiting on Blackie. I kept my thoughts as cheerful and positive as possible – we were pals and I was simply doing my part in our partnership.

On reaching the far side, I turned back. Blackie seemed to be hesitating – eyeing the serpent dragon, perhaps deciding whether or not to chew it's head off – or mine for interfering in a private dispute. I hoped it wouldn't come to an argument between us, since with dragons the size of Blackie, I'd probably have to argue with darts.

In the end, he simply growled, and lunged across the cove to fall in beside me, joined by all the little creatures that were accompanying us.

By either Blackie's skills or luck, we reached the edge of the islands not long afterward. We'd seen a faint strip of light far ahead and began to work our way towards it with renewed vigor. Blackie made it to the edge first and I expected to see the last of him as soon as he could get free. But instead he waited on a thick branch for me to catch up. I hesitated for a second, and then decided, what the Neb! There was still a hundred ways to die ahead.

He gave me a low, wary growl as I joined him on the branch in the dim green light.

I rattled off a string of spaceer curses as I surveyed the scene before us.

05

And when I ran out of curses, I just dumbly stared. Naylea was right. I attracted weirdness.

Blackie and I were perched on the edge of a great, funnel-shaped bay – 6 kilometers to the opposite side, and over 20 kilometers out to the wide opening to the Endless-sky – as measured by my survey glasses. The bay was surrounded by hundreds of islands smashed together to form one great island. Floating in the middle of the bay it had created, was the Dragon Kings' ship of legend. The one that brushed islands out of its way. It didn't look like any ship – it looked like a barren, rocky island floating less than half a kilometer away from us.. But what else could it be?

From our vantage point – some 4 kilometers out from the dim-lit inner end of the bay, the great ship/island stretched away in both directions. It was a fat cylinder of an island/ship that got fatter at its midpoint, so that I couldn't make out just how long it was when looking outwards towards the open sky. My guess was that it was likely similar to the Dragon Kings' ship we had come to investigate – something on the order of 14 to 15 kilometers long. We didn't catch more than a glimpse of the actual bottle-blown asteroid ship itself – just a dull glimmer of metal where some great chunks of rock had been peeled off its bow during its passage here. Otherwise it was sheathed in a thick layer of rocks. Cooling streams of lava streaked back from its bow, attesting to its speed of travel. Its rocky surface was covered with strange geometric scars – squares, lines and circles – laid out in an orderly manner as to suggest the foundations of a city. I studied it for a while with the survey glasses. Nothing moved. It just floated in the bay it had created by its spectacular arrival.

I lowered the glasses and considered the scene as a whole. The light from the bay's wide mouth was dim and green-tinted where we were, filtered through leaves that drifted like dust motes in the light. In this green light, between the jungle coastline and the Dragon Kings' ship, thousands of birds and lizards swirled into the air singing and croaking “we survived, we survived,” with more joining them every minute as they, like us, found their way to the light.

I turned to the big black dragon next to me, and asked, 'What do you know about the Dragon Kings?'

Blackie half turned to me, and hissed noncommittally.

'They're said to be the rulers of the Pela.'

A low growl disputed that.

'Must be a human legend, then. The king part, anyway, since I have it on good authority that dragons are the true rulers of the Pela...'

A sharp bark of agreement.

'Right. In any event, human legend has it that the rulers of all the Pela are the so-called Dragon Kings, who are said to sail the Pela in vast ships, ships powerful enough to brush islands out of their

way. I'm thinking that we're looking at one of those ships.'

A softer bark.

We contemplated the Dragon King's ship in silence for a while.

'What's going on here, Blackie? We came to these remote islands to study the ancient wreck of another Dragon Kings' ship. But we're not the only ones to have arrived within the last month or two. Others have come here as well, for reasons that are not entirely clear. And now this... So what is going on here, Blackie? Do you have a clue?'

A long, low hiss. And then a yap with a nod of his head towards the Dragon Kings' ship.

'Yeah. I suppose I could ask the Dragon Kings, should I see one, but it doesn't look like they're in any hurry to show themselves. Or maybe we've already missed them...' I looked around. More and more of the survivors were making their way out of the maze of islands, some of them quite large. 'I'm thinking that it would not be wise, for me anyway, to wait around for them. Everyone's still pretty friendly at the moment, but...' I tried to suppress that thought.

Blackie hissed softly and gave me a rather thoughtful sidelong look.

'Right,' I said, hurrying on. 'I don't want to keep you from finding your family and friends. I can make it on my own from here on out. You needn't have to worry about me anymore. I really appreciate all you've done for me – it's been great being your sidekick, Blackie. Thanks!' With a decade of Hissi astern, I knew all about dragons' egos and how they operated, and how he'd likely have viewed our partnerships.

This now, was the crisis point in our partnership – we no longer needed each other. Our partnership was now resting on the concepts of honor, gratitude, and/or friendship rather than self interest. Hissi and Siss's concepts of these qualities seemed to match the human versions of them. But then, Simla dragons had been living alongside humans for tens of thousands of years. A Green Diamond dragon from a remote island might have different ideas...

'You've been a good pal. Parting is so bittersweet,' I added brightly, trying to drive my concerns from my thoughts, though looking up to him perched on the branch next to me, that was nearly impossible – seeing that his forelimbs were as long as I was tall – and he was looking down at me from more than twice that height. Perhaps my careless regard for life mood was fading a bit, since questions about my judgment began to creep in. A little. I hastily tried to dampen down those doubts as well.

Neither of them quick enough. He turned his wide head towards me, his two big, cold black, and glittering eyes looking down his long, crocodile snout at me. He slowly opened his jaws to show me his many, many long teeth and gave a low, menacing growl.

I broke into laughter. I hadn't spent the last ten years alongside a dragon without learning to recognize dragon humor.

He roared a loud laugh of his own and then, without further ado, took to the air, all but shaking me off the branch as he launched himself.

'So long, Blackie! And thanks for all your help!' I called after him with a wave of my free hand.

He roared again, and soared away, limbs outstretched, towards the distant bay's wide, bright mouth.

I watched him soar amongst the birds and lizards along the shoreline of the compacted islands for a while and then laughed again as I looked around. It was all simply too strange to take seriously. I just couldn't. I still had a just enough sense to know that I shouldn't linger here. It might soon become a lot more dangerous. And, well, I had shipmates, I hoped, that I could now possibly contact.

Botts, at least, being within the Shadow Sea island should've been immune to the effects of the Dragon King's arrival. It should be able to find its way out of the rearranged islands like I did, so I'd little doubt that it would be on the scene sooner or later. As for my friends aboard the Complacent Dragon, well, they'd been well clear of most of the islands so they stood a good chance of avoiding my fate of being crushed between the islands and should've survived as well. Stranger things have happened. Usually to me.

But none of that would matter, if I didn't make it out of this bay before all the survivors decided that

they were hungry and called off the truce. I stepped out to the edge of the branch, and turning to the light, selected an unoccupied branch, and pushed off for it.

## Chapter 52 Ghosts of Many Pasts

01

The unofficial truce seemed to be still in effect, since I was ignored by all, as I soared one branch to the next along the coast of battered trees towards the wide bright mouth of the bay.

Traveling branch to branch, in free fall, can be a fast and efficient way to travel, but it requires concentration, so I didn't have a lot of time for useless speculation. No matter, I found that I was remarkably unconcerned. Things had gotten too weird to even bother trying to apply logic or order to them. I was simply one of the happy survivors. Glad to live and let live. I laughed every now and again when I thought of my partnership with Blackie. Dragons are strange – but thankfully, not too strange.

I took a moment to stop in a thick tangle of branches and catch my breath. I'd reached the thickest part of the Dragon King's island/ship so its surface was now within a few hundred meters of me. Sheltered by the bulge, the city behind the bulge was more than bare foundations. Massive piles of concrete rubble, held together and in place by steel beams and reinforcement bars, stretched across it where they had toppled. Amongst these ruins I could make out brown and wind devastated parks crisscrossed with walks and studded with tree stumps. It was all too strange for me to speculate about. It should keep the Committee amused, though.

Breath caught, I started out again. The closer to the bay's mouth I got, the looser the islands were packed and the more ragged the shoreline grew. This made for longer jumps and more thoughtful travel, especially since I'd seen several large dragons along the way and I didn't care to push my luck by testing the limits of the truce. So I hadn't made a great deal of progress before the surface of the Dragon King's ship erupted a kilometer or so ahead. A geyser of dust and rocks shot up and into the jungle shore, sending the birds and lizards screaming and fleeing in alarm as the boom rolled down the bay.

Was this the prelude to the grand appearance of the Dragon Kings? I ducked behind some leafy branches and brought the survey glasses up to my eyes to view the show. Several more explosions quickly followed, creating a large and very deep black crater in the surface of the island/ship. And then, nothing, giving me time to decide that I didn't really need front row seats for their grand appearance, I had survey glasses for that. I started out again, angling around the crater. Too late.

I hadn't gone far when the crater erupted in a red cloud of feathers. There had to be several hundreds of red-feathered Scarlet Guards sweeping upwards on their wing-like arms, like a cloud of blood. These were the true Scarlet Guard – the ones with the darq gem collars. They quickly spread out in all directions. Seeing no point in hiding, as they'd surely find me, I awaited their arrival. They found me quick enough, likely by telepathy. Half a dozen settled into the branches around me.

I smiled, and said, 'Hello,' before I felt the familiar sensation of being sucked into a cold, endless pit of nothingness, as my eyes were drawn to the darq gem.

Only one was waiting for me when I found my way back to the light of consciousness.

'You have been surveyed before,' he said in a high pitched Saraime, that was so highly accented that I likely understood more by his telepathic powers than by speech. Given those powers, I suspect he only spoke the questions out loud in an attempt to impose some order into my chaotic thoughts. Good luck with that, I thought, but put a little effort into it.

'Yes, twice,' I said as I cleared my mind of the cold darkness.

'You have seen our tender here.' I got the impression of the great white oval ship from Blade Island. 'In these islands.' Question or statement?

'Yes. Or the wreck of it. I first saw it years ago on another island.'

'How long ago did you last see it here?' Time in the Pela is a very elastic thing so that even if this Scarlet Guard had "seen" my memories, putting it into a time frame might be hard to do, especially in the state my mind was in at the time.

'I've not slept since I saw it.'

'How long ago was it destroyed?'

'I can't say for certain. We think it may have been attacked around the same time as the village in the island, some 25 to 35 Saraime rounds ago.' I went on to explain about the bones and the residential heat in the great chamber. 'All guess work of course.'

'Who did it?'

'We have no idea. You would know more about that than we do. I'm guessing that they would be your old enemies.'

'Are they here?'

'We haven't seen them if they are. But we only just arrived, so I can't say for certain.'

He stood for half a minute in silence, probably trying to sort out and organize what he had mined from my mind and my responses – I could easily imagine the jumble it must be. Abruptly, he spread his arms, and bringing them down to his side, took to the air without another word. All business, as usual.

Looking around, the bay was now clear of the Scarlet Guard except for the one who had interrogated me. I must have been under interrogation for some time. Well, at least their appearance made sense, since they were said to be the Dragon Kings' Guard, and apparently their scouts. Unless they were actually the Dragon Kings...

I struck out once again for the open sky. I now had to make wide detours around little bays and the more numerous survivors, like several large dragons roosting on a large, boulder-sized island, preening their feathers and bellowing to each other, no doubt relating their amazing escapes. I kept under cover and gave them a wide detour just to be safe.

Having circled around them, I paused to chart my next jump when someone said, "Captain?"

I started and swung about only to realize that it was Botts via my com-link.

'Botts! Where are you? The crew – is everyone okay?'

'Yes. We are all alive and now very happy and relieved to find you are as well. We feared the worst. Everyone is bruised and battered, but there were no serious injuries. The ship was driven into an island by the shock wave, but the ensuing damage, I am told, is relatively minor and is being repaired as we speak. I'm currently on the edge of the islands looking down on the large island. I'm getting a reading on your position, and will be with you in a minute.'

'The island is my last gift to the Directorate – it is a live Dragon Kings' ship. The ship of legends. The ship that brushes islands out of its way.'

'That was our initial theory as well. Do you know it for a fact?'

'Did you encounter the Scarlet Guard? The ones with the thought lens collars? They emerged from the Dragon Kings' ship not too long ago.'

'They flew by, but either did not see me or ignored me. They came from this island?'

'Yes, and I just had a short interview with them. They were concerned about the burning ship – called it a tender. I've no doubt we're looking at a Dragon King – or rather one of their ships. What I can't explain is the ruins of a city on it.'

'I will join you directly. Just let me set up a radio relay beacon so you can reach the ship,' said Botts.

Botts, on his rocket sled, arrived within two minutes. While I waited, I had a brief chance to talk with CrisJarka after Botts opened the link. She said that it had been a wild ride – everyone had cuts and

bruises to prove it but they were all working on repairs after some quick sessions with the med unit.

I warned CrisJarka about the probable appearance of the Scarlet Guard, and advised her to tell Captain LyeCarr not to resist – their telepath interrogations were unpleasant, but otherwise harmless. I signed off when Botts arrived aboard its rocket sled.

We slapped each other on the back and exclaimed how delighted we were to find each other alive and well. And then Botts, or perhaps the Committee asked, 'Would you mind, Captain, if before returning to the ship, I might take the time to make a quick investigation of the crater to see where it leads to?'

'Now? Alone?'

'No time like the present. The Scarlet Guard ignored me when they flew by, which suggests that they would not react with instinctive hostility to our visit. And even if they do, they are ill armed and I could easily outrun them in the rocket sled. We are very eager to make contact with, for lack of a better description, the Dragon Kings. We can think of no reason to delay that contact, that is, if you feel comfortable remaining here for the time being. Returning you to the ship would only delay our inquiry by an hour or two.'

It was eerie how Botts and the committee would fade in and out in the course of a single conversation. I was always, I suppose, talking to them all, but who was leading the conversation was now very fluid. However, whether it was Botts or the Pela Committee who was talking, I could sense that an hour or two delay was about an hour or two too long. And since I seemed safe enough here, I said, 'Go ahead and take a peek. This is your art, and who am I to deny you your art?'

'It is far more than that. It is a chance to meet and introduce ourselves to a new, machine-building race. Given the size of the Pela, this opportunity may not arise again for many centuries. And given the recent hostile activity in these islands, prompt action seems to be called for.'

'Right. I can wait. I'll find a place to hang out. I could use some time to reflect.'

'Thank you, Captain. We appreciate your understanding. We won't take more time than necessary,' said the Committee or perhaps, the Directorate itself.

Botts itself then added, 'There appears to be several structures on the surface that would provide better protection than these branches. If you would climb on board, Captain, I'll take you across. I will attempt to limit this initial recon to what is immediately necessary, however, it may take some time. When one considers that the ship, if it is like the one here, will be 15 kilometers long, travel time alone may take significant time.'

'Right. Go to it. I've food and water, and if I can find a hole to crawl into, I'll be content. Lets go.'

We shot across to the ship/island, where Botts located an ornately decorated gatehouse in a tall, thick wall between two brown and withered gardens. It would keep me out of sight and both the entryways and stone lacework looked small and strong enough to keep any hungry dragons at bay.

'This will do, I said, looking around the small dim chamber lined with a bench on either side. 'Off with you, and say "Hi" to the Dragon King for me. Just don't do anything I wouldn't do.'

'There seems nothing you won't do, Captain,' Botts replied.

'Make that "willingly do",' I replied with a laugh, as Botts and the Committee shot off on the sled, too eager to banter.

I didn't mind. I was still in good spirits, and some safe, peace and quiet rest was welcome. I spent some of the time trying to find some sense in the weirdness, but I fear made little headway before I may have dozed off – the casual end of a very unusual Pela round.

I was startled awake however, not too long afterward, when KaRaya said, 'So you're still alive, Wilitang,' over my com-link.

'It would appear so,' I mumbled as I stretched.

'And avoiding work.'

'Blame that on Botts and the Pela Committee. They had more important things to do than to carry me back to the ship to help out.'



'Oh well, most of the work is done anyway. Right now we're having a bite to eat, so tell us all about your adventures.'

I told them my tale and answered their questions.

'You really must be a natural-born dragon-talker,' said LyeCarr.

'I've no plans to test that theory. With Blackie it was simply a case of any port in a storm – and a generally understood truce between the survivors. And well, I was in a very fatalistic, but liberating, mood which, on reflection, may've overridden my better judgment.'

'If it was anyone but you, I'd agree. But I think there's more to it than that. Botts should've taken you along with it to call on the Dragon Kings. You'd make a great ambassador.'

'I'm happy it didn't occur to them. If I – if we all – get out of this alive, it's the quiet life for me – I've pressed my luck to its limits. But enough of me, what did I miss aboard the Complacent Dragon?'

Apparently the Dragon Kings' ship had come in hot and fast. It must have been using the inertia of the islands to absorb the remaining energy of its forward momentum, only coming to rest deep within the dense islands of the inner cluster. My shipmates barely caught a glimpse of it before the shock-wave or energy field sent them tumbling out of control, just like the islands. The Complacent Dragon had ended up being driven ashore on to the jungle-top of one of the inner islands. Its wings and rudders were damaged, but repairable. They had gotten the ship clear of the island and were finishing their repairs. We agreed, however, that they would still stay where they were until we had word from Botts as to the nature and intent of the Dragon Kings.

The Scarlet Guard had called on them shortly after my warning and they all had undergone the usual unpleasant, but benign, telepathic interrogation. We talked for a while longer, until their meal was finished, when they left me alone to return to their labors.

Standing, I waked to the entryway and looked out on the brown stretch of garden. No word from Botts. No doubt Botts and the Committee could look after themselves. And if they had contacted the Dragon Kings, it might well take some time to establish any sort of understanding. I had food and water for several rounds, and the Complacent Dragon could send its remaining launch for me, if need be, so I wasn't concerned. But then, I still wasn't all that concerned about anything – even the things I should've been.

My short nap had refreshed me, and growing restless, I, after a careful search of the islands overhead for large dragons, stepped out to explore the walled garden and the ruins beyond. I might as well be doing something useful, and exploring the ruins seemed to be as useful as anything I could think of. Given the apparent speed of the ship, I didn't expect to find anything alive on the island that hadn't come from the surrounding islands. I was wrong.

I hadn't gone far – I was just rounding the corner of the foundation of a large stone gazebo when I ran into a ghost. Which just goes to show you...

I stopped and stared – trying, and failing, to make sense of his appearance.

He pulled up short as well – and stared back at me, wide-eyed and uncomprehendingly.

'Blast me, a ghost!' he whispered, staring at me.

His expression of shock and dismay brought to mind the first time I'd met this ghost, and I found myself laughing. 'Well, well, if it isn't my old ghost friend, Glen Colin! How does it feel to be on the receiving side of a ghost?'

He shook and said, 'And here I am, sober as a saint, and still see'n ghosties. What was I think'n stepping out sober?' And then adding as he attempted to shoo me away with a wave of his hands, 'Go, get away from me, you blasted haunt. I ain't dead or drunk, so you've no business with me. Lift, you blasted ghost. Lift.'

I laughed. 'I know the feeling, Chief. But turn about is fair play. Still, I'm no ghost, and like you, as sober as a saint. The question is what are you doing here – if you are really here and not a figment of my imagination? Which you probably are – that blow on my head must be more serious than I thought.'

'Oh please, just lift! Have some pity on this poor old, sober, shipwrecked spaceer and lift. Lift

ghostie, lift and be gone!' he exclaimed, and tried to shove me back. His eyes widened even further when he found me to be solid. 'What the Neb?'

What the Neb indeed? He was as no figment of my imagination – though whether that was a comforting thought or not, I couldn't decide. 'Is it really you, Glen Colin?'

But before he could answer, a voice came from behind the gazebo beyond him saying; 'What are you raving about Colin? Have you found the Empress's wine cellar already?' Tenry stepped around the stump of the gazebo. He stopped abruptly to stare. Vynnica had to pull up sharply to avoid running into him.

'Ten, Vyn, it's grand to see you as well!' I said. 'The whole gang is here.'

'You,' gasped Vynnica softly, while Tenry stood speechless, for perhaps the first time.

'Aye, it's me. And I believe I've an explanation for being here but I can't think of one for you. It's been that type of round – one Neb-blasted thing after another. Still, it is grand to see you,' I said, and extending my hand, added, 'Good to see you again, sober or as a ghost, Glen Colin.'

He stared at my extended hand for a moment, and then tentatively extended his. 'Cap'n.' We both watched our hands as they met and grasped each other – flesh on flesh and added, 'What the Neb?'

What the Neb, indeed?

'Is it really you, Wil?' asked Tenry, finding his voice.

'As real as you,' I replied, stepping past Glen Colin to shake his hand as well. 'Hello, Ten, Vyn.'

'What, in the blazes, are you doing here?' he asked as he grasped my hand. 'Why aren't you back in the Unity?' added Vynnica as I shook hers.

'The exact questions I want to ask you,' I replied, 'Except why aren't you dead? I'd heard that Vinden had betrayed you to the Empress's forces.'

'You first. We outnumber you,' said Glen Colin.

'Right. But the short version. I came back – Vinden had sabotaged the ship, and I wanted to warn you of his treachery, but you'd sailed and then the island blew up under my gig, wrecking it and stranding me here. I've been kicking around this corner of the Pela ever since.'

'Where is this corner of the Pela?' asked Vynnica.

'Oh, maybe a hundred or so rounds of sailing from the where you met the Empress's fleet. I've crossed orbits with a number of the survivors, including, I'm happy to say, sub-captain Trin, and your old crew Ten, as well as sub-captain LyeCarr, who I'm sailing with at the moment. Now, how did you survive capture?'

Tenry grinned, 'Amazing! I'm happy to hear about Trin and the crew. Happy to hear about all the survivors. As for us, well, Vinden negotiated our surrender without mentioning it to the rest of us – but it didn't matter. The old Empress had died and her eldest daughter now sits on the Cloud Throne – or did until her throne ran away. She considered our rebellion old, unimportant business, and was just happy to have it wrapped up. She offered everyone pardons if they'd swear allegiance to the Cloud Throne and her. With the cause long lost, we eventually did so and have been in Cimmadar ever since.'

'Until now. What are you doing on this Dragon Kings' ship?'

Tenry laughed. 'Dragon Kings' ship or not, this is – or was – the Iron Island of Cimmadar – the island of imperial palaces and institutes. We happen to be standing in the Empress's private garden at this very moment,' with a sweep of his arms.

'The Iron Island was a Dragon Kings' ship? Didn't you once tell me that Cimmadar had some sort of great fear of the Dragon Kings?' I asked, turning to Glen Colin.

'Aye, they do, or did, anyway, Cap'n. Maybe we now know why. Maybe the empresses always knew and kept it a great secret. Or maybe they lost the secret but kept the fear. She didn't say anything to me about it, one way or another,' sighed Glen Colin. 'She just said, go, fetch my Coronation Stone.'

'We believe that the imperial family knew that there was something strange about the island, but it's hard to imagine why they'd have built their palaces here if they knew its true secret. The question is, why did it decide to come to life, and sail here?' added Vynnica

I shook my head. 'This is all too...strange.'

'Aye, cap'n. It's made me very thirsty. Unless you've got some Dew of Dugan handy, I suggest we retire to the ol'Raven to see if we can unravel this knot of questions, one drink, that is to say, one question, at a time,' said Glen Colin.

'The Rift Raven's here as well?'

'Aye, buried under the Cloud Palace. Unless you have a better idea, Skipper, I think we should follow Colin's suggestion,' said Tenry.

'Sounds good – as long as I can stay in radio contact with my ship and Botts. Botts is off introducing itself to the Dragon Kings...'

'Botts – your robotic butler?' said Vynnina.

'Well, yes, though Botts is a bit more than that...'

'Please save the explanation until I've fortified my wits with some Dew,' sighed Glen Colin.

'I'm with you, Colin,' sighed Tenry. 'I think I'm going to need some Dew to understand all this, as well.'

'Lead on,' I said. 'We'll be a dragon's supper before we're halfway through explaining all this.'

They led me around the great pile of the Cloud Palace, and then into it, through a twisting passage through the rubble that they had constructed during their year long voyage, to the air lock of the Rift Raven. After Tenry placed a transponder at the edge of the airlock so that I could remain in communication with Botts and my shipmates, we settled in to exchange our stories.

For the sake of brevity, I will condense all that I learned over the course of the next few hours into one short conversation. You know my story, so I'll only cover Tenry's, Vynnina's, and Glen Colins's tale. And I'll keep it concise.

'So what are you doing alive?' I asked. 'The survivors said that the Rift Raven, with all the outsiders, went over to the Empress's fleet to hammer out the details of it changing sides, only to have Vinden demand that the rebels surrender. Since the battle didn't go well for the rebellion, I didn't expect to ever see you on this side of the event horizon again.'

'Well, Cap'n, that was true enough as far as it went. We had sailed within the Pela for a while, hoping to avoid any forces the Empress may have dispatched to Redoubt Island, fearing your spy had tipped them off as to our location. When we felt we were far enough away, we struck out for the edge and the inner outer space, so as to make our way to the space station, as planned. We found the Empress's forces more or less waiting for us – a dozen ships, all drifter space ships, rather than Cimmadar battleships. When we appeared on their radars, they fired up their rockets to meet us. Vinden was all for continuing out and attacking them before pushing on to the space station – the bold stroke. DarQue, however, persuaded him that by withdrawing into the Pela, where our ships could fight at an advantage over the space ships of the Empress, was the more prudent strategy. We'd draw them in and ambush them amongst the islands.

Admiral CimKar, the Empress's commander, was a bit too canny for that. He chased us in, but did not commit to attacking us. This convinced Vinden that Admiral CimKar was only a lukewarm supporter of the Empress, and could be turned against the Empress. He began negotiations, and after a few rounds announced that he had succeeded. We would sail the Raven out to finalize the deal under a flag of truce.

'It was, however, Vinden who had actually agreed to surrender the fleet to CimKar in return for a pardon and his title. Truce or no truce, we were taken prisoners. Vinden, however, could not talk Captain LilDre into surrendering, hence the brief battle. It lasted just long enough to convince LilDre that resistance was futile. He surrendered. Prisoners were rounded up and the fleet sailed for the shell and the space station. We were transferred to Pela ships and sent on to Cimmadar.

'As I mentioned, the old Empress had been dead a decade and her eldest daughter was now on the Cloud Throne. Empress DaeSha is no fool, and can be ruthless, if necessary, but she wasn't exiled and

disinherited by her mother, and being born well after the rebellion had gone into hibernation on Redoubt Island, she had no emotions invested in the rebellion. Her mother had actually been a fairly popular Empress during her reign, and DaeSha is well loved and respected, so she had no fear of revolution by a small band of old revolutionaries, now a hundred years out of their time. So, when we arrived in court, she offered a pardon to everyone – from Talley, the would-be-empress down to the common sailor – as long as they would once more swear allegiance to the Cloud Throne and its Empress. Tally also had to renounce any claim to the throne. It may've been hard for some – for many of them the alarms and excursions of the counter-revolution were recent memories – but in the end, everyone did, including Tally, Admiral DarQue, and Prince Invoy.

'Vinden ended up a governor of a remote island and, Tally, well, she and her cousin, the Empress, got along quite well together. Two of a kind, I suppose. And as I said, DaeSha is no fool. She kept Tally close for a while, but as she came to trust Princess Tallith, she began to use her and Captain DarQue, they are a couple now, as her envoys and trouble shooters to deal with problems throughout the Cimmadar Empire. It proved to be a job they were well suited for.'

I noted that Vynnia was watching me closely as Tenry talked of Tallith and DarQue. I found that the ashes of that romance were quite cold. DarQue was welcome to Tallith Min. They suited each other. I had my own love now.

'The three of us,' continued Tenry, 'acted as Tally's and DarQue's aides, and have spent the last decade knocking about the Cimmadar Empire in imperial service. Not a bad life – we're all old hands at that sort of work.'

'That ended about a year ago – when the Iron Island came to life and set out on its strange journey here – wherever here is. The panic was less than one might have expected, but as the rounds went by and the Iron Island continued to accelerate away from Cimmadar, a general evacuation was ordered. Everyone, and almost everything of value, was evacuated over the course of several dozen rounds.

'As it turned out, one of the rarely used, but powerful symbolic relic of the Imperial Family, the Coronation Stone, was overlooked and left behind, locked deep in the palace vaults. This was realized only after the island was too far and traveling too fast for any Pela ship, so the Rift Raven, having been sent down from Cimmadar's inwards space station to aid in the evacuation was pressed into service once again. The three of us, experienced spaceers, trusted retainers of the Empress, and, dare I say, expendables, were given the task to chase down the runaway Iron Island to retrieve the Coronation Stone from the vault under the Cloud Palace.

'It proved to be a long chase, but since we were traveling in its island-free wake, we could go much faster than normal as well, and eventually caught up to it. However, by the time we arrived, many of the palaces had been damaged or destroyed by the turbulence of its passage. With the winds so strong, we had to land the Raven in the palace gardens on the lee side of the Cloud Palace and once we landed, wouldn't you know it, but the palace itself began to crumble and tip over. We were very lucky that being so close to the foundation the crew section escaped damage when it toppled over, but our engine room and gig were smashed under the weight of the palace.

'We were trapped, but with emergency power units to keep things running, we were no worse off than if we were on a typical space voyage. We spent part of that time tunneling our way out of the rubble, but dared not go all the way out for fear of what the air turbulence might do. A few rounds ago we noted that the island was slowing down, and so we have spent the last several rounds completing the excavation of our tunnel. We had just finished and were taking our first stroll among the ruins of the Cloud Palace when who should we run into but ol'Captain Litang, who, by all rights should have been growing cha in the Unity.'

'I think it may be tey in the Saraime...' I began, and then stopped when Botts signaled me via my com link.

'Captain? Where are you?' it asked, with a bit of concern in its voice.

'I'm visiting with our old shipmates, Ten, Vyn and Glen Colin. We're under the ruins of the Cloud

Palace of Cimmadar, aboard the Rift Raven. Did you get to meet the Dragon King?"

'Ah, yes we did. In a manner of speaking. We found it to be rather senile... Sir? Are you feeling alright?'

'I'm perfectly fine. Why don't you join us? Follow the beacon. We'll keep the airlock door open for you.'

02

I find that I'm unable to set down the many events of the following rounds in any sort of chronological order, perhaps because there was no clear chronological order. This is the Pela, after all. Looking back, it seems like a strange mix of past, present, and future, set in the timeless quality of the Pela. I saw my old shipmates from my past life as a tramp ship captain working alongside my new shipmates from the Pela – broad-feathered, Cimmadarian, with a Simla Dragon thrown in. Old plans were abandoned and new ones made. And then, everything was in a rush – a race against the possible return of the unknown enemies of the Dragon Kings. And yet, within those hectic rounds, the ages old mystery of the Dragon Kings was solved, only to unwrap more mysteries. Once again, I will resort to condensing many conversations into a single one for clarity and brevity.

'At the bottom of the crater,' Botts began. 'we came to an excavated tunnel that, in turn, led to the ship itself in the form of an airlock door set 10 meters into the twenty-some meter thick hull of a bottle-blown asteroid vessel. The airlock door answered one of our most pressing questions – its origin,' Botts/Committee paused for dramatic effect.

'So where does it originate from?' I asked, too weary to think, content to play the straight man.

'Either Terra, or more likely, one of Terra-settled solar systems. The Dragon King is a human colony-ship.'

'So the Dragon Kings are human?'

'The Dragon Kings are neither humans or dragons, nor are they the rulers of the dragons, or of the Pela.'

'All this you determined that from the airlock door?'

'No, Captain, not all of it. But the various labels in the airlock were in Terran characters – slightly different from the ones dated to the era of the Nine Star Nebula colony ships' departure from Terra. This may suggest that their origin is more likely from a Terra-settled system than Terra itself. However, a Terran origin can't be ruled out, since the differences could be accounted for by differences in departure times.

'The airlock door was open, where we encountered the first of the Scarlet Guard. We were noted, but surprisingly, not challenged or barred from entering the ship...'

'Some guards.'

'The explanation, we surmise, is that robots once made up a significant part of the ship's crew, and we were taken as one such example. The Scarlet Guard seem to be fairly specialized beings whose main purpose is to serve as the eyes and ears of the Dragon King. Without active direction by the Dragon King they appear to lack any incentive to act.'

'And the Dragon King is?'

'In a moment. The air lock opened on a vast corridor – some two kilometers in length – leading into the interior of a ship the size of the Shadow Sea. The corridor ended in a large compartment deep within the interior of the ship – the Scarlet Guard's barracks. Above and around this compartment, the entire ship is hollow, one vast, empty cargo hold – twelve kilometers long, and five kilometers wide. We theorize that it once held a prepackaged civilization.

'The Scarlet Guard's barracks consists of several thousand sleep-pods, most with Dragon People still

held in stasis. In addition, there are facilities to serve the active Scarlet Guard – environmental units, kitchens, dormitories, and such. We were ignored by one and all as we explored the ship. With only an empty cargo hold above us, we worked our way down, first through a vast engine room, consisting of a series of great coils that likely extend to the outer hull – two kilometers in every direction. The nature of the drive system is yet to be determined, though one theory is that it creates a gravity differential that drives the ship. We also identified a hundred reactors that power it. Below the engine room, we came upon a second large compartment. This proved to be the passenger dormitory. Unlike the colonialists who settled the Nine Star Nebula, the colonialists aboard the Dragon King's ships were millions of embryos held in stasis until the ship arrived in the Pela. In addition to the stasis-chambers, there are thousands of development chambers where the embryos could be developed into viable babies. Unless the current Scarlet Guard sleep-pods were used by a human crew, which we feel is unlikely...'

'Why?'

'Because based on the Dragon King's performance in arriving here from Cimmadar, driving through the Pela's atmosphere in the course of a year, we calculate that its acceleration rate in space would likely have been too extreme for developed humans in the stasis sleep-pods. So that while we cannot rule it out, we suspect that the entire colony was built and developed by machines – from assembling the colony's city shipped in the now empty hold, to raising the first generation of colonists from childhood to adulthood.'

'But why the Pela, rather than then the eight star systems in the Nebula and how did they find it?'

'A question that we hope to discover in time. Either the two known Dragon King ships discovered the Pela before they reached the star systems of the Nebula or they discovered the Nebula already settled, and moved on.'

'In any event, we now know how the humans arrived in the Pela.'

'It is not that simple. We theorize that only the broad-feathered humans of the Pela originated from these colony ships. This would explain why they are genetically almost entirely homo-stellar. However, we think that the embryos of the Dragon King ships were genetically modified prior to their development in order to better adapt them to the Pela's environment – both in their ability to thrive on islands with little or no gravity, and also to seamlessly fit in with the existing feathered fauna of the Pela. Based on the minor genetic differences in the shared genetic matrix, we think that the Pela's fine-feathered population arrived separately from the early Unity, rather than aboard the Dragon Kings. The origins of the Scarlet Guard/Dragon People have not yet been firmly established, but since they are also based on homo-stellar humans, they are likely modified from the Dragon Kings' embryo stock. Why they should be so extensively modified is unclear at this point. One theory is that they were a later modification designed by the Dragon Kings to serve as their interface with both human races, without appearing to represent one species or another. It appears that they were also used to monitor the expanding human societies for the Dragon King. The smaller ship you encountered on Blade Island, was likely one, of perhaps many, auxiliary ships that the Dragon Kings used to monitor human development as it expanded out from its founding colonies.'

'So it appears that we've not discovered a non-human, machine evolving race.'

'Not yet. However since we do not know who attacked the Dragon Kings' ship, that remains an open question – though we are confident that we may answer in time.'

'However the greater mystery is, what happened to the Dragon Kings' original colonies? The Pela history project does not seem to have turned up any likely suspects. While it is possible that the advanced cities the Dragon Kings could have fallen into such ruin as to be completely lost, we feel the more likely explanation is that we've yet to contact these first colonies. So perhaps there exists a much more advanced – Unity Standard level – human society within the Pela, somewhere beyond the edge of the known Pela. And it is possible they are the unknown enemies of the Dragon Kings – perhaps an old rebellion against the Dragon Kings. It is equally possible that this advanced society is native and waging a war against the intrusion of humans, or more specifically, the Dragon Kings themselves.'

'Just who are the Dragon Kings? You've not made that very clear.'

'You've actually met one. The Dragon Kings are the thought lens covered globe structures – sentient, or near sentient machines, charged with setting up and maintaining the human colonies they brought with them. Below the passenger decks we discovered a functional globe-chamber. The base of the globe has a human interface control section that we were able to use to make limited contact with the Dragon King. We have been printing components for a direct, machine to machine interface, that we hope will greatly increase our communication bandwidth and begin the reconstruction of the Dragon King. And once the parts printer is installed in the Dragon King, we plan to print out devices that we hope will allow us to facilitate communications with its enemies as well, if or when they return.'

'Good luck with that. But what do you mean by “reconstruction?”'

'The Dragon King, in its present state is barely functional. In part this may be a result of the tens of thousands of years that it has lain dormant. However, the greater part of it appears to be deliberate. At some point it wiped its memory clear of any and all identify data – from the location of the colonies it founded, to the location of the solar system that sent it out. Indeed, it seems to have wiped out its entire history.'

'Are you certain it did it itself? Why would it do that?'

'Our theory is that it did so as a response to the attack on its sister ship. The hostile encounter may have initiated such a response automatically, or it may have been a deliberate effort on the Dragon King's part. As we said, we are not yet certain if the Dragon King is sentient or not. This has not prevented us from establishing limited communication with the Dragon King, but with its present limitations, we have learned very little about it and its mission. From what we can infer, the destruction of its sister ship was so unexpected, that it responded by erasing its memories to protect its colonies and home world. After which it created and then buried itself in what became the Iron Island in order to hide itself from these enemies. We have no definite time frame for the incident, but judging from the condition of the sister ship, it could be 10 to 30 thousand years ago. So it seems likely that the two Dragon Kings arrived in the Nebula and the Pela within several thousand years of the Unity's founding ships. However, given the advanced features of the Dragon King's propulsion system, they may have left their planet of origin thousands of years after the Unity's founding ships left Terra.'

'So what brought it here, to these islands, now, along with everyone else, is seems, thousands of years after its sister ship was destroyed? It can't be a coincidence.'

'We believe so as well. Our best theory is that Dragon King you discovered here was severely crippled, but not completely destroyed. Since the Dragon King is housed in the thought lens studded globe, which was still partially intact, it may been partially operational as well. We speculate that the intense emotions of the assembled tribe during the ritual killing, picked up by the thought lenses, may have revived the Dragon King just enough to send a distress signal. This signal woke the slumbering Iron Island's Dragon King, causing it to set out to rescue its stricken sister ship, which it had long discounted as dead.'

'Now that you mention it, I remember feeling a brief, powerful passing wave of, well something, after tearing myself away from the macabre ritual.'

'That may be significant. It suggests a powerful signal was sent. That may also explain why their old enemies returned here as well. They must have some form of thought lenses which picked up the signal as well.'

'That makes sense. Though why everyone arrive within a month of each other...'

'Appears to be a coincidence, at this point... Though with interesting possibilities... Still all this is speculation. It may take years to reconstruct the Dragon King's memory – assuming it can be done at all, and that we have the time to do it.'

'Why wouldn't you have the time?'

'It is possible that the unknown enemies of the Dragon Kings may be able to detect the ship's thought lens activity, which in turn, may trigger a new response. We are actually hoping that they return

at some point because, in some ways, these enemies may more interesting than the Dragon Kings. In any event, it is important that we obtain as much data as we can from this Dragon King in the shortest amount of time, and have a representative on hand to make contact with this unknown power. For those reasons, Botts III will be staying on. And for the same reason, we strongly suggest that the Complacent Dragon sails as soon as you've taken on all that you care to salvage from the Rift Raven.'

'You're staying behind?'

'This unit will remain to build and maintain contact with the Dragon King, and, hopefully recover the data it erased. One way or another, we will likely discover the identity of the unknown power, and in time make contact with them. Since this is merely a remote unit, no sentient beings are in danger by leaving it here. The Directorate has authorized sending a replacement unit for Botts III via a courier ship direct to The Hermitage, along with one of the automated scanning machines that will make up for the loss of productivity that leaving this unit behind entails. This ship should arrive within the next two years.'

'Yes, I suppose that makes sense, but I'll miss you, Botts.'

'I'll miss you, too Captain. Still, this has been every bit as interesting as I expected it to be,' said Botts. 'And more.'

'Well, you tell the Directorate that I expect a statue for this.'

'We will do more than that, Captain,' said Botts, its eyes glowing bright. 'I believe that the virtual institute dedicated to studying the Pela will be known as the Litang Institute of Pelian Studies. It is the least we can do for all you've done to keep us amused.'

'Thank you. And thank you for keeping "Memorial" out of the name.'

03

I was having a mug of tey on the deck of the Complacent Dragon, two rounds before we sailed, when Tenry, Vynnia, and Glen Colin joined me with covered plates in hand.

'I've been thinking of how we might get you guys home,' I said as they settled into the deck chairs. 'I'm thinking that what's left of my gig, with what we're salvaging from the Raven, might be sufficient to take you to a point where you could contact Cimmadar's space station for a ride home.'

'We've been meaning to talk to you about that,' said Tenry. 'I can't speak for Captain LyeCarr, but Vyn, Glen, and I would rather return to the Unity than to Cimmadar. We're wondering if you could swing it for us.'

'Me?'

'You and your in with the Machine Directorate.'

'Why, yes, of course. But why the Unity?'

'We're homesick. While the Empress and Cimmadar have taken us in and kept us busy, it isn't our home. Tally, with DarQue at her side, doesn't need us to look after her anymore, if she ever did. So we're thinking that this is a good opportunity to make our exit. We're probably written off for dead by now, anyway.'

'And it's quite clear that the Empress isn't going to allow us to leave,' added Vynnia. 'Even if we promise never to say a word about Cimmadar and the Pela, given that she's aware that Ten and I are ex-Patrol intelligence agents. She no doubt questions where our true allegiance lies. We've brought the subject up, and though she hasn't outright said no, it's clear that it would be extremely unlikely.'

'So we were wondering if you could use some of your pull with the Machine Directorate to deliver us to some drift station, once they get their full scale investigation going. We understand that it might be decades before that happens, but that would still be better than never. In the meanwhile, we'd be more than willing to stay on here and work for the Laezans, if that was possible until the machines could carry us home.'



LyeCarr and I had decided to keep the Laezian Order's outside connections a secret from these Cimmadarians for now. We'd let Malin decide how he wanted to handle that situation.

'I'm sure you'd be welcomed by Malin, And I'm certain that the Directorate would be happy to oblige me as well – though you'd have to promise to keep the secret of the Pela. Would that involve too much of a compromise? Being Patrol and all...'

'The Patrol and the Unity have their hands full with the Drifts. I'm certain that they would wish to protect the Pela as much as Cimmadar, but if word leaked, I'm also sure they couldn't. Secrecy seems to be best for all. Given that, we can give you our word of honor that we will never reveal the secret,' said Vynnia.

'Then I'll mention it the next time I talk to Botts. I know that they've already scheduled a ship to arrive within two years to bring Botts' replacement. If it hasn't left yet, they might be able to accommodate your return aboard it. Though, of course, I can't promise that.'

'That would be wonderful,' said Vynnia. 'There are so many things I miss...'

'And what about you, Glen? Why do you want to return to the Nebula?' I asked.

'Well, I was born almost three hundred years ago, so none of my mates from my youth are still alive. And between sleeping pods and drifting about the Nebula for most of my awake life, I've pretty much put Cimmadar astern. I can give you my word as well. Indeed, drunk or sober, I've not spilled the secret in 300 years. I'll keep it to my dying breath.'

The Directorate readily agreed, though the courier they were sending was not equipped for passengers, and would be accelerating at speeds beyond human endurance. Of course the Directorate was not their only option for returning to the Unity – the Taoist could see them home too, but that option was not mine to offer.

After talking with Botts and the Directorate, I had a short conference with Captain LyeCarr.

'... So I can offer them passage home either via the Directorate or the Order, at some point, though I did not mention the Taoist options. We can leave that to Malin. And if he wants to keep the connection secret he could still send them home in the next Taoist courier by just letting them believe they traveled on a Directorate ship since they'd travel in sleep-pods.'

'If you can get Malin to part with them,' laughed LyeCarr 'They may prove too valuable to give up. But I'm sure he'll see his way clear to bringing them fully on board. Malin hates keeping secrets, and I'd be more than willing to vouch for their integrity.'

'I'd appreciate that. But what about yourself? How do you feel? This looked to be a chance to return to Cimmadar.'

'Well, I do get homesick at times, but I realize that I couldn't really go home any more the Glen Colin. It's been too long, and well, I like the life I have now. And between you and me, Cap'n, knowing that XinDi is distilling his Daffa berry brandy has given me one less reason to return home. I'm going to have to take a slight detour to Kaliza on the way back...'

The Complacent Dragon spent five rounds anchored alongside of the Dragon Kings' ship. We spent most of that time hauling out all the Unity tech we could remove from the Rift Raven to take back to The Hermitage. We did, however, leave the parts printer, a micro-generator, and some other devices, including the ship's missiles, that Botts might need to facilitate its project of restoring and perhaps defending, the Dragon King.

Even knowing that it was only one of its avatars – and now mostly under the direction of the Pela Committee – it was still hard to say good-bye to Botts, and just leave it behind – and alone.

'I realize that I'm being fool, Botts, I know you're not here. But, well, take care – wherever you are. It's been good having you alongside me once again.'

'I'll miss you as well, Captain. And so will the whole Directorate. They want me to say that while

you should feel no obligation to discover anything new and interesting, they're going to send along a quantum-chip com link for you, just in case you find something of interest. Though, of course, you could just use it to contact everyone in the Unity as you have been.'

'I'd appreciate that – though it may be awhile before I find my way to The Hermitage again. Nevertheless, I can assure the Directorate that this is the last of my gifts to them. I hope it continues to pay off for you and them.'

'Thank you Captain, and fair orbits!'

Before we sailed, I left messages for my old shipmates and family in the Unity telling them I'd be out of contact for a while. Despite the sadness of parting, I was glad to put those islands – and my last adventure – astern, once, and hopefully, for all.

## Chapter 53 On the Beach

01

I'm happy – and vaguely surprised – to report that the voyage home was as uneventful as the voyage out. Though we missed Botts, we had new shipmates and plenty of entertainment options brought over from the Rift Raven. With seven crew members to stand watch, we also had even more free time.

Glen Colin, Fina and Hissi played cards for hours on end. Fortunes were won and lost over the course of the voyage. Fina's education was continued under CrisJarka. And when she wasn't playing cards or sleeping, she and Hissi would still race around the ship, play dressing up, or some other make believe game with perfect understanding.

Throughout the voyage, future plans were discussed and made.

KaRaya, with Fina, would stay on as crew members of the Complacent Dragon even though they hoped be to pick up a recovered Defere on the way home. They discussed placing Fina at one of the Laezan communities when she was a little older, once KaRaya had settled into a regular service where she could see her frequently.

'While I ran the Complacent Dragon with a crew of two, a crew of six would be ideal,' said LyeCarr. 'I doubt Malin would be that generous, but I'll fight to keep KaRaya – I'm not about to give her up. The boss may very well find other uses for the Raven crew, but if not, I'll take them on as well until they ship out.'

02

'Talking to yourself?' asked KaRaya as she stepped onto the bridge from the companionway.

'More or less,' I admitted. I had the watch, and since it was the middle of ship's sleep watch, I had expected to stand watch alone. I'd been bringing my long-running journal up to date. 'I was recording my recent adventure to my com-link, so I'm not quite talking to myself.'

'You're talking to your bracelet instead – okay, Wilitang. May I ask why?'

I shrugged. 'Habit, I suppose. I've been keeping a journal for a long time now.'

'Of what?' she asked absently, as she, out of habit, inspected the bridge controls and glanced around

the endless sky we sailed. We were expecting to see the first of the Donta Islands any watch now.

'Oh, my old spacer, and now, my old Pela stories. I was just narrating the last of them. I think I have enough of them now to get by the rest of my life as a tey grower.'

'Right. Let me count how many times I've heard you say that...'

'Well, I'm done with places like DeArjen's Islands, Blade Island, and Outward Islands. I'm going to find a nice safe and civilized island to settle down on.'

'I've heard that many times as well. So what are these plans of yours? We've all made ours, but you've been very quiet. What's so secret about yours?'

'They're not a secret. I just haven't made any definite ones yet. I still have to wait nearly 900 rounds until Naylea's mission is over, so it's just a matter of how I care to pass the time until then.'

She gave me a slightly skeptical sidelong look. 'Ah yes. And then, after that?'

'Well, that would depend on what we decide, together.'

'Ah-huh. Still think she's the one?'

'I do. That's the one thing I'm certain of.'

'Ah-huh. You know best, just like I did. So what are all these nice safe options you're having so much trouble deciding on?'

'Well, I've always wanted to see what the Saraime and the Core Islands have to offer. I could go either as a tourist, or take an engineer's berth on a ship bound for the Core. I probably could get a berth on an S & D Line ship without too much problem. But then, there's Hissi. I don't think she is well suited for the heavier gravity of the big islands. And even if she could deal with it, I'm sure she'd not enjoy it. That's a dilemma.'

'A second option is to postpone that trip, and wait for Naylea at Jade Peak. It has a tey garden where I could probably swing some sort of apprenticeship to get some nice, quiet hands-on training.'

'You mean deadly boring.'

'I mean quiet, contemplative, learning, with enough physical work that I'd sleep soundly through the sleep watch. But I have a feeling that Naylea may not find tey growing all that interesting. Not for a while, anyway.'

'I'd put a few coins on that. So why not stay aboard the Complacent Dragon? We'll likely be back to running books between the Saraime and Windvera. Serratas aside, it's about as nice and quiet run as you could wish for. Plus, if all your old shipmates stay on board, it'd be great fun as well, not to mention allowing Fina and Hissi to stay together.'

'Yeah, but there's nothing for me to do aboard this ship. If I want to continue to sail – and I'm far from sure I do – I'd want to make myself useful, and do it in the engine room. And I'd like to see something more than just empty sky. And, then too, I've been thinking about the boat I left in the Outward Islands...'

'Hey, I'd forgotten all about that. I bet we can talk LyeCarr into making a slight detour and picking it up for us.'

'Us?'

'That was the deal, wasn't it?'

'Well, yes. But I also have a deal with Clan-chief EnVey to see what we could use from it. EnVey has factories, workers, and is a pretty sharp businessperson.'

'You made a deal with this EnVey? I thought we were partners?'

'Well, Sister, we were, but you never bothered to write to me.'

She shrugged. 'We were busy...'

'Yeah. I know. She's on board.'

'I didn't have a lot of free time aboard those ships, as you well know. Anyway, why don't we pick it up now? I still know where to find it, and the Complacent Dragon has all the radios and radars you'd need to find it quick enough. Maybe we can even cut this EnVey in on the deal.'

'Well, Raya, those plans all date from before I knew what the Laezans and their mission were up to.'

I gather that they're slowly leading Saraim scientists and engineers to invent these technologies on their own. I don't think a small trader from the Dontas introducing a med unit or a parts printer out of the blue fits in with those plans.'

'So what?' she asked, 'There's no law against doing it.'

'True. But if we use a Laezan ship pick up my gig, that rather ties our hands, don't you think? Besides, if I wanted to go into business with EnVey, I could just design better electric motors or something, though the gig's manual would be a big help with that. We'll see...'

'Wilitang, you have a lot of deciding to do, Brother.'

'Yes, I know. I have, however, decided one thing. Hissi and I will leave the Complacent Dragon on reaching Daedora. I feel that I need to just stop and do nothing for a while. I've been on the move just too long.'

'We'd miss you and Hissi. Fina would be heartbroken.'

'Well, it wouldn't be forever. We'll keep in touch. I'll know where to find you, and everyone else, as well. We'll all have the whole Laezan Order to keep us in contact. I just need some time to think.'

'I'd have thought that sailing for 59 rounds in an Endless Sky would've given you enough time to think.'

I shrugged. 'I would've thought so too. But maybe I need more than an Endless Sky to put my thoughts into order.'

03

Thanks to the trail of radio transponder crumbs we'd left behind, we made our island-fall in the Dontas two rounds later, on our 61st round, right on schedule.

Four rounds after that, Bomtrand announced from the wardroom's intercom. 'Company, Skipper.'

LyeCarr glanced at me with a raised eyebrow and a quizzical smile, said, 'Humm – Sounds like we should have a look.'

I followed him out onto the shelter deck and up the companionway to the bridge. Bomtrand was on the port wing deck, survey glasses in hand, studying the blue-green islands and white cloud to port.

Handing the glasses to LyeCarr, he said, pointing. 'The speck against that cloud. The radar track shows that it emerged from that island on an interception course.'

LyeCarr grinned, 'So it did, hey? Interesting.' And humming a cheerful tune, he studied the ship, while the mild Pela slipstream pushed and tugged us. KaRaya joined us, still wild-feathered from sleep.

After a minute or two, he turned and handed the glasses to me. 'I can't place it. Any ideas, Wil?'

Though it was only a small, bouncing image in the glasses, it still looked dangerous enough – a long, streamlined, dark green hulled ship, powered by twin propellers and several arching masts. It had what seemed to be half a dozen enclosures along its side that likely housed rocket launchers. 'Can't place it, but then the Telrai Peaks' never sailed this far into the fringes, 'I said, handing the glasses to KaRaya. 'What do you make of it?'

She studied it for awhile before handing the glasses back to LyeCarr. 'No. It's a new one for me. I can say, however, that if we were an island trader in the Outward Islands, we'd be hastily altering our course away from it and spreading all the sails that would draw, rather than standing around gaping at it, as we are now. But then, we're not an island trader, are we, Captain?' she added with a broad smile.

He returned the smile. 'No, we're not. Nor are we in the Outward Islands. Still, I think we might want to clear the tarps off the rocket launchers. As Wil here would tell us, better safe than sorry. So off you go.'

As Bomtrand and KaRaya left to man the rocket launchers and LyeCarr took the helm, I watched it grow ever larger and more distinct. Less than ten minutes later it was close enough, in the high-powered survey glasses, to see its colorful dress and numerous crew.

'They haven't manned the rocket launchers yet,' I said, 'If that's any comfort to you.' And looking back at the cheerful LyeCarr, added, 'Or a great disappointment.'

'Oh, they still have plenty of time,' he replied brightly. He was right, of course, the ship was still far away when viewed with the naked eye.

Still, if this was the Outward Islands, I'd have sent a rocket on its way, even at this extreme range, just as a warning. But this wasn't the Outward Islands, and even on the fringe of the Donta Islands, we shouldn't have much to fear. Yet... better safe than sorry. However, this was LyeCarr's show, so I said nothing and returned to watching the long green ship.

I saw a figure step out of its bridge, amidship to aim a pair of glasses at us. A slim figure in blue. I stared hard, my heart thumping in my chest, and as I caught her long black fine-feathers blowing in the slipstream.

I lifted off my cap and waved.

She waved back.

I turned to LyeCarr and asked, 'Would you think we are in the SaraDal Islands?'

He gave me a thoughtful look. 'Recognize the ship, now?'

I shook my head, laughed and said, 'No but I recognize one of the crew.' I handed him the glasses.

He looked, grinned, and handing them back to me. 'So you wouldn't object if I altered course to close with them, would you?'

'Not in the least, Captain.'

By the time the SaraDal ship came to a rest some 30 meters off, they already had one of their boats set to launch. Naylea called out a greeting as she, Prince VunaTarze and a crew of four cheerful cutthroats, to man the oars, set out for the Complacent Dragon. Hissi and Siss shot out to greet each other and then frolic around Naylea aboard the boat before swirling around me and on to the rest of the crew they knew, in a sloppy, exuberant greeting.

We gathered on the sheltered deck to welcome a beaming Naylea with cupped hands. She cheerfully allowed me to help her aboard and to hold her hand briefly as she introduced us to the many belted and colorfully dressed VunaTarze, Prince of the SaraDal island of Vuna, and captain of the Avenging Arrow, and his equally picturesque crewmen. She gave me a sharp, questioning look when she reached Tenry, Vynnica and Glen Colin, who had been at the back of the pack. However, she didn't falter in naming them as well.

'I am delighted to meet Teacher NyLi's friends in the Order,' exclaimed the fiercely grinning Prince VunaTarze. 'We were delighted to welcome back Teacher NyLi when she returned from her mission to those barbarian Temtres. Between you and me, my friends, we were a bit disappointed that she was so successful, but it is an ill cloud that doesn't bring rain – since it gives me all the more opportunities to do the job myself. With the watch system she has set up, these barbarians can not sail a ship into our islands without our watchers spying them with their long-seeing eyes and directing us by radio to meet them in battle. It is such a wonderful system! We never miss a battle!'

'It also means that the peoples of the SaraDals can live their lives without constant fear of raids from the sky,' added Naylea.

'Yes, yes, of course. We battle these barbarians only to protect our peoples from their bloodthirsty raids! Teacher NyLi is leading us to a better, more peaceful Way – once these barbarians have been dealt with,' he added, with a smile in her direction, though I don't think he expected anyone to believe that. And none of us did.

'I'm sure she shall succeed,' said LyeCarr, clearly a flattering lie, and added, 'Now if you will follow Bomtrand up, we can get to know each other better over some sweets and beverages on the forward deck.'

'It got weird, didn't it?' whispered Naylea to me as we waited, shoulder to shoulder, to follow the gang up to the forward deck, giving me a searching look.

'Yes. Very.'

'Dangerous? But of course...'

'Yes. Very. I thought I used up all my luck just surviving it,' I admitted. 'But clearly that's not the case, since you're here.'

She gave me a bright smile, and leaned against me briefly before following the gang up.

When the generalities were over, and the first drinks consumed, Naylea led the conversation around to the battles we'd each fought, either here or in the Unity. Her purpose, besides keeping the conversation on something that clearly interested Prince VunaTarze, was to impress upon him that the Order had, or could call on, very dangerous people. LyeCarr had many stories to tell, as did Tenry, Vynnia, and KaRaya, and even Bomtrand had a few from his drifter days.

'And take Captain Litang there – a more mild mannered looking person you'd never find. And yet he's the most ruthless of all of us. Why he destroyed a Temtre ship himself!' Naylea exclaimed, and went on to relate that incident.

'It was an accident,' I tried to explain. 'I meant it only to distract them...'

'Ha! So he says. How many other ships have you destroyed, Litang? And the truth now – you have taken the novice orders!' she said.

'Only one other, by myself – and only after I gave them time to abandon ship.'

'What about the ship you ran onto a rock?'

'I didn't run it on to a rock. We were the ones running...'

She'd have none of that, and told not only that tale, but the one of the three drift hawks as well...

'I had a good crew, with sure aim. And I gave them time to abandon ship as well,' I explained.

'Don't let that fool you,' broke in KaRaya. 'He's in with the dragons as well. A real dragon talker. Why in the islands we've just visited, a Green Diamond dragon came out to visit him, and later they were arm in arm together...' And she went on to describe my various encounters with dragons, Naylea cheerfully adding my encounters on both Redoubt and Tumbleweed islands.

Clearly, if I ever want a quiet life, I'm going to have to stop telling my old spaceer stories.

I had only a few minutes with Naylea alone, when I went down to the galley to have the synth-galley produce more sweets and spirits for our guests. She followed half a minute later – to help me bring them up. We didn't spend a lot of time taking, and as little time as possible, punching up the sweets and spirits.

'What was the weirdness this time?' she asked, her grey eyes looking into mine leaning back in my arms.

'I don't know where to begin, and we don't have time for the story anyway. I'll write you about it,' I said, pulling her close again. And then asked some moments later, 'How are you faring? Is it dangerous?'

'Not at all. Mostly administration – making sure everyone knows their job and is on top of it.'

'Then what are you doing aboard the Avenging Arrow with a cutthroat Prince looking to find Temtre ships to attack?'

'Making certain that Prince VunaTarze and his crew are up to speed with their how their new shipboard radar and radio and can work with the island watch stations to do things like intercept the Complacent Dragon. You were a test target.'

'But what if we had been a Temtre ship?'

'You'd have been in big trouble,' she replied with a cheerful grin. 'I've my pirate piece along.'

I sighed. 'So when can you turn over this "administration" work over to the SaraDalians?'

'Soon. But then, as I told you, I'm going to have to talk with the Temtres. They're just as eager for battle as Prince VunaTarze, but this shedding of blood needs to end. Give me my days, Wil and I'll be yours – if you'll still have me and your luck hasn't run out.'

'I'm taking no chances. I'm making no plans at all,' I whispered and pulled her close to kiss her, until she pushed away and said, 'In 900 rounds, now let's get the food and drink out before they come for us.'

VunaTarze, I'm sure, is getting thirsty.'

It was far too little, but far better than I deserved. And the parting, when it came several hours later, after we, and his cutthroat crew, poured Prince VunaTarza back into his boat, was too soon and painful, but it was unmarred by premonitions of doom. I'd settle for that.

04

I left the ship and my old shipmates when we reached the island port of Daedora. It was very hard. Tenry, Vynnia, and Glen Colin may well be on their way back to the Unity by the next time I found myself, and hopefully, Naylea, guests of The Hermitage. And, like all shipmates, in space or the sky, they're hard to find unless you're sailing with them. At least I knew how to keep in touch with them, and we promised to do so. We had a fine feast, a sad farewell, and then I had KaRaya and Fina run us to shore – dropping Hissi and I off on that familiar S & D Line pier alongside their shipyard. This parting was, by far, the hardest, since Hissi had to say goodbye to Fina – and Fina had to say goodbye to Hissi, which, she sobbed, was the hardest thing she ever had to do. And I was sure it was.

The parting was tearful and long, as Hissi was softly moaning her sorrow, even as she tried to comfort the sobbing Fina. KaRaya and I could do little to comfort them. At last, KaRaya knelt down beside her daughter and said, 'We must go, Fina. Our ship is waiting for us. We'll be seeing Hissi and Uncle Wilitang again, don't you worry about that. This is not goodbye forever, just for awhile.'

'It's true, Fina, we'll be seeing you again before too long, I'm sure,' I said. 'Hissi's going to miss you very much. I know she won't forget you. Ever.'

KaRaya lifted Fina up and set her in the launch, with Hissi swimming alongside. Then KaRaya clasped my wrist and said, 'Don't make a liar out of me, Brother Wilitang.'

'I won't. Hissi will see to that.'

She nodded and climbed into the launch as I cast off its line and stood back, drawing Hissi back with me.

I could feel her shaking with sobs. Parting was every bit as hard for her as it was for little Fina, who stood, sobbing and waving as the launch started off.

I felt a cold dart in my heart. I realized that this just wasn't right.

'Hold up!' I called out, and waved KaRaya back.

'What now, Wilitang?' she asked as she swung the launch back around. 'Change your mind?'

'Just wait a minute,' I said, and turning to Hissi, said, 'You know I love you, Hissi. You're my daughter. But you're all grown up now. I'd love to have you always by my side. It's where you've always been. But I mustn't be selfish. Who you want to sail with must be your choice now, not mine. If you'd really rather stay with Fina, you have my blessing.'

She looked to me, her black eye wet with tears, and barked a soft, question between her shaking sobs.

'It is your choice alone. Maybe she needs you more than I do. So if you want to make her into a card shark that would make her father proud...'

She barked a soft, sobbing laugh.

'Then I'll not stand in your way. I'm sure you'll make yourself useful, looking after Fina. And KaRaya's an old pal of ours, so I can comfortably let you go in her keeping – though, of course, you can live on your own, if you want to as well. You're all grown up. Or as grown up as you'll ever be.'

A halfhearted sobbing growl, on cue.

'Now, I don't want you to think that I'm pushing you away – I'm sure you see just how hard it would be on me to see you go. But I'd feel even more terrible if I kept you away from a little girl you love, and who loves you like I do, and perhaps needs you more. And, as I said, this is not goodbye forever. I'll be seeing KaRaya, Fina and you, if you go, often enough in the future and perhaps, if you want, we

can sail together again. But this must be your choice to make, Hissi. Sometimes being grown up means making hard choices.'

The launch drifted just above the pier, with KaRaya watching me. I'm sure she knew what was being decided, though I doubt Fina did.

Hissi shuddered, and turning gave me one of her sloppy tongue lashings that pass for dragon kisses, and slipped out of my arm. I drew her back and gave her a long hug. 'Be a good dragon, Hissi,' I whispered. And let her go.

She gave me another kiss and then swam for the launch.

'She's coming with you, Fina,' I called out. 'You look after her now!'

She cried, now with delight, and hugged Hissi close to her as soon as Hissi reached the launch.

'Are you good with this, Wilitang?' asked KaRaya.

'I'm fine with it. They need each other, and it will make your life a little easier. Plus Vere will have a daughter he can be proud of when he finally makes his way home – she'll clean him out of coins in no time.'

'Thank you, Wilitang. I'll take care of them both. I promise.'

'I'm sure you will. And I'll see you all soon enough again.'

And then, with one last questioning look, to which I nodded, she started the propellers and steered away.

Hissi barked a long farewell.

I waved until the launch slipped out of sight beyond the jungle. And drew a long breath.

And then I was alone. And on the beach.

I hadn't expected to be this alone. The emptiness at my side hit me hard. I swallowed and drew another breath. Still, it was the right thing to do – I'd have hated myself if I'd kept them apart. I'd just have to adjust. And well, now I could visit the high gravity large islands of the Saraime core without worrying about Hissi. She wouldn't have liked them at all. I might even have had to leave her alone on one of the port islands, if I wanted to go down. So maybe it was for the best. And girls grow up and leave their nannies behind, so maybe it was only a temporary parting.

'Chief? Litang?' said a voice behind me.

I turned.

'It is him,' said my old shipmate, TeyLin, first mate of the Lora Lakes.

'Who else would be standing around with his hands in his trousers?' said Captain KimTara, tartly walking next to him. She nodded, 'Chief.'

They were both in the dress whites of the S & D line.

'Captain KimTara, Lin! It's grand to see you!' I exclaimed clasping wrists with a beaming TeyLin, and the always serious KimTara. 'Is the Tyrina Temples your ship? I saw her in the offing.'

'Aye,' said TeyLin. 'We sail within the watch.'

'A fine looking cargo liner.'

KimTara nodded. 'And what ship are you off of?'

'Ah, I just signed off of the Complacent Dragon, so I guess I'm on the beach.'

'We haven't even a stoker's berth for you, Litang. TeyLin, do you have a your notebook? I'll write Litang a note to NebDara – our shipping agent here. Maybe she can come up with a berth for you, though I don't think you could expect a chief engineer's berth.'

'Thanks, Captain. But I'm not sure what I'd like to do next. I always have wanted to visit Saraime, so I might head inwards. Maybe even do it as a passenger. Or I might look into the shipyard and see if they have anything available for me, if I feel like it.'

She gave me a hard look. 'Did you get sacked?'

I laughed and shook my head no. 'It was my decision. A small ship, didn't have much to do. And well, I'm taking some time away from sailing the skies, except maybe as a tourist. I've been on the go for a long time.'



'Where's Hissi?' she asked, looking about.

'Ah... I was just saying goodbye to her before you arrived.'

'She abandoned you?'

TeyLin, beside her, was smiling at his captain's interrogation.

'Well, sort of. We've been on a long voyage and the ship had a child aboard. I may've mentioned my old friend Captain KaRaya? Well, anyway, it was her daughter, Fina, and did I ever mention how much Hissi loves children?'

'You mentioned a lot of things, Chief... but go on.'

'Well, over the course of the voyage they rather bonded. Grew to be inseparable. It broke both their hearts to part, so, well, the kindest thing to do was to make sure Hissi knew that she was free to choose. And she chose Fina.'

'And your fine with that?'

'I'm happy for them – Fina's father was a purser aboard the Island Zephyr, so she only has her mother, and her mother has to work... Hissi will look after her.'

Captain KimTara shook her head.

'So what do you plan to do, if it isn't running a ship's engine?' asked TeyLin.

'At the moment, I've no idea. I think I need some free time to decide. Some time free from having to be somewhere, free from making sure everything is working, free from having to show a profit. Free, I guess, from responsibilities.'

'You're that worn out?' asked KimTara. 'Washed up?'

I was tempted to tell them where I'd just been and all the things that had transpired, just in case ValDare was tempted to go back. But I bit my tongue. It's been telling tales which gets me into trouble. Instead I said, 'Oh, no. It was a pretty cushy berth. Spent most of my time on the bridge, since its engines didn't need much attention, so you know what a breeze that was...'

TeyLin, at least, grinned.

'No, it's more than work,' I went on. 'It's something I've been meaning to do. I've been wanting to try my hand at something new for some time now, and have never quite found the time – it was always something. But I've now made a clean break, and I intend to discover what else I might enjoy doing.'

'Has my cousin ValDare contacted you?' she asked, darkly.

'No, I've been mostly out of the Dontas. Why? Was he looking for me?' I hoped she didn't catch sight of that flash of guilt I felt.

She gave me a long hard look, and said. 'Maybe.'

'I assure you, Captain, I'll stay well clear of ValDare.' And those islands that I've just come from.

KimTara continued to stare at me, clearly disbelieving everything I said. 'Do you need some coins?' she asked, finally, while reaching for her coin pouch, to TeyLin's stifled amusement.

'Thanks, Captain. I've plenty of coins. I really am fine.'

'Don't take to drink,' she admonished out of the blue.

'Huh?'

'Drink. Engineers are very susceptible to drink. I don't want to trip over you the next time I'm in port.'

'I'll steer clear of drink, Captain,' I assured her.

She gave me another long hard look, and then shrugged. 'Look up NebDara when you've had your fill of rotting on the shore. And make sure you're reasonably sober when you do so.'

'Yes, Captain,' I replied. I was pretty sure, by now, this was all an exercise in KimTara's sense of humor.

'Right. We must be off. We have places we must be. Schedules to keep. Profits to make. Responsibilities.'

'Then I won't keep you, Captain. But it was great crossing courses with the both of you again. Clear sailing!'

'Thank you Chief,' she said, and clasping wrists again, they continued down the pier to where their launch was tied up. I stood and watched them sail for the trim, black-hulled Tyrina Temple floating in the offing.

Right, I said to myself. I was on the beach, just as I'd planned it. It was funny, in a way. Several decades ago, on Calissant, I'd done everything I could to avoid finding myself on the beach, and now I had contrived to land myself on it. I'd my kit bag beside me, but I was without a ship – without responsibilities, with no mission, no expedition, no crew depending on me. No owner to please, no profits to make, no assassin to fear. Not even a Simla dragon to feed. I was free. Totally free. Free to go wherever the wind or my fancy cared to take me.

It was a very unfamiliar sensation. Wonderful, and frightening at the same time. I stood on the pier with no obvious purpose to my life. I'd have to find one, a purpose, a goal, a port of call, but as I stood there in the bright, milky light of the Pela, with the birds soaring, the lizards fluttering, and the beetles buzzing around me, I had absolutely nothing that needed doing. Except to make some decisions. Decisions I'd been putting off for some time now.

Right, I said to myself, again. Time to make some decisions. I turned away from the harbor sky and drew a breath. So make one, Litang, I said to myself. You've gotten yourself into this position where you have to choose, so now choose. Do it.

Okay. I made one. That was easy. I grabbed my kit bag and walked down the pier to the strand. I stopped at EiVen's booth and ordered half a dozen spicy-sauce fini char-buns.

It was only when I turned to go that it struck me – another icy dagger to my heart – I didn't have Hissi at my side to share the buns with. There was only an invisible dragon-shaped hollow beside me. I was truly alone, and I'd no one to blame for it, but myself.

I shook myself free of that thought's icy grip and took a bite of a char-bun. What the Neb, I'd eat all six. Lifting my kit, I started up the strand for the jungle as the a monorail car swung overhead.

Now, I'll admit that, as decisions go, choosing EiVen's spicy-sauce fini char-buns, wasn't much of a decision. And the next one, choosing a place to stay while I decided what I wanted to do next, wasn't going to be much of one either. Still, it is said that a journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step.

And six spicy-sauce fini char-buns.